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Book review: Trauma, tragedy, therapy. The arts and human suffering, Stephen K. Levine, Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2009

Original Citation

Dale, Heather (2010) Book review: Trauma, tragedy, therapy. The arts and human suffering, Stephen K. Levine, Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2009. *The Independent Practitioner*. p. 20.

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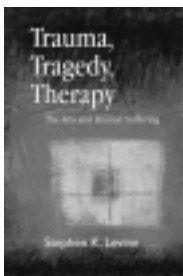
provides the individual with the freedom to represent their inner and outer world in the way they choose.

Sue Howlett, private group supervisor and independent researcher

Trauma, tragedy, therapy. The arts and human suffering

Stephen K Levine

Jessica Kingsley Publishers 2009
ISBN 978-1843105121 £18.99



No doubt, as the foreword states, this is a brilliant book. I also agree that I have never read a book like it in psychology. I could not find out who

the book is aimed at, but I think it must be written for an audience of very clever people. I am not a very clever person. This book, by pointing out my cultural, intellectual and academic inadequacies, makes my head reel.

It is a beautifully written book. The words flow like poetry. However, like some poetry, it is extremely difficult to understand. There are many unexplained Greek words, many references to Greek tragedies and to European philosophers, which make general assumptions of the reader's level of cultural, philosophical and academic understanding. Many of the points of reference that Levine assumes readers' familiarity with, were over my head. I am not sure whether this is due to cultural differences, as Levine is Canadian, or whether he is just too erudite for me. I suspect the latter.

Two central concepts of the book are *poiesis*, (which, if I have understood properly, refers to the process of creation, and is the root of the word poetry) and *mimesis* (which has a variety of meanings, including mimicry, the art of expression and presentation of self). These are not

concepts I had come across before, and it would have been helpful to have had a simple explanation very early on, as they are so central to the themes of the book.

These themes are about the making of trauma (that's *poiesis*) and how trauma mimics itself over and over (that's *mimesis*). Taking the Holocaust as his starting point, Levine attempts to offer a meaningful understanding of trauma and an explanation of how the expressive arts (poetry, singing, drama, dance, art, sculpture and music) can be used as a therapeutic framework, in which trauma can be understood and worked with.

His thesis is that trauma invokes a fragmentation of the human psyche, which leads to chaos. In truth, the book did seem rather chaotic, which may or may not be deliberate. Levine describes the book as a philosophical attempt to think about something (trauma) that defies understanding, and it becomes clear that the development of a philosophy is more important to him than the original idea of developing a framework with which to work therapeutically. His belief is that, in order to heal the wounds of trauma, we need to format a meaningful understanding (of trauma), and this is only possible through the expressive arts.

The book has three parts, in which the first is an introduction to what comes next, the second part develops the themes, and the third acts as an epilogue or postscript to what has come before.

The first part is a re-working of some of the themes from the author's journals, culled from years of writing. These begin with musings about the Holocaust and move on to a more developed interest in trauma. Levine is Jewish, and the Holocaust dominated his childhood, although it was never spoken about explicitly. Thus his interest in the forming and deconstruction of trauma. From this beginning, the book moves us back to ancient Greek myths,

forward to Freud and the French psychoanalyst Lacan, and forward again to post-modernism and beyond. In doing so, Levine is searching out evidence from the great thinkers throughout history that chaos is a necessary part of the human psyche; so necessary, that unless there is chaos there can be no order. Out of chaos comes form, and without chaos, form is not possible.

This theme is taken up, in particular in the second, and longest, part of the book (entitled 'Chaos into form'), which includes an extended interview with the artist, Ellen Levine, presumably a relative of the author, although there is no explanation for the reader of her importance in the field. This is lazy, if not on the part of the writer, then on the part of the editor. In this section, there is also a comparison of the work of the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty. Levine's point is that Lacan does not believe that the body can be a 'locus of healing' and Merleau-Ponty, like Levine, does. This is a little simplistic.

The last part of the book deals with the relationship between art and political action. This is quite a short section, in which Levine's only real conclusion is that, come the revolution, there should be room made for poets and other artists. In this part there is also a paean of praise for the Jewish French-Algerian philosopher Jacques Derrida, a hero of Levine's. Since I knew almost nothing of Derrida and his ideas before reading this book, a short explanation would have helped.

Levine has written a book for philosopher-poets. Those who love to search for meaning in a meaningless world will find much to ponder on in this book. However, in the end, it seems that it is full of sound and fury, without signifying very much at all.

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