

# The Undergrowth of Thought



Quay brothers: *Street of Crocodiles*

## Part 2

### Point of Convergence

The presence of deception came to light in considering the confluence of two levels of thought under the motif on an *undergrowth* of thought. These can be lightly considered as the habitual and the strange. The former, functioning between the poles of rationality and irrationality, includes attitude, tends towards making sense of the external world and establishing a secure sense of identity and belonging and ranges between creative thinking of a high order and basic assumption group instinctive reacting, between considered judgements and cautious hypothesis and the inhabiting of entrenched positions, flying in the face of evidence and sitting in judgement of others. The latter level, which I have called the undergrowth of thought, is at variance with habitual safe thinking but possesses a force which, while experienced as a threat to security, is capable of amplifying and ushering in a more enduring sense of self.

Having stumbled upon Bruno Schulz in the way I did, I picked up *The Street of Crocodiles* and started to read it in earnest. Here I find frequent evocations of chinks through which the deeper stratum of experience breaks in, poetically or with the force of madness, and enriches, at the same time exposing the tawdriness of the habitual view of things,

One context Schulz uses to express what I have called the *chink* is the dimension of time. Here, in *August*: 'The suburban houses were sinking, windows and all, into the exuberant tangle of blossom in their little gardens. Overlooked by the light of day, weeds and wild flowers of all kinds luxuriated quietly, glad of the interval for dreams beyond the margin of time on the borders of an endless day' (Schulz, 1934, p.17), and again, 'In that old familiar smell was contained a marvellously simple synthesis of the life of those people, the distillation of their race, the quality of their blood, and the secret of their fate, imperceptibly mixed day by day with the passage of their own private time' (*op.cit.* p.19). Also he speaks of the deranged girl – 'Maria's time – the time imprisoned in her soul – had left her and – terribly real – filled the room,

vociferous and hellish in the bright silence of the morning, rising from the noisy mill of the clock like a cloud of bad flour, powdery flour, the stupid flower of madmen' (*ibid.*).

It is difficult to see Maria's madness as anything but a helpless conduit for the undergrowth of thought, and thus the concept of deception can be disposed of. Yet it may serve as an entrée into what the Quay brothers focus on in their film. I think the following may bridge the gap: my contention is that the zone of cross-over is the minute interval between dreaming and waking often covered by the thought 'it was only a dream'. The difficult dream or recurring nightmare has for the dreamer the sense of his being trapped in a confined place. He must return to a similar location time and again without the hope of getting away. Of course, there are many variations of this dream theme. Paradoxically the common aspect of there being no way out may be just what gives the opposite message. That is, the nightmare may provide the clues to its unfolding in wakefulness (Ariadne's thread) as well as the motivation to try to follow the thread mindfully. The paradox resides in the tendency of the nightmare, the glimpse of hell, to provide two categories of outcome. It may promote occasion for the inveterate acting out of a seemingly predetermined course. On the other hand, I believe it may afford clues to a process by which fate may be cheated. It is the genius of Schulz' condensed imagery that it can create the impression that the glimpse of hell and the promise of richness are not mutually exclusive, but in fact simultaneous..

Is there not a fatal misconception involved? To settle for the tricked-out dulled-down version of the claustrophobia of the nightmare (the tawdry and meretricious atmosphere of Schulz' *The Street of Crocodiles*. pp. 69-77) is indicative of a fatal misconception. Some form of falsification is involved – obscurantism, lack of imagination, defensive denial. Meltzer points to 'a banal category' [of personal myth or autobiography] namely, events in which the attention to the experience was so split or *diverted* [my italics] to fiction-formation that the unconscious processes were forestalled from operation' (Meltzer, 1986, p.92). This is the *mise-en-scène* of the Quay's film – the eclipse of fashion and the decay of its fabric and the means of replacing it and the need to find in that situation a decadent fascination. The self-deception is the unpoetic turning away contained, for example, in the phrase, 'it was only a dream'.

