

# MEMORY AND DESIRE IN PSYCHOANALYSIS

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*"April is the cruelest month*

*Mixing memory and desire... "*

T. S. Eliot

There is a joke about a Jewish psychoanalyst from New York who every morning takes a crowded elevator up to his studio at the top of the tower. But every morning, when the elevator stops at the 13th floor, a man enters who, as soon as he sees the psychoanalyst, spits in his face without saying a word. The analyst does not react, but takes a handkerchief and wipes his face without batting an eye. This scene repeats itself every morning until one day the elevator operator can't help but ask the analyst, "Why do you let him spit in your face every day without ever reacting?" To which the analyst replies, "My boy, it's *his problem!*"

I don't know if Jacques Lacan was thinking of something similar to this joke when he said that the analyst *is a saint*. But he was thinking about how analysts should react to transference in patients (or analyzands as patients are called in France). For example, if the analyzand begins to show love and admiration towards the analyst, the analyst must not feel flattered or tempted to reciprocate, but first ask himself *who* the analyzand really loves and admires through the simulacrum of the analyst. If, on the contrary, the analyzand shows hatred and resentment, or perhaps insults the analyst, the analyst should not take offence as he would in a social reality (because after all the analyst is a man or a woman like everyone else). And in this sense, he *is* a saint. An angry analyzand's provocations should not lead to his own, an hysterical analyzand's kisses should not be returned, an obsessive analyzand's criticisms and insults should not lead to throwing him out of the window. The analyst endures, and tolerates--or at least *try hard* not to show it, to keep a "*poker face*" as one says in English, and not let his emotions shine through during the game.

This is usually referred to as the *analyst's benevolent neutrality*—which means many things, one of which we just mentioned: "to not be offended", that is, to distinguish himself as subject from that beloved, hated or despised *person* which he is for the analyzand. But the neutrality of the analyst also means the fact that the analyst does not "want the good" of his own analyzand. If someone is seeking treatment because he says "I can't find a wife", his explicit request is to "help me find

a wife", but the psychoanalyst – unlike other psychotherapists – does not try to respond to this request. For him, finding a cure does not mean giving the analysand the object of satisfaction that he or she is asking for. Thanks to analysis, what might emerge is that, instead, he discovers he abhors the idea of marriage, except he didn't know it, which is probably why he could never find a wife. Neutrality therefore means that the analyst does not try to gratify the analysand by satisfying his demand. Rather, he brings the analysand to an *elsewhere* that Freud called the unconscious, of which the initial demand is only the mask.

Over time the neutrality of the analyst was increasingly criticized by various analytic schools. The so-called Kleinians insisted on the *countertransference* of the analyst: the analysand's feelings towards the analyst, and the consequent results, in turn trigger in the analyst feelings that he must not try to repress. Initially, countertransference was considered incorrect, an unprofessional reaction of the analyst. If, for example, at a certain point the analyst feels a growing, frank antipathy towards the analysand, he is not to "answer in kind", but rather question the reason for this antipathy, given that a true professional – it was said – should be somewhat indifferent to the analysand.

Instead, today many think that the analyst must use his own countertransference to understand the analysand's transference and thus his unconscious investments. For example, the analyst might grasp that his own growing antipathy toward the analysand is his unconscious response to the fact that the analysand is behaving in a subtly provocative and frustrating way towards the analyst, just as the analysand had done with his own father in his childhood, let's say. For example, a Kleinian analyst used to say, "Whenever I feel bored and almost fall asleep while a patient speaks, I understand that unconsciously he wants to sing me a lullaby, he wants me to fall asleep, as his mother did with him, etc. etc."

But at some point this very principle of the analyst's "benevolent neutrality" was put into question. The analyst is only human, he cannot fail to have particular feelings towards the analysand. This led, in the wake of Heinz Kohut, to focus on the *analyst's capacity for empathy*. Far from being neutral, the analyst must empathize with his patient, in short, he must participate in his joys and sorrows. [I wonder, however, what such an analyst would do with clearly unpleasant, even hateful, patients, as certain paranoids often are. Would he avoid treating them? In fact, most analysts don't accept certain types of patients because they don't tolerate them. An analyst friend of mine confessed that he was horrified by hysterical women and never accepted them – and yet psychoanalysis was born in Vienna as a cure for hysterics. ]

Paradoxically, however, the affirmation of this principle of empathy in various areas of psychoanalysis has led, especially in Italy, to the success of Wilfred Bion's advice that, specifically: "the analyst must suspend memory and desire". A phrase so successful that it can by now be considered as the fundamental prescription-base of Italian analysts at the start of the 21st century. The success of this prescription is evidently connected to that crucial *neutrality of the analyst*. Bion's admirers allude to this passage:

"The conditions in which insight operates (intuits) are pellucid and opaque. I have already pointed out that, from the summit of those who intuit, opacities are sufficiently identifiable to be able to give them a name, however primitive and deficient their ascriptions may be. Such are memory, desire and understanding. All these opacities hinder insight. And that is why I have asserted that the psychoanalyst must exercise his insight in such a way that it is not damaged by the intrusion of memory, desire and understanding."<sup>1</sup>

But It should be noted that when today's Bionians reclaim this last phrase, *understanding* is usually expunged. I believe this is due to the fact that for many analysts, often influenced by philosophical phenomenology, understanding is, always, indispensable. They think that the analyst must above all understand (*verstehen*), in a phenomenological sense, his patients.

Personally, I think it is impossible for the analyst to neither remember nor desire, since he is first and foremost a human being. Memory and desire are what make us human subjects; we may believe we have put them aside, but in fact we *unconsciously* remember and desire. These are the ABCs of psychoanalysis, at least with Freud.

