Fidelity and Invention


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It is certainly on the basis of his atopia, of the nowhere-ness of his being, that Socrates sparked off a whole line of research…

Jacques Lacan, *Seminar VIII: Transference*

The question of the formation and authorization of the psychoanalyst was long taken for granted following the guild model of psychoanalytic institutes under the ambit of the International Psychoanalytic Association, despite the forceful protests of leading lights like Bernheim, Balint, and Lacan. The question has returned to the center of analytic discourse with a vengeance in recent years, or so it seems to me from my nest in the New York psychoanalytic scene, land of exodus and tea parties, where perhaps it echoes so loud as the place in which the question was most misunderstood. It is from within these reverberations that Sergio Benvenuto’s work takes on its significance. Benvenuto, the longtime editor of the European Journal of Psychoanalysis, has staked his claim to a minimalist psychoanalysis on remaining independent of any psychoanalytic school or guild, any master or university discourse. Benvenuto’s teaching effects a reduction of theories and schools, a traversing of family resemblances, in search of what is fundamental to the psychoanalytic act. Girding (always asymptotically) such a navel, each of us in our authorization and ongoing formation must engage in a dialectic of fidelity and invention, as we create our own way of inhabiting the position of psychoanalyst. I would argue that it is precisely such a dialectical confrontation, ever incomplete, that Benvenuto’s work stages.

Benvenuto’s eidetic reduction is at times violent, reducing the often extravagant complexity of analytic theory to something crystal clear: a ‘listening, which consists, in Freudian terms, of finding a latent content behind the manifest one’ (Benvenuto & Oyer, *in press*). In fact, Benvenuto (2016) describes psychoanalysis as a *folk theory* (p. xxxiii).
Nevertheless such clarity and simplicity by no means creates a line that it is comfortable to hem to. As he writes:

The poor, the child, and Freud call us back to our original nest; they take us back to our own, egocentric and somatocentric, world, from which we set sail for our centrifugal and abstract adventure. Hence also the ironic and violent effect that this reduction produces inside us: it throws our addiction to the impulses of the flesh into our face, mocking our pretence of flying too high. (Benvenuto 2016: xxxv-xxxvi)

It is precisely to such unsettling kernels that the psychoanalyst must remain in fidelity and take her bearings, while the trappings of psychoanalysis – its complex terminology, the transferences and identifications with particular theorists and schools, and its rituals of couch, session length and frequency, etc. – can and must be allowed to fall away, in a refusal, or askesis (a favorite word of Benvenuto’s) of the ballast they provide. Within this reduced matrix, each of us must find our own way of being a psychoanalyst. And here, too, Benvenuto’s approach is in fidelity to Freud’s earliest recommendations: ‘I do not venture to deny that a physician quite differently constituted might find himself driven to adopt a different attitude to his patients and to the task before him’ (Freud 1912: 111). And to the spirit of Freud’s technique, ‘a very simple one’ which is nonetheless impossible.

Benvenuto’s eschewal of any handy positioning is immediately evident in his primary references in the perversion book. Besides Freud, the primary influences on his thought, from the sprawling psychoanalytic literature on perversions, are Masud Khan, Jacques Lacan, and Robert Stoller. At first blush, three more different thinkers and writers could scarcely be imagined, and yet an underlying familiarity exists. ‘Yet beyond these vast differences, these three authors have something in common: the three of them have been at the margins of the IPA, the psychoanalytic establishment’ (Benvenuto 2016: xxxviii). Each occupied a position, as Benvenuto acknowledges, that was in its own right perverse: ‘minority,
nonconformist, conflictual’ (xxxviii), as does he. These thinkers, as well, were unusual in opening psychoanalysis up to neighboring fields: Khan to the literary, Lacan to philosophy, logic, mathematics, as well as to the arts, and Stoller to socio-psychological survey research (xxxix). With the epistemological reduction of psychoanalysis to a more and more minimalist theoria and praxis, cross pollination with neighboring fields takes on an ever greater significance. This is suggestive of Benvenuto’s own practice as a philosopher as well as a psychoanalyst.

The difficult position Benvenuto seeks to maintain is illustrated in his complicated relationship with Lacan’s thought. Elsewhere, he wrote of this relationship:

I confess: with regard to Lacan I seek a sort of optimal distance-closeness, which is just what Lacan did with regard to Freud. Lacan, despite his claim of being more Freudian than other analysts, convinces us precisely because he does not follow Freud à la lettre… Precisely because Lacan saw things in a completely new way, by après coup Freud appears to us as very different from the Vulgate that Freudians, and Freud himself, have given of psychoanalysis. (Benvenuto, 2017, para 9)

The distance Benvenuto (2016) achieves from Lacan is nowhere more evident than in the central thesis of his work on perversions: the primary distinction between the non-perverse and the perverse sexual act is the presence or absence of caritas. ‘In the carnal union, each partner enjoys offering the other what the other lacks’ (Benvenuto 2016: 11). This seems quite distant from Lacan’s famous dictum, ‘There is no sexual rapport.’

