

Psychoanalysis, Countertransference, and the Dialogical Principle

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In aesthetic seeing you love a human being not because he is good, but, rather, a human being is good because you love him. This is what constitutes the specific character of aesthetic seeing.

Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. (62)

Introduction

My article seeks to enter and contribute to a discussion that was initiated in 1996 by Tzvetan Todorov and Stephen A. Mitchell in a special symposium issue of *New Literary History*¹. In this issue, Todorov published the lead article, “Living Alone Together” which was followed by seven “Replies” or commentaries, including one by Mitchell. Todorov who summarizes his aims in “Living Alone Together” as follows:

In “Living Alone Together,” I defend two theses. One concerns the need to think through all of our anthropological categories, both explicit and implicit, in light of the constitutive sociality of man: the interhuman is the basis of the human. The other thesis deals with the forms of social interaction. I contest the dominant role habitually attributed to the relations of resemblance, which also means of rivalry and combat, and I recall that a role comparable in importance, indeed more important, is played by the relations of contiguity and complementarity, an exemplary incarnation of which is the gaze we turn toward one another and hence, at the origin, the gaze exchanged by the infant and his mother (or whoever is serving in that capacity). The *gaze*, not only the *fray*. (Todorov’s emphases, 95)

Mitchell’s aim, in responding to Todorov, is to: “... illustrate the ways in which current psychoanalytic thought may add a novel dimension to the kinds of issues Todorov is struggling with” (35). Mitchell goes on to review the tensions between social and individual factors in Freud’s psychoanalytic theories of drive and motivation. He also briefly describes — in the generation after Freud — a fundamental shift in psychoanalysis, with the appearance of the notion of the “internal object” in the theories of Melanie Klein and other “postclassical frameworks” (35). The shift, according to Mitchell, implies a move from a one-person to a two-person psychology (36). He adds that “the implications of this object relations revolution are still being worked out” by psychoanalysts today (37). Mitchell then presents and discusses a clinical vignette from his psychoanalytic work with a patient named “Robert”. Mitchell concludes (this statement could very well sum up the underlying

¹ Todorov, an expatriate Bulgarian who has lived in Paris since the early 1960s, has had a long and prestigious career as a researcher at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique. He began his career by introducing the Russian Formalists to Western audiences and then went on to make major contributions to the study of literary *genre* and, more recently, to political and social topics. Mitchell, up until his untimely death in 2003, was and still is considered one of the most important proponents of relational psychoanalysis.

ing relational principle of all of his work): “My intent is to demonstrate the way in which contemporary psychoanalytic theorizing regards (psychic) living together not as an option but as constitutive of human mind and the way in which the analytic process makes it possible for the analysand to regard (internal and external) relationships with others as a rich reservoir of resources” (40).

What I want to explore, using some of my own clinical material as illustration, is the following hypothesis. Todorov’s dialogical thinking and Mitchell’s relational thinking have, as Mitchell implies, important affinities. I want to look more closely at these affinities and, as a first step in this project, I will examine briefly a body of work — that of Mikhail Bakhtin (1895—1975) and the Bakhtin Circle — that lies at the heart of Todorov’s philosophy². Bakhtin, a Russian philosopher and literary critic who wrote on Dostoevsky, Rabelais and many other topics, is known primarily for having discovered and developed a theory of dialogism or — to use Todorov’s way of putting it — the dialogical principle. In works like *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, written in the early 1920s, we can see Bakhtin’s crucial epistemological shift away from the idea that the individual is the primary category for any kind of significant philosophical or other kind of thinking. The shift in Bakhtin’s thinking parallels the shift, which was taking place in psychoanalysis at approximately the same time, away from the “individual as isolate” (Mitchell 35) and toward a two-person psychology. My hypothesis, in other words, is that Bakhtin’s early work, Todorov’s recent studies, and the work of contemporary relational psychoanalysts like Mitchell share common features, all of which can help us better understand “the relational matrix that makes our individual consciousness possible” (Mitchell 36). I am interested in showing how dialogical thinking can illuminate the work that we do in the consulting room. The clinical work that I describe in this article was carried out as I was reading and rereading the work of Bakhtin, Todorov, and Mitchell over the past four years. There are, therefore, at least three kinds of voices — the theorists’, my analysand’s and mine — in the story that I tell here, neither one, in my view, having priority over the other. I would like to think that they will be heard as a conversation, or as Todorov might say, as “a meeting of voices”³.

