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## PSYCHOBABBLE

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WHILE HAVING DRINKS a couple of years ago with a young woman I had not seen for some time, I asked how things were going and received this reply: "I've really been getting in touch with myself lately. I've struck some really deep chords." I winced at the grandeur of her remarks, but she proceeded, undaunted, to reel out a string of broad psychological insights with an enthusiasm attributable less to the Tequila Sunrise sitting before her than to the confessional spirit sweeping America.

I kept thinking I was disappointing her with my failure to introduce more lyricism and intensity into my own conversation. Now that circumspection and reticence had gone out of style, I felt obligated to reciprocate her candor but couldn't bring myself to use the popular catchphrases of revelation.

Would she understand if I said that instead of striking deep chords I had merely tickled the ivories of my psychic piano? That getting my head together was not exactly the way in which I wished to describe the sensation from my neck up? Would it, I wondered, do any good if I resorted to more precise clinical language and admitted that I was well on the way to resolving my attitude toward my maternal introject?

"Whenever I see you," she said brightly, "it makes me feel so good inside. It's a real high-energy experience."

So what was wrong with me that I couldn't feel the full voltage of our contact? Unable to match her incandescence, I muttered, "Yes, it's good to see you," then fell silent.

Finally, she said, her beatific smile widening, "But I can really dig your silence. If you're bummed out, that's okay."

If anything characterizes the cultural life of the seventies in America, it is an insistence on preventing failures of communication. Everything must now be spoken. The Kinsey report, Masters and Johnson, *The Joy of Sex* and its derivatives; the *Playboy Advisor*, the *Penthouse Forum*, *Oui's Sex Tapes*; contraception; the Esalen ethos and the human potential movement; the democratization of psychotherapy; the suspicion that technology and imperialism have rendered us incapable of something called "feeling," a shortcoming everyone is aggressively engaged in correcting—all these various oils have helped lubricate the national tongue. It's as if the full bladder of civilization's squeamishness had burst (though hardly for the first time). The sexual revolution, this therapeutic age, has culminated in one profuse, steady stream of self-revelation, confessed profligacy, and publicized domestic and intrapsychic trauma.

It seems that everyone belongs to the cult of candor these days and that everyone speaks the same dialect. Are you relating? Good. Are you getting in touch with yourself? Fine.

## PSYCHOBABBLE

Exactly how heavy are those changes you're going through? Doing your own thing? (Or are you, by some mistake, doing someone else's?) Is your head screwed on straight? Are you going to get your act together, or just your shit? Are you mind-fucked, or just engaged in cortical foreplay? Are you a whole person or only a fraction thereof?

One hears it everywhere, like endless panels of a Jules Feiffer cartoon. In restaurants, distraught lovers lament, "I just wish I could get into your head." A man on a bus turns to his companion and says, "I just got back from the Coast. What a different headset!" The latest reports from a declining Esalen provide us with new punch lines: a group leader there intones that "it's beautiful if you're unhappy. Go with the feeling. . . . You gotta be you 'cause you're you and you gotta be, and besides, if you aren't gonna be you who else's gonna be you, honey? . . . This is the Aquarian Age and the time to be yourself, to love one's beauty, to go with one's process."

It's apparent that we can't proceed any further without a name for this institutionalized garrulousness, this psychological patter, this need to catalogue the ego's condition. Let's call it psychobabble, this spirit which now tyrannizes conversation in the seventies. Psychobabble is difficult to avoid and there is often an embarrassment involved in not using it, somewhat akin to the mild humiliation experienced by American tourists in Paris who cannot speak the native tongue. Psychobabble is now spoken by magazine editors, management consultants, sandal makers, tool and die workers, chiefs of state, Ph.D.s in clinical psychology, and just about everyone else.

In the sixties, sociologist Philip Rieff developed a theory about "Psychological Man," the dominant mid-twentieth-century figure who, finding traditional sorts of faith no longer useful, turned to himself under the auspices of modern psy-

chology. He became a victim of his own interminable introspection, and acquired the belief that "a sense of well-being has become the end, rather than a by-product of striving after some superior communal end." The idea of a new style of human being, one whose existence is geared to the avoidance of affliction, became evident even at the end of the last century, as historian Donald Meyer has pointed out. But this Psychological Man has regressed in the seventies to an adolescent—not just the victim of interminable introspection but also the victim of his own inability to describe human behavior with anything but platitudes. One psychoanalyst, who has observed the ascendancy of therapeutic interest over the course of several decades, takes its measure in the fact that "virtually everyone who is touched by psychoanalysis identifies with it and soon wants to become a therapist himself. Eventually there will be one fantastic group, like a therapeutic chain letter. Ultimately, all these different therapies will look the same and everyone will say 'Fuck it' and then get back to the basics, like how to feed the world."

