The Devil's Castle - Who is truly mad?
Review by Eva Goedendorp

Writing a review of a book that addresses the history of eugenics is no easy undertaking - particularly when the work in question is as beautifully composed as Susanne Paola Antonetta's *The Devil's Castle*. Its prose is elegant, its sentences exquisite, and its subject matter unflinching. How might one do justice, in words, to a book that reconstructs with such care the entangled history of eugenics and psychiatry?

Antonetta situates her narrative around Sonnenstein, the former asylum also known as "the Devil's Castle." Once celebrated as a cradle of "moral treatment" (*traitement moral*), inspired by Pinel's revolutionary psychiatry, Sonnenstein later became infamous as a site of Nazi extermination. Its trajectory exemplifies psychiatry's capacity to deviate devastatingly from its humanistic ideals.

The story unfolds partly through the experiences of two patients, Paul Schreber and Dorothea Buck, whose lives illustrate psychiatry's transformations across centuries. A history that has never unfolded in linear fashion, as the book makes clear: "psychiatry has never been a linear medicine" (p. 52).

Pinel and the Origins of Moral Treatment

A full chapter is devoted to Philippe Pinel, beginning with his 1794 declaration that madness was curable and that the "insane" were not only human, but "among the best people he had ever known." This view starkly opposed the brutal practices of the time: chaining, starving, bloodletting, and cauterisation. Together with Jean-Baptiste Pussin, Pinel implemented reforms at the Bicêtre asylum in Paris, liberating patients from shackles, improving diet, and introducing a humane and psychological approach later known as *traitement moral*. He insisted that the patient's mind should be understood within the context of a life lived—that their "hopes and dreams" were indispensable to recovery. Work therapy, including gardening and sewing, was part of this vision of meaningful, restorative care.

Pinel's ideas influenced William Tuke in England, who established the Quaker Retreat in York, as well as American reformers such as Benjamin Rush and Dorothea Dix. Through such figures, psychiatry entered a new age in what Antonetta calls an "atmosphere of reform," with hope and individual dignity at its centre.

Sonnenstein's Transformation

Among Pinel's students was Ernst Gottlob Pienitz, who transformed the Sonnenstein asylum in Saxony in 1811 into what was regarded as a "summit of Europe" in humane psychiatric care. Patients had airy rooms, nourishing food, access to music rooms, gardens. Within a year, Pienitz could release a quarter of his patients as "fully cured." His gentle attentiveness to patients became a model for many physicians.

Antonetta underscores the bitter contrast between these ideals and today's "average 20-minute medication check," which leaves little room for the complexity of inner life. Ironically, Pinel's classificatory systems, meant to deepen understanding of madness, later fed into reductive distinctions between mind and body - culminating in the development of neuroleptics, drugs intended to "drive out the devil."

Yet the promise of moral treatment dwindled in the nineteenth century under financial pressures. By the time Paul Schreber entered Sonnenstein under director Guido Weber, the asylum had become overcrowded and oppressive - a far cry from Pienitz's humane vision.

Schreber's Case

Paul Schreber (1842–1911), a distinguished judge, voluntarily admitted himself to a clinic for the second time in 1893, for what became a nine-year stay. He suffered from anxiety, depression and severe sleep disturbances. During his confinement he began to experience complex visions and delusions of 'nerve-rays' and of his own transformation into a woman (p. 58). He would later write about these experiences in his *Memoirs of My Nervous Illness*. In these memoirs Schreber depicts the clinic's psychiatrist, Flechsig, as a "soul murderer," whose controversial methods left him deeply traumatised. After seven months Schreber was transferred to the state asylum at Sonnenstein, which under the directorship of Guido Weber had degenerated into an overcrowded warehouse reeking of bodies—far removed from the humanistic ideals of its founder, Ernst Pienitz. It was here that voices told Schreber that he had entered "the Devil's Castle".

