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The Radical Cure: Commentary on Paper by Eyal Rozmarin

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This commentary on Eyal Rozmarin's paper "To Be Is to Betray" considers the place of history in the psychoanalytic encounter. Examining texts by Adorno and Ferenczi, the author cautions against "radical cures" that conflate political values with analytic ones.

History is what hurts.

—Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*

There is a moment in Eyal Rozmarin's marvelous essay that I find particularly moving. Tal has asked to reduce the frequency of her sessions; Rozmarin has reluctantly agreed. Usually we would think of such a request as a form of resistance. Instead we discover that she is struggling to free up the words she needs to talk about something that has been troubling her. "Once I released her," Rozmarin writes, "she could tell me in detail about anxiety before and during our sessions. I learned that sometimes she was sitting in front of me with her stomach badly aching. This is what hugging the pillow was about! I had no idea that for us to be sitting together was sometimes literally painful."

Tal, we learn, suffers from other people's reminiscences. Her stomach pains come from an undigested piece of history. Even the dream of the two faces that helps Rozmarin arrive at his understanding of her unease belongs not to Tal but to her maternal aunt. Her physical discomfort during sessions or during sex arises from the fact that she can never simply be alone with another person. There is always what Rozmarin calls "the collective," really a collection of collectives: friends, ancestors, an angry and defensive nation. She clutches the pillow as if to soften the impact of her wish to be left in peace.

"History is what hurts," the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson (1982, p. 102) wrote, in a phrase that captures Rozmarin's argument neatly. The convergence of world history and personal history can be painful indeed. Like Tal, I come from a family that was both created and destroyed by the Holocaust. Created because it is unlikely that my family would have existed without it; destroyed because the suffering and memory of suffering have prevented us from ever simply being at peace, with ourselves, with each other, with the world around us. We might say that such families miss out on their chance to be unhappy in their own way.

Rozmarin suggests that we need to turn to critical theory to make sense of such struggles with these big and unwieldy Others. “For psychoanalysis to be a practice of freedom,” he writes, “it must address the ways in which subjective experience answers to social forces and collective history.” As a historian, I am largely sympathetic to this argument; there is no personal experience that is not also historical experience. But does psychoanalysis become a practice of freedom by addressing itself to social forces, to collective history? Or might its potential contribution to freedom lie elsewhere? In this short space I want to work with and through Rozmarin’s essay to ponder the responsibilities of psychoanalysis to history. In particular, I want to raise some questions about “radical cures,” that is to say, treatments whose interpretations are guided by even the most laudable political values (and I sense that Rozmarin and I agree on nearly all of these values). Psychoanalysis becomes a practice of freedom, I think, not by addressing collectives, but by helping us in our constant struggle to uncollect ourselves.

Adorno’s relationship to psychoanalysis was more complicated than his advocates usually acknowledge. On one hand, he shared with many of his generation the hope that it could provide a rational explanation for the mass irrationalism that seemed suddenly everywhere. On the other hand, he feared that it too represented a tool of irrational influence, a sort of Caligari-style mind control. In other words, his enthusiasm for psychoanalytic theory entailed a skepticism for psychoanalytic practice. Nowhere was this contradiction more evident than in *Minima Moralia*, his postwar collection of essays and fragments, where he repeatedly invoked psychoanalysis to help him understand the forms of domination that he then accused it of perpetrating. “The psycho-analyst’s wisdom finally becomes what the Fascist unconscious of the horror magazines takes it for: a technique by which one particular racket among others binds suffering and helpless people irrevocably to itself, in order to command and exploit them” (Adorno 1951/1974, p. 64). In effect Adorno summoned psychoanalysis only to conjure it away again, or rather, to denounce it as one more form of conjuration, as one more spell cast on the weary and unwary masses.

Fortunately, Rozmarin guides us towards Adorno’s (1966/1973) far more thoughtful critique in *Negative Dialectics*, where the philosopher takes up Sandor Ferenczi’s paper, “The Elasticity of Psycho-Analytic Technique.” This essay, first published in 1928, is probably best remembered for its central metaphor:

A patient of mine once spoke of the ‘elasticity of analytic technique’, a phrase that I fully accept. The analyst, like an elastic band, must yield to the patient’s pull, but without ceasing to pull in his own direction, as long as one position or the other had not been conclusively demonstrated to be untenable. (Ferenczi, 1928/1955a, p. 95)

Like the little implement in question, the metaphor stretches in all kinds of handy directions. Ferenczi’s patient applies it to analytic technique, which can be extended and reshaped depending on the clinical context. Ferenczi himself then shifts its meaning slightly to describe the psyche of the analyst, which must be able to withstand the stress and strain of countertransference.

Adorno is less interested in Ferenczi’s technical contributions, however, than in a brief aside in which the author sets forward the goals of a successful analysis. “I should like to add that it is the business of a real character analysis to do away, at any rate temporarily, with any kind of super-ego, including that of the analyst,” Ferenczi (1928/1955a) writes. “The patient should end by ridding himself of any emotional attachment that is independent of his own reason and his

own libidinal tendencies. Only a complete dissolution of the super-ego can bring about a radical cure” (p. 98). Adorno (1966/1973) is clearly delighted to have found this passage, which he presents as an example of “the Freudian school in its heroic period.”

If this is heroism, it is a particularly reckless sort. Adam Phillips (2002, p. 621), writing in the pages of this journal, has suggested that we could devote a whole conference to this passage from Ferenczi. If we did, I would want to single out this idea of a “radical cure,” which resonates so strongly with the final sentences of the *Fragments of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria* (Freud, 1905). “I do not know what kind of help she wanted from me,” Freud writes of his reunion with Dora, “but I promised to forgive her for having deprived me of the satisfaction of affording her a far more radical cure for her troubles” (p. 122). In both cases, the “radical cure” signals the intrusion of ulterior and undertheorized—though not necessarily unconscious—motives into the analytic setting. The ideal of analytic neutrality is abandoned, and with it the atmosphere of safety.