The equivocal nature of 'endless time' (*vide supra.*) and its *location* in the undergrowth of thought is symbolised in Bruno Schulz' piece *Pan*. It is set in a 'corner between the backs of sheds and outbuildings, a blind alley... the furthest ultimate cul-de-sac, hemmed in between the privy and the wall of the chicken-run – a dismal spot beyond which one could see no further... It was there that I saw him first and for the only time in my life... It was a moment when time, demented and wild, breaks away from the treadmill of events and like an escaping vagabond, runs shouting across the fields' (pp. 53-55). Confronted by the crouching form he writes he saw 'the face of a tramp. He both looked at me and did not – he saw me and did not see... strained in a transport of pain or the wild delight of inspiration' (*ibid.*). The demented figure jumped up and ran in his ragged clothes 'to his familiar haunts'.

A day or two before my conversation with J, I had read of the following exchange between two people. It arose from one of them recounting a dream about a cracked sweet jar. To consider the insight that followed the context would have to be known.

But it wasn't the insight so much as the condensation of the response that impressed me. While listening to the dream the other had a thought which at first he deemed silly. He found himself thinking of the old riddle, 'When is a door not a door?' Answer: when it's ajar' and in his mind this turned into, 'When is a jar not a jar?' Answer: When it's adored.'

Immediately after my conversation with J about Bruno Schulz I left and at the very moment I stepped out into the street, (with the front door ajar) a car whizzed past and I happened to notice the registration plate: JAR and that it was a Jaguar. 'When is a jar not a jar?' I thought. 'When it's a jaguar?' But any meaning I tried to give to this seemed to me to be completely artificial. Yet I had a distinct sense at that moment that here was a sign that a peculiar sequence was unfolding.

On my way to the centre the following day I was thinking about psychic defences as self-deception and how something unresponsive is covered over so that a sense of fulfilment or connectedness is forfeit, and once again about the priority between thought and feeling and how a thought can carry the dissatisfaction of the deceit. Meeting J again I asked her why she had mentioned Bruno Schulz. She answered that she thought it was the word 'fantastic' which she had used about her phone that had been the link.

'Phone!' I exclaimed, 'I thought you said *friend!* That's what I meant as having many connotations.' 'No, no, phone!' Then she said she was reading a book called *See Under Love*. Again I said, a little too promptly, I had read it but could not remember anything about it. In fact on reflection I had a faint memory of putting it aside unfinished having lost interest in the story. J was referring, she said, to a chapter in that book which, from what she said, I connected with Jung's 'night sea journey' and the Old Testament story of Jonah in the belly of the whale, which Jung uses as metaphor for his process of individuation.

The following night I had this dream: *Instead of making sure I was on time I devised a plan to improve the railway system in order not to miss trains at the station near where I grew up (Magdalen Green). My plan was to cut the control box in two leaving the half that stopped the trains and taking the other half to install at my destination. Armed with only a screwdriver and a saw I cut through the long yellow plastic box and waited to see the effect locally. The train approached, slowed to pull in to the station but did not stop. I was at once alarmed and rushed to try to reverse what I had done. What was going to be the knock-on effect? I imagined a catastrophe with trains crashing into one another. Already the papers and TV were covering the story that someone had sabotaged London Underground. I was panicking that I would be found out. Hundreds had been late for work and the cost to businesses was mounting. Then I realised with dismay that I was going for a therapy session when I would be challenged to admit what I had done. If I did not it would make a mockery of my therapy. I would be an impostor. I got out of the train at my destination and realised I was lost. I did not know the way to the consulting room.* Waking from this dream I realised that this was where my train of thought had been leading. What had been incomprehensible I now realised to be an intolerable sense of guilt over some sense of having destroyed what(?) – the transport system on which I depended to get me where I wanted to be on time. At heart I seemed to be confronted by a profound sense of self-deception I felt compelled to operate.

