

The Last Psychoanalyst

Mariano Horenstein

None of us knows for certain that he or she will not be the last psychoanalyst.

Psychoanalysis is a theoretical system which undermines the traditional way of conceiving man, and moreover contains a very subtle method of analysing the vicissitudes of life.

These aspects and, even more so, the transformation effects of psychoanalytic clinic deriving from this analysis, are clearly more important than the “job” aspects of the psychoanalytic profession. But the image of a psychoanalyst who opens his office, in order to earn his living, in some city, far away from any institutional convenience, has been central to psychoanalysis since its beginnings. Today we are many and we move in swarms, but Freud's “splendid isolation” finds its place in every psychoanalyst's life.

For a profession, there is no guarantee of survival. There are notable regional differences – for example between the eager thirst of knowledge which we find in Asia, in Eastern Europe or in Latin America, and the intellectual paralysis in some developed countries –, but what is quite certain is that our future is not guaranteed in vast temporal and geographical perspective.

There are professions which are being wiped out from the face of the earth: a tailor or a clockmaker is nowadays an anachronistic figure, just like the tail gunner in the old B-52 bombers became anachronistic, when the task of dropping bombs was passed to the pilot. And maybe now it's the pilot's profession's turn to disappear, since bombs are being dropped by unmanned drones. A future without psychoanalysts seems quite imaginable.

The Freudian concept of the unconscious might disappear, too, just like phlogiston or ether disappeared as explanatory hypotheses. The opening and closing movement characterizing the notion of unconscious and its historical correlates support this idea. Today, we speak more about the brain or the self than about the unconscious, and we observe in amazement how positions which seem to offer new perspectives, but which are in reality pre-Freudian, appear on the market of ideas.

I don't mean to reedit the polemics between “apocalyptic intellectuals” and “integrated intellectuals” – i.e. between those who think that the changing times will wipe them out and those who affirm that integration and mutual enrichment are possible – with reference to psychoanalysis and times past., But it is evident that the critical and neurotic subject, the cause and, at the same time, the effect of psychoanalysis, is in crisis.

But psychoanalysis has practically always been in crisis. It flourishes better in the margin, in the precariousness of a somewhat anachronistic practice which does not respect any other obligations than those deeply rooted in its own implacable ethics. This provisional character – a source of uncertainty, but also of its efficiency – obliges every practicing psychoanalyst in an exceptional way to risk the whole fate of his discipline at every occasion.

The phrase “the first time” involves without any doubt sexual allusions. The mere pronouncing of these words evokes the memory of first love experiences or of the clumsy apprenticeship of sexuality. This connotation which “the first time” has in common language is reflected in the first time in analysis, even in terms of sexuality. It is only that the first time in analysis is rather an encounter with what does not function in sexual life, with the impossibility of perfect relationships between words or the sexes. This structural failure of relationship and the symptomatic way of solving it without solving it is what brings people into our psychoanalytic offices.

With every patient we meet we are only potentially analysts. We turn into real analysts, as soon as the analytic dispositive becomes effective. And just for this one patient. This dynamic has to be repeated in every psychoanalytic treatment, without any guarantee of success .

We can point out some elements which are necessary for an analytic experience to get started and which are above all anchored in the establishment of a fertile transference relationship. But to get something moving, we have to rewrite the whole history of psychoanalysis with every patient within a few meetings.

We are part of a genealogy which goes back to Sigmund Freud, the first psychoanalyst, with whom we necessarily identify ourselves in some moments. O. Mannoni emphasized that everyone has to repeat that “original analysis” which Freud realized with Fliess as best as he could. There is no tradition that avoids the redoing of this work, individually, again and again, in an analysis which will have been a training analysis, if it allows the appearance of a psychoanalyst. Otherwise it will have been just one more psychotherapeutic exercise, independently of the appointment of the analyst who performs it and of the institutional legitimation waiting for the one who concludes it.

Beyond the old advice, that the principal objective of the first meeting with the analyst is to ensure a second one, Maud Mannoni stated clearly what really is at stake in the first encounter: “If anything is going to be lost in the confrontation with the analyst, it is a certain lie; in exchange for abandoning it, and as a real gift, the subject gains access to his personal truth” .

We fulfil this task of unmasking by means of an instrument which is not based in a positive doing, but rather in a certain negativity. We work by means of listening, and this special listening which contains the other's state of apprehension causes a symptomatic and phantasmatic exposure in which we offer ourselves as object. This is our most efficient instrument. We don't propose an indication, we don't recommend medications or procedures, and we don't offer ourselves as objects for emotional unions with our patients: we just offer an empty container. The sentences which we might say in the meetings emerge from there. Sometimes we have to be content with just one encounter for demonstrating our extraordinary listening method.

This implies a tension which may turn into failure. A premature reflection of hostile transference can annihilate the possibility of analysis, but the analyst's anxiety may also be a relevant factor. The first encounter demands more from the analyst than any other: in some way, he should draw up and proclaim a manifesto of his practice and his unique way of listening, adapted to this special case which is almost completely unknown to him and without having the possibility of making it explicit. Every time that we analysts meet a new patient, we proclaim our manifesto without words. We do it in silence, we demonstrate what is essential: an attentive listening which is at the same time cleared of any specific interest. If we succeed in making our patients experience what we intend to suggest, there will be another encounter – and perhaps even another one.

