

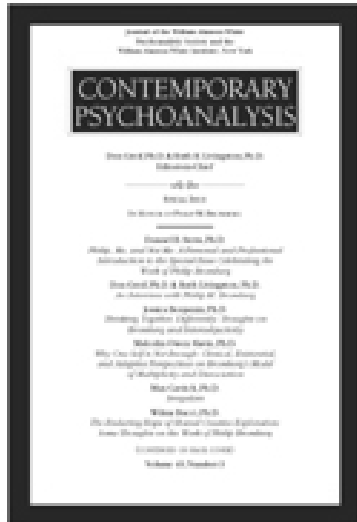
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Daniel Shaw L.C.S.W.

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BOOK REVIEWS

MADNESS AND EVIL: AN INSIDER'S VIEW OF THE SULLIVANIAN INSTITUTE

A Review Essay of *The Sullivanian Institute/Fourth Wall Community: The Relationship of Radical Individualism and Authoritarianism*,
by Amy B. Siskind. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003. 170pp.

DANIEL SHAW, L.C.S.W.

I RECENTLY PLAYED, for a psychoanalytic study group of which I am a member, a comedy sketch recorded ages ago, in which Elaine May and Mike Nichols portray a psychoanalyst and her patient. Having had a good laugh each of the numerous times I have listened to this sketch over the years, I gleefully, and as I now know naively, imagined my typically serious and scholarly group uncharacteristically doubled over, wiping tears of laughter from their eyes, enjoying a good joke on us all. In the sketch, the patient (Nichols) informs May, his analyst, that in the following week he will have to miss the last of his five sessions per week, since it is Christmas Eve and he plans to be with his family that day. Instantly shattered by the news of her patient's plan to desert her, May attempts to maintain her analytic stance and mask her spiralling self-fragmentation by demanding that her patient explore, be curious about, reflect on, and associate to his need to miss his session. In the face of his insistence that he just wants to be with his family on Christmas Eve, the analyst begins to weep quietly, then to sob in despair, then to scream with rage. Unable to help her recompensate, the patient quietly retreats, wishing her a Merry Christmas, as the analyst continues to unravel. When I turned off the recording, I faced a silent group, with some members finally confessing to a sense of excruciating anxiety while listening. There was little further discussion. We moved on quickly to the material we had planned to discuss. In showbiz parlance, I had bombed. Though unable to articulate at the time why the sketch repeatedly cracks me up, I can now say that for me, it helps to laugh about the ever present,

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always not fully analyzed narcissism of the psychoanalyst—that is, to laugh at it, but not to laugh it off.

Narcissism is a problem for our patients, but it is just as much a problem for the profession of psychoanalysis and for every psychoanalyst. It is a problem that has shadowed our profession from the beginning, and it is a problem that our profession still struggles to address adequately. Freud formulated his conceptualization of narcissism in 1914, and proceeded to enact some of its more problematic aspects: deeming himself the only analyst not in need of an analysis by another analyst; setting up a book of rules for the analytic process, which he exempted himself from following; and marginalizing innovative followers and favoring those whom he could more easily control. Authoritarian control and suppression of dissent may have seemed, at the time, like necessary means to the crucial end of establishing psychoanalysis as a profession, but in the long run these methods have not proven effective. To the contrary, Balint's (1968) portrayal of the banishment of Ferenczi from the analytic community as a trauma to the profession remains relevant still, decades after he made it. Although it is increasingly likely in our professional publications and conferences to see rival psychoanalytic schools seeking common ground, years of rampant factionalism and internecine power struggles, along with authoritarian, incestuous training systems (see Levine & Reed, 2004), have substantially contributed, I believe, to the embarrassing fact that the majority of the public no longer has a clue as to what we mean when we say "psychoanalysis."

The worst potential of narcissism, for which we reserve the term "malignant," was fortunately not realized by Freud, whose work, in spite of his imperial tendencies and many serious mistakes, has nevertheless been profoundly generative. But because the psychotherapist is a potent transference figure—not quite a parent, not quite an Oracle, not quite God Almighty, but, for many patients, something like all three—it is within our power, if our power goes unchecked, to gain almost total control over our patients, or a group of patients, and, in the name of psychotherapy and with the power invested in us, to abuse, exploit, and enslave them in every conceivable way. That is precisely what happened when, in 1957, Saul Newton and Jane Pearce began training therapists in what they called the Sullivan Institute for Research in Psychoanalysis, and followed with the publication of their book, written primarily by Pearce, *The Conditions of Human Growth* (1963). Aside from an article