Yes, but until then we have psychobabble. Its more specific origins can perhaps only be hinted at. On one level, it seems to have emerged toward the end of the sixties, distilled from the dying radical/liberal dialects of activism and confrontation, absorbing some black ghetto phrases along the way. But its roots are also firmly planted in the language of the human potential movement with its Fritz Perls of wisdom. One of psychobabble's problems is its insistence on interpreting the individual's history and history in general as the result of *conscious* choices; in this, psychobabble has fed both on the tendency toward shallow political analysis and sloganeering that was certainly one feature of the sixties counterculture as well as on the human potential movement with its emphasis on ego psychology at the expense of a deeper, psychodynamic critique.

## PSYCHOBABBLE

Political activism was acquiring more and more of a therapeutic cast toward the end of the sixties, particularly as the left fragmented and the great communal causes splintered into smaller, more idiosyncratic crusades. Many radical battles, once fought exclusively in the real political world, were now being enacted in the individual psyche. T-groups, encounter groups, sensitivity training, group gropes, psychodrama, and primal scream therapies (this last an apt reflection of the clamorous sixties) all helped return political conflicts to the realm of the personal. Four years ago, when Jerry Rubin proclaimed in *Psychology Today* that he was going back to his body, where the real wars of liberation were taking place, those who hadn't already preceded him now rushed to swap their exhausted political ambitions for therapeutic ideals (in the interim, Rubin attached himself to almost all the newest therapies and became a media-circuit spokesman for a new "love and peace" message stripped of its former political content). Somewhere along the line—it is hard to remember just when—the disaffected were saying "Off the pigs!" one day and "Man, I'm really tense, don't mess with my head" the next.

On another level, the emergence of psychobabble is a provisional and highly imperfect solution to the problem of what sort of language to use to describe feeling states, behavior, and emotional growth. Looked at in this way, psychobabble can be seen as a feeble compromise between two contending visions of human behavior. First, there are the behaviorists, who see human behavior as *causal* and psychology as an empirical science. Their stimulus-response paradigm reduces us to the status of rats (if we ever do end up acting just like rats or Pavlov's dogs, it will be largely because behaviorism has conditioned us to do so) and makes any talk of feelings or unconscious mental life largely irrelevant. According to behaviorists, the only things that count in human

behavior are those that can be observed. Hence the joke about two behaviorists who meet at a convention: "You look like you're doing fine," says one. "How am I doing?" But, of course, behaviorists point out the fallacy of their own theory by their very existence; as Walker Percy remarks in *The Message in the Bottle*, "... after all the behavior of behaviorists is notable in that it is not encompassed by behavioral theory: behaviorists not only study responses; they write articles and deliver lectures setting forth what they take to be the truth about responses, and would be offended if anyone suggested that their writings and lectures were nothing more than responses and therefore no more true or false than a dog's salivation." Behaviorists have trouble, then, paying homage to their own beliefs. One Arnold Lazarus recounted in a *Psychological Reports* article how he sought to arrange a meeting of leading behavior therapists, but was stunned to find that most couldn't attend because of a conflict: the meeting fell on a day when they had appointments with their psychoanalysts.

The second contending vision is the psychoanalytic or psychodynamic theory of behavior—that our actions (thoughts, wishes) don't have causes but rather meanings and motives that arise from a complex play of intrapsychic conflicts and clashes with the environment. Psychoanalytic theory doesn't refute the behaviorists so much as put them in their place as custodians of a *partial* explanation of human behavior. Those who believe in the psychoanalytic perspective see a difficult logic in the richness of human behavior but lack an effective vocabulary for systematizing their insights in ordinary language.