The following night I dreamed a dream with a fairly familiar theme. *I was in a gang that was about to commit a crime but I very much did not want to be party to it. Down the hill in the centre of the town the gang leader was sitting in his car monitoring what was going on up the street where I was and at once saw that I was about to break away. He accelerated up the hill. He seemed to be like Hitler in appearance. He ordered me into a building and the rest of the gang followed in. But as in a dream I was also outside and after some time saw a bedraggled figure emerge. It was obvious that he had been badly abused by the gang and there were telltale signs that a rape had taken place.* Now I understood that my defence against the terrifying and primitive sense of my destructiveness represented in the first dream and the deception encoded in the defence was like a humiliating rape of an aspiration towards openness.

Harold Rosenfeld develops a theory of the gang in the mind. 'The destructive narcissism of these patients appears often highly organised, as if one were dealing with a powerful gang [in the mind] dominated by a leader who controls all the members of the gang to see that they support one another in making the criminal destructive work more effective and powerful' (Rosenfeld, 1971, p. 249). The aspiration to get better is experienced as an attempt to escape from the clutches of the leader. 'To change, to receive help, implies weakness and is experienced as wrong or as failure by the destructive narcissistic organisation which provides the patient with his sense of his superiority' (*op.cit.*, p. 242). The compelling terror of this metaphor is the theme of films such as David Cronenberg's *A History of Violence*. Retribution for betrayal and defection is swift and brutal and is fired by envy of the aspiration to independence, and the ability to face the unconscious guilt, adumbrated in the dream of the transport system, which is, in fact another metaphor for the undergrowth of thought, envy too of a freedom that distinguishes beneficent from malignant dependence; envy does not allow for what is new or flowing and pretends a kind of omniscience ('Oh yes, I've read that!').

Rosenfeld draws a vivid picture of this ruthless delusional state of arrested infantile omnipotence, and further, points to how it becomes more entrenched when some progress takes place. 'When narcissistic patients of this type begin to make some progress and to form some dependent relationship to the analysis, severe negative therapeutic reactions occur...' (*ibid.*). The hegemony produces a state Rosenfeld describes as resembling primary narcissism, a powerful sense of being trapped and claustrophobic. What he is identifying are 'defused destructive impulses' against the realisation of which firm defences are mobilised, a compulsive omniscience, for example, that is a well established form of self-deception, or perverse structures which obviate the natural pains of dependence upon and trust of others.

In the first of the two dreams about the disruption of the transport system is an underlying persistent theme of a sense of loss of time, being late, displaced, failing to get to my destination. Instead of heeding this recurrent dream thought I apply a desperate remedy to it, which results in devastation. By ignoring the defensive valency (my own agency in the matter) in what I misrepresent as a series of unfortunate occurrences, missing the boat ('it always happens to me'), by 'taking matters into my own hands' I seek to defend against knowing about my tampering with the truth (what seems to lurk in the undergrowth) - turn my defence into a virtue. This is developed in the second dream I undergo some form of sexual abuse as punishment for my intention to defect from the criminal act of misrepresentation

(confront my own defence, or in terms of the dream, fly in the face of accepting the patronage of the gang leader). The rape is code for the besmearing effect of a defensive structure which in consciousness is exalted with ejaculatory fervour to a highly prized status, an exciting resort that eclipses awareness of the depredation, the loss of time, opportunity, urgency, represented in the first dream. In the logic of the raping dream the defence is turned into the punishment, a sign of the adept condensation of dream thoughts (cf. the day of the JAR).

