The Autobiographical Dialogue in the Dialogue Between Analysts:
Introductory Notes on the Use of Relational and Intersubjective Perspectives in Conference Space

By Gershon J. Molad and Judith E. Vida © 2002

Authors’ acknowledgment: We give special thanks to the friends, colleagues, patients and candidates who enter into “the autobiographical dialogue” with us.

“It operates on a basis of missing parts. The formal structure, a Minimalist strategy of viewer completion and involvement, is one of fragment, space, fragment, space, fragment, fragment, space, space, space.”

Allen Ruppersberg, “Fifty Helpful Hints for the Art of the Everyday”

“I would say more than this if the question here were what I should have done; but it is what I have done, and unfortunately that is not the same thing.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, The Confessions, p. 236

“The point is [that] with Baldessari it’s always something else. It’s this and that. He’s not only interested in the choices one ultimately makes but in the whole universe of

---

1Earlier versions of this chapter were presented (by GJM) to Tel Aviv University Postgraduate Psychotherapy Departmental Seminar on “Supervision,” April 15, 2002; and (by JEV & GJM) to “Clinical Sándor Ferenczi,” International Conference organized by Università Degli Studi Di Torino, July 21, 2002
2 Since we write in the context of an ongoing mutual dialogue, the order of names intermittently alters and is of no significance.
options we reject. As he says...while something is happening here, something else is happening there.”

Meg Cranston, “John Baldessari: Many Worthwhile Aspects”

1. Introduction

Allowing the autobiographical dialogue

For some years, the two of us, separately and together (Molad, 1998, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2001a, 2001b; Barish & Vida, 1998; Vida & Barish, in press; Vida & Molad, 2000/2001; Molad & Vida, 1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2002a, 2002b, in press; Vida, 1999, 2000a, 2000b, 2000c, 2000d, 2000e, 2001, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c) have been concerned with the way analysts talk to each other, encompassing the whole range of interactions from private dyadic conversations in corridors to presentations in conference space, including the talk of teaching, training, and writing, and from historical circumstances to the immediate and personal.

We observe that when presenting our case in conference space we find ourselves in the middle of two developmental trajectories: the historical development of psychoanalysis and the personal development of the analyst. In clinical space, psychoanalysis has had some success in developing a working method to create in the consulting room a “psychoanalytic space.” Yet “conference space,” with its mixture of mainly medical, philosophical, and religious conference-practices, is not a “psychoanalytic space.” In broad terms, the developmental trajectory of the analyst tells a story of dialogical difficulties within the external world. The analyst takes his difficulties into the consulting room (that of his analyst, and of his own as he works with patients) for
further development, and then a reconstituted dialogue is brought back to the conference world, with some hope (conscious or not) of “using” it to create a kind of intermediate transitional psychoanalytic space. Many times, however, the analyst re-entering conference space finds himself in a “disaster area.” Conference space, in current psychoanalytic practice, is not allowed to be an intermediate space: we meet one another defensively straining to demonstrate superior knowledge in the impersonal disguise of most clinical and theoretical presentations. The developmental-historical phase of psychoanalysis does not match the personal development of the analyst. The collision between the two unsynchronized “untuned” developmental trajectories leads to re-traumatization in the analyst, and to the traumatization of theory as well.

In the last three decades, a time of importance for psychoanalysis, there are some signs of a possible future mutual-tuning between the two trajectories. The developmental history of the intersubjective and relational schools, in the very heart of the general line of development of psychoanalysis, at last allows the analyst a central position. This is a new reading\(^3\) of the development of the analyst and his “voice,” his identity. As the analyst becomes less of a singular authority and sees himself as partially being and expressing something multiple, alternative and more mutual, there is a meeting point for the two developmental trajectories. The Freudian tradition of psychoanalysis, speaking a re-phrased “postmodern” relational language of love and life, now can meet the Ferenczian line of the analyst’s personal development, and for the first time in the history of psychoanalysis, they can really have some mutual development. And in fact, this “mutual introjection” is the developmental essence of an autobiographical dialogue.

\(^3\) And at the same time an old one (see n. 5)
Presenting the notion of an autobiographical dialogue, we begin from the premise that everything we say, do, think and write not only stems from our autobiography but expresses it, explicitly or implicitly. We understand what a patient says only in the context of his life, his autobiography. This is equally true for the analyst: we understand what the analyst says only in the context of what he tells about his life, only in the context of his autobiography. And further, we understand what an analyst says only in the context of the autobiography of his dialogical development, his dialogical autobiography.

In very general terms, dialogical autobiography aims at self-restoration, as a result of the intersection of internal and external dialogues. Internal dialogue is aimed at myself: I hear myself speaking as I tell my life and represent myself to myself (Smith, 1995). In external dialogue, I try to attribute “voice” to others and to myself. Here (as well as in internal dialogue) we can feel the “lost, non-present” voice, and it represents the other (and ourselves) as speaking, working across the gulf between voice-less selves and possibly restored voices.

Thus each clinical and theoretical development, each case presentation, is about the survival and development of the analyst, though the detail of it is usually kept secret, private, unacknowledged, unconscious (“lost, non-present”), and this makes it hard to know what we, readers and listeners, have heard or read, and who we are in relation to it. But when we can exchange something of our autobiographies, and hold one another’s difficulty as we do with our patient, we have some basis for a meeting, for some mutual understanding, and for possible transformation through the immediacy of contact with another’s survival and development. This is the model for “mutual introjection” that the
two of us believe can happen not only in clinical space but also between analysts who are able to engage in the autobiographical dialogue in conference space.

