

A PLEA FOR HISTORY

Over the last decades, a subtle, but very important shift has taken place in the way in which psychoanalysts relate and make use of the patient's history. In the classical tradition, the present was considered to be an instrument to gain access to the past. The focus was on the repetition of past events and behaviors and it was understood that if the past could be understood, the patient would be freed from his symptoms. In other words, the present was only considered to be important in as much as it served as a guide for the recovery of the past.

Nowadays, the recovery of a memory no longer serves as a link in the process of historical reconstruction but simply functions as a confirmation of an interpretation in the here and now. Memories of the past are useful only in as much as they throw light on the here and now of the session. Consequently, the transference/countertransference relationship has become the focal point of analysis at the expense of examining the patient's individual history as he remembers it and is shaped by it.

Many contemporary voices in psychoanalysis warn of the perils of genetic reconstructions which, so the argument goes, dilute the intensity of the here-and now interaction between the analyst and the analysand. In other words, making linkages from the present interaction to the past is considered a diversion , a way of taking refuge from the heat of the transference/countertransference tension. Many clinical examples exist where analysts, sometimes knowingly, but often unconsciously, invite their patients on excursions to the past, so that he/she does not have to address the inflammatory nature of the current relationship. In those instances,

linkages to the patient's past history constitute a way of hiding the present behind the past. There are of course also those patients who use their past history as a thick camouflage in order not to breathe life into the present. In that clinical moment the past is carried around like a fetish/ a talisman which is warding off dangerous/immediate influences. However, I consider both clinical phenomena, problems of technique where the analyst has to understand with the patient to what use the past is put in each instance. Hence it is puzzling to see that such clinical problems have often justified an entirely novel approach to the way in which we relate to history, -namely, where history merely serves as a check-up system for the primary scene of the transference scenario.

There are other ways in which a patient's individual and family history is given little attention in preference of detailing the here-and now relationship of the transference. In addition to a strong discouragement of genetic interpretations, current psychoanalytic technique, primarily influenced by the Kleinian school, dissuades its practitioners from gathering an in-depth history at the beginning of treatment for fear that such a guided inquiry would provide a skewed picture of the patient, one in which the patient would comply with the analyst's questions and map out his/her own internal landscape in compliance with the analyst's guided questions rather than his own internal leanings. Judith Mitrani (1999), a prominent analyst from Los Angeles, for instance advocates a gradual gathering of the patient's history through the transference relationship. In a recent article, she writes, " Although I am aware that it is the practice of many analysts-perhaps after a

medical tradition-to solicit a detailed history from a patient before agreeing to commence an analysis, I find it suits my *personal style* to allow the history of a patient to unfold within the context of the transference or in associations given, in much the same way as I handle a dream, wherein I refrain from soliciting associations(p.49)

Before I discuss the implications of this shift in our current psychoanalytic practice, I would like to examine the various theoretical currents which, I think, have contributed to this radical-although by now common practice- in our psychoanalytic discourse and practice. Since this is a paper arguing for the continuous appreciation for history, I believe it is important and necessary to trace the history of this important conceptual shift in the development of psychoanalytic theory. As all historical accounts, this one also represents a highly subjective view , but one that hopefully opens up a dialogue with others. I think that Bion's essay *Notes on memory and desire*, has had a profound effect upon the Kleinian school of thinking, even upon analysts who do not consider themselves being otherwise influenced by Bion. Arguing that "memory is always misleading as a record of fact since it is distorted by the influence of unconscious forces", Bion urges psychoanalysts " not to remember past sessions" because "otherwise the evolution of the session will not be observed at the only time when it can be observed-while it is taking place." (p.18). "Psychoanalytic "observation" is concerned neither with what has happened nor with what is going to happen but with what *is* happening" (p.17) At every session, the analyst should feel

