



HAL
open science

**News and Notes: Autobiography of a Schizophrenic
(1951) and the postwar anti-psychiatric movement:
1946-51**

George Rousseau

► **To cite this version:**

George Rousseau. News and Notes: Autobiography of a Schizophrenic (1951) and the postwar anti-psychiatric movement: 1946-51. *History of Psychiatry*, 2008, 19 (1), pp.101-106. 10.1177/0957154X07085284 . hal-00570915

HAL Id: hal-00570915

<https://hal.science/hal-00570915>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



News and Notes

***Autobiography of a Schizophrenic* (1951) and the postwar anti-psychiatric movement: 1946–51**

GEORGE ROUSSEAU*

University of Oxford

Autobiography of a Schizophrenic, published in 1951, is one of the earliest examples of the fictional mental breakdown memoir written in English. Its unknown author should also be considered prophetic of the anti-psychiatry movement that would flourish a decade later in the 1960s. The anonymous author trusts to Christian salvation rather than humanism or nihilism, and thinks faith in God the schizophrenic's only secure remedy.

Keywords: *autobiography; schizophrenia; mental breakdown memoir*

The Radcliffe Science Library in Oxford holds a scarce copy of a little book containing sixty-four pages: *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic*.¹ Anonymously published in 1951 and printed by J. Baker and Son in the Mall in Clifton, Bristol, who may have catered to private clients rather than authors interested in reaching the reading public, the Library's copy has only been called up twice in six decades, and no one – from what I can discover – has ever commented on it in print. As a consequence the curious student must interpret it by other means. I briefly attempt that here through contextual analysis and the composition of its contents, especially the moment of its publication, and I intentionally present its contents before discussing its genre.

The *Autobiography's* first-person narrative evolves in linear time with approximately half the seventeen chapters containing brief descriptive headings such as: 'The Might Have Been' (ch. 3), 'Life at Oxford' (ch. 5) and 'Darkness

* *Address for correspondence:* Magdalen College, High Street, University of Oxford, Oxford OX1 4AU, UK. Email: george.rousseau@magd.ox.ac.uk

and Gesthesemane [*sic*]' (ch. 6). The narrator is one Ernest Cassalis (a fictional name without symbolic significance attached to the 'Cassalis' portion beyond the obvious one that 'casa' means home in many Romance languages and serious 'Ernest' perpetually searches for a loving home): a young man born to a 'respectable lawyer' father and 'flabby of disposition' mother (17)² whom Ernest dislikes. The family's domestic life is hollow – an emotional shell: its tyrannical father devoted to 'filthy Lucre' who decides his children's professions but neglects the rest of their lives. Ernest has two older sisters whose names are withheld, a younger sister called Hazel, an unnamed brother and their nanny Jane. Descended from farmers, the family is paradoxically portrayed as 'loving, English and Quaker' (4) despite the absence of affection at home, but we are never told where they live. The Cassalises are rich, they take their children on reading parties, and expensive holidays to the Swiss Alps. The first trait Ernest records about himself is that he 'must have been an ultra-sensitive boy' (3), followed by the revelation that he 'ought to have been a girl' (7), for 'I had the feminine temperament'. His childhood is ruled by parental reprimand and criticism, which stirs him to retreat to the 'Palaces of the Fairies' (8), where he indulges in wild delusions describing how it feels to be 'Ernest' – he proclaims his past and narrates these events sans the vivacity they deserve. It appears clear within the first ten pages that the narrator is confused rather than 'schizophrenic'. Indeed 'schizophrenic' may be the title of his autobiography but it is also a word that *never* appears in his sixty-four pages.