But at the same time, we are only too aware that the personal and autobiographical has a long history in psychoanalysis of being mainly excluded in a formal way from the dialogue between analysts, both in the literature and in conference space. This history and practice of exclusion has led to enormous difficulty in the dialogue between analysts, and inevitably this leaks back into clinical space and into our relations with patients.4

In the work that follows, we try to read some of the blindness in the dialogue between analysts, as we search for the “missing” and as the dialogue becomes obscure and turns against itself. We listen to some liminal voices speaking languages of despair and nostalgia, and observe experiences of using the autobiographical dialogue. The last section deals with the ethics of the autobiographical dialogue. Along the way, we suggest implicit meanings of specific modern and postmodern concepts for the psychoanalytic situation and for the dialogue between analysts, but we leave it very much to the play of the reader.

This chapter has its inception in the desire and despair which unfold in a dialogue between analysts, as the dialogue comes into being not only by a mutual coming-together, but also in a turning of the dialogue against itself, where the missing appears not only as an absence (of something, some-self, some-structure) but also as presence of void and nothingness in oneself and with the other.

4 Our ongoing work (in preparation) addresses directly the clinical relevance of the autobiographical dialogue.
But the place we speak from reflects more than our experience of working with analysts and therapists in seminars on the autobiographical dialogue. There is also a current element of examining our life in facing personal, traumatic, possible and actual loss and death, and the personal, possibly reconstituted, mutual introjection of the work of looking for the yet-unattained missing. This life-span perspective, a Ferenczian historical theme, is a basic --- present but not presented --- undercurrent throughout these pages, a distant echo to what Rousseau wrote in a letter we will touch further later on. In that letter, speaking about his withdrawal into solitude and isolation, Rousseau cites Similis, a courtier of the Roman caesar Trajan, who resigned his command, “left the Court and all his employments to go to live peacefully in the country [and] had these words put on his tomb: ‘I dwelt on the earth for seventy six years and lived for seven’(1762/1995, p.577).”

2. A reflexive dialogue of disorders

--- Playing balloons in the breeze, using some postmodern language and concepts, reading the “fear of death” ---

Looking at the autobiographical character of conference talk and presentation, we use some postmodern language and concepts. Pointing at the indeterminacy and richness of readings, creating a play of differences along time, we suggest that allowing the autobiographical dialogue to be an operator of reading and understanding (in the dialogue
between analysts) restores freedom and meaning to a dialogue that is all too often blocked.5

In psychoanalysis, the postmodern has always been there, as a “way beyond” that is partially found both in the “historical” Freud and in the past history of psychoanalysis, as unsolved antecedent presented issues, or as embedded yet undeveloped themes. Postmodern merely marks a difference in the way it has been used. As such, the “post” in postmodernism indicates a continuum of difference. This is either difference from the modern as a negating alternative discourse of the human condition, or difference within the modern as a critical-radical developmental stage of modernism, or even as an alternative-parallel line in human history. Within this continuum, modern’s dread (loss of form) is postmodern’s hope (the deconstruction of form).

Modernism requires a reality objectified by authority, an “is,” and the modernist tradition of psychoanalysis emphasizes “knowledge” and “cure.” In the eyes of that tradition, experience that is de-centered, paradoxical, “multiplied,” non-unified, non-hierarchical, tends to look weak, broken, fragmented, irrational, chaotic --- and these then become the synonyms for “unanalyzed,” “untreated,” “mental problems,” and “illness.”

What is it, for an analyst, to use postmodern language and concepts? Well, we can begin by thinking of postmodern practice as a reflexive dialogue with the other (where there is mutual genesis of self and other, ranging from “benign introspection” toward “radical constitutive reflexivity” [Pels, 2000, p. 7]). But because of the weakness in a construct that has no modernist “is,” it is better to think of reflexivity as a distributed

---

5 Thus giving “mutuality” (a term long stashed in the deep-freeze with Ferenczi and only recently, intersubjectively, de-frosted) some wider meaning and better prospects for life in both conference and clinical spaces.
process, like a scene of children playing party-balloons in the breeze. In a postmodern reflexive dialogue, saying what “is” must always be partially left to the play (the contribution, the critique, the interpretation) of others.

What the formal arrival of postmodernism as a concept in intellectual discourse did for psychoanalysis was to encourage a fresh look at early psychoanalytic ideas about the unconscious. The cornerstone postmodern notion of simultaneous multiple realities, for example, is clearly visible in Robert Waelder’s classic concept of multiple function (1936). The modernist psychoanalyst seeks a “cure” by moving the patient’s internal compromise formation into greater congruence (order) with the privileged view of external reality. The analyst leaning toward the postmodern end of the continuum will see disorder not only within the patient but in external “reality” as well.

In other words, what “postmodernism” as a concept did for psychoanalysis was to open, in a horizontal axis, a postmodern vertical leap that had already been discovered or pointed at by early psychoanalytic ideas on the unconscious. The multi-faced as-if-chaotic inside-disorder was taken by psychoanalytic postmodernism from the deep back stage of the unconscious out into the open: this now-outside multi-order was moved front stage into the conscious and observable. Now transformation and communication are caught not so much between chaos and order as between kinds of disorder, internal and external. What postmodernism does is to create a different kind of dialogue, a dialogue of disorder. This disorder is not theoretical; it exists in the dialogue (or in the theory of dialogue), both within the analyst and between analysts. It is quite common to see a

---

6 Imagine a group of children playing balloons in the air, throwing them to each other like volleyballs, and the balloons’ lines of movement reflect influences of the tosses, the gentle balloon aerodynamics, and the breeze.

7 This (re)discovery of “something that was always there” is taken up more fully in Section 10 “Crushing” (I)
parallel struggle with patients, particularly patients new to the analytic experience, to allow themselves just this dialogue of disorders with the analyst, and within themselves with the analyst.

However, if, as psychoanalysts, we start to question the modern professional traditional position, we notice that we are on shaky ground. Despite the support of some postmodern social forces that challenge modernist notions of a single objectifiable reality (anti-psychiatry, feminism, anti-colonialism, etc.), psychoanalysts are still expected to embody some professional identity. When we see our patient and our colleague each as a person who bears the same human condition as ourselves, we may be helped, or hindered, by our dialogue with other analysts: our friends, colleagues, and professional community.

