The Subject of Otherness, The Subject as Otherness

Dr. Eyal Rozmarin

Le pour-soi est ce qu'il n'est pas, et n'est pas ce qu'il est.
Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Etre et le Néant.*

The great French Philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas, expressed the fundamental paradox of the human condition such: "subjectivity is structured as the other in the same." (Levinas, 1981, p. 25) Psychoanalysis is founded on a similar premise, that there are in each of us matters and forces that are other to the conscious and deliberate self. This otherness in/of the self is conceived in different analytic frameworks in different ways. Freud, although he did not use such language, began his thinking with the enigma of forces beyond the subject's control invading her experience. The symptom is by definition other to the conscious self. One might add that both the notion of the drive and of the superego speak to the presence in the "I" of foreign, trans-subjective forces; biological in the case of the drive, social in the case of the superego. Lacan (2006), when he speaks of subjectivity as created through the discourse of the other, offers an echo to Levinas' conception. Laplanche (1999), when he speaks of the unconscious as formed by the desire of the other, is in a similar terrain.

But all of this is true for psychoanalysis in general. As long as psychoanalysis remains a theory about the relations between human consciousness and that which eludes it, that which remains dialectically, paradoxically, conflictually or definitively unconscious, and therefore other to it, psychoanalysis also holds that subjectivity is structured as otherness in the same. It adds to the Levinasian proposal some important ideas about the dynamics of this complex and fragile structure.

This otherness that contains and is contained in each of us, to the extent that "each of us" is indeed a discrete unit, and to the extent that this otherness can be said to be "in" us in any legible sense – this otherness is almost everything (Rozmarin, 2007b). There is nothing much to each of us except for a fickle self-sensing point of reference, a rebellious body, and a volatile bank of memories. When we consider that, indeed, our memories are treacherous, our bodies tyrannical and our self-consciousness unstable, we might wonder what is precisely the identity that is entailed in the notion of the self. What is it exactly, about each of us, that feels the same with itself? We might ask that question, and yet most of us have a sense of identity, and a somewhat continuous experience of being.

Freud attempted to capture this seeming paradox throughout his work. And in the end, circled to the beginning. Unlike Levinas, he was unable or uninterested in reaching beyond being. Perhaps because psychoanalysis is a clinical practice as much as it is a theory of the human condition. And the clinical makes on us intractable demands (Rozmarin, 2007a). It remains one of our biggest challenges, to keep exploring the terrain between these two tendencies of psychoanalysis, the tendency towards a grand theory of the subject, and beyond the subject, collectivity, and the tendency towards the actual, concrete other who comes to our rooms for help.

It is with this in mind that I have been interested in the question of immigration. Immigration is a reality that involves our lives and our practices. Immigration is a metaphor for something much more general, the unsettledness and otherness and precarity that is part of the experience of being human.

Thinking the reality and metaphor of immigration challenges both our theories and methods of practice.

Immigration means displacement, of life and family and language and culture, having to learn sometimes radically new ways of life. Immigration implies complex, sometimes traumatic shifts in relations with social knowledge/power equations, as Foucault would call them, relations that translate into subjective and intersubjective domains in both evident and hidden ways. Immigration is all around us. Many of us are immigrants or descendants of immigrants. Immigration has been forever, and continues to be a pressing human and political issue everywhere. There is constant flow of people from terrains of economic and political trouble to the richer, more settled parts of the world. The competing demands to accommodate and change, or retreat and expel animate a great deal of the global political discourse, and drive worrisome political changes. Our lives and the lives of our patients are deeply impacted. We experience and encounter these realities and their translations into subjective and intersubjective domains everywhere.

And yet we often underestimate their charge, if not ignore them completely. This is, I think, for two major reasons. First, because with its subject-centered notions of individual and family life, psychoanalysis is poorly equipped to address larger social phenomena. Second, because psychoanalysis has for a long time disavowed its own migrant heritage (Jacoby, 1983).

And so immigration, like most of what we may call “the social," is in the unconscious of the unconscious of psychoanalysis. Immigration as a dramatic instance of the always precarious socio-political registers of human living. Immigration as a symbol for movement across all kinds of social and political boundaries. Immigration as a relation between a melancholic without and a desired within, as a specter of otherness that comes to reside inside. Oedipus himself, we forget, was an exile. And in that sense we are all exiles, from the places and times of our original family constellations, to the conditions and kinships that make our adult lives.