Ernest's health deteriorates after he is sent to a fictitious 'Rockton School' run by a headmaster possessed of 'an awful temper' (12) who persecutes him. The older boys also bully and abuse him. Ernest senses 'morbid feelings of my brain' (14) and concludes he is an 'hysteric' (19). At Oxford (the only real place name in his *Autobiography*) Ernest's room-mate is the oddly named 'Strangeways' – 'possessed of a good brain but morally rotten' (22), as is another classmate called Blenkinsop, also fictitious. 'Strangeways' is probably not allusive to the mental prison in Manchester despite a sensational execution there in May 1951 that had made national headlines. Ernest hears 'voices upbraiding him' and decides to kill himself:

My illness, as it was termed (& by this time I was rapidly becoming ill in earnest), was looked upon as a personal injury by my parents ... My Father could not or would not understand that I was not normal. The time came for me to return to Oxford. Ill both in body and mind I went back to try and get through the term's work. (23)

His parents learn of his suicide attempt and hospitalize Ernest, who grows resigned to his condition. He is swiftly incarcerated, which he attributes to the fact that 'in England lunacy is greatly on the increase, especially among the educated classes' and as the result of 'over-civilization [and] unhygienic marriages' (29) – not the type of claim, or distanced reflection, made by real schizophrenics.

Ernest's father visits him in hospital and takes him to London for the day. There Ernest tries to stab him but the sequence of events grows confusing: the father suddenly recedes and Ernest claims that he next 'awakened in a hospital – ... the beginning of a life of an insane man in captivity' (27). His 'new life' is in Parkfield Hospital (59), a fictional 'home' that Ernest describes variously as a prison and asylum where the patients could improve if only the nurses 'came from his own class' (29) – another odd observation for a putative schizophrenic. Meanwhile his mother's health has deteriorated, as has sister Hazel's, both of whom Ernest holds in contempt for unstated reasons. A consultant visits him but he 'is not a brain man' (31).

We have reached midpoint in the *Autobiography*; the second half deals with an Ernest who has fled reality to detail his dreams, which he writes down. While in the asylum's chapel he has heard the preacher's sermon and has a biblical awakening to an angelic 'fairy ... named Crystal' who rows him to different countries 'to meet the Great Father' (39–40). These places are described as zones of contrary states – 'Good' and 'Evil' (43) – many of them containing 'Holy Mountains, Holy teachers' and 'Holy Fathers' (44–5). The 'Holy Father' wears 'a girdle containing seven precious stones' of which one is presented to Ernest, who is required to depart the Father's dwelling at dawn. Crystal next takes him to a 'Dream Garden' containing orchards where 'Mother Love Spirit speaks' (50): 'I sorely wanted to have speech with you to hear from your own lips of all the difficulties you have to contend with and how to manage to fight on in the Earth World with the great cloud on your brain' (51). But the omniscient 'Mother Love' is stiff and impalpable, and as Ernest becomes devoted to her he alters: 'For weeks I have been unable to write' (52), and when she asks him to 'take up His Cross and follow wherever thou shalt be bidden to travel' (53), Ernest practically transforms himself into a card-carrying Christian.

In the remaining three chapters Ernest travels with Crystal to 'the Valley of Content' where he tells 'more than one-thousand people the story of my life' (56). While there, a cloud bursts into flames destroying the valley and its inhabitants. But the 'Great Father' remains silent about the cataclysm, as Ernest awakens in his asylum room and discovers this was only a 'dream'. He also dreams of travelling to tropical shores where natives perish in flames, to remote deserts where an Arab chief has converted to Christianity, and to the Azores where he persuades a native to return to his dying wife in England. The last chapter, the seventeenth, explores 'the sickness of the soul' (61–4) and recounts mystical dreams prophesying 'Love is all and Death is naught' (64). These are punctuated with comments such as Ernest's view that the clergy of England are no longer 'holy' (61), and his personal view that he became ill only after he had sinned ('When sin came I was a very derelict afloat on a limitless ocean', 63) and because his 'brain became affected' (63). At the end Ernest leaves Parkfield to commence a new Christian life. He may not be cured but somehow has been rescued and released.

It is all most confusing, but 'Ernest's' *Autobiography* is a rather disorganized fiction whose unknown author nevertheless deserves attention within the history of a genre (the mental breakdown memoir) rather than for any literary achievement. The book is easily dismissed, of course, as a would-be autobiography, parody or failed potboiler, but at the time of its composition in 1949–50 very few such memoirs of a 'schizophrenic' had been published in English – this is the salient point to make. And we err to remove it from its time and imagine that it appeared in 1961 or 1971 when the anti-psychiatry movement on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean was flourishing (Boyers and Orrill, 1972; Kotowicz, 1997; Tantam, 1991: 339) and the breakdown genre booming.