Some analysts have always been postmodern in the sense of de-centering and reading in the postmodern difference, in the dialogue that occurs in a clinical space where an intimate relation provides safety. Reading in the postmodern difference partially means holding and tolerating the disorder: within the patient, between the patient and his world, between the patient’s external world and the analyst’s external world, between the patient’s internal world and the analyst’s internal world, between the analyst and his own world, and within the analyst. In the more formal, conservative conference or written spaces, this de-centering and reading in the difference can become “as-if disappeared,” and/or unseen. This is the door frame effect, the metaphorical, illusionary door frame of thinking that clinical space is different from conference space, a distinction between what happens in the safety and privacy of the consulting room and what we allow ourselves to say to our colleagues (Molad, 2001a, b). While many analysts act postmodernly within their private clinical space, allowing for a considerable expanse of reading differences,
they will turn modern when moving through that illusionary door frame to conference space. That is, they will sound as-if “congruent” and “clear,” but the larger human experience of clinical space is utterly lost.

Analysts usually don’t see that they are not really talking to each other, and this inflicts blindness upon their dialogue. Postmodernism, even in its radical nihilistic streams, helps in reading the differences, de-blinding some of the dialogue and bringing congruence and integrity into dialogical practice. This anticipates the words of a candidate you will read later, “I don’t often hear others speaking of their [personal] clinical process…not in the class setting, anyway.”

What this meeting and movement between “alive” (clinical space) and “dead” (conference space) dialogues reveal is the enormous difficulty of holding death within and as part of life. This is what constitutes the fear of the postmodern in psychoanalysis, as theory, technique, and profession. The fear of death in meeting with the other combines despair and anxiety: fear of annihilation and despair from subordinating one’s self to the other, and anguish for lost solitude and freedom. There is also a devastating fear of the collapse of hope, both hope as a defense, and hope as a primal source of energy for existence. This fear of death --- the fear of dying-in-the-dialogue --- is a traumatic fear that reappears as a post-traumatic condition in the analyst, whenever postmodern elements introduce themselves into the dialogue. It is in part the disorder of postmodernism that generates a seeming catastrophe in a conservative narrative.

---

8 By de-blinding the dialogue, “congruence” and “integrity” are brought into the “meta” level of working in the dialogue. Now it is as though being able to see the complexities and differences does not blind eyes but sharpens them.
3. Autobiographical dialogue: the work of the “re-know”

“In myself I find an unexplainable void”

The meeting and movement between the alive and dead, as an unsolved antecedent, speaks (for example) to the re-emergence of Sándor Ferenczi in the contemporary psychoanalytic scene. “Analysis should be regarded as a process of fluid development,” he wrote in 1928, saying as much about the development of psychoanalysis in general as about a specific analytic treatment. “[It unfolds] itself before our eyes rather than as a structure with a design pre-imposed upon it by an architect (p. 90).” Two years later, he advised analysts to return to “abandoned workings” to locate “new veins of gold (1930, p. 120).”

In our view, the work of the autobiographical dialogue is to “re-know,” a search for the missing, a never-resolved, fluid, double-movement of simultaneously reaching present gold in abandoned workings and touching the missing that lodges in an always-there, hopeful yet dreadful, inconceivable structure.

This chapter itself has its inception in the desire and despair which unfold in a dialogue between analysts, as the dialogue comes into being not only by a mutual coming-together, but also in a turning of the dialogue against itself, where the missing appears not only as an absence (of something, some-self, some-structure) but also as presence of void and nothingness in oneself and with the other.⁹

“In myself, I found an unexplainable void that nothing could have filled; a longing of the heart towards another kind of fulfillment of which I could not conceive but

⁹ With this paragraph (see p. 5), we call attention to the value of repetition; elsewhere, we have focused on the value of silence (Molad & Vida, 2001b, 2002b).

8/5/2015
of which I nevertheless felt the attraction,” wrote Rousseau in an autobiographical letter10 (Rousseau, 1762, in: de Man, 1983, p.18). … “[And] even that was enjoyment, since from it I was penetrated by a very lively feeling and an attractive sadness that I would not have wanted not to have (Rousseau, 1762/1995, p. 579).”

That difficulty of reading the “being there with absence and void” is a fundamental issue of psychoanalysis. But as privileged positions and structures change in the collapse of observing distance, when (in the best Ferenczian tradition) it is “no longer clear who is analyzing and who is being analyzed (de Man, 1983, p.10),” analysts come together, in conference, conversational, or reading space, in modernist dread of disintegration and with hope for restoration. Bearing in mind the risk of a post-traumatic Ferenczian fate, we dare to ask one another for mutual help and dialogue.

4. Liminal voices (1)

A man sitting at a piano

There is a specific kind of internal disorder that the artist Arie Aroch (1908-1974) used painting to sort out. The experience and practice of painting can be thought of as parallel to “an analytic experience,” in which it can seem that nothing is happening for a very long time, until something allows the focus to shift to the process itself instead of the content. (In fact, it is what occurs when a patient and analyst are able to move from talking-about to being-in-the-room.)

“For years,” he wrote, “I had no satisfaction from what came out in my work as a ‘painting painter.’ This went on for five years or more. I think of that time, when I tried

---

10 In 1762 Rousseau wrote four letters to Malesherbes, his patron at the time. The letters are a somewhat miniature autobiography, preceding his later, voluminous Confessions. The two sentences of this quotation combine alternative translations, de Man’s (1983) and Kelly’s (1995).
to adapt what I had learned from others, as a means for expressing those things I wanted to articulate before being painted, that time was a time of conflicts…As long as I wanted to decide [in advance, to tell the story I want to tell, using methods I’ve learned] I had no success. When I was absolutely in despair about [this], I began painting … for the pleasure of the work of painting; then I suddenly saw, for the first time, as if on a movie screen, stories on the canvas. I can say that it was the despair that brought me … to the conclusion that I can not create the story; at that time I freed myself from that ‘mission;’ no more was I a Beethoven who decided to write a symphony, and I became a man sitting at a piano, trying his fingers on it (2001, p.10-11).”