First Vignette: A Dream

“Donald”, a social worker and therapist in his thirties, seeks psychoanalytic treatment because he wants to understand better his sexuality, his relationships with family members, the sense of loss he feels following the end of his marriage, and

²See Todorov’s landmark study, *Mikhail Bakhtine et le principe dialogique*, in which he writes: “On pourrait accorder sans trop d’hésitations deux superlatifs à Mikhail Bakhtine, en affirmant qu’il est le plus important penseur soviétique dans le domaine des sciences humaines, ainsi que le plus grand théoricien de la littérature du vingtième siècle”. (Dust jacket)

[One could, without too much hesitation or exaggeration, say two things about Mikhail Bakhtin — he is the most important Soviet thinker in the area of the human sciences, as well as the greatest literary theoretician of the twentieth century] (my translation).

³See Todorov’s *Critique de la critique*, especially the chapter entitled, “Une critique dialogique?” in which he outlines his understanding of dialogical criticism: “Or, la critique est dialogique, et elle a tout intérêt à l’admettre ouvertement; rencontre de deux voix, celle de l’auteur et celle du critique, dont aucun n’a le privilège sur l’autre” (185)

[“Now, criticism is dialogical, and it is in its own interest to admit this openly; a meeting between two voices, that of the author and that of the critic, neither one having priority over the other”] (my translation).

the difficulty he experiences in forming and maintaining friendships. Sessions take place four times per week on four consecutive days, and the following session, the first one of the week, takes place about a month after the beginning of therapy. My analysand arrives a few minutes late, looks tired, and is moving slowly. He lies down on the couch, is silent for a few moments and then says:

D: I'm a bit slow today. Since yesterday I've been feeling fragile, vulnerable to crying. I had a dream yesterday. I think it was yesterday. I remember I was a child, at my parents' house, who took me to see a policeman. I was very much looking like a zombie, with a rigid posture, a blank facial expression, non-responsive to someone else's presence. The policeman didn't know what to do with me. All of a sudden I was gagged, had something in my mouth, stopping me from making any sound. Then I woke up. A confusing dream. I can't put sense to it.

CT: You said you were a child in the dream?

D: It wasn't really me, didn't look like me as a child. The child had dark hair and was slender. I had bright red hair and was very obese.

CT: Could you see your parents in the dream?

D: No. Don't recall them at all. I have an impression of them from the shoulders down. Nothing concrete.

CT: What did the policeman look like?

D: Like one of the officers on an old TV series. I watch reruns sometimes. I'm not sure if I'm remembering the policeman or remembering the show. He does everything by the book. He's condescending.

CT: Can you make anything of the dream?

D: It's confusing and uncertain. I have a thought. Again I'm fully aware, it's maybe me projecting an interpretation on it. My thought is my parents just wanted to shut me up, took me to the wrong person. I just got shut up. It's another rephrasing of thinking I'm a victim of my parents. Don't know what to think of that. Can't get the answer. When is it time to move on from there? I could just wait for the answer or carry on without the answer. Not sure. Seems odd. Don't know what it is.

Donald tells his dream in what sounds to me like an affectless voice, speaking slowly, uncertainly, almost disinterestedly. As I ask him my somewhat pointed questions, I am aware of my own feeling that, if I don't persist with some questions, the dream will get lost. I am also aware of a disconnection in the room. Within the first month of therapy, my analysand established a pattern of telling me his dreams in this uncertain manner, usually ending with the comment, as he does here, that the meaning of his dreams is confusing, opaque or difficult. I am expecting and I want a dialogue with Donald, because the content of the dream appears immensely rich to me. But I retreat into my own space in the consulting room, as our work on the dream fizzles. Yet, as my mind begins to wander, I remember what Freud said:

