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ANNUAL ISSUE

PROTEAN SELF

by John Briggs

DAVID SHAINBERG'S LIFE'S WORK was understanding and illuminating the problems and potential transformation of consciousness.

In the early years of his career, he carried out his investigation through the profession of psychiatry. In later years, he did it as a painter. The two were entirely congruent.

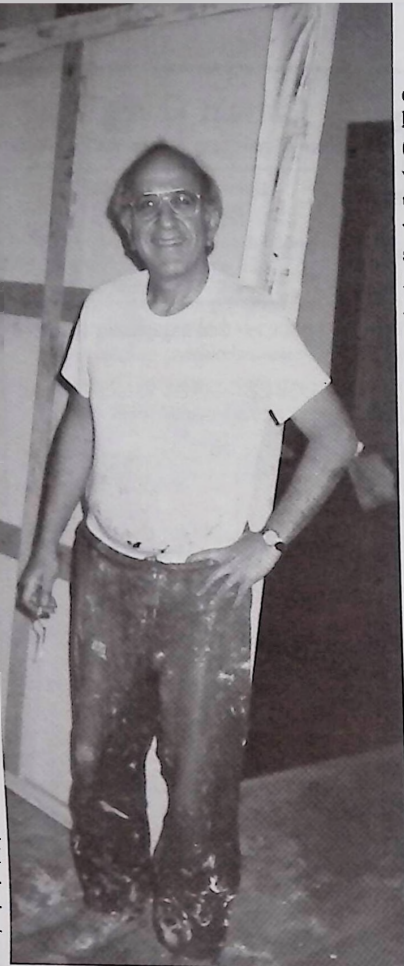
I first met David in the winter of 1970 when my father, a psychiatrist himself, took me to a brownstone on East 95th Street in New York for a meeting of the staff of a new journal David was founding for the American Academy of Psychoanalysis. David was eager to bring some radical revelations about consciousness to the psychiatric profession.

The Academy, as he called the newsletter, did just that, introducing readers to the ideas of holistic quantum theorist David Bohm, Indian philosopher J. Krishnamurti and to the emerging enthusiasm (now an established part of our culture) about Eastern and shamanistic mysticism and altered states of awareness. Shortly after I began to work with him on *The Academy* as its managing editor, I edited his book, *The Transforming Self: New Dimensions in Psychoanalytic Process*, which was published in 1973.

In that book David set out insights he would develop the rest of his life in papers, talks, dialogues, and unfinished book manuscript—and in the literally hundreds of paintings and drawings he completed in the decade after he quit his analytic practice.

The title of his book, *The Transforming Self*, was an accurate metaphor for David's whole approach to consciousness and self.

David viewed the self as a continuously emerging form rather than the expandable, long-term entity portrayed by modern psychology. One image he used, borrowed from Bohm, was the individual as a vortex in the stream of human consciousness—the self as a “fluctuating resonance.” He argued that our problem is that consciousness has played a trick on itself, cre-



ating the illusion that it is the self producing thoughts rather than thoughts that generate the self. He considered this illusion a very dangerous one that led to others.

In his writing, David drew an important distinction between a healthy, creative human consciousness and the pathological forms of consciousness he encountered as a psychiatrist. He made a significant, though generally unrecognized, contribution to psychiatric understanding by showing that most, if not all types of mental pathology are rigid forms of self that block the ongoing integration of consciousness with its environment.

One summer in the mid-1980s during my annual visit to David's house on Slough Pond in Truro I asked him to help me on a book I was writing by applying his approach to the persistent myth that creativity and psychopathology (inspiration and madness) are closely related to one another, even identical. One mellow Cape Cod afternoon after he had finished painting we sat in sunchairs on his deck overlooking the pond and far-off dunes—beyond which lay the ocean—and I set out the tape recorder. The dome of his forehead glowed softly in the milky light and his forearms and hands still bore a few daubs of paint. The spatters of paint which cov-

ered the floor of his studio, his running shoes, his clothes and the exposed parts of his body (especially his ears which he somehow missed when he washed up) always seemed to me a testimony to his complete immersion in his work and his impatience to be moving on. It seemed to fit with the fact that he ate meals faster than anyone I've ever known, not as late for an appointment but as if bursting through the inertia of one place into a new direction. As we talked he occasionally struck suddenly at a mosquito on his forehead with the flat of his palm as if just coming to an idea. In our talks his playful smile was always there, especially when he was stepping into someone else's process to see where it led. I reported this exchange in my book, *Fire in the Crucible*:

DS: Let's take psychosis as an extreme example of pathology, one that's often associated with creativity. One of the basic things that distinguishes psychotic perception and creative ones is the ability to test reality. The psychotic organizes his anxiety around one interpretation. He says, “They're poisoning me.” He reads every aspect of reality to fit that.