This distance from Lacan, however, is not without its own closeness. Benvenuto acknowledges that Lacan, more than anyone has appreciated and theorized the difference between the other, the imaginary counterpart, and the Other, of the symbolic order, and with this distinction the central importance of the Law in the vicissitudes of subjectivity. He continues, however, that Lacan, like Freud before him in his effort
to create a new science, fails to account within his theory for the phenomenological other-subject-like-me, a juridical and ethical concept of the other subjectivity with whom I am interchangeable before the Law, equally protected and equally bound. To the extent that this other-subject-like-me is excluded from psychoanalytic theory, it is a perverse theory. Indeed, a concept of the other-subject-like-me, Benvenuto argues, is essential to an understanding of the perversions, as it is precisely what is missing or refused (caritas) in perverse sexual relations. He dubs such a disavowal of this other-subject-like-me hetero-dystonic, as it refuses the desire or enjoyment of the other-subject-like-me (in opposition to the ego-dystonia of the neuroses or the socio-dystonia of the psychoses).

It seems to me that Benvenuto’s atopic approach has a profound impact on the structure of his book. A contrast case is informative. Stephanie Swales’ (2012) *Perversion: A Lacanian Approach to the Subject* is another recent psychoanalytic contribution to the study of the perversions, and the differences between Swales’ and Benvenuto’s texts could not be more obvious, beginning with Swales’ self-localization in the very title of her work. Swales was a student of Bruce Fink, and the text was developed from her doctoral dissertation. It is certainly the case that no product could be more reflective of the University Discourse than its emblematic dissertation but Fink himself generally occupies such a discourse in his translation of Lacan’s work – both in its obvious intralingual sense and in its inter-lingual one.

Swales’s book dutifully unfolds from an introduction to Lacanian theory, to the etiology of perversion, to an explanation of the fundamental fantasy and its workings in the perverse structure, to the longest chapter on the substructures of perversion (exhibitionism, voyeurism, masochism, sadism, and fetishism), to two case studies, before concluding with treatment recommendations. The structure of Benvenuto’s book, on the other hand, is much less systematic, with chapters titled: ‘What Are Perversions?’, ‘The Pervert’s Pain, ‘Masochism: Ways to Power’, ‘Sadism: “Punishing Women”’, ‘Perverse Women’, ‘Weaning from Perversion’. As a reader, it is easiest to find one’s bearings in the chapters devoted to specific perverse presentations – masochism, sadism, and perverse women
– while Benvenuto is at his most interesting and elegant in the opening chapters and the concluding chapter on the perverse cure. In these chapters, Benvenuto seems to be at his maximum distance from Lacan, the Master, as well as from the University.

A paramount lesson from Benvenuto’s writing is that the teaching of analytic theory need not be dispensed via the educative model and very often must be transmitted in the manner of the analytic act itself: via transference. I am speaking here of the two times of the psychoanalytic act: ‘the induction to the transference and its dissolution in the fall of the subject supposed to know’ (Oyer, 2015). Benvenuto is neither Master nor keeper of a tradition: he speaks from nowhere. This was forcefully brought home to me in a very brief parenthetical aside he made in his discussion of masochism: ‘Perversions, however, are neither Cartesian nor linear, they are baroque (so much so that I wonder if an analyst who does not appreciate the baroque and its dizzying brilliance can truly understand them)’ (Benvenuto 2016: 62). I was brought up short. What did I know of the Baroque? The question launched me into a months long investigation of the visible and invisible, trompe-l’oeil, anamorphosis, perspectivism, chiaroscuro, and the fold. This passion seemed to fall away in a flash as I imagined Benvenuto in Baroque Rome surrounded by the light and shadow of Santi Luca e Martina and Sant’Ivo alla Sapienza. I began to question what kind of analyst I might become, here in New York, inspired by Benvenuto’s Baroque but with my own truth of hip hop, punk rock, and the downtown composers. I thought of my ownmost ancient geographies, the terroir of my idiom, my making and unmaking by this land without memory. While going beyond Wikipedia might be an indication of the beckoning of transference (something agalmatic), this collapse and thrust into something beyond mere identification is a requisite for a passage to the act of authorization.

References