Guido Weber is portrayed by Antonetta as a physician who sought Schreber's lifelong confinement, motivated in part by the considerable fees that Schreber was required to pay for his stay. Weber ignored Schreber's complaints of abuse by staff, focusing instead on what he termed his "pathological shell" - his outbursts of shouting at the sun and his gender transition, which Weber regarded as signs of madness. Schreber's insanity, however, carried within it, in his own view, a kernel of objective truth. As the reader comes to see, this is not an altogether implausible claim. Certain experiences will never be fully comprehensible to others, a philosophical dilemma Antonetta captures in a single, striking sentence: "the start of an understanding of Schreber is to be a Schreber" (p. 73).

Paul Schreber fought against his lifelong confinement and ultimately won his case in 1902, after dismissing his lawyer and representing himself. "He became the great advocate of the madman" (p. 72). His central argument was that any person confined to an institution who seeks release should be freed if he poses no danger to himself or to others. In doing so, he proposed the legal category of "harmless madness."

Dorothea Buck

Another prominent figure in the book is Dorothea Buck (1917 – 2019). At the age of nineteen she experienced her first psychosis, accompanied by a sense of rebirth, which led her family to send her to a psychiatric institution. Buck, too, endured deeply traumatic experiences during her stay there, some of which are recounted in the book, and as a reader one can vividly imagine her suffering as well as her acts.

Her dream was to become a teacher, but under Nazi law she was forcibly sterilised, which destroyed not only her prospects of marriage but also her professional aspirations. For Buck, psychosis was both cognitive and sensorial: she once described how an ordinary blanket, when touched by a nurse, felt as though it burned her skin. She regarded her psychosis as a kind of liberation and remained religious, though she demanded of God that he act as her partner in the "humanising of the world" (p. 96). Her insights were often profound; Antonetta cites Buck, for instance, as saying: "To be healed one must understand and process what one has experienced" (p. 103). Yet a succession of medications limited her capacity to work through and heal from her ordeals. She linked psychosis to the unconscious and to dreams - 'eruptions into waking thought,' as Antonetta puts it. And she adds, with philosophical elegance: "This existent world isn't subject to ordinary language or the demands of ordinary

life. To find it strange is simply to not know it. It’s a world as real as any and, I’ll add, often far more kind" (p. 110).

Dorothea Buck suffered several psychoses, the fifth and final marked also the abrupt end of her art studies. During this episode, her *Elementary Language* erupted, granting her profound insights into the sound patterns of her mother tongue, German. She experienced visions of human actions that ravaged the climate, of a planet undoing itself. She wrote letters to professors, issuing warnings, and was subsequently admitted to the psychiatric hospital again. Had one been able to peer into the future around 1959, one might have foreseen that such visions could, in 2025, verge on reality.

Yet the hospitalization was far from inconsequential. Within its confines, she began to converse with fellow patients about their psychotic experiences. These exchanges would sow the seeds of what later became Buck's psychosis seminars and the *trialogue*, a dialogue in which patients, families, and clinicians speak as equals. During one of her admissions, she overheard hints of the euthanasia program but could scarcely believe it. People spoke of "useless eaters," yet only during the Eichmann trial in 1961 did she grasp the full reality of the T4 euthanasia program. The systematic killing of disabled and neuropsychiatric children, and later adults, became known as Aktion T4.

Eugenics and Aktion T4

The Nazi Aktion T4 program emerged from the idea of eugenics, a notion introduced in 1883 by Francis Galton, a nephew of Charles Darwin. Its literal sense - "of good birth" or "good germ-plasm" - belied a political rationale: Galton believed that directed reproduction might be an inevitable corollary to Darwin’s doctrine of the survival of the fittest. By encouraging the 'fittest' to procreate (positive eugenics) and by curbing the fertility of the 'less fit' (negative eugenics), the argument ran, the stock of good germ-plasm in the population could be increased.