The creator, on the other hand, knows to expose places where his creative interpretation does work.

DS: More than that, in a state of omnivalence [a state in which the creator senses the immensity of multiple meanings and perceptions all existing together], you see that nothing works. There are things that imply working, that's all. I think omnivalence is the basic human state, a condition which we usually try to ignore. But if you're a creator, you don't ignore it. Your desire is to organize this omnivalence. But when you organize one part, you immediately have a relationship between that part and the whole rest of the universe. It draws you on. Compare that movement with the psychotic person who says, there's nothing else but this part. He refuses to see there's more, because anything else makes him anxious . . . I think we're all somewhat psychotic to the degree that we believe our world is complete.

David envisioned that a possible antidote to the illusions of consciousness and traps of the rigid self was a state of conscious awareness in which the observer recognized that it was what he observed. Perhaps for that very reason he gravitated naturally to making works of art—because art re-entangles (or rediscovers the entanglement) of observer and observed. He had speculated that we might experience a new kind of harmony with our environment if we could deeply grasp (which is to say, if consciousness could grasp) that the separation of subject and object is at best a momentary convenience and never an absolute fact. His paintings, with their environmental colors, were reminiscent of

gleams pulled from sunsets, forests, cloudy skies—abstract movements sprawling in objectless layers, waves and bursts of integrating energy. This work reflects the spontaneous, creative sort of harmony he envisioned. He wrote in *The Academy* to his psychiatric colleagues:

In the painting process I have found an opportunity to constantly challenge the nature of consciousness. For example, I see a tendency to become fixed into believing that a particular form, a particular color relationship, is sufficient. I see myself falling into satisfactions and attempting to paint pictures that match specific forms I recall from masters I admire. I most vividly become aware of these tendencies to get fixed or to imitate another when I look around the room or take a walk: I take another look at the picture and even though I might just the moment before have felt it was perfect, it now is apparent that it doesn't work. In an instant I see that the pattern of settling on a set of perceptions has blocked my view of the whole picture. I see the pleasure I took in a set; I see that I continued with it because the feeling of closure was so pleasant. In that instant, however, I see that I had not seen the painting and that there are many more aspects to it than I thought. I see new possibilities in the painting and feel connected to something larger than the painting.

I remember a night two summers ago driving to Provincetown with David and his wife, Catherine, and sitting in the glassed dining room at Pucci's on the bay. The tide was out. Tidal pools gleamed on the flats and the light on the houses along the rim of the bay was opalescent. I listened as David and Catherine carried on a quiet and somehow incredible conversation about the light in Provincetown and how he wanted to paint in that light. Outside I saw—the light upon the houses, the kids inspecting the tidal pools, the driftwood and tilted boats on the flats, the tops of distant dunes—an evening of solid transparency. We all knew then that he was sick: a runner who sat zazen and watched his breath, a man who had frequently written about the lungs as a metaphor for the complete integration of life. An auto-immune disease of the lung had begun to choke off his breath. It was ironic. But in his philosophy reality was inherently ironic. Catherine knew then he was dying and I was in the mode of avoiding that particular uncertainty. Nevertheless, I think that in that light I sensed his mortality. It was there in the patient and abiding light which he said with his wonderful enthusiasm that he loved and was greedy to paint. ■

JOHN BRIGGS, a professor of English at Connecticut State University and the New School for Social Research in New York, is the author of four books including *Fire in the Crucible* (St. Martin's).

lost friends

“I'll see you in two weeks”

by Sideo Fromboluti

THIS man was sometimes a psychiatrist, sometimes an artist. The one field requiring analysis, the other intuitive vision. One involved with humanity, reaching out to aid one's fellow man, the other self-searching, hoping that through knowing the self a contribution can be made to society. To live by such a pattern is burdensome. Add to this an intensity of purpose, and we have David Shainberg before us.

