Postmodernism versus psychotherapy

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‘Postmodernism’ has made a substantial impact on various schools of psychotherapy, including family therapy. ‘Postmodern’ therapists tend to focus on the productive capacities of language, developing narrative styles for their work. ‘Postmodern’ family therapy is differentiated from modernist approaches by its disavowal of truth claims and its encouragement of alternative ‘voices’ or narratives. In this paper, it is argued that this represents too narrow an approach to psychotherapy and to postmodernism. Postmodernism takes as a central concern the limits of symbolization, so a postmodernist therapy would deal primarily with failures of language. Language-based therapeutic procedures such as those to be found in family therapy are consequently not postmodernist. This state of affairs should be welcomed, as a truly ‘postmodern’ mode of therapy would probably celebrate irrationality.

‘Postmodernism’ has become an important notion in the thinking of psychotherapists of various schools, but perhaps most profoundly in psychoanalysis and family systems therapy. This has been a creative and provocative process, and has also supplied links with cultural theory that serve to reduce the isolation of psychological thought from the other human disciplines. However, there must be doubts over the extent to which the infiltration of the therapeutic field by postmodernist discourse is a substantive advance, rather than a recasting of traditional psychotherapeutic dilemmas in more fashionable terms. In addition, the diversity of positions which can or have been characterized as ‘postmodernist’ is very great, and psychotherapists have not necessarily been attuned to this in their own selection of apparently postmodern perspectives. One consequence of this selective attention is that psychotherapists have seized upon some aspects of postmodernist thought apparently amenable to therapeutic applications, but potentially more challenging or contradictory elements have been ignored or edited out.

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In this paper, I want to consider the possible tension between postmodernism and psychotherapy by outlining a particular reading of postmodernism that raises problems for family systems therapy. These problems can be summarized in the comparison between therapeutic approaches such as family systems therapy, which are concerned with finding ways to make symbolic sense of experience via language, and a theory (postmodernism) concerned, in the final analysis, with what happens when language breaks down.

‘Postmodern’ therapists, particularly family systems therapists, have focused their claims of a break from modernist therapeutic orthodoxy on the emancipatory and deconstructionist potential of their concern with language and ‘narrative’. Hoffman (1990; p. 11), for example, states her credentials in the following description of the process of therapy.

The therapeutic interview is a performative text, as the postmodernist jargon has it. This text will take its shape according to the emergent qualities of the conversations that have inspired it, and will hopefully create an emancipatory dialogue rather than reinforce the oppressive or monolithic one that so often comes in the door . . . In therapy, we listen to a story and then we collaborate with the persons we are seeing to invent other stories or other meanings for the stories that are told.

In a similar vein, Parry (1991; p. 41) claims that, through its opposition to any notion of a transcendent Other and through its deconstructionist elements, the ‘post-modern sensibility offers a propitious context for the transition to a narrative paradigm for family therapy’. Narrative is a good thing, in this argument, because of its democratizing tendency: rather than knowing the ‘truth’ of the other person/client, the therapist knows only how to help others tell a more creative story about their life. This includes the therapist knowing how to share her or his ideas as alternative stories instead of as expert knowledge. For Parry,

The post-modern treatment of a story as simply a story, hence something endlessly inventive, offers the narrative therapist a tool for enabling clients to shake off constraining beliefs so that they can live their stories henceforth as they choose. Their stories need no longer live them. (pp. 42–3).

This version of postmodernism emphasizes the breakdown of rationalist certainties supposedly characteristic of modernism, which leads in the practice of therapy to authoritarianism. Parry’s critique, which is largely targeted at psychoanalysis, is similar to many such reappraisals of the modernist vision.
Equipped with theories that explained problems in living on different levels than they were experienced by their sufferers, therapists became particularly prominent cultural exemplars of the modernist tendency to require an authority to pronounce on the underlying meaning of the person’s experiences. (1991; p. 38).

Postmodernists replace these certainties with relativistic encounters in which different points of view are juxtaposed, or rather (following an influential metaphor from Gilligan, 1982), alternative ‘voices’ are allowed their right to be heard. The postmodernist break is thus conceptualized as a dismantling of claims that behind language there lies something more profound and more meaningful, and its replacement with a celebration of difference and heterogeneity, centred on the constructive possibilities of language. Language, in this sense, is all that there is: ‘language does not mirror nature; language creates the nature we know’ (Anderson and Goolishian, 1988; p. 378).