So the language of behaviorism is too arid and that of psychoanalysis too complicated to offer an attractive vocabulary for conversational use. It has fallen to a third general psychological camp—ego psychology and the human poten-

tial movement—to do that. This vast category—which includes neo-Freudians like Alfred Adler and Erich Fromm, non-psychoanalytic thinkers like Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, as well as the Esalen crowd, for starters—has emphasized the conscious ego as the true subject of psychological theory and practice, and has minimized, or entirely ignored, Freud's most challenging discoveries—the persistence of the unconscious, the interpretation of dreams, the theory of repression. In varying degrees, they are interested in the “here and now” and the possibility of psychological solutions that do not require dwelling on the individual's childhood in order to be effective. Where Freud formulated a psyche forever at war with itself and the culture it inhabits (or, one might say, the culture that inhabits it), the human potential movement speaks relentlessly of a “self” or “the real self” (Karen Horney), “self-actualization” (Maslow), and the “whole person” (Rogers). Where Freud saw a mortgage that could never be entirely paid off, the human potential movement hints at a final freedom and a life lived in the black.

The vocabulary of “self” and “whole person,” etc., has installed itself comfortably in popular speech. There is no question but that these words are highly evocative and seem to have a natural place in our verbal picture of the world. But their meanings are so elusive and subject to ad hoc definitions that they have come at last to represent, not a theory or an understanding, but rather just a *style* of speech. They are easy terms to use precisely because they are so adaptable to various meanings, and, for this very reason, they have a way of swallowing up complexities in their large and inelegant folds. Psychobabble is, at least in part, the use of these terms elevated to a fashion of observation.

Of course, this is not the first time in our history that psychological ideas have so dominated national conversation. Previ-

ously, in the forties and fifties, Freudian terms gained a vulgar, wholesale currency and were used for intellectual oneupmanship. Freudian terminology was so ardently embraced by liberal magazines, novelists, and the middle class that the growing demand for the thing itself—psychoanalysis—soon outdistanced the supply of doctors. It is interesting to look back at the way in which writers would noisily wheel in their faulty appreciation of Freud in the middle of dialogues, as when Al Manheim, Budd Schulberg's narrator in *What Makes Sammy Run?*, suddenly begins talking about id, ego, and superego and manages to get most of it wrong.

As one Boston psychoanalyst who has practiced for over thirty years says, "After the war, everyone was talking simplistically about the Oedipus complex. It was the rage. Everyone had the idea that knowledge itself would make you free." Now he has to listen to the new psychobabble. A patient of his, a social worker and group leader in his thirties, eagerly responded at the beginning of therapy to each interpretation his analyst made by saying, "I hear you, I hear you."

"I'm sorry," said the doctor, "I didn't know you were a little deaf."

"I'm not. I *hear* you. It means I comprehend."

"Well, what is it that you comprehend?"

The patient paused. "Jesus," he finally replied. "I don't know."

Psychobabble, the psychoanalyst muses, "is just a way of using candor in order not to be candid." The similar dangers of the old psychobabble were remarked on as early as 1929 by another Boston psychoanalyst: "Everybody talks glibly of repression, complexes, sublimation, wish fulfillment and subconsciousness as if they really understood Freud and what he was talking about. Gentle reader, let me say this, that with the exception of a few professional philosophers, psycholo-

gists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, I have not met a dozen people who knew more than the terms of Freud."

The new psychobabblers, however, don't even seem to know the *terms*—of Freudian or any other organized body of psychological theory. Their jargon seems instead to free-float in an all-purpose linguistic atmosphere, a set of repetitive verbal formalities that kills off the very spontaneity, candor, and understanding it pretends to promote. It's an idiom that reduces psychological insight to a collection of standardized observations, that provides a frozen lexicon to deal with an infinite variety of problems. *Uptight*, for instance, is a word used to describe an individual experiencing anything from mild uneasiness to a clinical depression. To ask someone why he or she refers to another as being *hung-up* elicits a reply that reveals neither understanding nor curiosity: "Well, you know, he's just, well, *hung-up*." And interestingly, those few psychiatric terms borrowed by psychobabble are used recklessly. One is no longer fearful; one is *paranoid*. The adjective is applied with a generosity that would be confusing to any real clinical paranoiac. Increasingly, people describe their moody acquaintances as *manic-depressives*, and almost anyone you don't like is *psychotic* or at the very least *schizzed-out*.