The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest until it has gained a hearing. (...) This is one of the few points on which one may be optimistic about the future of mankind, but it is in itself a point of no small importance. (The Future of an Illusion 53)

I am convinced, in spite of my feelings of disconnectedness, that my analysand, on an unconscious level, must want to make his voice heard. After all, he has been coming to see me regularly, four times a week for more than a month. He

has seen several other therapists before me. After the session, I start to work on the dream on my own and I notice that Donald represents himself as inexpressive, non-responsive, incommunicative. He is cut off from the circumstances in which he finds himself and he neither looks at his parents nor can he be the object of their gaze. He sees them only from the shoulders down. Donald can look at the policeman — or is this me, the analyst, “the wrong person”? — but the policeman doesn’t know what to do with him and that ignorance turns into a gag. The dream would appear to be about disconnectedness, among other things. The parallels between my feelings when I am with Donald and the content of the dream are striking.

Both Mikhail Bakhtin and Tzvetan Todorov have written extensively about dialogue and otherness. I turn my mind to their writings in the hope of a better understanding of the clinical material and I continue to think about Mitchell’s exchange with Todorov. In *Les genres du discours*, as Todorov analyzes Dostoevsky’s *Notes from the Underground* and, in particular, the master-slave relationship, he underlines both the importance of the gaze as an essential component in our experience of otherness and the fears that the gaze of others can sometimes provoke:

L’homme n’existe pas sans le regard de l’autre. (...) Le narrateur ne veut pas regarder les autres, car, à le faire, il reconnaîtrait leur existence et, par là même, leur accorderait un privilège qu’il n’est pas sûr d’avoir pour lui-même; autrement dit, le regard risque de faire de lui un esclave. (153)

(Man doesn’t exist without the gaze of the other. (...) The narrator [in *Notes from the Underground*] doesn’t want to look at the others, because, if he does, he would recognize their existence, and in doing so, would grant them a privilege that he is not sure he has for himself: in other words the gaze runs the risk of turning him into a slave.) (My translation)

As I continue to explore Donald’s dream and my countertransference, I wonder if he sees himself as a prisoner, perhaps even a slave, in some of his interpersonal relationships, including his relationship with me. After all, he has no voice or power in the dream. He gives himself no agency. His dream seems to pose a huge question about his transference issues. Perhaps he is asking, unconsciously: “Will you, my analyst, know what to do with me, in these early stages of our work together? My parents abdicated their responsibility when they divorced and when I was left alone with my mother who certainly didn’t take very good care of me. Will you, my analyst, want to shut me up, or worse still, retraumatize me?”

For the moment, I admit to myself that I am feeling disturbed and helpless, perhaps even a little hopeless. Daniel Burston, in his *New Literary History* reply to Todorov, entitled “Conflict and Sociability in Hegel, Freud, and Their Followers,” comments on R. D. Laing’s work and captures succinctly, as follows, what I am feeling, in terms of “being for oneself and being for others”: “Laing hints, one’s being for oneself and one’s being for others are dialectically intertwined, and when the two become deeply disjunctive, for whatever reason, disturbance results — a theme he explored brilliantly throughout *The Divided Self* (and elsewhere)” (78). Donald and I have a long way to go, it seems, before we can be for each other, while being for ourselves — neither is it at all clear how the above exchange could be seen, as Mitchell writes, as a “rich reservoir of resources”.

Yet I continue to reflect on my exchange with Donald about his dream. His inclination is to “interpret” it and he wonders if he is simply projecting an interpretation onto it. For some reason that is not clear to me, I am uneasy with his way of going about working on his dream. I am aware that my response to the dream in the session is also probably a little off, because it felt mechanical, intellectual. Am I too conventional, trying to be classically Freudian, in the way I seek clarification, ask for associations, and then — probably much too quickly — go for an interpretation. I wonder if Donald felt silenced by my approach. Does he feel unconsciously that his dream isn’t good enough for me? It’s very possible. After all, my questions which, in retrospect, look to me like an interrogation, could easily suggest the inadequacy of the dream material that was brought to the session.