Before coming to art David was a respected professional who did not need to cast about. His office on Park Avenue was busy. Three books on psychiatry written by him sat on his shelves. Yet, for the last eight years of his life, courageously, as if facing the devil, he crossed over and painted passionately. He was indomitable. Where men's feet stuck fast, he plowed through. He burned with a quest to know, his mind forever churning with questions about what makes us tick. His wondering brought him into many philosophical areas, among them Hindu religion, yoga, and meditation. I cannot help but think of the humanitarian in Van Gogh, who, at the outset, wanted to be a missionary. He went out to help the poor, the potato eaters, a kind of psychiatrist, sympathizer, or aid to people with problems. The Dutchman never thought of painting until all avenues led him to it. God has made only one Van Gogh, but David has a kinship with his spirit.

Two ingredients are necessary to make a painting: feeling and analysis. One is the emotional force that speaks to you, the observer, the other is the structure the artist uses to make the painting speak. In time, I believe, these two needs dissolve and become intuition, a form of buried knowledge which rises to surprise the artist. For years David and I met every two weeks and I looked forward to these visits to his studio. Each time I was barraged with dozens of paintings, some covering the walls, some stacked waiting to be discussed. We had a wonderful time attacking the do's and don'ts. He had attached himself to the abstract expressionist school, a natural choice, with its attitudes of total release, one to one encounter with the canvas, and the free flow between you and it, leading to unforeseen discoveries. Magnificent colors, red, blue, green, yellow, the whole spectrum, poured vigorously from his brush. Strange configurations loomed under the crusty surface.

He craved the new and fresh and was thrilled by what his imagination revealed.

Dip yourself into his paintings and the expressive painter is present. I, as a painter, consider this a contribution. I sense his journey. The last four years of his life he suffered an incur-

able lung problem. A non-smoker, he told me in non-medical terms, “The body sometimes turns on itself and there is nothing I can do.” His bright colors took on a disturbing quality and some of the forms rising out of the paint were frightening. Undaunted he painted until he was taken to the hospital. I hope I could be as brave and dedicated under such pressure. Only a week before he went off to die he was discussing changes he meant to make on several canvases. The last time we met I said to him, “I'll see you in two weeks.” He answered, “Maybe we should make it sooner.” ■

SIDEO FROMBOLUTI is a painter who exhibits at Long Point Gallery in Provincetown.

A Painter's Lament

for David Shainberg

by Joan McD Miller

I know that work will save me but first I want to paint the inside of my house white, the chairs, the floors, the mirrors, everything a continuous white and out doors everything green, the houses, the tree trunks, the roads. Then I'll dip a brush in black and on all that white a gesture, a statement you can't miss, and on all that green I'll spill a bucket's worth of red and it will settle there as if it belongs. That's what I want, a black mark to say I am and a red splash to say I am a part of everything that falls apart. Then I will go to work with pale pinks and burnt oranges and not worry that form always misses the point.

JOAN MCD MILLER is an artist who has been writing poems about artists.

EDDIE

by Michael Lee

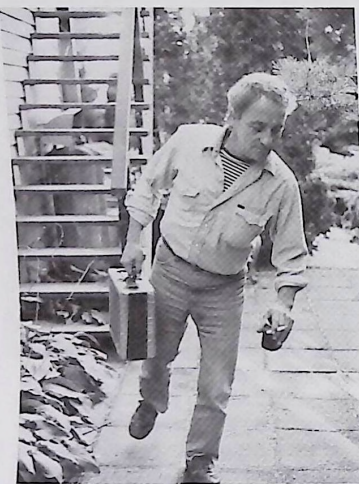
PHOTOGRAPHS BY LYNNE BURNS

The first time I meet Eddie in 1978 I want to fight him. Six or seven of us share a big house in Wellfleet off the highway. While the peepers chatter in the wetland on the edge of the property, we're into our third party of the week. Eddie is perched on a bar stool in the middle of our kitchen, his face fuzzy from wine and pot. But his body is poised to answer the bell for another round. Forget he's drinking my wine, forget he's draped all over my date. He has that fuck-you look that other volatile drunks take as a challenge. I hear him saying to her, "Right now, at this moment, you and I are the *only* ones in this room, the only people on earth. Look at me—the only ones." My girl friend looks like she's listening to Svengali and suddenly I don't want to fight him any more. I have to love a guy who can get away with that.