“I sympathized very much,” said Aroch later, “[with] the freedom abstract art brought to the world. On the other hand, the chaos and the absolute breaking of boundaries which overtook painting was devastating … I wanted to create objects for myself. I was looking for a defined form, ‘an object,’ the opposite of something chaotic. I filled up sketch-books trying to examine form, to myself, for myself (p. 12) … I have debts to myself. There are things I know I have to paint, people and events related to me, that for years I’m trying to paint, with no success. I’ve already paid some debts; I have many paintings that were debts. Part of it I can’t pay. I know what I want to paint, but I do not precisely know how to do it. So, to help myself paying these debts, I re-examine basic forms. I hope these examinations … will help paying other debts waiting to be paid (p. 21 and 24).”

5. Liminal voices (2)

“Are you comfortably listening?”
We have a friend, a European scholar, who is working hard to make a new life after the slow inexorable journey toward death of someone very dear, followed by many months of an illness of his own in which he very nearly took the same path. Much of his work is contained in an extraordinary piece of personal writing. These personal notes have their own life but exist so far as a liminal dialogue, speaking a recognizable language but holding lightly his despair, without the burdensome intent of presentation or publication. This work, this writing, exists more on the side of self-pure-talk, like pure-art. There is a concomitant easy meeting and touch, with no time stress and limits --- to convey a sense of “oh, I need time, so much time, does it have anything to do with needing so much space, the nature of love and embracement I long for, a long mountain trail walking: look at the fog, and the trees coming out of it, here and there, do you get my pace? can you feel the rhythm? are you comfortably listening? do you want to say something? I’m listening, is this a time for pausing?”

This friend is emerging from hiding, and his writing is a kind of quest to see who, if anyone, is “comfortably listening” as he turns over half a lifetime of memories and thoughts and imaginings to weave and re-weave them together. Recently he said, “I think that in the writing I am doing what I could not do in life and in so doing it, I am laying it to rest, yet in writing, at the same time I am doing it in life (personal communication).”

6. Liminal voices (3)

_The “missing” is the heart of the work_

Charles La Belle is a Los Angeles artist whose body of work for many years has been concerned with the psychological and formal relations of interior and exterior,
informed by his basic conviction that transformation, *continuous* transformation, is always involved in making and presenting art, transformation of the artist as well as the viewer, the public (Vida & Molad, 2001). I (Judy) met him several years ago and we enjoyed each other's conversation at a dinner for another artist. When I heard about some new work of his, I went to the gallery where he told me this story:

Charles La Belle (2000) cut his shirt into 597 fragments, and put each into a tiny balloon, which he swallowed, and then waited for each to come back out. He says the process took two months. When one piece, #108, failed to emerge, he became quite anxious, thinking that perhaps it was only the first of many to be lost. But no, it was only that one. For a long time, he thought that the missing piece ruined the project, and that it mustn’t be shown. Eventually he understood that the missing piece was the heart of the work.
The finished product, the reassembly of pieces, demonstrates the process of identification, how what is taken inside passes through, even passes through one’s internal shit, to re-emerge with little modification to sit on the surface. The *missing* piece is what introjection looks like, the absent, the absorbed, the disquieting new experience that we can’t know how or if it will come out and how we will be affected by it, until it happens. Charles La Belle said that in the middle of the process, he became quite anxious about how his body was being affected, possibly even harmed. By the introjected we are transformed, never to be the same again, and the transformation is visible to others, if they are able to look (Molad & Vida, 2000).

7. Liminal voices (4)

*The language of ghosts: nostalgia and despair*

---

11 We use here “identification” as a mode of learning, emphasizing its cognitive and intellectual patterning after a received tradition, personal, theoretical and technical (Vida & Molad, 2001).

12 “Learning to fill the emptiness of the mouth with words is the initial model for introjection” an altogether different mode of learning (Abraham and Torok, 1972, p. 128). The agent of transformation is desire, especially thwarted, unmet desire (Vida & Molad, 2001).
In a sense, up to a certain time, “language” has been a missing part in the dialogue between the two of us from the beginning: Gersh was the non-native English-speaker and I (Judy) was the English-only foreigner. From our earliest contact, Gersh said that we “spoke the same language,” yet there was something haunting for me not only in his English usage, but also in our complementary and contradictory interaction, with frequent skirmishes between his manner, somewhat closed and poetic, and mine, which tended to be more open and blunt. This brings to mind Lisa Appignanesi’s recent memoir, *Losing the Dead* (1999). Her search for missing parts takes her back as an adult to Poland, from which she was taken away by her parents when she was about three. During a long second visit to search for surviving records and places, she discovers that although she can still understand some Polish, she cannot use it herself and has a dream that illustrates this dramatically, of herself as a baby, surrounded by tall people talking loud unrecognizable babble:

“They talk and talk. They speak in a babble I can’t understand but all its intonations and rhythms mark it out as Polish. I can’t speak. My tongue won’t move properly. And I need to get away from this clamour of sound. I must. The noise is unbearable. But nothing my mouth does produces the requisite speech which I know will lift me above the babble. I raise my head. There is a barrier above it. Thick solid wood. I can’t break through it (p. 230).”

Unable to break through, she concludes, “Perhaps one can’t speak to ghosts, only listen.” It must be that I heard ghosts in Gersh’s language, how else to explain what came up some five months into our dialogue? When I was 2 ½, my parents had taken me, and themselves, away from the Hungarian immigrant grandparents and community (in
Detroit, Michigan) where I had lived with my mother during my father’s service in the war. Long told that I had never learned the Hungarian language, I had been startled by its eruption from unconsciousness in rudimentary baby-language form on a first visit to Hungary in 1993. Since then, I have been gradually assembling some of the missing parts of my earliest life (Vida, 2000a, in press).