Many people express the view that this new psychobabble is a constructive retreat from obfuscating clinical terms, but if so, it is only a retreat into a sweet banality, a sort of syrup poured over conversations in order to make them go down easier. Kierkegaard recoiled, in the middle of the nineteenth century, at the false, romanticized candor he sensed about him: "Our age . . . demands, if not lofty then at least loud-voiced pathos, if not speculation then surely results, if not truth then conviction, if not honesty then certainly affidavits to that effect, if not emotion then incessant talk about it." This reminds one of Samuel Johnson's reply when Boswell

complained to him, "I have often blamed myself, Sir, for not feeling for others as sensibly as many say they do." "Sir," Johnson said, "don't be duped by them any more. You will find these very feeling people are not very ready to do you good. They *pay* you by *feeling*."

Psychobabble, as a style of speech (as opposed to the jargon of certain specific therapies, which will be discussed in later chapters), is more than anything else a feature of contemporary decorum, a form of politesse, a signal to others that one is ready to talk turkey, to engage in *real dialogue*. Unfortunately, in the rush for revelation, real dialogue often turns out to be real monologue. When I asked a man to whom I had just been introduced at a party recently, "How are you?" (no doubt an early, but harmless, form of psychobabble!), he responded by describing, with an utter disrespect for brevity, his relationship with his wife.

Confession, alas, is the new handshake.

If psychobabble were a question of language alone, the worst one could say about it is that it is just another example of the corrosion of the English language. But the prevalence of psychobabble signifies more than a mere "loss for words." One never loses just words, of course, and so psychobabble represents a loss of understanding and the freedoms that accompany understanding as well.

There has been now for several years a tendency to believe in the ethos of "being oneself" and in the promises of total liberation. This trend has been well-documented in some excellent books during the last ten years. In his recent *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing*, social historian Russell Jacoby noted that the reasons for this current occupation with self and liberation go beyond the *voluntary* desire to be enlightened: "The more the development of late capitalism renders obsolete or at

## PSYCHOBABBLE

least suspect the real possibilities of self, self-fulfillment and actualization, the more they are emphasized as if they could spring to life through an act of will alone." If Jacoby is right, and I think he is, then psychobabble must be seen as the expression not of a victory over dehumanization but as its latest and very subtle victory over us. What the casual use of psychobabble accomplishes is this: it transforms self-understanding, which each must gain gradually through experience and analysis, into tokens of self-understanding that can be exchanged between people, but without any clear psychological value.

Psychobabble facilitates a belief in the immediate availability of well-being. I once spoke with a young woman at an Erhard Seminars Training guest lecture who, after three years of relatively unsuccessful psychotherapy, had discovered *est*. After assaulting me with the same ritual *est* phrases I had heard from countless other "graduates"—about having created the space in which to experience herself and about wanting to assist me in my understanding—she stated that in the three months since taking the training she had become "totally satisfied with her life." Although I firmly believed that *est* had been a positive experience for her, such complacency—aggravated by her not knowing at all *why* she was satisfied—did not bode well for the future. She seemed to be no more than the conduit—certainly not the source—of the statements she was making. Only when I mentioned specifically her apparent inability to speak spontaneously did any individuality return to her conversation.

This notion that psychological growth may be achieved through an act of will that takes into account neither one's own unconscious (behavior and activity) nor external social conditions is clearly embodied in the following advertisement from *Publishers Weekly* for Martin Shephard's *The Do-It-Yourself Psychotherapy Book*: "This book will save you

thousands of dollars and give you control of your own life and your best self. *No More Paid Advisors, Sex Hangups, Feeling of Inferiority, Psychosomatic Illness, Guilt. Enjoy More Personal Power, Boundless Sensual Pleasure, New-Found Self-Reliance, Your Birthright of Health, New Lifestyles.*" It is a notion that leads to a narcissism perfectly expressed by an Esalen group leader named Shirley, in a conversation reported in the *Village Voice*:

"Leo," said Miriam, "you have to realize the important thing is living in the present moment. You have to be fully aware in the now, that's the trick."

"Beautiful," said Shirley, "beautiful. It's just like the Aquarian Age."

"Shirley," said Leo, "you've got to stop that Aquarian Age stuff. If this is the Aquarian Age, we're in trouble, we've been screwed by Nixon, we've been screwed by Ford, and we're letting Kissinger screw everyone he wants."

"I don't understand politics," said Shirley. "I don't know anything about politics, so I don't feel as if I'd been screwed. It's not part of my reality, so it's not true for me."

