

MICHAEL SCHARF

*An Unendurable Age: Notes on John Ashbery's "A Boy" from
Some Trees (1956)*

1.

“...Not your meaning of the word, but its meaning to the patient must govern its use. The latter must be most often constructed from the contexts in which the word occurs in the patient's productions. When there are no data to help in this procedure, we are but bucking ourselves up to talk about 'scattered speech,' incoherence and so forth. In general, it is wise to be very wary of conclusions based upon the use by a patient of words well known to be highly ambiguous, or very diffuse in reference.”

—Harry Stack Sullivan: “The Peculiarity of Thought in Schizophrenia” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 82 (1925-26): 21-86.

A Boy

I'll do what the raids suggest,
 Dad, and that other livid window,
 But the tide pushes an awful lot of monsters
 And I think it's my true fate.

*It had been raining but
 It had not been raining.*

No one could begin to mop up this particular mess.
 Thunder lay down in the heart.
 "My child, I love any vast electrical disturbance."
 Disturbance! Could the old man, face in the rainweed,

Ask more smuttily? By night it charged over plains,
 Driven from Dallas and Oregon, always *whither*,
Why not now? The boy seemed to have fallen
 From shelf to shelf of someone's rage.

That night it rained on the boxcars, explaining
 The thought of the pensive cabbage roses near the box-
 cars.

My boy. Isn't there something I asked you once?
 What happened? It's also farther to the corner
 Aboard the maple furniture. *He*
Couldn't lie. He'd tell 'em by their syntax.

But listen now in the flood.

They're throwing up behind the lines.

Dry fields of lightning rise to receive

The observer, the mincing flag. *An unendurable age.*

3.

Harry Stack Sullivan was Director of Clinical Research at Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Towson, Maryland from 1925 until 1930.

Using a microphone “concealed by an ornamental piece” on his desk, Sullivan recorded his analytic sessions with some patients. With “The Peculiarity of Thought in Schizophrenia,” Sullivan was the first to publish case histories that included long passages of transcribed schizophrenic discourse.

4.

“Well, you’re smoking . . . you’re burning . . . your building is burning down . . . symbolizes a cigar. . . . in my mind . . . it symbolizes man.

“I was . . . in there . . . shooting some pool . . . I was in there shooting French . . . and . . . I . . . touches . . . What’s his name put the 3-ball in the pocket.

“I slept with my brother ‘till after the war * * * that homosexual feeling H— spoke of. I’d tell him . . . anything, and . . . it seemed I got worse and worse. All our actions and talks were tensions between us, you see. It was on the morning of the eclipse . . . I was relating it to myself . . . and the morning it came, I was wild, I thought I was dying or something. * * * I was supposed to be in hell, I guess . . . and they had a language there; I’d hear things . . . I couldn’t smoke a cigarette or drink water.”

5.

In "Peculiarity," Sullivan describes the onset of schizophrenia as the failure of "adjustment" in young men.

For Sullivan, "factors" in 1920s American society conspired to "effect castration of the boy" who, "loaded with dogma completely divorced from his biological necessities," is "taught more or less clearly that his hand on his penis is his hand against God..."

The boy is thus "confronted by a problem of no mean proportions" and "[i]t is not strange that such boys attempt to carry on the late juvenile attitudes and to satisfy the new impulses by the stimuli obtainable from members of their own sex. But this usually requires, in our so advanced society, an infinity of rationalizations.

Sullivan's interpretation is in line with Freud's characterization of homosexuality as a kind of arrested development, but Sullivan adds a coda that suggests that what is at stake is more than "stimuli":

"Moreover, the homosexual love object all too frequently fails to 'stay put,' and the youth is subjected to one disappointment after another."

6.

DIAGNOSTIC AND STATISTICAL
MANUAL

MENTAL DISORDERS

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000-x20 SCHIZOPHRENIC REACTIONS

This term is synonymous with the formerly used term dementia praecox. It represents a group of psychotic reactions characterized by fundamental disturbances in reality relationships and concept formations, with affective, behavioral, and intellectual disturbances in varying degrees and mixture. The disorders are marked by strong tendency to retreat from reality, by emotional disharmony, unpredictable disturbances in stream of thought, regressive behavior, and in some, by a tendency to "deterioration." The predominant symptomatology will be the determining factor in classifying such patients into types.