as if he/she has seen the patient for the first time, his mind being unclouded by neither memories from past sessions nor desires on the part of the analyst for future cures or ending of sessions and treatments. Bion's recommendations were a bold move to encourage a more direct attention and attunement to the here-and now flow of the analytic session. Bion, I believe, felt strongly that worthwhile material was being ignored when the analyst's mind was preoccupied by and with a reconstruction of the past and by and with an unspoken, yet powerful wish for a cure in the future. Of course, in the latter recommendation, Bion strongly resembles Lacan's dictum that the analyst's desire for a cure should not be a card of the analytic game since the analyst ought to remain, or at least strive to remain, in the position of the dummy, the one who does not know, or at least does not know more than to position himself as the cause of the analysand's desire. Yet with regard to history, these two, otherwise rather similar eccentrics in the psychoanalytic playing field, radically differ from each other. For Lacan, a person's memory constitutes the symbolic history of the subject, representing a link in the chain of signifiers, which as a whole composes the structure of the subject's desire, a desire that is always forming itself through the desire of the Other. Without knowledge of the Other, without the subject's rendition of the Other, it would be very difficult to know where to locate the subject's position in the signifying chain. Of course, memory is highly subjective and distorting, it is not an accurate recording machine but one that is highly sensitive to unconscious and conscious desires and phantasies and also highly variable depending upon the contexts within which the memories are evoked and assembled.

However, this very telling fact about memory should not discourage psychoanalysts from obtaining the patients' history no matter how fragmented and skewed it may be.

Bion's goal to discourage any conscious recollection of past sessions and conscious desires for future outcomes surely breathed new life into the psychoanalytic process and encouraged psychoanalysts not to become fixated as the passive observers and "documenters" of the patient's dynamics but to join the relationship more actively by living in the moment with the patient and becoming more aware with their whole body (i.e. sensations) of how the patient was affecting them. In that sensory contact, a great deal of "direct" information can be gathered that a purely verbal reception of the patient's narrative would fail to communicate. One of the most prominent contemporary Kleinians, Betty Joseph, even though she may not consider herself a Bionian, elaborated upon this idea, redefining transference "as a living relationship in which there is constant movement and change" (p.72). Branching off Klein's idea about transference as the total relationship, Joseph focuses upon the way the patient makes use of the analyst, she writes: "much of our understanding of the transference comes through our understanding of how our patients act on us to feel things for many varied reasons; how they try to draw us into their defensive systems; how they unconsciously act out with us in the transference, trying to get us to act out with them; how they convey aspects of their inner world built up from infancy-elaborated in childhood and adulthood, experiences often beyond the use of words, which we can often only capture through the feelings aroused in us, through our counter-transference, used in the broad

sense of the word." (p.62) In a way, the idea that runs through this argument is that the verbal tale of one's history does not provide the entire picture, but that we need to rely on other forms of discourses, in particular on the sensual and affective information channeled through the countertransference to obtain a fuller picture of the patient's conscious and unconscious life. Joseph's focus on the patient's use of the analyst as an important informant about the analysand's unconscious desire has been a crucial contribution in the more recent history of psychoanalysis. Yet , I believe that she has confused the part with the whole, the tool with the subject matter and in so doing collapsed the three-dimensionality of the psychoanalytic process.

In addition to the Bionian re-writing of Kleinian theory, other theoretical shifts have contributed to the movement away from an active interest in a patient's past history to a privileged focus upon the here- and now- drama of the analytic interaction. In the United States, I am thinking of Merton Gill who laid the groundwork for the relational school by emphasizing the ubiquity of transferential meaning in almost every aspect of the analytic relationship. Moreover, Gill was one of the first and most convincing analyst to point to the analyst's subjective influence upon the entire dynamic in a highly consistent and organized way. Gill was one of the first to draw attention to the persistent influence the analyst exerted upon the patient and thereby destroyed the illusion that the analyst/qua person could be reduced to a vanishing point. As the "subjective" features of the analyst and their effect on the entire analytic process became more prominent, a gradual shift occurred from viewing the analyst as a "neutral"