The current narcissism engendered by the idea of just "being oneself" involves the belief that psychological characteristics and sexual proclivities are entirely *conscious* choices made by the individual, and not functions of the unconscious or instinctual life as well. It is not uncommon these days to hear people speak about their homosexuality as a "preferred" form of sexual life or defend their three divorces on the grounds that "marriage simply doesn't work any more"—all as if what one is, what has become of one, has been nothing more than a *moral* choice, a decision to participate in a prevailing and attractive ideology; as if understand-

## PSYCHOBABBLE

ing one's childhood experiences is irrelevant, just a quaint Freudian ploy to undermine one's will, one's ability to do and be exactly what one wants.

And, since to the psychobabbling mentality all behavior is a matter of taste, it also adopts in crude form the assertion (most widely publicized by R. D. Laing and Thomas Szasz) that there is no inherent difference between "sanity" and "insanity." Psychobabblers may concur that what differences there appear to be are determined by the presiding culture, but they show no interest in examining those relationships between culture and the individual.

The contemporary psychological air is scented with a secularized positive thinking, and, according to one former *est* trainer, "Life is nothing but one happy trail." Anything goes. What is, is, and what ain't, ain't, as the *est* punch line says. In fact, psychobabble describes anyone with a commitment or a highly developed interest as a *freak*. A composer is a music-freak, a writer a word-freak, a cyberneticist a computer-freak—as though one's profession were just one's chosen perversion or stimulant. "Do your own thing" goes beyond a mere libertarian attitude and dangerously implies an equality to all endeavors. Critical judgment succumbs to institutionalized tolerance. As social conditions degenerate, a tender but cruel optimism suffocates skepticism.<sup>1</sup> Confusion is not clarified, merely given the name "reality."

Psychobabble has quite naturally insinuated itself into many art forms, and in most cases this is no surprise. That we can now hear it regularly on television—that we even have a sitcom, *The Bob Newhart Show*, in which the lead character is a friendly psychotherapist—seems only fitting for a medium

<sup>1</sup> For an interesting discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the human potential movement's ascendancy, one would do well to read Russell Jacoby's *Social Amnesia: A Critique of Conformist Psychology from Adler to Laing* (Beacon Press, 1975).

that reflects midcult values. In rock music the incidence of psychobabble is high, which is only natural for a form whose requirements of rhyme and accessibility limit the range of its insights.

Lines such as Todd Rundgren's "Get your trip together, be a real man" abound more than ever today, but some of the most eloquent psychobabble comes from John Denver, who, fresh from *est*, told a *Rolling Stone* interviewer in 1975:

How far out it is to be a bird and fly around the trees. I am what I've always wanted to be and that is the truth. And I think—in fact, it's not what I think, but I observe that if people were to really take a good look at themselves, they are exactly the way that they have always wanted to be. . . . My experience is that if I can tell you the truth, just lay it out there, then I have totally opened up a space for you to be who you are and that it really opens up all the room in the world for us to do whatever we want to do in regard to each other. If I don't like you, I'll tell you. And that's great.

As for contemporary films that deal in psychobabble (*Easy Rider*, *Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice* and countless others), one is always tempted to praise highly those that capture the essence and cadence of psychobabble dialogue, simply on the basis of verisimilitude. But because film and rock music are always to some extent engaged in *representing* behavior, not scrutinizing it, they are easy targets to attack. One has to look elsewhere to find a medium that has truly suffered at the hands of psychobabble.

Such a victim is American publishing (although one might just as easily say it victimizes itself). Psychobabble's and publishing's influence on one another has been disastrous, and the number of psychobabble books offered to the public with a solemnity formerly reserved for great works is astounding.

## PSYCHOBABBLE

Seventeen years ago, Alfred Kazin derided the Myth of Universal Creativity, which was engendered by the Freud craze in this country in the middle of the century—"The assumption," as he put it, "that every idle housewife was meant to be a painter and that every sexual deviant is really a poet." The time has never been more propitious than today for everybody and his or her therapist to spill the beans in print. To an older and still mistaken belief that one only has to be deemed neurotic in order to create has been added the more recent societal sanction—that, according to the spirit of the cult of candor, it is actually virtuous to reveal to as many people as possible the tragedies and erotic and emotional secrets of one's private life. It seems that all you need these days to qualify as a bona fide author is a few hours of therapy and a minimal ability to compose grammatical sentences.