And if there will be no other meetings, we will have no other option than to resign ourselves to our failure, so that we will be able to “fail better” next time, as Samuel Beckett put it.

The psychoanalytic game resembles more a bet than a technical application. Even knowing that there is a psychoanalytical technique, we have to forget this technique according to its instructions. We should abstain from defensive instruments and artefacts, we should burn the prescription pad and archive the batteries of tests, we should forget the indication suggested by the referring colleague and by common sense. We should just listen in emptiness, hardly guided by the thin thread of the analyst's wish.

“Encounter” is a better name for this initial space than “interview” – an encounter may succeed or fail, and we cannot predict it. On the one hand, the term alludes to the encounter with an analyst who has been asked to heal or ease a patient's psychic suffering. On the other hand, it evokes the idea of an encounter with oneself, since, without knowing it, the patient searches for his most intimate part in the other person, that essence which determined him as subject. The possibility of an encounter involves also destiny – there are encounters destined to fail – and chance. We intend to reduce the neurotic behaviour which destiny brought to us, the irresistible repetition of the fatal conflict. At the same time, we should do all we can to deserve the chance of this possible encounter through hard work, as

Kieslowski suggested in an interview.

A psychoanalytic treatment is preceded by suffering or apprehension. What motivates a new patient is not an intellectual interest, even if such interest may and perhaps must emerge later. But in order to be able to do something with the pain, it must be transformed into a question, and often this is not given in advance. We work for the transformation of pain into a question. Furthermore, this question must be addressed to the Other, at first to psychoanalysis as a stock of knowledge relevant for the patient's own state of apprehension, and later to an individual psychoanalyst who embodies the psychoanalytic theory in the transference relationship. This analyst is supposed to have insight into his own being where the patient will be able to search for what he mounted as his "agalma". This gem that reveals the object of his desire.

The psychoanalyst is host and guest at the same time: he offers room and he moves in. He offers room for transference, reflecting its real, imaginary and symbolic value. And at the same time he places himself in the locus indicated by the analysand's phantasm, with the only objective of restoring an asymmetry that always risks being lost.

So the first meeting with a new patient involves two scenes. The first one is the scene of the original analysis which is recapitulated within the psychoanalytic training process. This is the scene which brings into effect the analyst as an ex-analysand, who once was on the couch, not due to his zeal to learn the psychoanalytic technique but rather to his suffering and his neurotic questions. This determines our practice: all psychoanalysts are ex-patients, and if we accept to lead those who wish to make an insecure and perhaps dangerous journey, it's because we walked the same path before. Not many professions offer such guarantee.

The other scene is that of the final meeting, being present since the first one. The way in which an analyst conceives the end of the psychoanalytic treatment – and above all the way in which his own analytic experience is reflected in his psychic functions – determines the modality of his listening since the first meeting with a new patient.

We are more experienced in initiating a game than in finishing it; our experience declines with approaching end points. The theoretical controversies erupt right here: the modality of listening varies depending on assumptions, for example the assumption that the analyst represents the surplus, the object which will fall at the end of the analytical treatment, or the assumption that the analyst is the ideal bulwark which the patient approaches, little by little, until complete identification is achieved; or a symmetric or asymmetric conception of the cure; or the venture of an analysis without end or the conviction that we can never know when an encounter will be the last one.

An idea of loss comes into play as soon as we are asked to listen. Perhaps the analysand doesn't know it, but the psychoanalyst has to know. The conception, in which the one who listens does not abuse the patient as an object to satisfy a need, and will eventually help him to detach, transmits itself.

We might say that the first meeting is placed under the protectorate of the goddess Occasion. This divinity that is depicted with a semi-bald head passes quickly and gives us just a few moments to „seize the opportunity by the tuft“. If we hesitate too long, there will be no more tuft to seize. The opportune moment is not ensured in advance, and it will never be possible to do so. It is the moment that brings into play the possibility of other times, of further encounters which will retrospectively mark this meeting as the first one. If there will be no further meetings, this one will not have been the first one, but rather the orphan of a lost series. The series in which an encounter is followed by the next one and the one after the next one, until it might be possible to get aware of the radical conflict that determines our psychic reality so deeply, and in view of which even the most durable therapeutic success reveals aspects of failure.

In every single case it is our responsibility to give the series a chance of developing. To ensure that every session generates another session, apart from every contract, just like every analyst generates

another analyst by giving him the idea of psychoanalytic thinking.

During the last century, every analyst might have been the last analyst. He is the one who risks all, and brings everything into play, every time, so that this meeting will not be the last one. He is the one who rediscovers the unconscious and reinvents a dispositive which is as strange as effective. He is the one who finds that in some way every time is a first time – just like in sexuality.

Beckett, S., Worstward Ho, John Calder, London, 1983.

Eco, Umberto, Apocalípticos e integrados, Tusquets, Barcelona, 1995.

Dufour, Dany-Robert, El arte de reducir cabezas. Sobre la servidumbre del hombre liberado en la era del capitalismo total, Paidós, Bs. As., 2007.

Mannoni, Maud, La primer entrevista con el psicoanalista, Gedisa, Bs. As., 1981.

Mannoni, Octave, Un comienzo que no termina; transferencia, interpretación, teoría, Paidós, Bs. As., 1982.