000-x24 Schizophrenic reaction, paranoid type

This type of reaction is characterized by autistic, unrealistic thinking, with mental content composed chiefly of delusions of persecution, and/or grandeur, ideas of reference, and often hallucinations. It is often characterized by unpredictable behavior, with a fairly constant attitude of hostility and aggression. Excessive religiosity may be present with or without delusions of persecution. There may be an expansive delusional system of omnipotence, genius, or special ability. The systematized paranoid hypochondriacal states are included in this group.

000-x60 SOCIOPATHIC PERSONALITY DISTURBANCE

Individuals to be placed in this category are ill primarily in terms of society and of conformity with the prevailing cultural milieu, and not in terms of personal discomfort and relations with other individuals. However, sociopathic reactions are very often symptomatic of severe underlying personality disorder, neurosis, or psychosis, or occur as the result of organic brain injury or disease. Before a definitive diagnosis in this group is employed, strict attention must be paid to the possibility of the presence of a more primary personality disturbance; such underlying disturbance will be diagnosed when recognized. Reactions will be differentiated as defined below.

000-x63 Sexual deviation

This diagnosis is reserved for deviant sexuality which is not symptomatic of more extensive syndromes, such as schizophrenic and obsessional reactions.

The term includes most of the cases formerly classed as "psychopathic personality with pathologic sexuality." The diagnosis will specify the type of the pathologic behavior, such as homosexuality, transvestism, pedophilia, fetishism and sexual sadism (including rape, sexual assault, mutilation).

7.

Section 000-x63 of DSM I reserves a diagnosis of “deviant sexuality” for “patients” who exhibit “homosexuality” that is not related to “more extensive syndromes, such as schizophrenia and obsessional reactions,” of which “homosexuality” is also seen as part.

8.

John Ashbery's "A Boy" can be read as an ironic comment on the American midcentury's tying together of homosexuality and schizophrenia: "*He/ Couldn't lie*. He'd tell 'em by their syntax."

Italics as voiceover. Voiceover as normative.

9.

According John Shoptaw, John Ashbery wrote "A Boy" after seeing John Huston's film adaptation of *The Red Badge of Courage* (1951). The film, which stars a young Audie Murphy, is a movie about adjustment.

10.

Voiceover at film's beginning:

“Stephen Crane wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* in 1894. From the moment it was published, it was accepted by critics and public alike as a classic story of war, and of the boys and men who fought war. Stephen Crane wrote his book when he was a boy of 22. Its publication made him a man. Its story is of a boy who, frightened, went into a battle and came out of it... a man with courage. More than that, it is a story of many frightened boys who went into a great Civil War and came out... as a nation, of united, strong, and free men.”

11.

From the SparkNotes *Red Badge of Courage* plot summary:

A tall soldier named Jim Conklin spreads a rumor that the army will soon march. Henry Fleming, a recent recruit with this 304th Regiment, worries about his courage. He fears that if he were to see battle, he might run. The narrator reveals that Henry joined the army because he was drawn to the glory of military conflict. Since the time he joined, however, the army has merely been waiting for engagement.

Eventually they approach a battlefield and begin to hear the distant roar of conflict. Henry, boxed in by his fellow soldiers, realizes that he could not run even if he wanted to. He fires mechanically, feeling like a cog in a machine.

The blue (Union) regiment defeats the gray (Confederate) soldiers, and the victors congratulate one another. Henry wakes from a brief nap to find that the enemy is again charging his regiment. Terror overtakes him this time and he leaps up and flees the line.

As he scampers across the landscape, he tells himself that made the right decision, that his regiment could not have won, and that the men who remained to fight were fools. He passes a general on horseback and overhears the commander saying that the regiment has held back the enemy charge.

Ashamed of his cowardice, Henry tries to convince himself that he was right to preserve his own life to do so. He wanders through a forest glade in which he encounters the decaying corpse of a soldier. Shaken, he hurries away.

After a time, Henry joins a column of wounded soldiers winding down the road. He is deeply envious of these men, thinking that a wound is like “a red badge of courage”—visible proof of valorous behavior.