This literary incontinence has affected even our serious writers, as Gore Vidal once pointed out in a review of John Dos Passos's *Midcentury*. He called it "a terrible garrulousness in most American writing, a legacy no doubt of the Old Frontier." He went on: "For every Scott Fitzgerald concerned with the precise word and the selection of relevant incident, there are a hundred American writers, many well regarded, who appear to believe that one word is just as good as another, and that anything which pops into the head is worth putting down. . . . Most of our writers tend to be recorders. They tell us what happened last summer, why the marriage went wrong, how they lost custody of the children, how much they drank and whom they laid. . . ."

Books written in the spirit of psychobabble share this quality of aimless chronicling, but with a light dusting of psychology. These books almost always seem, as the phrase goes, "touchingly human," but in their simplification of psychological issues they participate in what Herbert Marcuse has termed (referring to some of the neo-Freudians, to whom

psychobabblers are indebted) "the laboring of the obvious, of everyday wisdom" and what Jacoby has called, after him, "the monotonous discovery of common sense." Books of psychobabble present revelation uninformed by history, unmediated by theory or understanding; they are, for all their professed drama, like verbal home movies.

In *Intimate Feedback: A Lover's Guide to Getting in Touch with Each Other* by Barrie and Charlotte Hopson (published in 1975 by Simon & Schuster) we are offered these insights:

Who am I? This is a question which has always been central to man's awareness of himself.

Human existence is exemplified by one person trying to communicate with others.

When couples say that they have nothing new to learn about each other, this is due to stereotyped communication patterns, unless they really do not like one another and have no interest in their partner.

Other books, such as Harry C. Lyon, Jr.'s, *It's Me and I'm Here!* (Delacorte Press, 1974), are more personalized guides. Even the title suggests a giddy infatuation with self-actualization—and the contents do not disappoint. Lyon was raised comfortably middle-class, attended West Point, bedded numerous women to prove himself, and then realized that he was living by a morality that directed emotional traffic without getting him anywhere. Off to Esalen. In the book's foreword, human potential psychologist Carl Rogers tells us that he "became thoroughly convinced that [Lyon] was 'for real.'" Lyon concurs heartily in his own introduction:

Look, my life has been exciting. It has been strange and painful, and I don't quite know what to make of it myself. But I want you to touch it—touch me—because

## PSYCHOBABBLE

I so much want to reach you. I want you to feel that pain and joy I have felt.

One tendency of psychobabble is to interpret each new phase of life as "liberation," regardless of its context. Take Louise Diane Campanelli, whose recent book, *Sex and All You Can Eat* (Lyle Stuart, 1975), is a masterpiece of the banality of liberation. Repulsed by her husband's obesity, she went out and had, at last count, sixty-two lovers. Her psychiatrist has provided an introduction in which he tells us that the book's theme "concerns the poignant life story of a young woman of foreign parentage who is caught in a clash of culture, as well as in an identity crisis." Sounds like Henry James, but it reads like *True Confession* by an M.A. in sociology. She writes:

There is a tremendous amount of adultery going on in America today. Going on, indeed, at this very minute. Yes, while you read, thousands upon thousands of couples are coupling in hotel and motel rooms, in the rear seats of automobiles, and in "his" or "her" bedroom because the spouse is safely away.

Her book is sprinkled with routine references to childhood events, but mostly it reports on her numerous sexual encounters, including this comment on her career in fellatio: "You have to know what you're doing, and you have to know when to quit, but even a girl with a little mouth can go a long way."

The fact that women are reclaiming the emotional, professional and sexual prerogatives so long denied them has been the source of many excellent books, but it has also been the inspiration for volumes of psychobabble that reduce complex feminist arguments and impulses to the merely sexual. Promiscuity always makes good copy, and if it can be advertised

in the context of more serious issues—whether it actually discusses these issues or not—it acquires, in addition, the patina of intellectual respectability. This is precisely what happens in *The Sexually Aggressive Woman* by psychotherapist Adelaide Bry (Peter Wyden, 1975). *The Sexually Aggressive Woman* is composed largely of transcribed interviews with women who responded to Bry's posted notices and personal want ads asking that women who considered themselves sexually aggressive come forward.