Ferenczi (1928/1955a) catches his mistake and, to Adorno’s dismay, reverses himself in the final paragraph of the “Elasticity” essay. “In reality my objective was to destroy only that part of the super-ego that had become unconscious and was therefore beyond the range of influence,” he tells us. “I have no sort of objection to the retention of a number of positive and negative models in the pre-conscious of the ordinary individual” (p. 101). Adorno considers this retraction to be typical of psychoanalysis’ bourgeois tendencies. Any compromise with the superego in any form represents an concession to unfreedom:

As soon as it puts the brakes of social conformism on the critique of the superego launched by itself, psychoanalysis comes close to that repression which to this day has marred all teachings of freedom. . . . A critique of the superego would have to turn into one of the society that produces the superego; *if psychoanalysts stand mute here, they accommodate the ruling social norm* [italics added]. (Adorno, 1966/1973, pp. 273–274)

But isn’t “standing mute” what psychoanalysis does best? Or if not exactly standing mute, at least sitting quietly? Adorno and Rozmarin are both right, of course, to point out that psychoanalysis, especially in its classical form, contains many Enlightenment, bourgeois, liberal-in-the-bad-sense-of-the-term elements. I would add that psychoanalytic listening, in particular, seems to have its origins in the disciplinary practices of attentiveness that emerged in Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries, when audiences at concerts, museums, and other institutions of high culture began to fall silent (Crary, 2000; Johnson, 1995). To this day, one’s ability to remain silent and still in such surroundings is evidence of cultural belonging. That said, through its silence, through its stillness, psychoanalysis made it possible for the subject to speak her mind in a way that was radically incompatible with existing rules and norms of comportment. By sitting silently, by sitting still, psychoanalysis makes it possible for the subject’s unconscious wishes, fantasies, conflicts to be heard.

I recognize that this might be taken for a critique of relational analysis, but that is not my intent here. My intent is more “academic.” Like Rozmarin, I am a strong advocate of greater exchange between psychoanalysis and history, psychoanalysis and philosophy, psychoanalysis and feminist and queer theory. But I would argue that history, philosophy, feminism, and queer theory might have more to gain from this exchange than psychoanalysis. I was concerned, for example, to read Rozmarin’s (this issue) remark that “the premising of desire as directed at a

fantastic object, the denial of desire as a reality among subjects, is as spellbound as the denial of suffering, and indeed, its consequence” (p. 342). If this is true, it would mean abandoning some of the best scholarship written of the last 50 years. Imagine *Gender Trouble* without its argument that “the fantasized body can never be understood in relation to the body as real; it can only be understood in relation to another culturally instituted fantasy, one which claims the place of the ‘literal’ and the ‘real’” (Butler, 1990, p. 90). Those of us in the human sciences have turned and returned to psychoanalysis because it allows us to understand that even something as apparently real as a body—its pleasures, its sufferings—are inextricable from unconscious fantasy.

Along these lines, I would have liked to hear more about Tal’s representation of her sexual anesthesia as “the lobster.” This must be an overdetermined image. It evokes dietary taboos, ancestral prohibitions, the irrational and inexplicable requirements of the collective. But at the same time the claws, legs, antennae are unmistakably—unless, of course, I am mistaken—Melanie Klein’s “combined parent-figure.” Or perhaps they share something with Wilhelm Reich’s “character armor,” which, like an exoskeleton, protects the bearer from the world outside it while also, crucially, holding everything together.

As we know, wholeness is one of the most enduring fantasies and one of the most disappointing. Reading Rozmarin’s essay, I became more and more fascinated by the recurrence of the theme of “reconciliation.” At one point he cites Adorno: “The human subject could be liberated only where it had achieved reconciliation.” Elsewhere he argues for

the possibility of reconciliation—reconciliation within and among subjects in their collectivity, such that they become less antagonistic than both norm and history make them to be. It is only in the vision of such possible reconciliation that Adorno sees hope for a world where a subject who is less adamantly bent on living *against* himself and others lives *among* similarly willing others in a society that is both more just and more free. (p. 339)

I share these goals, but I also suspect that such reconciliation may be the oceanic feeling with a Hegelian undercurrent. I agree with Rozmarin that theory is the place to swim in these currents, to experience their pleasures and their hazards. His essay demonstrates just how invigorating such a theoretical venture can be. I’m less certain about the analytic session.

Around the time he published the “Elasticity” essay, Ferenczi (1930/1955b) jotted down some notes on trauma in which he observed that some lower organisms respond to external shocks by fragmenting themselves. Paradoxically, this response might work to their advantage.

Fragmentation may be advantageous (*a*) by creating a more extended surface towards the external world, i.e., by the possibility of an increased discharge of affects; (*b*) from the physiological angle: the giving up of concentration, of unified perception, at least puts an end to the simultaneous suffering of multiple pain. The single fragments suffer for themselves; the unbearable unification of all pain qualities and quantities does not take place; (*c*) the absence of higher integration, the cessation of the interrelation of pain fragments allows the single fragments a much greater adaptability. (p. 230)

Tal’s case illustrates one of the consequences, or at least one of the potential consequences, when a group fails to fragment after a historical disaster, when it refuses to allow itself and its members to fall apart. If the fragments had been able to suffer for themselves, they might have been able to heal for themselves as well. Instead there is the unbearable unification of all pain qualities and quantities—an intensity so unbearable that Tal can only flee. But of course we can’t flee such things any more than we can reconcile ourselves to them. We must learn to live unreconciled. This is what makes psychoanalysis so tragic.

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