in *New York* (Black, 1975) and another in *The Village Voice* (Conason & McGarrah, 1986), little has been written of the Sullivanians, until recently. Amy B. Siskind, raised within the Sullivanian community and now a sociologist, has adapted her Ph.D. dissertation into the first published book about the Sullivan Institute. Siskind does not provide a tell-all personal account of her own experience as the child of a Sullivanian patient, nor does she provide a psychological analysis of the dynamics of the group, its leaders, and followers. What she does present is a thorough sociological-historical account of the group, its leaders, and its practices, as well as excerpts of accounts of the experiences of former members. The publication of Siskind's book presents the psychoanalytic community with an opportunity (although the opportunity has been there for quite some time) to confront and try to make sense of some of the most egregious professional violations and abuses ever to have occurred in the name of psychoanalysis. This review of Siskind's book is a preliminary effort in that direction.

As Siskind tells the story, Jane Pearce, a psychiatrist who studied with Harry Stack Sullivan in the late 1940s, met Saul Newton in the early 1950s at the William Alanson White Institute, where he worked in the bursar's office. Newton had no degree and no formal training. He was a charismatic confabulator, who convinced people who knew him that he had fought with the Abraham Lincoln Brigade in the Spanish Revolution. In fact, he had not been a soldier at all, but a payroll clerk. Newton and Pearce married, and together they sought to extend and elaborate Sullivan's ideas. They were particularly disappointed that Sullivan's critique of society and family norms hadn't gone far enough. Dissatisfied with the White Institute and seeking full control of an institute of their own, they permanently severed their ties to White. Like many others swept up in the counterculture revolution of the 1960s, Newton and Pearce sought to create a community, like a Puritan city on a hill, whose members would disdain decadent bourgeois conformity and convention, and reach superior psychological status (and, by implication, superior moral status) through radical processes of regression, corrective experience, and personality restructuring. The hidden problem with many of these kinds of personal growth and self-realization projects is that they can often degenerate into an attempt, for leaders and followers, to gain power so as to compensate for a sense of impotence. Things go very wrong in these groups when narcissism runs amok, and when omnipotence, as opposed

to power, becomes the unconscious goal. In such cases, these groups develop delusions of superiority accompanied by self-righteous justifications for scapegoating, dominating, and controlling others.

Before cataloging some of the practices of the Sullivanian community, I want to emphasize, for those who may not know, that these things did not happen, for example, in a fundamentalist, apocalyptic, UFO or other cultic group in the deep south or the remote west of the United States, far from the reach of progressive contemporary cultural and intellectual influence, and from the culture of psychoanalysis. This story took place on the Upper West Side of New York City, involving a population of middle-class, liberal, college-educated artists, professionals, academics, and intellectuals, many of whom were notable in their professions, and several quite famous. At the group's peak in the 1970s and 1980s, Siskind describes how hundreds of patients lived communally in large apartments and saw their therapists several times a week. The second-tier therapists were current and former patients of Newton's and the other founding leaders. The patients saw the senior and junior therapists not just for therapy, but also at meetings, classes, legendary parties in the Hamptons with plenty of drugs and alcohol, and in bed. Patients were told to spend as little time as possible with anyone not in the group and to carefully schedule every minute of their time to be with other group members. They were encouraged never to sleep alone, to experiment and sleep with anyone and everyone in the group. They were taught that families, and especially mothers, are toxic. Pressured to cut off contact with families of origin, they were told that if they did not, they would likely become hopelessly mentally ill and end in suicide. Patients were discouraged from marriage, and some mothers in the group were persuaded to have their children raised by others in the group. In the 1970s, parents were expected to send their children to boarding school as soon as they could afford to, so as to have as little contact with their own children as possible, and thus not poison their child's development.

Much of the above was justified on the theoretical premise, derived from Sullivan's work, that infants react to their mother's anxiety, viewed as being cultural in origin, by restricting their own development, by splitting up the self into good me, bad me, and not me parts. Children raised by unconscious, overly anxious parents, according to Newton and Pearce, contributed to the endless perpetuation of a sick society, a culture of convention and malaise. Up to this point, many of us might, to some extent, agree. What made Newton and Pearce's execution of their

theory particularly destructive was the quality of disavowed hatred and contempt in their scapegoating of parents, which they insisted their patients share, and which they effectively disguised, even from themselves, as zeal for therapeutic transformation and social reform. Disavowing their hatred and rage, they were blinded by it, dissociatively unaware of the obvious: that planning to reform and liberate society at large by psychologically enslaving a group of people, calling them patients, exploiting them financially, emotionally, and sexually, and controlling and directing every move they make, is sheer madness, plain and simple.