Indeed, at the time of its publication in 1951, R. D. Laing, for example, had just failed his exams at Glasgow University and was working as a houseman on a psychiatric ward; his best-selling *Divided Self* attacking the psychiatric profession would not be published for another nine years (Laing, 1960); the same year (1960–61) Thomas Szasz was writing his *Myth of Mental Illness* (Szasz, 1961), the first of his books stirring the anti-psychiatry campaign in the USA. Ken Kesey would not publish the *Cuckoo's Nest* for over a decade (Kesey, 1962). Also on this side of the ocean, historians of psychiatry Ida Macalpine and Richard Hunter had not yet published their landmark studies of Daniel Schreber and Christoph Haizmann, which came later that decade (Macalpine and Hunter, 1953, 1956), nor Gregory Bateson his account of *Perceval's Narrative* (Bateson, 1962). It is indeed tempting to forget how very few popular pronouncements about schizophrenia had been made in English outside professional medical circles in 1950; even Eugen Bleuler's studies of schizophrenia had only just appeared in English (Bleuler, 1950), and Margaret Naumburg's first one about 'schizophrenic art' – *art brut* – as an instrument capable of probing the schizophrenic's nether world (Naumburg, 1950). Non-specialist books about schizophrenia had been published in English by 1950 but only very few (Baynes 1949; Ogden 1947). Harry Stack Sullivan's *Schizophrenia as a Human Process* (Sullivan, 1950) had also just appeared, a bestseller soon to be discussed in Britain. Our anonymous author was thus brave to call his or her book the autobiography of a 'schizophrenic' in 1950–51 at a time when, for example, the death of Swiss psychiatrist Adolf Meyer was making international headlines and Michel Foucault was still a young student at the *École Normale Supérieure* and had, as yet, published nothing.

In the literary domain, mental breakdown narratives were then so scarce you could number them on two hands. The eighteen-year old Sylvia Plath was just entering Smith College and had not even contemplated the suicide attempts that would result in *The Bell Jar* published a decade later (Plath, 1963). Her reference to the mental breakdown genre as 'potboilers' was influenced by anti-psychiatry protests in the British press during the spring of 1962 (when she was living in London) of the campaign led by Laing, Szasz and Goffman (Boyers and Orrill, 1972; Goffman, 1961). Plath's view of these matters had been formed much

earlier: during the years clustered around 1946–50 when she was making sense of her father's death. During those post-war years, at the end of her adolescence, her own troubles attracted her to mental breakdown novels and memoirs, like our *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic*. For example, she read Mary Jane Ward's novel *The Snake Pit* (Ward, 1947) and cited it when she herself was breaking down (Stevenson, Merwin, Murphy and Myers, 1989: 154). She sympathized with its protagonist Virginia who also disintegrates and feels terrifically isolated (Butscher, 1976: 156). In her second year at Smith, Plath also read American novelist Shirley Jackson's (1916–65) breakdown novel *Hangsaman* (Jackson, 1951), the story of seventeen-year-old Natalie Waite who, like the biographical Plath, mercifully escaped her father's (mental) oppression by leaving home to attend college. Jackson was the wife of Professor Stanley Edgar Hyman, a distinguished American literary critic on the faculty of Bennington College, not far from Smith College. The couple was much discussed in Smith circles during 1950–51, and Plath may well have heard about Jackson's striking memoir of a schizophrenic breakdown there.