observer/detective to a highly subjective co-participant. With this conceptual change, which had an enormous effect on psychoanalytic practice, the unspoken idea emerged, I think, that psychoanalysis no longer needed the outside world, no longer needed to rely on "medical interviews" detailing a patient's history because all the patient's psychodynamics could be observed and analyzed far more directly in the psychoanalytic cabinet itself. I am not suggesting that a patient's history completely disappeared from the psychoanalytic screen, but that its relevance as a motivational force has been assuaged since this conceptual shift has gained more ground.

Another source for the current minimization of the patient's historical background can be attributed, I think, to Donald Spence's theory of narrative and historical truth. Since the past can never be known as it truly was, but as Freud already said in 1899 "...that memories relating to our childhood may be all that we possess", the direct inquiry into a patient's past eventually began to be considered an obsolete residue of the classical technique.

Yet it is also important to remember the historical context in which Spence's theory of historical and narrative truth gained a great deal of prominence. For a while, Spence was positioned right at the center of the "False Memory" debate. In that controversy, it was crucial to emphasize the interpretive and disruptive force of memory, since the past was pictured by the False Memory advocates as a stable depository of accurate memories laying dormant in the patient's psyche, only to be uncovered by a sufficiently sensitive psychotherapist. Hence, in that argument, it was crucial to demonstrate that memory is a dynamic force, a net/chain of ever-changing

meanings, one that is continuously re-shaped and re-edited by conscious and unconscious phantasies and desires. Spence argued powerfully against the analyst adopting a stance of an over-zealous, fact-finding detective who can turn every memory into an undisputable fact, cautioning him/her instead to remember that every form of memory entails a metaphoric process which carries within it manifold currents of truths pointing towards the past, present and future. What ensued from this debate, as one of its unforeseen side-symptoms- was a general reluctance and distrust into an inquiry of the patient's history since the remembrance of history could not be relied upon anyway. Hence, so the argument continues, the only memory and history that can be trusted is the one that is being constructed in the here-and now between the analyst and analysand. (Steiner, personal communication). In a curious way then, the very analysts who argued against the historical truth, in other words, against Freud's archaeological model of the past lying buried in the unconscious underground, ready to be excavated in its pure and immaculate form,- remained nonetheless haunted by the interpretive nature of the memorial process. Instead of holding onto the paradox existing between the historical and narrative truths, these analysts , highly suspicious of the empirical aspects of history, resolved their conflicts by trusting only those historical events occurring in the transference/countertransference relationship.

The difference lined out thus far between the Kleinian and Relational school of psychoanalysis, privileging the here and now over the past as opposed to the Lacanian school of psychoanalysis which, I believe, still

makes the inquiry into a patient's history a cornerstone of its analytic endeavor, appears to be "our professional inside trade" version of the debate Pierre Nora describes when he writes about the ongoing confrontation between history and memory in the field of history. "Memory and history, far from being synonymous, appear now to be in fundamental opposition. Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, ...vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived. History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer. Memory is a perpetually actual phenomenon, a bond tying us to the eternal present, history is a presentation of the past. Memory, insofar as it is affective and magical, only accommodates those facts that suit it... History, because it is an intellectual and secular production, calls for analysis and criticism. Memory installs remembrance with the sacred; history, always prosaic, releases it again...memory is by nature multiple and yet specific; collective, plural and yet individual. History belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority." (1989, p.9)

Other historians have attempted to capture the relationship between history and memory when they are discussing the close connection between myth and history. In his book *The Return of Odysseus*, Irad Malkin elaborates upon the function myth held in the history of the Greeks' exploration into foreign provinces. He looks at the active role of myth in "filtering, shaping and mediating cultural and ethnic encounters" (1998, p.5) He writes, "Rather than searching for the history behind the myth or

examining the role of myth in ancient historiography, I treat myth as a mediating function resulting from and influencing encounters and colonization.” (1998, p. 5)

In a similar vein, I think we can conceive of the transference/countertransference myth as powerfully mediating, shaping and filtering a person’s history. It is on the screen of the transference that the individual’s history comes alive and is in turn also influenced and changed by it. However, it is important not to confuse the tool with the source or the mediating function with the historical data itself.

