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SALLEY VICKERS

## *Bodies of Evidence*

The Ceiling Outside: The Science and Experience of the Disrupted Mind

By Noga Arikha

(Basic Books 304pp £20)

Noga Arikha, who calls herself 'a science humanist', is that welcome rarity today, a contemporary scholar and philosopher with a breadth of interests that transcends disciplines. Fascinated by the problem of consciousness and the still-mysterious complexities of the human mind, for eighteen months she attended clinics in the prestigious neuropsychiatry unit of Paris's Pitié-Salpêtrière hospital, where alongside the medical team of clinicians she was able to observe patients with unusual and often inexplicable symptoms.

Her interest was purely scientific until, in a potentially tragic turn of events, she found herself studying her own beloved mother, the talented poet Anne Atik, whose journey into dementia had led to her becoming a patient at the same hospital.

I should declare that I have a dog in this fight. My own mother, maternal uncle and grandmother all succumbed to Alzheimer's; given that the APOE4 gene that disposes people to Alzheimer's often passes down the maternal line, I am likely to be in the sights of this cruel and unforgiving disease. This would ordinarily make me reluctant to dwell too much on the topic. It is a tribute to Arikha's writing that my resistance was swiftly overcome,

in large part thanks to the subtlety of her observations and conclusions, which go well beyond the materialism which too often limits scientific thinking on this and indeed all subjects.

The fact that Arikha has no qualms about including her own mother's condition in this study gives a flavour of the book's ambience. There is a fearlessness in her approach to tackling the more bizarre symptoms in the repertoire of the human condition that recalls the work of Oliver Sacks, to whom Arikha acknowledges a debt. The ability to embrace the potentially disquieting leads, in my experience, to a special breadth of understanding. Anne Atik becomes a central and compelling figure in the book's eclectic dramatis personae. It is she who provides the author with the book's title. 'The ceiling inside, the ceiling outside,' she observes one day. At one point Arikha writes, 'Our self in time is perhaps but a thin gauze wrapped around the shifting elements we are made of.' And yet this utterance of her mother's is a sign that at a deep level a core self persists within those 'shifting elements', for this striking if opaque comment could easily be a line from one of Atik's own poems (part of the book's



*Arikha: fearless*

charm comes from the chapter headings, taken from poems, which convey a rich cultural hinterland).

As well as offering a moving and often amusing commentary on her own mother, Arikha reflects on various other members of the community of sufferers under the clinic's care. Much of the focus of her interest is on the role the body plays in the drama of an unravelling or stymied consciousness. She laments that 'the old mind-body dualism' has 'given way to a brain-body dualism' and holds firm to the view that 'the sense of self is profoundly anchored in our body'. As someone who has always believed in the inseparable connection between mind and body, I

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found this aspect of the book especially compelling. One of the book's subjects, Greg, has lost all feeling on his left side and is unable to form fresh memories. I was reminded while reading about Greg's case of the work of Iain McGilchrist on the differing influences of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. A damaged right hemisphere, which governs the left side of the body, might well affect memory; but an absence of the values associated with the right hemisphere – feeling, intuition, empathy – might suggest that the root of the paralysis is psychological. Indeed, Greg's symptoms turn out not to be neurological at all but the outcome of a hostile set of experiences – what in psychiatric terms is known as a 'conversion', a shift of the emotional to the physical.

Psychosomatic symptoms are the ways in which we dramatise what we cannot verbalise. They illustrate the inseparable connection between psyche and soma. As the philosopher William James noted, all emotional events are bodily events. The obvious truth of this is easily demonstrated

in the commonplace phenomena of blushes or erections, in which a shameful or guilty or an erotic or libidinous thought seamlessly translates into a physical manifestation. In another instance of 'conversion', the hand of a patient, Claire, becomes the focus of her anxiety and the locus of acute physical pain.

One of the most reassuring aspects of the book is Arikha's contention that 'medicine at its best is also the practice of cultural empathy'. She writes, 'the elements from which we are made are ancient.' The cultures out of which we emerged may physically disappear but they can survive in our unconscious. As anyone who has worked with schizophrenics can confirm, this will often manifest in symptoms. This is particularly pertinent in the case of Toussaint, another of Arikha's subjects. Of Haitian extraction, Toussaint believed that his inability to sleep or concentrate was the consequence of a *marabout* (a seer or sorcerer) transmitting hostile thoughts to him from acquaintances back home.

I had a similar case in my own practice with an otherwise highly sophisticated

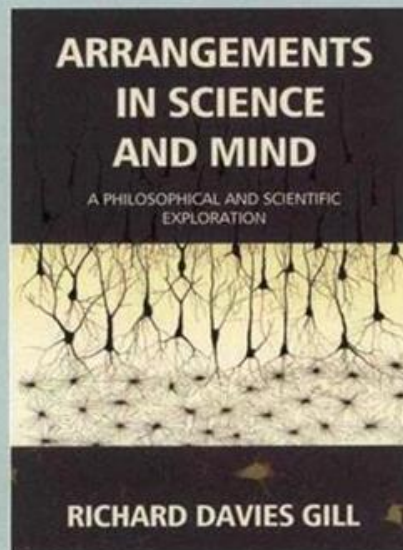
and successful patient. He was plagued by jinn who disrupted his mind with improper thoughts. In order to treat him it was necessary for me to treat the jinn respectfully and to converse with him on their terms. In the same way, Toussaint's doctors worked within his belief system. As Jung pointed out, people have always made sense of their psychic disturbances in the context of the mythological and the supernatural. Moreover, we are all plagued by voices in our heads – alluring, critical, escapist. For most of us they remain intangible, but the fact that for some they metamorphose into real presences should not seem so very far from our common experiences. It is after all what happens when creative writers make patent on the page the imagined characters in their minds.

This book is an eloquent and informed plea not to reduce ourselves and our existences to categories: ill and hale, sane and mad, mind and body, inner and outer. It is a clarion call to a more holistic approach, urging us to find meaning and even beauty in apparent loss and decrepitude.

## ARRANGEMENTS IN SCIENCE AND MIND

RICHARD DAVIES GILL

This book is about trying to comprehend the mind and consciousness from both scientific and philosophical standpoints. The difficulties of understanding our minds have been considered in the past mainly from philosophical or religious viewpoints, but more recently from scientific perspectives. This book charts the landscape and proposes that the fundamental and only thing in the world is an arrangement. This eliminates the old distinction between mind and matter and produces a philosophical monism that is consistent with modern science.



A perspective is developed that encompasses many human activities but narrowed to exclude certain philosophical puzzles. Suggestions are made about how some of the tough problems in the philosophy of mind, such as causality, intentionality, and the nature of qualia, can be resolved by considering the fundamental structures and limitations of human thought, linguistic processes, and our position in the web of life. The nature of acts of creation and their importance in the arts are considered, and suggestions are made about the place in our world for spiritual beliefs.