

# Chapter 3

## Notes on the Work of Professor German E. Berrios



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When I was invited to write a contribution to Professor Berrios' 80-year Festschrift, I thought that this was the ideal place to address briefly the following questions: What is an intellectual debt? Namely, what we do owe to our teachers when we are lucky enough to meet them? And how we can repay them? Someone said that 'students must surpass their teachers', but the task is certainly not easy, particularly when it comes to masters who have been unparalleled for generations.

I have known Professor Berrios for more than 20 years. After studying medicine and psychiatry, I decided to undertake research and achieve further qualification abroad; my background convinced him that I would do well, and we started exploring the issue of atypical psychoses, which would become the core of my Cambridge PhD (Darwin College 2001–2004), and - later on - the topic of a monograph currently in preparation for Cambridge University Press.

When I joined his research group in Cambridge, Professor Berrios was renowned for his 'conceptual approach' to psychopathology and had already received a number of awards, prizes, and honorary degrees. Psychiatrists flocked from all over the world to San Marcos, a 'laboratory' where generations of clinicians and researchers were forged and equipped for their profession. He was attentive and curious about anyone and promoted the creation of an international network of alumni interested

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in historical and psychopathological research. Several of these went on to become professors.

At that time, the history of psychiatry was still a physical task no less than an intellectual one, involving laborious data collection and systematic and rigorous analysis of primary sources: a discipline that demanded a strong commitment and shaped both intelligence and character. None was more productive in this field than Professor Berrios, and the publication of his book *The History of Mental Symptoms: Descriptive Psychopathology Since the Nineteenth Century* in 1996 was hailed as ‘a remarkable account of the mappings of the mind through a study that transcends the private technicalities of psychiatry to shed light on the changing representations of the Western psyche itself’ (Porter 1996, p. 289).

Professor Berrios’ work reflected an impressive level of intellectual activity; both the quality and variety of topics made him closer to a *savant* of the Enlightenment, who was able to move among the genres of scientific knowledge, history, and philosophy, than mere ‘academics’ ever could. The method of intellectual history enabled him to explain through detailed accounts of psychiatric texts how the convergence of words, concepts, and ‘abnormal’ behaviours influences the historical and epistemological continuity of mental symptoms. It offers a powerful antidote to an ahistorical ‘presentism’, which naively assumes that mental symptoms and disorders have remained unchanged, and challenges modern symptom-based psychiatric classification as no atheoretical diagnostic language exists.

Paraphrasing what the Nobel prize winner poet Iosif Brodsky (1983) wrote about the work of Derek Walcott (the Nobel Laureate in Literature 1992), it is more than 40 years since Professor Berrios first started to rewrite the history of psychopathology, an activity which he has continued unabated, and without his contribution the map of modern psychiatry would resemble wallpaper. His work supplies a concrete way in which we can understand Dostoevsky’s statement that ‘beauty will save the world’.

## References

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Porter, R. (1996). Mind maps. (Book review). *Nature*, 381, 288–289.