How do we account for that psychic terrain where we are all transient children of retreating parents, where no attachment can remain secure? How do we make sense of otherness coming in, in all forms of novelty and displacement, unsettling a subjective-collective sense of identity, arousing suspicion and a drive to repress or expel? How do we think of our work when the enigma Laplanche (1999) writes about and the trauma Ferenczi (1949) highlights imbue life far beyond the unconscious of the family. When we realize that confusions of tongues and enigmatic messages underlie the very relations between individuals and collectives, forming the very foundation of social life (Rozmarin, 2015)?

Thinking immigration allows us to see the disavowed obvious: There is a vast and multiply determined social unconscious engulfing us. An unconscious of dissociated and displaced subjective-collective signification and trauma, and of the overwhelming presence of the political and historical in our lives. It is an unconscious that we have little means of accessing. A vast otherness that persists in unsettling whatever sense of identity and sameness with ourselves we can manage. And yet our lives depend on making such sense.

Our lives depend on it because it is necessary to understand our social enchainment, the spell, as Adorno (1973) called it. Understanding is a condition of freedom. Freedom vis-a-vis social and political oppression or routine manipulation that alienates us from ourselves and others. Freedom vis-a-vis the ghosts of history that surround us, and that can be seen anew when released from their times and places of origin. Freedom, finally, from the fear of otherness, a fear instilled in us by the

machinations of civilizations that depend on binaries of inside and outside, same and other, to maintain their regulatory power.

We are all terrified by otherness. We need only to look at certain currents in contemporary political discourse to realize that otherness-panic can reach Schreber-Like psychotic confabulations. Otherness-panic leads often to desperate clutching of deceptive artifacts of selfhood. Artifacts created by whatever local civilization we inhabit for the purpose of pressing and repressing us into their particular straight-jacket versions of subjectivity. It is one of the great insight of psychoanalysis, that our subjectivities are destined by their very structure to eternal conflict and compromise. Had Freud been using such language, he would have agreed that it is our conflict with otherness, and our need to locate ourselves apart and against it, that drives our civilization and our discontent alike. This fundamental conflict is where the limits and challenges of psychoanalysis continue to be encountered.

Recently, a patient has been withdrawing, pulled, he says, into a mental space where he does not know what to say. We are both immigrants, versed in moving from one country to another. His career may take him away again, but this time he is afraid that we would not manage the distance. Why? I wonder. In the past, we met regularly online during long periods of his being elsewhere. His answer surprises me. He says that for him to feel secure in our future, he needs me to be present in a way that I have not been so far. “This arrangement, that you are there, doing your job, and me here, going through all of this trouble across from you has become disturbing. I want to us to switch places. I want you to sit on the couch, and I want to sit in your chair.”

I tell myself that he wants to feel what it’s like to be settled. Even more so he wants me to unsettle, to lose my secure place in the room and in our relationship. To get there, he wants me to emigrate from my safe continent, to literally move to the place from which he has been for a long time trying to reach me. I know that such move could indeed make me understand something better, his transiency and uncertainty in our tightly orchestrated landscape. It would be a form of learning much more dramatic than the usual, for both of us. Also scary. It is hard to imagine what would happen if we changed positions. But also exciting, because it would suspend the myriad of superegos that govern our relationship.

I think about Ferenczi’s declaration (1939, in Adorno 1973, p. 272[1]); that for a psychoanalysis to reach its full potential, the superego must be renounced by both patient and analyst. It seems that with this patient, this liminal moment has arrived. To renounce the superego would mean in this junction to renounce our territorial rights and all that comes with them, to undo the immigration rules and narratives that govern our different status in this country and in this room.

It would require me to give up my hard-earned citizenship, to understand, or rather recall, what it felt like to live with an expiring student visa. And him? In the beginning he used to comment about my room’s design and furniture. It signaled to him that our positions in life were different, that I had achieved a social station that made it difficult for me to understand his. He used to make fun of the effortful casualness of it all. We moved on. Today he is becoming again aware of the furniture and its arrangement. But now he wants to take hold of it, to unseat and unsettle me, to make me feel other than the usual.

It is an understatement, that I find myself reluctant. I am having a hard time questioning in vivo the forms of hegemony and sovereignty that we call our frame. We are lead to believe that for our frame to hold, everything must stay the same. But perhaps it is time to consider that with all the reason and

experience supporting this premise, it is also deeply compromising, to both our patients and to psychoanalysis. It keeps us sedentary, hierarchal, protective of our territories. It makes us afraid of others the same way civilizations always fear those who remain nomads. It prevents us from thinking against the grain.

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[1] This declaration appears in the German edition of Ferenczi's *Bausteine zur Psychoanalyse*. Interestingly, it was not included in the Ernest Jones English translation of Ferenczi's work. I became acquainted with it through Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*. I am therefore using the translation into English included in that book.