On the face of it, the language-centredness of psychotherapy can be made to mesh well with the linguistic concerns of postmodernism. However, I am going to argue that the position described above is an inadequate portrayal both of supposedly ‘modernist’ psychotherapy and of postmodernism. As a way into this debate I will outline in the next section a partial and peculiar, but I think nevertheless accurate, characterization of the psychotherapeutic enterprise as a way of dealing with the experience of otherness. My argument will be that it is not accurate to portray modernist psychotherapy – pre-eminently psychoanalysis – as constituted only by authoritative and expert tendencies, as Parry (1991) does in the quotation above. Rather, there is a tension between this strand in psychotherapy and an opposing one, claimed as their own by postmodernists, simply to give the ‘other’ its voice. Both these tendencies are present in so-called modernist psychotherapy, so the claimed postmodernist break within therapy cannot be based simply on recognizing the constructive properties of language and the concomitant importance of allowing the client’s voice to be heard. Traditional psychoanalytic psychotherapy, just as much as family systems therapy, concerns itself with putting experience into words – and sometimes the resulting narratives are fragmentary, contradictory and subversive enough to satisfy any contemporary criterion.

Following this argument concerning therapy, I will suggest that postmodernism has in any case a different trajectory from the democratizing of voice, a trajectory of disavowal of language that places it in opposition to the psychotherapeutic enterprise as a whole.
For in the reading of postmodernism to be described here, a reading derived most directly from the work of the Slovenian critic, Slavoj Žižek,* language is not taken as the constructing force of human experience, which is how some contemporary psychotherapists take it. Rather, it is in the gaps and breakdowns of language that reality inheres; in this sense, postmodernism points to the insufficiency of language as a means of embracing experience. Working within language and conceiving of its task in purely linguistic or narrative terms, psychotherapy remains pre-postmodern in its outlook. I do not, however, take this as a necessarily devastating criticism of psychotherapy; rather, I shall suggest simply that psychotherapy has little to do, essentially, with postmodernism—and that that is just as it should be.

Encounters with the Other

The history of psychotherapy during the twentieth century can be viewed as a series of ambivalent encounters with what is experienced as ‘other’ to the self— with that which is alien and challenging, perhaps frightening but also alluring. This is perhaps most clearly the case in psychoanalysis, beginning with Freud himself, but I believe that it is a general characterization, marking a tension, universal in therapy, between appreciating what is ‘other’—that is, what is different and disturbing—and colonizing it by trying to make it ‘same’, incorporating it into what is already known and understood. Even if this is a general phenomenon, however, psychoanalysis is a convenient and powerful exemplar, especially relevant as it has functioned as the ‘modernist’ cradle of authoritative knowledge against which much ‘postmodernist’ family therapy has measured itself.

The ambivalence can be found right at the start. Faced with the mysterious and inexhaustible passion of his female hysterical patients, Freud’s scientific enterprise can be seen as an attempt at colonization— at taking over what was ‘other’ and making sense of it in rational

* Žižek’s writings, made available in a string of recent English translations (e.g. 1989, 1991a, 1991b), explore with great verve the relations between psychoanalysis (specifically of the Lacanian school), culture (especially film), politics and philosophy. His work is a particularly good example of the way the insights of postmodernism and poststructuralism can be put to use to reclaim a place for subjectivity in the political process.

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terms. This procedure was one instance of the attempt to dominate apparently wilful nature (usually seen as feminine) by science, which was itself a common nineteenth-century strategy for dealing with the terrors induced by the unknown. Characteristically for such strategies, it also spanned the polarity of femininity versus masculinity, translating the former into the latter by making women's hysterical discourse the possession of the male expert. Anyone who has tried teaching Freud's (1905) 'Dora' case to mainly female groups of psychology or gender-studies students, will know just how hard it can be to argue that Freud's work was not simply a disenfranchisement of women – a further insidious turn of the screw, silencing the woman's voice.

But really this is not all that there was in Freud's encounter with the other, nor all that there is, at least in principle, in comparable contemporary projects. Alongside his imperialism, Freud also offered recognition to something outside the control of the analyst, something exciting, admirable and in essence untameable. This something became coded as 'the unconscious', thus having a boundary drawn around it, but the label did not dispose of it or keep it quiet despite the continuing attempts of psychoanalysts to master it. Rather, in a pre-echo of the claims of postmodern therapists, it gave voice to 'the other': it pointed to the existence of something which could never be fully mastered or controlled. Moreover, there is a reflexivity present in Freud's autobiographically founded procedure of discovery which is also congruent with currently fashionable concerns. Uncovering the otherness in everyone meant acknowledging that Freud's women patients were presenting an otherness which could be found even within the man of science – indeed, right inside Freud himself, in the heart of his self-analysed unconscious.