While I do not want to interchange images too much, or make the rather ordinary practice of psychoanalysis more melodramatic by bringing in highlights from the by now already distant conflict in Kosovo, I nonetheless found the politics of that forced exile very instructive for this paper concerning the importance of history. You may remember that after the ethnic Albanians had been threatened to be killed and exiled out of their country, the Serbian forces confiscated their passports and identity papers , so that the refugees would enter a bordering country with no reference to their name, birth or location. In addition , the Serbs systematically destroyed all tax records and other official documents that would reveal any trace that ethnic Albanians had ever lived in Kosovo. I remember being stunned by the fact that the Serbs, like the Nazis during World War II, had enough time and patience in the midst of an on-going war, to sort through the documents in a given village, to select out the papers of the Ethnic Albanians and destroy them. Apart from the violent intention of re-writing Serbian history as if no Albanian had ever lived in Kosovo, their meticulous

destruction of records in the midst of this human chaos suggests, I believe, the danger each non-democratic country perceives in the preservation of their country's historical past. In the violent takeover of a province, or country, every dictator seems immediately compelled to re-write their country's history in one broad stroke, as if this past, dead as it is, nonetheless harbors potential dangers in its very concrete existence.

"You cannot negotiate the past" is a sentence that has stuck in my mind. It was uttered by one of the chief negotiators of the Israeli/Palestine conflict. Negotiating and then rewriting the past is the very first task, dictators undertake once they have violently overthrown or invaded a country, and it is the very first step, skillful mediators have to abandon when they are negotiating a peace settlement. But let me return again to the Serbs for one more time. Why, I wonder, did the Serbs think it to be so necessary to destroy the records of the very people they had killed or expelled when the world was already aware of their atrocities. While the motive to erase an entire group of people both in person and on record, may have been a far more powerful/motivational force, I think something else was operative. I think that the ordinary existence of the communal/documentary history exerts such a powerful influence that dictators and tyrants alike frequently set themselves the task to destroy and re-write history as soon as they assume power. Individual memories are less feared by these organizers of history precisely because they constitute subjective and interpretive phenomena, ones that are highly susceptible to multiple influences and contexts. History, on the other hand, while it can be falsified, distorted,

erased, idolized and denied, the testimony it can provide through the uncovering of sometimes a single letter, a document or photo can evoke such an unshakable evidence of a history often long forgotten or thought to be lost, that it enforces a definite limit to the infinite interpretive spirals of memory. In an article by Ian Buruma on *The Joys and Perils of Victimhood*, he writes "Memory is not the same as history, and memorializing is different from writing history. Sharing a cultural history is more than "negotiating an identity". It is perhaps time for those of us who have lost religions, linguistic, or cultural ties with our ancestors to admit to that and to let it go. Finally, and I think this goes to the heart of the matter, we should recognize that truth is not just a point of view. There are facts which are not made up but real. And to pretend that there is no difference between fact and fiction, or that all writing is fiction, is to paralyze our capacity to distinguish truth from falsehood."(1999, p.9)