We meet officially at one of Pete Frawley's parties a few months later. Eddie doesn't remember me and that girl friend I had is long gone. "Pete tells me you write. It's got to be the most important thing to you," he says, as if we're the only two people on earth.

We become friends and Eddie visits daily. I see him marching through the snow up the hill, carrying his ubiquitous briefcase, a banged-up, scruffy box held together by duct tape. His work is never farther away than the length of his arm. We spend these slow gray mornings talking about writing and drinking coffee until we're both twitching. Eddie's perpetual cigarette fills the kitchen with a low cloud of smoke. His phrase for facing the blank page is "shaking hands with the devil," but sometimes the devil's grip is so firm he doesn't face the page. He works slowly, painfully, an end-of-sentence revisionist who doesn't go on to the next sentence until the one he's working on has the cadence and clarity he wants. Confidence in the work has to be achieved daily, which is why writers drink a lot, he tells me, pouring the first wine of the day.

After making one of life's end-of-an-era decisions—"I got too comfortable"—Eddie leaves the Cape, and soon his visits are less frequent. He moves in with old friends, Dick and Doris Goodwin, living in a carriage house on their property in Concord, then eventually winds up back in the house where he grew up in Savin Hill, a working-class suburb of Dorchester, with his aging mother. He sets up shop in his childhood bedroom and continues his search for the right words. We see each other sporadically and only when I come up to meet him at his water-



ing hole, Bulldogs, in Savin Hill. But we talk on the phone once a week and I send him stories that we hash over. He complains about his novel, the agony of it and how consumed he is with finishing it. "What's the rush, Eddie?" I ask him, knowing he can spend a week on a short paragraph. "No rush, really," he says. "Except for the cancer."

Eddie's in tough shape now and asks Pete Frawley to take him to the oncologist. They wait in a room with others who are filled with doom. When Eddie's name is called he stands up and hands Frawley his briefcase. Frawley shakes his head. "I'm not taking responsibility for that, Eddie," he says, remembering Hadley losing Hemingway's trunk, loaded with work. Eddie follows the nurse toward the examining room. She asks him what's in the briefcase that's so important and Eddie turns toward the patients, holds the case up for all to see, and says, "Plans for the next war."

When the phone buzzes in my ear, I'm scared. We both know this is a goodbye call.

"How are you?" he asks. "How's Kathy?"

"Great," I say.

"Marriage is a dangerous business for a writer," he says. "But I think it might work for you." He likes my wife because they sing Billie Holiday songs together so well it can break your heart if it's late enough in the evening.

"So, Eddie, how are you?"

Eddie chuckles into the phone. "I couldn't go but maybe three rounds."

"Eddie, I just want you to know what a difference you made."

"I didn't do shit," he says. "You're the one who picked up the pen and started working."

"I love you, Eddie," but my voice cracks.

"Well, that's different," he says. "I love you too." ■

MICHAEL LEE is a Wellfleet writer who teaches fiction at Cape Cod Community College in Hyannis.

Edward Bonetti 1929-1993

On Eddie's first collection of stories:

I WOULD EXPECT that an Indian carving a totem would give attention to each cut of his knife, and offer a prayer for every stroke that went with the grain and another for each chip across the grain. So it is with Edward Bonetti's work. He reminds me of Hemingway and Steinbeck. His material is his own (what material!), but there is the same sense of a workman's heart full of awe, dread, and private joy in every fearful word set down forever (what a grave act!) upon the page. I love this collection piece by piece and taken all together. I also think *The Wine Cellar*, but itself, is a work about Italians living in America that begins where *The Godfather* ends. This is not small praise, but then not all prose partakes of the breath of the author's life.

—NORMAN MAILER, 1977



At Eddie's memorial at the Beachcomber's in Provincetown, August, 1993
above: Norman Mailer and Richard Goodwin
below: Michael Lee reading



POEM

There is no central mourner
when the good poet dies,
but in his dying
you become him
and feel the pain he felt,
and for a while
the memory of him
will rob you of your pleasures.

—EDWARD BONETTI