Now I am beginning to understand a little better how my relations with Donald have become disconnected. To put it simply, theory and intellectualizing got in the way, in the sense that I hijacked the dreamwork by imposing my agenda and my method on it. I’m the one who proceeded so conventionally and unilaterally.

I remember what Bakhtin wrote on a closely related topic — what he called “theoreticism” — in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*, a piece of writing that exists only as a fragment and that some of his disciples prepared for publication after he died. Although Bakhtin’s main goal was to warn philosophers about the risks of “theoreticism” at a point in his career when he was in his so-called Neo-Kantian phase, I believe he has lessons for psychoanalysts today⁴. Bakhtin’s concern, among others, was to reform ethical thinking by getting rid of binarisms like theory versus practice, cognition versus life, thought versus reality. He puts it this way:

All attempts to surmount — from within theoretical cognition — the dualism of cognition and life, the dualisms of thought and once-occurrent concrete reality, are utterly hopeless. Having detached the content-sense aspect of cognition from the historical act of its actualization, we can get out from within it and enter the ought only by way of a leap. To look for the actual cognitional act as a performed deed in the content-sense is the same as trying to pull oneself up by one’s own hair. (7)

The point that I take from this densely worded and convoluted quotation, if I reformulate Bakhtin’s thinking for my own purposes, is that a dream can be seen as an act or a deed, and that no amount of intellectualizing (what Bakhtin calls “theoretical cognition”), imposed from the outside, will help me or Donald understand it. I must try to see and grasp its value as a “once-occurrent” event, or as a performance that is located in a specific relational context — the time-space of the specific session in which the dream was recounted by my analysand⁵.

Donald and I continue to meet over the ensuing months and our sessions seem to come most alive when we are intellectualizing. I am aware to some extent

⁴I am not the first to make connections between psychoanalysis and Bakhtin’s theories. See the work of Joe Barnhart, Adolfo Fernandez-Zoila, Peter Good, and Rachel Pollard. My article is, as far as I can determine, one of the first attempts to make links between the theory and clinical practice.

⁵Bakhtin invented another original concept, that of the “chronotope”, as a way to refer to a specific time and space in narrative. He was concerned to avoid separating the concepts of time and space in his cultural and literary analyses. See his “Forms of Time and the Chronotope”. This concept, in my view, could be usefully applied to the context of the consulting room. Peter Good has developed the notion of the “care chronotope” in the realm of psychiatry.

that I am colluding in this way of working together. I also feel that the therapy is stagnating. My frustrations intensify. Again I turn to Bakhtin to find an accurate description of the static world that my analysand and I have created. It is a world that Bakhtin calls indifferent, finished, dead, and “unanswerable”:

In that world [the world in which abstract cognition is paramount] we would find ourselves to be determined, predetermined, bygone, and finished, that is, essentially not living. We could have cast ourselves out of life — as answerable, risk-fraught, and open becoming through performed actions — and into an indifferent and, fundamentally, accomplished and finished theoretical Being (which is not yet completed and as yet to be determined only in the process of cognition, but to be determined precisely as a given). (9)

Bakhtin nudges me into asking an important question. How do I preserve a sense of “open becoming” or “open-endedness” (another term that Bakhtin coins in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*)? How do I create a sense of “answerability”?

Second Vignette: Forgetting Sessions

Six months later, Donald arrives for our session, having missed the previous one. (What follows is a transcription of the complete session.)

D: Hello, Clive. Just laying down here right now, I'm reminded of how I used to feel when I took yoga classes. When I laid down I would tend to go to sleep. As soon as I laid down, I start to feel tired. (PAUSE) I apologize for yesterday. I don't know if I was supposed to be here.

CT: Yes, on the sheet you gave me a month ago, you indicated an appointment for today at 4:15.

D: I made a mistake. My place is a bit of a disaster area. I apologize for missing my appointment.

CT: The problem is, when we miss appointments, or forget them, or start late, we never can know what might have happened in that time.

D: Yes, it's a bit of a loss.

CT: What do you think is lost?