In August of 1999, I wrote to Gersh, after the remembrance-service of a friend who had died young, and after watching a video of Central Station, a film about a suddenly orphaned boy of 5 who is taken grudgingly on a trip to search for relatives by a sour old woman:

“By the middle of the movie, with the two of them on the road, I got a little drowsy until I emerged into a very strange state, a feeling that nothing was real, that I didn’t know quite where I was. Although I could see dimly my living room around me and the big stone fireplace, it felt at a distance, with an invisible barrier between me and the rest of the room. There was a distinct feeling that you, Gersh, were not real, that I had made you up, and there was something menacing about that, that I would be in trouble somehow because of that, trouble emanating from you, or from me, or from somewhere (someone) else. I was not anxious while this was going on, I just felt in a detached way rather cold, and very, very, very alone. The thoughts that started to come were also quite detached, like, what if this state is real? What will happen to me? I have no idea how long this went on, nor can I say what brought it to an end. I probably started watching the movie again, and then I was somehow back to myself, and reality returned. I was still not anxious, but sad, and not deep piercing sad, more like a blanket of sad, a thin layer covering everything. I finally thought that I had fallen into a pocket of something
really old, how it felt to be gone from my grandparents, for my grandparents to be gone. When I did see them again my grandparents were strangers and I now sense that, like my parents, they were afterwards always mad at me for not being who I had been, or was supposed to be. Your voice on the phone, Gersh, must have sounded like a ghost to me. Perhaps this is what my grandparents might have sounded like after the long absence during which they had ceased to exist (Molad & Vida, 1999).”

This is how our dialogue became a vehicle for re-knowing, a re-knowing that was at that time much more despair than nostalgia. For all the despair, though, there was a strange accompanying hope, a hope that sprang perhaps from being able at last to see the ghosts.

8. The autobiographical dialogue

*Playing inner objects as we travel*

The previous section presents a version of the autobiographical dialogue in the dialogue between analysts. The autobiographical dialogue is a reflexive dialogue. It’s something about having company, a way of working with disorder, a making room to lift one’s own voice to be audible. It is sitting at a piano, trying one’s fingers on it. We have previously written about this as the difference between learning by identification and learning by introjection (Vida, 1999, 2002a; Vida & Molad, 2001). The autobiographical dialogue requires mutual de-centering and an openness to the disordered narrative, to the missing and to the void.

These four liminal voices, creating a peripheral talk with a center, point to the possibility that something interesting happens when we de-centralize, de-peripheralize
“the other that is me,” “the me that is another,” partially, and, for moments, totally. It is like traveling to other places that are and will become ourselves---places, and movement.

And as we travel, what are we holding in our pockets? Meira Likierman (2001) tells us that for Melanie Klein, “the pre-verbal understanding of earliest infancy is never recaptured in quite the same way again, [and] its loss is one of the early sources of loneliness (p. 193).” But our sense is that we carry childhood inner basic object/places as we go. In personal terms, what are these things that touch the basic me, the feeling of relaxed basic existence, of staying in place, where it is okay to remain for a while, playing, contemplating, slowly being? For one of us (Gersh), there is a curved left-turning wooden-stairs; a small house in the mountains; an empty gallon can of oil paint to play with: the smell, the white oil paint, the old marks of dry white oil painting, the birth of abstract, coincidental meaning and attachment. For the other (Judy), it is the sound of the clock from her grandparents’ long-ago house; and it is visits to Hungary where not the place but the **surround** of the Hungarian language allows a real touching of relaxed basic existence, slowly being. And as the dialogue proceeds, we exchange these inner objects, the way children play: three left-turning wooden stairs for grandpa’s clock.

9. **A quadri-partite model of intersubjective-relational training**

**The voice and the no-voice of the analyst**

How do we hear the voice of the analyst, that voice of our own (Molad, 1998)? This is the voice that traditionally, in the modernist way, is taught in the tri-partite system\(^{13}\) of psychoanalytic education to be both silent and neutral. One recent effort

---

\(^{13}\) The traditional tri-partite system of psychoanalytic education comprises (1) the training analysis; (2) the seminars; and (3) conducting psychoanalytic treatments under supervision.
occurred in The Institute of Contemporary Psychoanalysis in Los Angeles when I (Judy) was allowed to reorganize the required 4th year Integration of Theory seminar. Combining an old idea of mine with Gersh’s (2001a) notion of the autobiographical dialogue in the dialogue between analysts, I asked candidates to identify a paper most loved and most hated from their seminars to date and to talk about the autobiographical origins of that love and hate. Many candidates were upset at first: this was so different from the way the seminar had previously been presented. The introduction of the language of personal love and hate was antithetical to the theoretical thrust of the program and seemingly of psychoanalysis in general, and the contrast of elements “required” with elements “invited” felt double-binding and created antagonism that was difficult to bridge. I waded into the difficulty with autobiographical stories of my own not-easy journey through psychoanalysis, and spoke openly about my contributions to our on-the-table mutual difficulty, and this gradually led to a safer atmosphere.

Not all the candidates liked the experience, but, afterwards, one wrote: “I think there has been too much theorizing and emphasis on learning techniques. Something about being human is lost.” Another said: “I found the class to be exceptional…I loved that people opened up and shared themselves, instead of only their clients and their theory…I [already] relate everything through my personal experience---not that that is unique in any way, but I don’t often hear others speaking of their clinical process in a similar way, not in the class setting, anyway.” A third wrote, “For me the integration of my personal life with my analytic life which resulted in the paper I wrote was certainly very powerful for me [sic]. I believe that it will continue to be the context from which I continue to develop myself both personally and professionally.” It is this inclusion of the

14 The unconscious iteration of “for me” points to the role of the seminar in approaching “the missing.”
always there but hidden personal voice of the analyst that constitutes the fourth part of psychoanalytic training: the use of the autobiographical dialogue in the dialogue between analysts.

