On the Difference Between Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy by Jean-Gérard Bursztein (Marie-Laure Bromley-Davenport, Trans.)

Duane Rousselle, PhD

This is not a book about the difference between psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. It is a book about the difference of psychoanalysis; which is to say that it is a book about its singular incommensurability. The reader may be surprised to discover that a detailed analysis of psychotherapy is not at all provided. Instead, the author has it as his objective only to highlight the “specificity of psychoanalysis” (9). This specificity can be directly attributed to its taking as object that which remains from the conjunction of demande and need: namely, desire, which is never without its objet petit a.1 The author is therefore correct to claim that psychoanalytic praxis does not involve the extension of the ego’s commensurability (as expressed by the dictum “where id was, there ego shall be”). Rather, psychoanalytic praxis aims at the reduction of “the weight of this egoic narcissism” (60).

The first part of the book functions as a remarkably concise introduction to the Lacanian orientation for practitioners of all levels. It is by making the neuroses the central focus of analytic discourse that the author misses two further possibilities offered by the Lacanian orientation, the first of which is clinical and the second of which is metaphysical or materialist. First, the author has overlooked the altogether more difficult and pressing problem of the clinical psychoses, for which effective praxis does not by necessity involve the reduction of the weight of the ego. Second, the “infinite desire” for obtaining some knowledge about the real of the subject of the unconscious (cf., 9, 93) – where knowledge is in the position of unconscious truth – comes at the price of the loss of any knowledge concerning the intimate real of the non-human material unconscious. For example, Lacan wasn’t at all afraid think about the plant’s jouissance.2

Bursztein claims that the analyst has it as her duty to fight for and defend psychoanalysis (97). The obvious question we ought to ask ourselves is the following: against what threat? The author’s claim about incommensurability compels us to take the position that psychoanalysis must defend itself against itself, it must fight against its temptation to give up on knowledge in the position of truth, and this, finally, is why the author stages a confrontation between psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. For example, in Canada and the United States, psychoanalysis is often practiced under college regulations for psychotherapy. It thus becomes a method among methods within the overarching rubric of psychotherapy and psychology. Consequently, one most likely visits a psychotherapist in order to work through the unconscious. In the movement from psychoanalysis to psychotherapy there is a risk of shifting knowledge from the place of truth to knowledge in the place of the circuitous route of identification (96).

The author suggests that psychoanalysis is best defended as a praxis of interpretive cuts (34) which incessantly divides the subject (96). It is here that the author makes a genuine advancement in clarity on the topic of treatment with obsessional neurotics. It is the analyst’s knowledge which makes possible any reduction of the sufferings and symptom formations of the analysand. This in turn releases the analysand from the grips of secondary narcissism or narcissistic identification (43). The psychoanalyst’s knowledge is

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1 Toronto Psychoanalytic Institute and Society
therefore obtained through her very desire to know the analysand’s unconscious truth and to let it speak. She becomes the cabinet where all such knowledge is stored.

This short book succeeds in three ways. First, it succeeds by offering a brilliant introduction to the Lacanian orientation which can be read in no more than an hour or two. Second, it succeeds by demonstrating clinical effectivity by mapping the Lacanian Borromean orientation onto Freud’s “Rat Man” case and by demonstrating how previous impasses may have been better resolved by contemporary practitioners. Finally, by turning, in the final part of the book, to Lacanian topology in the author is better positioned to make a strong case for the replacement of the Freudian notion of sublimation with the Lacanian notion of “identification with the symptom” (87). Sublimation is liked to an idealized object, but the process of a Lacanian treatment involves the tossing away of idealized objects (including the analyst) (cf., 88, 92).

Finally, we come to understand why it is that psychoanalysis is one of relatively few fields of thinking today that remains in fidelity with truth.

References