D: I'm not sure. I'm never sure if a missed opportunity is something profound or something inconsequential. It creates this uncertainty. I don't know if certainty is lost. What certainly was, wasn't.

CT: Do you have a sense of interruption when you miss a session or when we miss a session?

D: Sitting here today, I don't miss it. When I got home yesterday, I have this sliver in my brain, and for that moment I realize there was a sense of interruption. I guess I'm thinking of interruption as something unpleasant. I'm thinking of that discomfort when I realized I missed the appointment. Interruption, by its nature, is something unpleasant. I'm thinking of that discomfort when I realized I missed the appointment. Maybe it depends on what's being interrupted. Certainly, being interrupted in my feelings is cause for discomfort.

CT: Would you say you forgot the session on Wednesday?

D: Yes. It was very odd. I was looking at my daytimer when I got home. I had some time to myself. I looked at my daytimer. I had three things written in. I had the my workout at 5. Then I remembered I see you on Wednesday afternoon. Then I remembered on Tuesday saying, “See you tomorrow”. What's curious is if I had

you at 4:15, I had a therapy client at 3:45. I have a feeling I actually forgot to say anything about it, that I needed to change my appointment with you.

CT: Is it possible that you didn't want to come yesterday?

D: I don't think so. There are times when I don't feel like coming. Sometimes it's harder or easier. It's harder when I'm tired. Unless it's something I'm not aware of. I'm thinking in what ways I might not want to come to see you. The only hesitancy is I know my anger frightens me.

CT: Are you afraid that your anger might frighten me?

D: I don't know how you would react to my anger. I think it would be a terrible thing for me if you found it ugly. I don't know you would necessarily feel that way. It would be a double whammy if you feel the way I do, if my anger made you angry. I feel it's important for me to come here. I keep thinking I don't know why I would give you that kind of power.

CT: What kind of power?

D: It feels like the kind of power to devastate me. Part of me says: "If you don't like it, too bad". Another part says: "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I must be liked". Another part says "This is who I am". It doesn't feel very strong when it comes to my anger, or the same thing. I've done rage-workshops. I've done crouch-in-the-woods-naked-and-howl-at-the-sky workshops. I feel a bit like saying I've already had the exorcism.

CT: I think you know what we're doing here is not an exorcism.

D: I feel like I wish it was exorcism. I feel I come face to face with this person who's trying to make me into something I'm not. Then there's part of me that aspires to a kind of idealistic goody-goodyness that makes my life hell. (TEARS) Then there's this... I don't even know what to call it. Then there's this religious obsession about being the right person, doing the right thing, the Judeo-Christian thing... I don't know. In some ways I feel screwed. I want to be this professional person. (TEARS) I'm supposed to be this right-thinking person. The amount of anger I have in me... . It doesn't seem to apply. I don't know. I'm trying to be the person I am, the person I want to be. Do I ever let myself be the person I want to be? I don't want my life to fall apart. I feel very angry about how I thought my life was going to go and how I've been mistaken about it. I lay here. I even try to be a good client. What does a good client say? I try not to piss you off. I was tempted to say I try to be... (PAUSE) So I keep pushing myself, push, push, push. (PAUSE)

My mind's gone in a different direction. When I tell people how busy I am, people tell me I'm crazy. I'm irritated about not telling them the whole story. I was thinking about being underestimated earlier today. It's one of the things that strikes me. (PAUSE)

CT: How does it feel, over the past two weeks, since you started working during the day?

D: Like I'm going to have anxiety attacks. Give me another two weeks and I'll start having anxiety attacks. I enjoy having seven hours of sleep. I'm finding it a nightmare to schedule my life. I still have four jobs, plus my therapy placements, and then I come to see you four times a week. I try to fit in laundry and other things. I feel I can't give up. I leave here now and I have ten minutes to get to work, with just enough time to hit the drive-through for dinner. Somebody asked me yesterday to take a new client and I said no. (PAUSE) I'm just going to try to

manage it and figure it out. It's a mixed blessing working days. Working at nights, I could do my school work. I'm scrambling to do my computer programming the day before I'm running it at work. I have three case presentations to do. Two at the end of the month and one in June.