The eugenics movement had already flowered in the United States before the First World War. In 1911 the Carnegie Institution in America commissioned a report proposing remedies to purge “defective germ-plasm,” and euthanasia by gas appeared as the eighth item on its list. These developments across the Atlantic exerted a clear influence on Adolf Hitler. A pivotal text that radicalized eugenic thought was *Permitting the Destruction of Life Unworthy of Life* (1920), by jurist Karl Binding and psychiatrist Alfred Hoche. The book advocated killing those deemed "*geistig tot*" - mentally dead - notably children, and it invoked the disposable human losses of the First World War as justification. It became a handbook for the Nazi euthanasia program.

Their logic was chillingly syllogistic: if suicide is legally permissible, then assisted suicide is permissible; if assisted suicide is permissible, then it is permissible to help end the life of someone who cannot request it but might wish for death; and if that is lawful, so too - by the same reasoning - would be killing those who refuse death but whose minds can be defined as "dead." (p.77) Antonetta traces how eugenic reasoning slid from sterilization to the mass killing of minorities in both the U.S. and Germany, all under the veneer of rational policy, justified by hereditary labels - criminality, alcoholism, epilepsy, feeble-mindedness, or idiots. The category feeble-minded remained notoriously vague and all-embracing; its definitional emptiness was precisely its power.

Binding and Hoche introduced concepts such as *dasein ohne leben* (existence without life) and *geistig tot* (mentally dead) and their book became a source of inspiration for Hitler. Another figure whose ideas profoundly influenced him was Emil Kraepelin, the German

influential psychiatrist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Kraepelin himself was a eugenicist and an anti-Semite, a proponent of the theory of "social degeneration." He argued that "bad germ-plasm" threatened the population, and his psychiatry cannot be disentangled from its eugenic foundation. He saw faulty brain function as the origin of mental differences and believed that Jews possessed a natural predisposition to mental illness and a tendency toward psychopathy.

Kraepelin, known today as the 'father of modern psychiatry', supported forced sterilization rather than euthanasia, yet he trained individuals who would become the worst Nazi doctors, executing mass killings that included Germany's own mentally ill. The war itself served as a pretext to exterminate mental patients within the country. Who, then, is truly insane?

In *The Devil's Castle* one reads with near-horrific clarity how children in school were given arithmetic problems comparing the costs of constructing asylums with ordinary houses. The author convincingly demonstrates that ordinary people can commit terrible acts without demur. The book also documents the language Nazi doctors employed in court to describe their deeds: gas chambers were "shower rooms", euthanasia was "putting them to sleep", a form of "salvation".

The author of *The Devil's Castle*, Susanne Paola Antonetta, weaves her own experiences with mental illness throughout the narrative. This writing style creates a bridge between past and present, and shows that many questions remain urgently relevant. She advocates for a humanistic approach, echoing Pinel, emphasizing the importance of attempting to understand patients. Antonetta is critical of the DSM: "reading through the DSM, I cannot think of a single person who couldn't be diagnosed with a major disorder and put on antipsychotics" (p. 223).

At times, she describes in meticulous detail what a psychosis feels like for her, or how certain phenomena operate. She often draws parallels with the experiences of Buck or Schreber, making the book resonant for readers that are themselves acquainted with experiences in psychiatry. Consider the psychosis paradox she describes: she cannot visualize the chickadees, yet she hears in her mind their voices saying, "six degrees." She sees the birds every day but still does not know what they look like, even after consulting Google, and she immediately forgets again. At the same time, perhaps every human experiences this, to some degree. Antonetta raises a profoundly relevant question: "what are psychiatric diagnoses if they can suddenly disappear?" And who is truly mad: the individual who has relinquished independent thought, blindly following the crowd without remorse for their actions, or does madness exist along a continuum, encompassing shades between full autonomy and total submission? Susanne Antonetta convincingly demonstrates in this book that there are no simple answers to these questions, and delivers a story that shows the importance of a psychiatry based on the experiences of those with lived experience.

Eva Goedendorp studied French studies, and works as expert by experience.

The Devil's Castle. Nazi Eugenics, Euthanasia, and How Psychiatry's Troubled History Reverberates Today. Counterpoint, 256 pages, see here.