Another example of teaching the autobiographical dialogue as the fourth part of a training model was in my (Gersh’s) Ferenczi seminar at the Tel Aviv University School of Psychotherapy. Trying to help my students listen to their own voice, I questioned our basic assumption of having a teacher (me) with a solid voice of his own. The question created anxiety and protest from many students. Their first reactions ranged from: “This is an artificial dilemma; you have no choice but to be a teacher” to: “He is confused, and difficult to follow.” At a certain point, commenting about our mutual teacher-student anxieties, I told them why I quit teaching a long time ago, and that it took me many years to be able to speak in my own voice so that now I can listen to others. At that point, I used the metaphor of the Millennium Bridge in London, recently built to link the two sides of the Thames at the site of the Tate Modern (Art Museum). Two days after its opening in June 2000, the bridge was closed as the sideways movements created by people crossing the river were greater than expected. As people were crossing in a crowd, reacting to a moving surface and finding it more comfortable to synchronize themselves with the movement of the bridge, they also subconsciously tended to coordinate their pace with one another, walking in each other’s steps, thus creating more vertical loading on the bridge. Then, like sailors trying to balance themselves against the lateral-sideways movements, they created even more lateral load and sideways movements (technically termed Synchronous Lateral Excitation), till it was so rocky and swaying that it seemed unstable and unsafe, and people were unnerved.
“Do you really understand what you’re saying?” asked one seminar participant, an experienced pediatrician and psychotherapist, and I could feel some worry and sympathy in his voice. “Yes,” I said. “As we feel this synchronous-lateral-anxiety, we have to consider that there is not a given working bridge, no given ‘use of the other’ in teaching relations, so we either recognize the risk of the false stability of what we’re doing, and use our own voices mutually to mend it, or we have to admit an unspoken failure and face closing it down.”

It took the Millennium Bridge builders a year and a half to investigate, re-design, and modify the bridge. Their basic solution was to add dampers that dissipate movement energy and control lateral motions. There wasn’t that much time in my seminar; we had only enough time to feel the shaking, do some investigation, and share a mutual experience. In the last session a highly critical and intelligent young student said that he forgave me for the way I led the seminar. I smiled and said nothing to this mixture of patronizing and sincerity. It was in that very same week that an early version of the last part of the present paper was written: forgiveness and the ethics of the autobiographical dialogue.

10. “Crushing” (I)

Here then are experiences of teaching the autobiographical dialogue, but it is instantly obvious that “teaching” is the wrong word. Milan Kundera in The Art of the Novel (1988) commented that, “to write means for the poet15 to crush the wall behind

---

15 Kundera quotes this quatrain by Jan Skacel: “Poets don’t invent poems/The poem is somewhere behind/It’s been there a long, long time/The poet merely discovers it (p. 115).”
which something that ‘was always there’ hides (Bauman, 2000, p. 79).”16 “Crushing” is very much like what “traveling” is in postmodern language: a complex meeting of the known and unknown. It is a de-centering of oneself, going away not only from home places but also from identity-bound self-integrations and self-disarrays. It is to be away from actual home and longed for shelter, being in perpetual exile. It is having many home-lands and language-universals, refusing integration, and at the same time and to a certain extent, being in and on one’s own (self, room, place), exercising responsibility and hospitality for self, and others. Crushing as a creative act of understanding echoes simultaneously hope and dread. There is a great hope of finding something and of reconstituting oneself, and a great fear of not only not finding but also losing oneself on the way.

11. The Basic Emotional Nature of Dialogue

“Unable to solve verbal ‘crushings’ ”

Hope and dread, to use Mitchell’s terms (1993), are the accompanying music of the re-know, of the modern and postmodern interplaying identities of self, other, and world. The emotional aspect is a main inner core of developmental understanding, and the accompanying tones of hope and dread are the music of language as it dismantles (deconstructs) itself. This music carries language forth and back, to its proper regressive and progressive developmental places, which are emotional. Language that is de-centered is not required to be structured or less chaotic, and becomes safe and less feared. Then the theoretical modern linear image of development from the pre-verbal to the verbal stage

---

16 This is Bauman’s own translation. In Linda Asher’s translation of this passage from the French (New York: Harper & Row, p. 115) “crushing” becomes “breaking,” a far less suggestive rendering.
gives way, changing to a non-linear postmodern developmental image, where the verbal is conceived to be no less chaotic than the pre- or non-verbal.

This emotional aspect of language calls attention to the basic emotional nature of dialogue. The use of language involves an endless deconstructive struggle of hope and dread, so the primary nature of dialogue is that of a complex and intensive meeting of emotions, which comes before and overlaps a meeting of content (minds). This has implications for both personal and professional psychoanalytic development: *the basic issue of conference dialogue is that it is the dialogue of unanalyzed (the yet-unanalyzed and unanalyzable) countertransferences.*

At the time of writing this, I (Gersh) became somewhat anxious, as if I instantly emotionally comprehended the vast intensity of dialogue. I felt I had been there before, a moment of excitement of really touching something. I became restless and moved around the room, feeling uncertainty and power of understanding at the same time. How could one not be overwhelmed by the intense complexity of this tenderness and power, primal-old movement? “Is this what happens to me and others all the time, as we think and speak? How can we face this? Can I?” For a moment I did not want to remain alone in and with this intensive-solitude-meeting of writing. This was where a fantasy of making love came in, a clash which had basic tranquility in it, something that preceded being a subject, speaking almost an object-body language, and then transcended again to a momentary less-tensioned subject, split and reduction, momentary retreats for an overwhelmed subject, becoming blind, deaf, mute. “Is this another aspect of my stuttering as a child: constantly, overtly, and critically deconstructing speech and dialogue-
relations, unable to solve outside and inside ‘crushings’?” The roots of imagined resolution are self’s responsibility and other’s hospitality.