CT: How much work is involved in preparing the case presentations?

D: I'm going to limit them to forty-five minutes long. I remember, for other cases before, I really did some nice genograms. I have to learn how to do them all over again. I have cases to review, files to review. I don't even know how much time I need. I feel like a train loose on the tracks. I'm rolling. It might be a mess when I stop. I wish I didn't need this much pressure. I started tracking my hours at work. That's useful. It's a 70-hour week, just with work commitments. I have a 45-hour week coming up. (PAUSE) Every once in a while, I ask these silly questions. Is the way I avoid my feelings? I'd like to sit back and enjoy it a bit. I'm still trying to finish off my semester, because of the strike.

CT: Are you close to finishing the work from the semester?

D: Yes. I should be done by next week. I had to set up these practicums that run into the summer. I have to come up with the money for that. I have to come up with a schedule of payments. A big stress. (PAUSE) With all this, I'm still trying to work on romantic interests. I saw C... the other day. I just said "Hi". It's something I really want, something I really miss. I have to finish all my training first. I think that's what makes me attractive as a man. At least that's what I think.

CT: Let's stop there for today. I'll see you on Tuesday.

D: Yes, at 8:30?

CT: Yes, that's right.

This session suggests, among many other things, what a difference six months of therapy can make. My question — “Is it possible that you didn't want to come to therapy yesterday?” — is an attempt both to show empathy and to explore my analysand's forgetting the session. But perhaps my question, and the tone in which I ask it, does not bring feelings into the session. It appears to bring more talk about feelings. But for a moment our session feels real to me when I hear Donald say: “I feel it's important for me to come here”. This is the first time in six months that he has said such a thing. But it doesn't take us long before we are off, intellectualizing again, talking about power, anger, and his busy schedule. I begin to see that at least part of what is preventing the therapy from moving forward has to do with our inability to stay with the feelings that are expressed in the sessions. I suspect that the problem is my misunderstanding of empathy. And I remember that Bakhtin wrote extensively about empathy in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* and in his essay on *Author and Hero*:

I empathize actively into an individuality and, consequently, I do not lose myself completely, not my unique place outside it, even for a moment. (...) But pure empathizing as such is impossible. (Bakhtin's emphases, 15, 16)

Empathy is perhaps the hardest thing to do in psychoanalysis, especially for Donald and me. Bakhtin's thinking on this topic is complex and much has been written in the psychoanalytic literature about empathy⁶. Bakhtin sees it as a dy-

⁶Much has been written about empathy in the psychoanalytic literature, especially in the self-psychological perspective. See, for example, the work of Hans Kohut.

namic process where, the empathizer remains in that unique place/space that is his own, while, at the same time, he puts himself in the place/space of the one he is empathizing with.

Perhaps asking a question, as I do in the session, is not the best way to be empathic. Instead of asking, “Is it possible that you didn’t want to come yesterday?” — which appears to put my analysand on the defensive — I could have said: “I’m very interested to know what you were feeling at the very moment when you realized that you’d forgot our session yesterday. I’d like to know more about that moment”. Instead of asking, “Are you afraid that your anger might frighten me?” — which sounds like an accusation — , I could have said: “I’d really like you to say more about those moments when your anger frightens you”. These comments might have conveyed empathy, as well as the fact that there are two subjects in the consulting room, working together, each being and having feelings for himself, while at the same time being and having feelings for the other.

Todorov builds on and extends Bakhtin’s writing about empathy and answerability. Todorov, in *The Morals of History*, describes, in a very systematic way, understanding or knowing as a form of empathizing, as in the following quotations. This way of seeing things, I believe, can help to understand better the psychoanalytic context (in the following quotation, we could substitute “therapeutic empathizing” for the term “understanding”):