Suspending memory and desire is something that comes to Bion perhaps from Buddhism. But Freud is not Buddhist, nor is he a Stoic: he does not believe that desire can ever be suspended. Saying "I must not desire anymore" means "I desire not to desire", therefore, it is always a question of desire.

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<sup>1</sup> *Cogitations*. Provisional translation from the Italian translation.

As for memory, it is constitutive of the unconscious itself. The unconscious is a memory that is not remembered. To suspend memory is to say to suspend the unconscious, which is the opposite of what Freud recommended to any analyst. According to him, instead, it was necessary for the analyst to continuously draw on his own unconscious, on his own repressed memory. When Freud recommended "fluctuating attention" to the analyst during analytic sessions, he meant just that: the analyst listens to the unconscious of his analysand with his own unconscious. It is only the desiring memory that renders us creative.

The analyst certainly *desires to analyze*, that is, he is eager for truth. It is not enough for him to comfort or console the analysand, he pushes him to tell the truth. In my opinion, this is what distinguishes psychoanalysis from other psychotherapies (which does not at all mean that psychoanalysis is good and these psychotherapies bad!). But while other psychotherapists *wish to satisfy the patient's demand* (for example, to help him find the wife he has never succeeded to find), the psychoanalyst *wishes above all to bring a subject to his own truth*. But while bringing a subject to his own truth also entails, in most cases, increasing the subject's satisfaction, it is not what an analyst consciously pursues. In fact, the healing of the analysand mostly surprises the analyst himself.

But even if the analyst were able to remain neutral, objective, or completely impartial, the analysis would not be. Analysis cannot be neutral, because it was born and thrived on the basis of some fundamental ethical assumptions which belong to our era.

Lacan said (in the Seminar *Ethics of psychoanalysis*) that the analyst pursues certain ideals, which are: (1) the promotion of human love, (2) non-dependence, and therefore the independence of the subject, and (3) authenticity. While it would take too long here to analyze what these three ideals imply, I think that it is very important to note one thing, and that is that these ideals have a very precise political meaning: These ideals are absolutely typical *of modern woman and man*.

By modern I am obviously not referring to everyone alive on this planet today. We know that, probably even in Lithuania, there are many anti-modern or not very modern people. In many countries there are even flat-earthers, that is, people who believe that the earth is not round but flat. It seems that in the USA alone, flat-earthers make up 10% of the population. I have even heard of people who are in fact Ptolemaic, who are convinced that the earth lies at the center of the universe. Now, an essential part of what we consider modernity is the trust we place in scientific discoveries.

So here by modernity I am referring not to a matter of fact but to a certain ideal of humanity that has established itself in certain areas of the world (certainly in Lithuania) but not in others. Sometimes we refer to "Western culture", but in fact we are including countries that are not geographically Western, such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, New Zealand, Israel, etc. But while *modernity* as an ideality does not coincide with certain countries and certain political regimes, this ideality itself runs through almost all countries (perhaps even Afghanistan).

This ideality encompasses the three ideals expressed by Lacan, which I would call 1) the liberation of sexual love, 2) the autonomy of the individual, and 3) the authenticity of the subject. But for a century and a half now, these ideals have found expression in both the various artistic movements that have established themselves on our (modernized) side of the world, from Impressionism onwards—as well as in philosophy, from Nietzsche to Deleuze, from Wittgenstein to Foucault. In fact, *liberal democracy* itself is part of this ideal of modernity, even if a part of modernity criticizes it as insufficient. Democracy is based on the autonomy of individuals, whose sum is the true sovereign, thus they are the foundation of all legitimate political power. The rights of sexual minorities such as LGBT+, or women's rights, are aspects of the promotion of love sexuality: there is nothing that regulates the expression of libido anymore, if not the protection of the right of the other not to suffer.

Many fellow analysts say that psychoanalysis does not presuppose a liberal-democratic society, nor even liberal-democratic ideals. Yet psychoanalysis is what in English is called "a liberal art". It does not seem to me a coincidence that non-liberal-democratic regimes, be they fascist or communist, have usually banned, and persecuted, psychoanalysis. I know that even in Lithuania psychoanalysis spread only after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it would not have been possible before. But also in Nazi Germany psychoanalysis was banned. When the military dictatorship dominated in Argentina, many psychoanalysts were killed and persecuted by the regime precisely because they were psychoanalysts.

I fear that if Putin's regime strengthens and becomes more cohesive in Russia, then the practice of psychoanalysis might be in real danger. And even if Putin's regime might not actually ban psychoanalytic practice, psychoanalysis itself would be destined to fade there, because psychoanalysis needs the air of a liberal-democratic context to breathe.

It is true that the analyst does not preach these ideals, he does not theorize them, as did a dissident psychoanalyst, Wilhelm Reich, once very popular in Western Europe and North America. The analyst is not a propagandist of modernity. But he does belong intimately to modernity, which is its background.

Modernity is not a fact, it is an ideality. That is, a certain human condition desirable for many (but not for all), and a way of re-interpreting the past in relation to this desirability.

Modernity focuses on the subjectivity, the singularity of each subject, in the sense that each subject is the bearer of a unique fundamental truth. But this unique fundamental truth is based on a remembrance-memorization that traces the path of an alienation.

Now, this truth lies not outside the subject, but within the subject himself insofar as he is the artifice of his own alienation. It is in his original alienation in the Other that the subject reveals his own truth, and the analyst bets on the fact that this truth can free him. In this way, the ethics of psychoanalysis renews the evangelical promise, "the truth will set you free."

I think one of the reasons why many hate psychoanalysis is precisely because they don't believe that the truth can be liberating. And they think that freedom can only be based on illusions. This is psychoanalysis' challenge, on which it gambles its very existence in the modern world.