In accordance with the two-dimensionality of psychobabble, any thoughtful analysis must be avoided in favor of behavioral observation and an extolment of "liberation" in virtually any form. We never get an analysis from Bry of why sexually aggressive women are that way, only a description of *how* they are that way. No illuminating psychological theory is invoked; Bry settles for saying that "We do not know why one woman assumes power while another does not. . . . There are theories, of course, but the mystery still has not been solved to the satisfaction of most." There are theories, of course, but why waste precious time? If the mystery cannot be solved, let's just keep examining the evidence over and over. The evidence in *The Sexually Aggressive Woman* consists of five wives and mothers, eight single women between the ages of thirty-two and fifty, and seven young single women, all of whom chronicle their sex lives. At the end of each transcription, Bry appends her italicized commentaries which, in fact, are no more than blistering fusillades of paraphrase and cliché. Joan, for example, is thirty-two, divorced, a junior high school English teacher. She details her active sex life and then sums up her own character succinctly with the phrase, "I'm me." Bry's comment on Joan reads, in part: "She revels in being herself. She rejects male-defined standards of beauty. 'I'm me,' she says. I am woman, I am sexual, but I am also me. I conform to my own criteria."

One year later, Bry surfaced with another book called *est: 60 Hours That Transform Your Life* (Harper & Row, 1976). In it, through the description of her *est* volunteer work, one gains some insight into her further flight from critical thinking. "The high point of the weekend," she writes, "came when the man in charge of logistics said to me, after I had mapped the shortest and most efficient route to the bathrooms, 'Thank you, Adelaide. You have done an excellent job in writing these instructions.' Wow! I was high for hours. From which I *got* that it's a lot more satisfying to be *on purpose* than scattered, *and* that I enjoy someone else's approval for a job well done." How can one respond to such perception but to cheer Ms. Bry's recognition of the already apparent?

If women are testing their independence these days, and finally making their domestic jailbreaks, then many men are certainly suffering as a result. Male response has been in many quarters a sudden and useful self-scrutiny, sometimes culminating in pedantic apologies for being men in the first place (in America, where movements proliferate like fast-food outlets, the new femininity must be met with a new masculinity—all God's children gotta have instant ideology). In the case of the pseudonymous Albert Martin and his *One Man, Hurt* (Macmillan, 1975), though, one hears only a bewildered lament. In 1972, his wife of twenty years asked him for a divorce. He couldn't understand why she didn't love him any longer, but many readers of his 278-page account will no doubt get some idea. Martin, in reality a New York public relations executive by another name, has a very two-dimensional understanding of his failed marriage and yearns, in prolix paragraphs, for an uncluttered security in the face of this threat to his androcentric world-view, one he is not in the least capable of modifying to accommodate his wife's side of the story. One can certainly sympathize with

Martin's pain, but his book is essentially self-justification dressed as compassion—and reading it can only inspire respect for his ex-wife, who has not felt similarly compelled to burden the reading public with her grievances.

When Martin attempts to be reflective, he succeeds only in attributing a large portion of his troubles to external forces:

I think there are bad times to be certain things in history. It was bad to be a witch in Salem in the 1700s, bad to be a Negro in America before May 1954 [and it's a ball being one now?], bad to be a polio victim the year before they discovered the vaccine. And I know it is bad to be in marital trouble in America today because the times have never been worse for getting effective help.

The implied equation of his predicament with religious persecution, racial prejudice, and physical handicap is an indication of his refusal to see the extent to which *he* is an accomplice to his own woe and not just the "hurt" victim of his title. Publication of *One Man, Hurt* is further proof that nowadays there is someone ready to hear anybody's complaint.

The publishing industry's enthusiasm for psychobabble of the preceding variety as well as of the more explicitly therapeutic strain (*How to Be Your Own Best Friend*, *How to Be Awake & Alive*, *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*, etc., etc.) was perhaps foreshadowed during the past decade by the success of confessional books. To name but a very few, Gestalt therapy "refounder" Fritz Perls's *In and Out the Garbage Pail* was a lesson in incontinent narcissism ("I am becoming a public figure," he announces on page one); R. D. Laing's *Knots* made relationships seem irresistibly complex; Erica Jong aired her own fantasies in the fictional *Fear of Flying*; and Nigel Nicolson's tribute to his famous parents Harold

## PSYCHOBABBLE

Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West, *Portrait of a Marriage*, endowed the polymorphous perverse with historical dignity: Sexual fantasies, helped along by James Joyce's love letters to his wife and Nancy Friday's *My Secret Garden* and *Forbidden Flowers*, seem to have achieved the status of art.