My highlighting this *train* of thought begun in the earlier dream of the problem of coherence leads in process order to unmask the extent of an unconscious self-deception and to indicate a process akin to poetry, for poetry is the faculty by which personal meaning is arrived at, not logically reached, in the first instance, but by the imaginative capacity to be surprised. Keats called this 'negative capability'. In a letter to his brothers he wrote, 'Negative Capability that is when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason' (Keats, 1954, p.53) and in another of his many letters, 'The only way of strengthening one's intellect is to make up one's mind about nothing, to let the mind be a thoroughfare for all thoughts.' (*op.cit.* p.354). Something of Keats' 'nature magic' (Matthew Arnold's words) is close to Meltzer's thinking that 'strength of conviction... comes from the aesthetic component of the experience, the "beauty" with which the material and the formulation cohabit, blossom, fruit, as a thing apart from ourselves' (Meltzer, 1992, p.75), and elsewhere, 'emotional experiences which are worked upon by unconscious processes and distilled for their meaning become learning experiences which alter the personality... not factually recalled but may be reconstructed always with a sense of uncertainty about the facts, which, stripped of litigious significance, are not valued in themselves but from the meaning that was distilled from them' (Meltzer, 1986, p.92). At the start of the paper (*Facts and Fictions*) he remarks that 'all psychopathology could be said to be the consequence of self-deception... probably more correctly described, as Money-Kyrle has done, as enquiries into the sources of misconceptions' (*op.cit.* p. 83).

In his 'Cognitive Development' Roger Money-Kyrle writes: 'As my starting point, I take from Bion (1962, 1963) the notion of an "innate preoccupation mating with a realisation to form a conception"; and from Schlick (1925) the view that acquiring knowledge consists, not in being aware of sensory-emotional experience but in *recognizing* what it is.' (Money-Kyrle, 1968, p.418). In his paper Money-Kyrle sets out to stress the role of 'unconscious misconceptions and delusions' underlying mental disturbance. An innate preconception, he thinks, may be like a form waiting for a content and something a bit like a forgotten word. 'Various words suggest themselves to us which we have no hesitation in rejecting, till the right word occurs which we recognize immediately. I think this is what Bion means by an "empty thought"' (*ibid.*) Something is known, but not yet recognized. (Christopher Bollas talked about an 'unthought known'.) It can be communicated in some other way, for instance in dreams or what is transferred to another, such as an analyst, to be understood first by the other, if not simply to be evacuated. 'When a concept is not available to complete an act of recognition, its place is usually taken by a misconception.' (*op.cit.*, p.423).

It is that to which the train of thought started in the syntactical conflict has led, misconception, a self-delusion coded in an entrenched defensive system such as the

illusion of omniscience or shallowness or addiction or sexual perversion. It seems that defensive behaviour of what ever sort which stands in the way of what Keats called strengthening the intellect and Metzer, alteration of the personality, involves the closing of a gap through which the undergrowth can emerge and be worked on by unconscious processes evident in dreaming and thus, by cancelling the gap, a misconception persists to keep the dark interior of thought from upsetting a fragile compromise.

And so the last word in what is a constant process is accorded to attention to the chink. This spacial metaphor I would like to hold alongside that of time, namely speed. In a paper on lies Meltzer and Scotti write, 'Examination of the techniques of the pamphleteer and pornographer, the demagogue and the propagandist, suggests that what looks like high intelligence is in fact a compound of speed and negativism that dazzles the mind and interferes with rational honest thought' (Meltzer et al.1986, p.103). And on that note I shall pause to marvel at the mysterious and perhaps never-ending 'slow' process that challenges our relationship with truth with these words of Meltzer's 'our strength of conviction does not, I suggest, come from the wedding of insight and judgment. It comes rather from the aesthetic component of the experience, the "beauty" with which the material and the formulation cohabit, blossom and fruit, as a thing apart from ourselves... But we can notice times at which quite another process takes place in ourselves, one with which we can even confuse with inspiration... and I have come to think of it as "delusion of clarity of insight" It, too, bears offspring, but not ones of beauty. Its favourite child is called "sitting-in-judgment"' (Meltzer, 1992, p.75). Let that be the judge of this paper of mine.