As the group grew in size, Siskind chronicles how it became ever more paranoid and coercive. A former actress named Joan Harvey became Newton's wife after he divorced Pearce, and Harvey created a political theater group called the Fourth Wall, which became the chief activity of the group in its latter years. Now community members not only had to support the therapists, but to support a theater as well, and demands on members for contributing money and participating in group activities increased to the point that members barely had four hours a night for sleep. The Three Mile Island nuclear reactor crisis, and then the advent of AIDS, became flash points for further panic, demands, and restrictions. Siskind's portrayal of the group's reactions to these events is particularly chilling, as she describes how the typical dynamics of an apocalyptic cult came into play.¹ As with apocalyptic groups in general, the failure of Newton's and Harvey's dire predictions about nuclear devastation and germ warfare triggered a deepening of their paranoia and the florescence of their underlying psychosis. By the time it all started winding down for the Sullivans, Newton was alleged to have attempted to seduce several children, including his own daughters. Splits among the leaders, now numbering even more former husbands and wives, and finally Newton's death were the last nails in the group's coffin.

In the space permitted, I have only been able to scratch the surface in describing the innumerable abuses perpetrated on the followers of this group. Siskind's book is valuable not just for clarifying the nature of these abuses, but for many reasons, not the least of which is that the accounts of followers whom she quotes puts a human face on the suffering caused by these abuses. Their testimony should be heard. As is often the case, it is all too easy for a victim of abuse to remain silent, rather than deal with the shaming, blaming, and doubting that often greets them when

¹ See Lifton (1999) for an excellent account of the Japanese apocalyptic group, Aum Shin-rikyo.

they find the courage to make public their abuse. The Cult Clinic of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services in New York helped counsel traumatized members who left the group, and helped divorced spouses and family members of Sullivanian patients to organize support groups. Beyond that, the professional mental health community was silent. The absence of any serious psychoanalytic writing on the Sullivanians suggests that there has been a dismissal, a turning away from the stories these former members tell. It may be that, for the psychoanalytic community, for those who knew what was happening, it was easier to minimize, doubt, and dismiss the testimony of the members of the group than it would have been to confront and acknowledge how seriously deranged Pearce, Newton, Harvey, and their trainees actually became. Pearce was, after all, a highly respected student of Sullivan's before she severed her ties to the White Institute. While sexual violations in psychotherapy have been well studied by psychoanalysts (e.g., Celenza, 1995; Celenza & Gabbard, 2003), therapy cults have not. Perhaps the concreteness of sexual violation makes it easier to grasp and repudiate than the dynamics of sadistic control and domination between therapist and patient, which can be enacted more subtly and therefore be less obviously transgressive.

In considering the Sullivanians, it may be tempting for us to focus on the analysis of the pathology of the followers, whom we might identify as the patient in this kind of story. While further study in this area would certainly be beneficial (see Shaw, 2003), we should not allow a focus on pathology in followers to obscure the more pressing issue for our profession: to understand the psychology of the therapist who exerts abusive, totalitarian control over a patient, or a group of patients. I present the following as an initial foray into this area, in the hopes of generating further interest in this subject.

Siskind quotes accounts from former followers of Newton and Harvey, indicating they lived in constant fear that the psychological illness diagnosed by their therapists would never end, unless they gave themselves over completely and allowed their therapists total control of their lives. The question is, why would a therapist need or want to put a patient in this position? Although Siskind provides a sociological perspective on the Sullivanians, I believe this book can be particularly valuable for the psychoanalytic profession as a resource for the study of the destructive effects of pathological narcissism in our work, which is the lens through which I think these issues can best be perceived and comprehended.