Now that the confessional genre has been appropriated by every other divorcee, adulterer, and successfully therapized individual, there is no end in sight to the number of truisms published as striking revelation, to the prurience parading as sociology. Is it that society has become so atomized that the emotional strength once derived from communities, the extended family, and the simple observation of life is now thought to be obtainable only from self-help books? The popularity of psychobabble has eclipsed the public taste for literature and psychological theory. Novelists are going out of business while small-town gurus appear on talk shows to exchange insights with Joey Bishop.

There is more self-help and psychological advice literature on the bookshelves right now than ever before—*Your Inner Conflicts—How to Solve Them*; *How to Give and Receive Advice*; *How to Live with Another Person*; *Free to Love: Creating and Sustaining Intimacy in Marriage*; *Stand Up, Speak Out, Talk Back*; *When I Don't Like Myself*.

Please! one wants to cry—no more books by unhappy housewives crying, "I've just got to be me!" No more female ad agency executives telling me how they make men want to get into their pants at singles bars! No more divorced men screaming for justice! No more daydreams of Great Danes with searching tongues! Enough!

In the chapters that follow, it should become clear that the word "psychobabble" does not refer simply to certain modes of expression, but to a social mood as well—a verbal anxiety, a certain sort of disposition to talk about oneself, a

way of thinking. Most of the elements described by psychobabble are neither new nor unique, but they seem to have forcefully converged in the seventies.

As a designation for popular jargon, the term "psychobabble" has to be used with some circumspection. It does not *necessarily* imply a shallowness of understanding. For example, honesty or being "up front" is generally a good policy, but it can also become a nervous habit or a subtle petition for someone else's confession to which one has no right. Being "open" is a worthy ambition, unless it comes to mean merely using one's vulnerability as a calling card. "Getting it together" may denote a very real effort at psychic integration with all the harrowing revelations that entails, but it may also mean no more than a temporary reshuffling of needs to suit the moment. Talk about "the whole person" and "feeling whole" may actually refer to the recovery of an aspect of one's character that was formerly repressed or uncultivated, but it can also serve as a shorthand for an ideal that one indulges precisely in order not to work out problems closer at hand.

Arguing against psychobabble is not an argument *for* more elegant expression. It is—and this point will be refined in what follows—an argument for a language that has better access to the paradoxes of emotional life and therefore a language that is more revealing, more powerful, more therapeutic. Here a warning is in order: this book does not culminate in a radical new proposal for how we all should talk, and those who expect one will be disappointed. Nor does this book take the term "psychobabble" so seriously that it proposes a counterpsychobabble; that is, a systematic vocabulary to use *against* psychobabble. Those games are left to others.

Finally, there are those who will claim that psychobabble is a positive cultural sign, for it shows that many people are becoming less fascinated with materialism (some to the

point of repudiating the material world and its demands altogether) and more curious about their interior life and motives in general. As a man of my father's age told me recently, "When we were your age, we didn't think about being people." Now, "being people" obsesses us. But it must be remembered once again that there is a hitch in this freedom to contemplate our "total personalities"; that freedom, such as it is, has been won by some at the cost of the continuing fragmentation of personalities. And, as Herbert Marcuse pointed out over twenty years ago, those who have the freedom to be "people" have it only as a condition of what he calls "repressive desublimation," that, in Marcuse's words, "in a period when the omnipotent apparatus punishes real nonconformity with ridicule and defeat—in such a situation the neo-Freudian philosopher tells the individual to be himself and for himself."

This stage of therapeutic consciousness and introspection has its materialistic side as well. "Keeping up with the Joneses" has been transformed into a Wholer-than-Thou attitude. Insight, packaged as psychobabble, has become a commodity. A conviction in the noble savagery of freely playing emotions and a return to the romantic transcendental notion that God and everything else noble is right there already, inside us, hammering at the door of consciousness—these ideas about what "liberation" is seem now to have displaced in the popular mind an understanding of the difficult, dialectical nature of growth.

Psychobabble is not merely the verbal rent we pay to contemporary American life in the seventies. Increasingly, it is that life.