He meets a tattered man who has been shot twice and who speaks proudly of the fact that his regiment did not flee. He repeatedly asks Henry where he is wounded, which makes Henry deeply uncomfortable and compels him to hurry away to a different part of the column.

He meets a spectral soldier with a distant, numb look on his face. Henry eventually recognizes the man as a badly wounded Jim Conklin. Henry promises to take care of Jim, but Jim runs from the line into a small grove of bushes where Henry and the tattered man watch him die.

Henry and the tattered soldier wander through the woods. Henry hears the rumble of combat in the distance. The tattered soldier continues to ask Henry about his wound, even as his own health visibly worsens. At last, Henry is unable to bear the tattered man’s questioning and abandons him to die in the forest.

Henry continues to wander until he finds himself close enough to the battlefield to be able to watch some of the fighting. He sees a blue regiment in retreat and attempts to stop the soldiers to find out what has happened. One of the fleeing men hits him on the head with a rifle, opening a bloody gash on Henry’s head.

Eventually, another soldier leads Henry to his regiment’s camp, where Henry is reunited with his companions. His friend Wilson, believing that Henry has been shot, cares for him tenderly.

The next day, the regiment proceeds back to the battlefield. Henry fights like a lion. Thinking of Jim Conklin, he vents his rage against the enemy soldiers. In an ensuing

charge, the regiment's color bearer falls. Henry takes the flag and carries it proudly before the regiment.

The group is sent into more fighting, and Henry continues to carry the flag. The regiment charges a group of enemy soldiers fortified behind a fence, and, after a pitched battle, wins the fence.

As he and the others march back to their position, Henry reflects on his experiences in the war. Though he revels in his recent success in battle, he feels deeply ashamed of his behavior the previous day, especially his abandonment of the tattered man.

But after a moment, he puts his guilt behind him and realizes that he has come through "the red sickness" of battle. He is now able to look forward to peace, feeling a quiet, steady manhood within himself.

12.

Within schizophrenia, Sullivan argues, language has a “peculiar” relationship to thought, being simultaneously the means of association and dissociation in interpersonal relationships. If a shared language is part of the social contract, then the schizophrenic's inability to produce discourse conforming to expectations of exchange is major source of his or her estrangement.

13.

Shoptaw calls "A Boy" "a tense encounter in which patriarchal and nationalist pressures are deflected." He finds this deflection particularly in the deployment of "the homophonic, homophobic stereotype audible in [the poem's] last line," where we hear "mincing fag" for what's actually there: "mincing flag."

Shoptaw points to "flag" as a "crypt" word. Such "cryptography," he argues, "cannot be equated with concealment." That is particularly true given the extent to which crude neo-Freudian interpretation, where "this" really means "that," had become part of American popular culture, particularly as it pertained to homosexuality.

Holden Caulfield, for example, sees signs of homosexuality everywhere *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951). Recall Carl Luce explaining to Holden that Luce's analyst father had helped Luce make certain "adjustments," along with Holden's suspicions that Luce was a "flit" to begin with. Sullivan's analysis of schizophrenic discourse, which was well-intentioned, helped create that equation.

In the poem, the signs are intentionally exaggerated. The third stanza's "vast electrical disturbance" parodies camp Victoriana, as an older queen winkingly propositions the boy, who delivers the next line as a knowing twink.

14.

If to be “homosexual” in the mid-20th century U.S. was to have a pathology, one associated with schizophrenia, then a deliberate display of schizophrenia’s characteristic linguistic manifestation is a form of resistance.

Shoptaw writes that “[the poem] finally raises the white badge of cowardice. The author behind these strange lines never quite surrenders them to understanding.”

But as “patriarchal and nationalist pressures” come to bear on the boy, he must pony up his identity in language as if to a house subcommittee.

The non-accretive discourse of “A Boy” resembles the schizophrenic discourse published and evaluated by Sullivan. The poem tells its readers to locate its queerness there—to tell it by its syntax.

An Unendurable age” is a double-entendre covering the boy's adolescence and the homophobic culture of early-50's America.

15.

The poem's critique of adjustment is accomplished through its style.