12. “Crushing” (II)

An identity in flux

Personal walls are nets interwoven with being and non-being (good-enough and not-good-enough) relations behind which hides something (and someone) who was always there. The crushing of personal walls is a difficult aspect of dialogical meeting. It encompasses a whole range of movement from uncovering-recognition to revolting-negation, and is the meeting with what was, is, and perhaps will be there.17 Crushing is not only the story of therapy and analysis, but also of conversation, presentation, and dialogue between analysts. The power and violence embedded in the word “crushing” attest to barriers of need and longing, shame and reticence, and the psychoanalytic tradition of neutrality and silence that must be breached and dismantled before a meeting can take place. Violence surfaced in the initial antagonism between the candidates and me (Judy) in my seminar, but when fear and suspicion were undefensively invited to be present in our talk, there was an enormous shift. What happened makes clear that the autobiographical dialogue cannot be taught. Instead we must find ways to “reach” it, an “it” that is in hiding, always there. Reaching it will inevitably involve difficulty and some kind of crushing, but the dialogue between analysts, and the quadri-partite model of training which reaches to include what was always there, is the future development of psychoanalysis.

17 In football (soccer), a ball kicked through the line of defense to a player who, it is hoped, will be there, is called a “through ball.”
In the autobiographical dialogue, our inner basic object/places, not just from childhood but from our whole life, appear in various guises to combine and synthesize in the present either a dialectic or an ever-going movement of distance and unification. This is another version of the modernism-postmodernism continuum encompassing harmony and acrimony. A basic quality of being involves the possibility of being a recognized subject within a holding-dialogue, and, at the same time, the possibility of being a negated other, in exile. “Exile” is de-centering, multiplicity, traveling and drifting, alienation: no place, no meaning, one’s identity in flux.

13. The autobiographical dialogue as a reading-operator

*It takes time (FOOWAP Fridays)*

Psychoanalytic postmodern thinking puts the analyst in the center, or sometimes the text is in the center, but, at the same time, preserves the classical central position of the reader and patient.\(^{18}\) The idea of an autobiographical dialogue proposes that it is the autobiographical dialogue itself that is the reading and the authorship, and the mutual autobiographical dialogue (or multiple conversation) shapes, leads, and is the essence of a talk, or reading or interpretation. What can be known is determined by the actual participants of the dialogue. This is the experience of reaching the autobiographical dialogue with candidates in the creation of the fourth part of psychoanalytic training.

Our basic assumption here is that the participant in the autobiographical dialogue is not just a person facing the content of a conversation, nor even simply a person facing another person. A participant in the autobiographical dialogue is a reading person facing

\(^{18}\) “Classical” yes, but in much writing, modern or postmodern, the writer is in the center in an odd way, pointing at the patient, often disregarding the reader, and disavowing the operation of the process of writing itself. For a rare, striking example of the reader in the center, see Likierman (2001).
another reading person. The autobiographical dialogue functions as a “reading operator” --- it is through the autobiographical dialogue, a dialogue between the participants’ autobiographies, that one comprehends (“reads”) the other. The implication is that the autobiographical dialogue as a reading operator, very much like the mutual analytical understanding that develops within therapy and analysis in clinical space, is not an a priori ready-made, but is an operator, an instrumentality, that is not only uniquely created in each dialogue, but also used differently by each creator. It takes time, and more than only time, for participants to grasp and learn the use of a reading operator that they have developed within their dialogue. We see this in our own relation, as shared events of past years develop a larger and deeper understanding through continued dialogue and meeting in the present.

Telling one another about it may be considered part of the autobiographical dialogue itself, as it re-constitutes the dialogue in terms of giving it theory and meta-theory. Telling another person external to the dialogue about it is complicated: here emerges another autobiographical dialogue, a kind of a presentational-autobiographical dialogue, which takes-in the new dialogue into the previous one, and it also takes-out the initial dialogue, out into another creative phase of a re-reading operation; the two autobiographical dialogues are reading each other. The 4th year candidates’ seminar we mentioned in Section 9, which met on Thursdays, was identified by the acronym FOOWAP (for Finding One’s Own Way As A Psychoanalyst). There came to be a running joke about FOOWAP Fridays, meaning that the candidates were talking about the seminar the following day in their analyses. When I (Judy) later would meet analytic colleagues, without any words being exchanged, some of them would make their
eyebrows jump and they would smile, and it took me a while to figure out that this might be about the cycle of influence that passes between seminars and analysts. Again, it takes time, and more than only time, for all the participants to grasp and learn the use of a re-reading operator that they try to develop within the new dialogue, and this is very much like what happens in conference or seminar space.

14. Leaving it partially to the play of others

*Not “whether” but “how”*

A problem in encountering the missing part in the dialogue between analysts is that awareness of it makes us anxious, very anxious. Much as in the treatment of post-traumatic states, what is experienced as a collapse of reality can be re-read as a collapse of the dialogue. What is of most importance here is a revival of the time element within the reconstituted dialogue. Here time limits are brought into the autobiographical dialogue, not as a forced external event, but instead as mutually negotiated. Time --- in both its life and death manifestations --- thus becomes part of the identity and “self” of an autobiographical dialogue. This gives to hope both its essential needed ingredient and its longed-for effect. In that sense, as much as the treatment of post-traumatic conditions has no time limit, an autobiographical dialogue has no end, nor has it any pre-defined content and form. There is no death, but rather, ultimately, a meeting of dissipative-structures. “The proper ending of an analysis,” wrote Ferenczi (1927), “is when neither the physician nor the patient puts an end to it, but when it dies of exhaustion, so to speak (p. 85).”
Mindful of the party balloons mentioned in Section 2, the birthday-child analyst entering the territory of the autobiographical dialogue must be prepared to practice “leaving it partially to the play of others.” Within this matrix of play we can observe the politics of autobiographical dialogues on many levels (personal, professional, clinical-private, and conference-public). The operation of such politics will permit certain things and block others. At times, leaving it to others is immensely difficult. Pre-and post-traumatic defenses come out to turn the possibly delightful arena of the dialogue between analysts into a very difficult place. This is where a careful and patient analytic attitude is needed, to ease anxiety and pain, and to sustain dialogue. (This is analysis at its best, for it is most difficult to take care of one’s own colleagues.) It is in this context, in the intensive careful use of a reading operator, that we look at (or mutually read) not “whether” one participates in the autobiographical dialogue, but “how,” the way one plays the ever changing autobiographical dialogue in the dialogue between analysts.