Based on theoretical formulations from my own work over the last ten years with former members of cultic groups, including the study of cult leaders (Shaw, 2003), I have suggested that malignant narcissists who promote a cult around themselves succeed in enslaving their followers through seduction, intimidation, and humiliation. Their narcissism compels them to deny and expel their own self-loathing, fear, and shame, which is the result of their own traumatic upbringing. They typically rewrite their histories, creating heroic, triumphant pasts, reversing the impotence and humiliation they actually experienced. Desperate to evacuate his shame, the malignant narcissist contrives to elicit and reinforce self-loathing, fear, and shame in an other, or many others, thereby "passing the hot potato," insuring that these despicable defects and weaknesses are located and kept under control in an external other. The narcissist then obsessively corrects and punishes the other as a means of assuring himself that the shameful defects are taken on by the other, and thereby kept externalized. For the malignant narcissist to claim these defects as his own would mean unbearable mortification, which must be avoided at any cost. By making followers highly anxious about their status at all times, the narcissistic group leader is able to keep them dependent and afraid to leave. The followers accept endless shaming, belittling, intimidation, and scapegoating as the price of remaining in the leader's good graces on the road to purification and enlightenment. In so doing, the leader effectively conceals, as Elaine May was unable to do in the comedy sketch, the desperation and shame connected to his own underlying pathological dependency. Instead of conveying the message of May's analyst to their patients—"don't leave me, or I'll die"—Sullivanian therapists, in a manic reversal, literally said, "don't leave me, or *you'll* die." Thus, Sullivanian/Fourth Wall followers were repeatedly bullied into believing their only hope for redemption was to allow therapists to control them completely, and therapists were able to sadistically leverage their power, keeping patients tied to them at the juncture where madness and evil intersect. The cruel therapy practiced in the Sullivanian/Fourth Wall community amounted to nothing less than mental torture.

The malignant narcissist's project of domination and control often begins with fervor and idealism, but degenerates because of the narcissist's instability. Soon, the narcissist's perpetration of cruelty on others is justified as the necessary means to what he defines as a righteous end. Pathological narcissists create totalitarian systems (ranging in size from a dyad to a coalition of nations), in which their fear, rage, and hate, defended

against with delusional omnipotence, merge to shape a contemptuous agenda to enslave and control others, a project they passionately defend as morally justified, for the good of the other. The narcissist is convinced that his selfish, cruel agenda is in fact a generous, compassionate offer of enlightenment and liberation, conducted under his superior auspices for the benefit of the rest of the inferior world. With malignant narcissism, all is self-righteousness and sanctimony, but nothing is sacred, no boundaries are respected.²

The story of the Sullivanians, shameful as it may be, is a story that all of us interested in the postmodern problematization of the analyst's influence and authority should know. But our interest should not be merely academic. We psychoanalysts once believed that our theories could have a powerful effect on society, and during the time of Erich Fromm and Erik Erikson, that was the case. The Sullivanian project was one of the last gasps of that hope. The scope of our professional aims seems to have become a great deal more modest, a trend directly influenced by the crash-and-burn grandiosity and destructiveness of groups like the Sullivanians and other self-realization cults of the 1970s. It may be that the most valuable knowledge we as a profession can offer the world at this point is our understanding of the malignant narcissist. Perhaps such people would not be granted so much power if malignant narcissism were better understood. Of course, we can only bring this information to others to the extent that we understand it ourselves, and we can start by acknowledging and understanding its existence within our own profession.

Siskind's history of the Sullivanians might be a useful starting point, but the opportunity for psychoanalytic historians to analyze and study what went wrong remains wide open. It is my hope that the whole story, told by those still left within our profession who were there and who know what happened, and by more former patients willing to speak out about their experience, can be told. The extreme of malignant narcissistic pathology in therapists may seem far from the experience of most of us, but I believe it takes a great deal of consciousness and vigilance to do good enough psychoanalytic work that is free enough from the destructive potentials of our narcissism. Whether we realize it or not, much of

² If at this point the reader hears, in my description of the malignant narcissist, a speculative character analysis of G. W. Bush that would explain his rationale for the invasion of Iraq, the reader would be correct.

our therapeutic effort takes place on the proverbial razor's edge.³ Knowing more about the Sullivans could, at the very least, help remind us just how thin the line between influence and domination, surrender and submission, can be.

Siskind is to be thanked for using her experience of being raised in this group, and all that she has learned from leaving it, to bring thoughtful and thorough scholarship to bear on the history of the Sullivans. Though not intended specifically for this purpose, Siskind's study will be instructive to all of us who seek, not naively, but with eyes wide open, to preserve, nurture, and grow that which we believe to be good and true in psychoanalytic theory and practice.

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850 Seventh Avenue., Suite 906
 New York, NY 10019
 Shawdan@aol.com

³ *The Razor's Edge*, the title of a W. Somerset Maugham novel about a Westerner seeking enlightenment in India (there are also two film versions), is a phrase from the Katha Upanishad, referring to the danger of delusion inherent in any spiritual quest for enlightenment.