The first phase of understanding [therapeutic empathizing] consists of assimilating the other to oneself. (...) There is only one identity: my own. (...) The second phase of understanding consists of effacing the self for the other’s benefit. (...) In the third phase of understanding, I resume my own identity, but after having done everything possible to know the other. (...) Duality (multiplicity) replaces unity; the “I” remains distinct from the other. (...) During the fourth phase of knowledge, I “leave” myself again, but in an entirely different way. I no longer desire, nor am I able to identify with the other, nor can I, however, identify with myself. (...) Since knowledge of oneself transforms the identity of this self, the entire process begins again. (...) Not every recognition is a struggle for power or a demand for a confirmation of value. Nor is every struggle accompanied by a demand for recognition either. (13)

Todorov explains, in *Face à l’extrême*, what he means by the “self” — the self is essentially a matter of “internal plurality”:

The internal plurality of each being is the correlative of the plurality of people who surround him. The multiplicity of roles that each one of them assumes; this characteristic is distinctive of the human species. (122)

And Todorov reminds us further, in another passage from *The Morals of History*, that: “Knowledge of self can only be gained through knowledge of one’s difference from the other”(). What strikes me as so valuable and original about Todorov’s four phases of understanding lies in the detailed and systematic way that he accounts for the process of understanding. Perhaps the most intriguing moment of the process is the second phase: “The second phase of understanding consists in effacing the self for the other’s benefit”. This second phase of understanding is especially interesting to me, but I want to know more about how this “effacing of the self” happens. Perhaps it’s best, at this point, to return to my clinical material for purposes of illustration.

Third Vignette: A Gift

This is a brief excerpt from a session a year and a half after therapy began. Donald and I are still meeting four times a week. This session occurs in the last session just before we took a break for the December holidays:

(...)

D: I had a sudden thought about Wednesday's session when you said I appeared to be drifting in the session. I wanted to validate your word "drifting", not to reassure you but as a gift. Drifting is like being safe here, a feeling of safety. Is that what you meant?

CT: Drifting seemed like the right word. You seemed to drift in and out of our session, without losing your train of thought. I've noticed that and mentioned it to you before.

D: I always feel present here, even when I'm semi-conscious or sleeping. I didn't have that safety growing up, so it's important here.

(...)

This exchange demonstrates that Donald and I are finally working productively together. I think that this exchange can also be seen as symptomatic of that second crucial moment in Todorov's description of the process of understanding: "the effacing of the self for the other's benefit". I had been able, in the previous session, to leave my subject position in order to notice something about my analysand's drifting. He, in turn, is able to do something similar, when he wants to "validate what I said as a gift" and he tells me is now feeling safe with me. How were my analysand and I able to get to this point in our work? It took months and months of struggle, frustration, missed encounters, "empathic failures", misunderstandings, disconnections — for both of us, I am sure. Perhaps we could call this work, using one of Bakhtin's favourite expressions, "participative psychoanalysis," that is, a kind of therapy that is engaged, committed, involved, concerned, interested, unindifferent.

Conclusion

I have tried to show, through this brief analysis of my countertransference during three distinct phases in a therapeutic process, how Donald and I moved from stalemate to a more productive way of working. The writings of Stephen Mitchell, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Tzvetan Todorov helped me reflect on this process as a process of *becoming*. More specifically, I was able, by instituting a fruitful dialogue between me and them, to get my thinking moving. I don't believe that I was engaging in a form of "theoreticism" here, that is, the mechanical application of some theoretical constructs to a clinical situation. The clinical material informed the theoretical writings that I have quoted, and vice versa. In this sense, I learned a new way to become an "answerable" therapist, while, at the same time, Donald and I became "answerable" to each other. More importantly, Donald was able to move from seeing himself as "a psychological isolate" (Mitchell's phrase, 39), as he does in his dream where he is disconnected from his parents and the world around him, to an awareness (perhaps not entirely conscious) that this might be an illusion. The session in which Donald recounts a dream involving "rivalry and combat" stands in stark contrast to the session, a year and a half later, in which he gives me a "gift". The subsequent analytic work that he and I co-created allowed

for a new relationship between us. The distance travelled between these two sessions is evidence that he is perhaps beginning to have some sense of himself as a “reservoir of resources” and that his view of his (internal and external) relationships has shifted from one of “rivalry and combat” to one of “complementarity”.

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