15. An Ethics of “To Re-Know”

*Friendship as a way of life*

In thinking about how to “stay close to events, to experience them, [to] be willing to be effected and affected by them (Rabinow, 1997, p. xviii),” Foucault called attention to the “fragile moment from which we can’t detach our identity, and which will carry that identity away with itself (p. xviii).” Such an exquisite contradiction requires “resisting the temptation to always have a ‘position’ or an ‘identity’…[yet maintaining] the task of observing oneself, with a certain distance (p. xviii).”
In speaking about observing the other, Foucault “can’t help but dream about a kind of criticism that would try not to judge but to bring an oeuvre, a sentence, an idea to life; it would light fires, watch the grass grow, listen to the wind, and catch the sea foam in the breeze and scatter it. It would multiple not judgments but signs of existence; it would summon them, drag them from their sleep … It would bear the lightning of possible storms (1997, p. xx).”

We see this kind of criticism and observation (in other words, “living”) as a vital part of the ethics of the care of the self. Such care means opposing the asceticism of certain rules for attaining the so-called knowledge of the self, rules which claim that the “renunciation of feeling, solidarity, and care for one’s self and for others” is the “culturally coherent but humanly intolerable” price to be paid (Rabinow, 1997, p. xxvi). The sacrifice of “feeling” for “knowledge” is the “intolerable price to be paid.” A different kind of debt is created than Arie Aroch’s “debt to himself” which is willingly paid; “the intolerable price” is a debt that can only be paid with the surrender of one’s own aliveness. Instead the ethics of the care of the self “emphasizes ethical practices” as a way to activate one’s own subjectivity (the way we freely relate to ourselves), “forming the self within a nexus of relationships,” where “authority would be self-referential and might take a therapeutic or philosophical form (p.xxvii).” This ethical practice strives at making possible a different relationship to ourselves and others, and to what Foucault referred as our “work of thought, pleasure, and invention (p. xxviii),” a practice that is not a search for one’s identity but for ways of relationship, “creating new modes of being together,” leading to friendship as a way of life (p. xxxvii).
But this practice that should not aim at one’s identity but searches for friendship may fail if there is not enough love in it. Love of one kind and another is needed to hold and mend nostalgia, the pain (algos) of a return-home (nostos) in which one suffers with not-having and not-knowing what was and what has never been there (Kundera, 2000). A failure to hold nostalgic pain (one’s own and the other’s) is the way in which the autobiographical dialogue does come to an end. The immense difficulty of re-writing one’s own identity, not merely an editorial activity, the fear and frustration of a deep un mendable chasm, the pain of possibly no home-return, may rupture the dialogue.

Or, it may not.

At the heart of this impossible moment, in the need for hospitality, we find an ethics for the autobiographical dialogue in Derrida’s notion of forgiveness. For Derrida (2001), forgiveness should not be pragmatic, final, and conditional, re-establishing “normal” through mourning, but, rather, unconditioned, gracious, and infinite: “What I dream of … [is] forgiveness without power: unconditional but without sovereignty (p.59).” There remains (and must remain) an abyss between the pure and pragmatic conditions of forgiveness, and hospitality enables the endless work of “negotiation between these two irreconcilable yet indissociable demands (p. xii).”

Here we are, at the farthest limits and innermost depths of the autobiographical dialogue, amidst two dreams: Foucault’s dream of life and Derrida’s dream of forgiveness, an on-going work of deconstructing power and context, de-blinding open eyes.

“ I met people who were born blind. Who had never seen. I asked them what their image of beauty was,” writes Sophie Calle, a French artist (1986). She presents 23
portraits of people who were born blind, each one accompanied by a text and a photo-
image of the response. One part combines the portrait of a young man, a photograph of
the sea, and a text; the man’s not-seeing eyes are open and he says:

“The most beautiful thing I ever saw is the sea,
the sea going out so far you lose sight of it.”

References

Abraham, N. & Torok, M. (1972). Mourning or melancholia: introjection versus
incorporation. In The Shell and the Kernel, N.T. Rand, ed., trans., intro. Chicago


Museum of Art, 1996.

While Something is Happening Here, Something Else Is Happening There: Works
Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König.


Derrida, J. (2001). On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness (S. Critchley & R. Kearner,


Courtesy the artist and Robert & Tilton Gallery, Los Angeles, 6150 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90048.


analysts” to the Sixth International Meeting of the International Association for the History of Psychoanalysis, “Psychoanalysis in Exile: Elements of a History,” Barcelona, July 27, 2002.

Molad, G. & Vida, J. (in press). On listening to the other analyst’s voice: “In fact we were fellow language students, although she did not know this.” *International Forum of Psychoanalysis.*


An earlier version was presented in conjunction with the exhibition “Freud: Conflict and Culture” at the HUC-Skirball Cultural Center, Los Angeles, CA, April 15, 2000.


Vida, J. (2000d). Drawn to the asylum: in search of missing parts (on the way to a possible conversation). Presented to UCLA/Armand Hammer Museum, in conjunction with exhibition Drawings from the Prinzhorn Collection, September 7, 2000; to Haifa University Department of Psychology, Haifa, Israel, November 28, 2001; and to Academy for the Study of Psychoanalytic Arts and Michigan Society for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy, Detroit, Michigan, September 8, 2002.

Vida, J. (2000e). At the frontier of psychoanalytic understanding. Discussion of
presentations by R. Stolorow, Ph.D. and J. Schwarz, M.D. “Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Trauma,” conference sponsored by La Vie Counseling Center, Pasadena, California, September 23, 2000.