But in English, little more than this had been published by 1951. The scene was different just a few years later when first-person memoirs like W. L. Moore's *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic* (1955) appeared, and terrifically different a decade later when Laing, Szasz and Kesey (Kesey, 1962) launched their anti-psychiatry campaign (Boyers and Orrill, 1972; Tantam, 1991: 339–41). Yet in 1950, when our anonymous author wrote, there was no counter-movement, no campaign, just the constant long-term incarcerations in Anglo-America of mental patients in psychiatric hospitals (Lemert, 1951); and if we trust Mike Gorman (1956), who studied its asylums, 'every other bed' in American hospitals in the 1950s was filled by a mental patient. These are the contexts in which the anonymous *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic* should be considered: its non-schizophrenic author, the theme of religious solution to mental illness, the literature of breakdown and the anti-psychiatry movement it anticipates in the 1960s. The crucial element, however, is that mental breakdown memoirs and novels had barely begun to appear in English after the war. By 1960–62, the watershed years, they were pouring forth and were on their way to the schizophrenia boom they later became (Chung, Fulford and Graham, 2007; Murray, 2003; Navratil, 1994).

Note

1. Shelfmark 1535 e.437. The British Library copy appears to have disappeared; my limited search indicates there are no other copies in British libraries; I have not looked for the book among bookdealers.
2. Throughout my discussion I refer to the page numbers in the *Autobiography* in brackets, e.g., (4).

References

- Anonymous (1951) *Autobiography of a Schizophrenic* (n.p.; printed by J. Baker, Bristol).
- Bateson, G. (1962) *Perceval's Narrative: A Patient's Account of his Psychosis, 1830–1832* (London: The Hogarth Press).
- Baynes, H. G. (1949) *Mythology of the Soul: A Research into the Unconscious from Schizophrenic Dreams and Drawings* (London: Methuen).
- Bleuler, E. (1950) *Dementia Praecox; or, The group of Schizophrenias* (New York: International Universities Press); first English translation of the German book, originally published in 1911.
- Boyers, R. and Orrill, R. (1972) *Laing and Anti-Psychiatry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin).
- Butscher, E. (1976) *Sylvia Plath, Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury Press).
- Chung, M. C., Fulford, K. W. M. and Graham, G. (2007) *Reconceiving Schizophrenia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).
- Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums: Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books).
- Gorman, M. (1956) *Every Other Bed* (Cleveland: World Publishing).
- Jackson, S. (1951) *Hangsaman* (London: V. Gollancz).
- Kesey, K. (1962) *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest: A Novel* (London: Marion Boyars).
- Kotowicz, Z. (1997) *R. D. Laing and the Paths of Anti-Psychiatry* (London: Routledge).
- Laing, R. D. (1960) *The Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness* (London: Tavistock Publications).
- Lemert, E. M. (1951) *Social Pathology: A Systematic Approach to the Theory of Sociopathic Behavior* (New York: McGraw-Hill).
- Macalpine, I. and Hunter, R. A. (1953) *The Schreber Case: A Contribution to Schizophrenia, Hypochondria, and Psychosomatic Symptom-formation* (New York: n. p.).
- Macalpine, I. and Hunter, R. A. (1956) *Schizophrenia 1677: A Psychiatric Study of an Illustrated Autobiographical Record of Demoniacal Possession* (London: William Dawson & Sons).
- Moore, W. L. (1955) *The Mind in Chains: The Autobiography of a Schizophrenic* (Chicago: Exposition Press).
- Murray, N. (2003) *Memoirs of a Schizophrenic Goddess* (Los Angeles: IUniverse[sic]).
- Naumburg, M. (1950) *Schizophrenic Art: Its Meaning in Psychotherapy* (London: William Heinemann).
- Navratil, L. (1994) *Schizophrene Dichter* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer Taschenbuch).
- Ogdon, J. A. H. (1947) *The Kingdom of the Lost* (London: Bodley Head).
- Plath, S. (1963) *The Bell Jar* (London: Heinemann).
- Stevenson, A., Merwin, D., Murphy, R. and Myers, L. (1989) *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Faber).
- Sullivan, H. S. (1950) *Schizophrenia as a Human Process* (reprinted 1962; New York: W. W. Norton).
- Szasz, T. S. (1961) *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct* (New York: Dell).
- Tantam, D. (1991) The anti-psychiatry movement. In G. E. Berrios and H. Freeman (eds), *150 Years of British Psychiatry* (London: Gaskell), 333–47.
- Ward, M. J. (1947) *The Snake Pit* (London: n. p.).