By the same token I want to argue that the transference/countertransference dynamic is a crucial carrier of a person's past, it is the matrix within which the patient replays his/her history in all its ordinary and not so ordinary aspects, it is a stage upon which the past can come alive again, but it does not replace a patient's history and it certainly does not substitute for it. To suggest and act as it does, is to confuse the largely imaginary relationship of the transference with the symbolic relationship to which both analytic participants are subjected to and spoken by. To relegate historical truth to the back-burner suggests once again that the dimension of the third and thirdness is gradually eroded under the aegis

of greater immediacy and spontaneity in the analytic space, a trend one can observe in other facets of contemporary psychoanalytic theory and practice. The belief that every aspect of analytic discourse has transference bearings has led, to the implicit conviction, that the external world can be essentially shut out since the outer dynamics replay themselves in the dual comfort of the analytic zone.. However, I do not think that aliveness is created through the drama of this psychoanalytic duet, but is more genuinely unveiled when the analyst knows how to work in the paradox of the imaginary, symbolic and real without jettisoning one realm for the other. I think the time has come to encourage our students once again to inquire actively into a patient's history, not in a canned and stale manner, but in one that suggests a vivid interest into the patient's personal/ familial and cultural history. Without these background stories, we are in no position to shape and direct our interpretations, and instead we enclose ourselves in a narcissistic, self-referential enclave in which we prefer to rely on the stories of our theoretical leanings, mistaking them for the real stories of the patient. If we do not accept the authority history yields, we are bound to make similar mistakes to the ones analysts made when they focused entirely upon their internal psychoanalytic understanding with no awareness of the larger social-political realm in which they were operating. When American and Israeli analysts treated the children in Israel who had lived through and survived the concentration camps, they could not believe the childrens' horrendous stories. Listening to the tales recounted from the concentration camps, the analysts attempted to ignore the bizarre tales by the camp survivors, encouraging them instead to adapt to their way of thinking. Tom Segev

writes: "The kibbutzim tried to help the Holocaust children in the only way they knew, they made an effort to erase the children's past, obliterate their otherness, and teach them to be better people-Israelis... The problem was, he noted, that the children "did not think the right way" about the relations between the individual and society. They were described as "corrupt ,prematurely adult, selfish and anti-social". They were diagnosed with "oedipal complexes, inferiority complexes, weak ego, latent homosexuality and the like." Of one child was said that he was "overattached to his mother" she had been killed in the war. Another was termed "disturbed" because he spoke too much Polish". (1993, 168/169)

I think in a climate like the current one, where substituting the present for the past, instead of experiencing and accepting the loss of the past in the present, it is useful to remember the distinction Hans Loewald drew between being a past and having a past. In some sense, echoing Lacan's dictum of being the phallus versus having the phallus, Loewald argues that in the mode of having a past, the present is not distinguished from the past, instead the past is re-enacted in the present. Conversely when you have a past, "the mind presents something to itself as its own past experience, distinguishing past from present and himself as the experiencer from what he experienced." (1980, p.165) When historical reconstruction is left to function merely as a confirmation of an interpretation in the here-and-now, it insinuates a certain arrogance on the part of the analysts who mistake themselves as carriers of both the present and the past . In collapsing the different modes of time, the linking/memorializing activity is perverted and

the history to which both analytic participants are subject to is subverted. This constricted psychoanalytic space begins to resemble a field cluttered with imaginary figures and devoid of their symbolic dimensions. The increasing psychoanalytic convention of focusing the analytic ear and interpretive activity upon the “here and now” and the simultaneous disappearance of genetic reconstructions suggest a psychoanalytic practice that has become more and more self-referential. Using Tzvetan Todorov's distinction between literal and symbolic memory, I want to argue that current infatuation with the here-and now dynamics of the transference spectacle risks collapsing the historical dimension and treats memory in a literal, personalized fashion where the past collapses into the present, rendering it useless in its differentiating, forming function. In the literal memory, things are kept the same and appear timeless. Symbolic memory, in contrast, allows for the utilization of the past with a perspective on the present”, striving to mark out analogies and differences. Let me conclude by saying that I think the time has come to reconsider seriously our preoccupation with the here-and now dramas of the transference and to re-situate our analytic work again between the liveliness and immediacy of the here-and now and the structuring and shaping forces of the past.

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