The discovery of the unconscious was Freud's discovery, within the discourse of the other, of what was actively reading within himself. (Felman, 1987; p. 60)

There is an infinite regress here of great importance: psychoanalysis analyses – that is its function. But it can never fully encompass its object in its analysis, because one of the principles of psychoanalysis is the unending nature of the unconscious dynamic. The analytic attitude, as Rieff (1966) and others have famously portrayed it, is characterized by a relentlessly deconstructive urge that allows no endpoints or perfect solutions – no cures, just living with ailments. On and on goes analysis, striving to domesticate an otherness, a wildness,
which it knows to be untameable. Psychoanalysis is in this sense a both/and phenomenon of a potentially postmodern kind: it attempts to make sense of otherness and yet it also recognizes the essentially irrational way the sense-making process operates. It argues that all mental phenomena can be explained by reference to unconscious impulses, but also says that the explanations themselves are in part constituted by these same impulses – that they are motivated and hence themselves available to analysis.

Again Freud offers a clear instance of this self-reflexive conundrum from which psychoanalysis can never escape. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1900) presents his famous ‘Specimen Dream’ of Irma’s injection, concluding from it that dreams are constituted as wish-fulfilments – the discovery which he believes will make his name. However, as Anzieu (1975; p. 140) comments, ‘Freud noted subsequently that thoughts which follow on from dreams are still dream-thoughts. So the thought that dreams are wish-fulfilments is an integral part of the dream content.’ Analysis of the dream produces the generalization that dreams are wish-fulfilments, but this too is a wish-fulfilment, the wish being that Freud should unravel the mystery of dreams. More generally, psychoanalysis is itself constituted within the structure of irrationality – of the unconscious – and all its operations bear that mark.

Psychoanalysis has here been used as an exemplar of modernist approaches to therapy – the role in which it has been cast in many supposedly postmodernist critiques. In particular, I have tried to address the notion that claims to authority and expertise characterize modernist therapies, while postmodernist work adopts a more democratic and respectful attention to the various ‘voices’ to be found in the client or family. It should be clear from my brief sketch of what might be called ‘Freud’s tensions’ that the apparently authoritative nature of modernist truth-claims is only one element in the development of pre-postmodernist psychotherapy. Furthermore, the breaking down of assumptions about absolute truth in this most ‘modernist’ of approaches, psychoanalysis, has little to do with a recasting of the therapeutic process in linguistic or narrative terms. Psychotherapy of this kind has always been linguistic – psychoanalysis was, after all, the primordial ‘talking cure’ – with the construction of a coherent narrative about experience being a major therapeutic aim. Nowadays, there is less confidence amongst psychotherapists that the laboriously constructed narrative expresses some total truth of the subject, but this is a weak peg on which to rest claims of a break.
between then (modernism) and now (postmodernism). The therapeutic encounter with the otherness to be found in clients always leaves one feeling awed and uncertain, however coercive one's approach towards it might be, and those 'modernists' who have faced this issue have been as open to such feelings as have their successors. As will be argued below, the real transition is not from certainty to doubt, nor does it lie in views of how language is used; but rather, of what escapes language, of what cannot be symbolized. For this reason, all linguistically based therapeutic endeavours remain modernist – or at least non-postmodernist – to the last.

The postmodern flux

Previously, when dealing with the relationships between postmodernism and psychoanalysis, I have focused particularly on the antagonism of some strands of postmodernist theory towards interpretive strategies (Frosh, 1991). Interpretation is defined by the cultural theorist Baudrillard, in a way strongly redolent of psychoanalysis, as 'that which, shattering appearances and the play of manifest discourse, will set meaning free by remaking connections with latent discourse' (1979; p. 149). That is, interpretation seeks to look through, beyond or beneath what is immediately observable, to uncover the integrating mechanism which represents the 'cause', 'explanation' or 'meaning' of the surface image. But postmodernist theory takes issue with the entire interpretive endeavour, arguing that it is based on a wish to make connections between things which are not in fact connected – that human experience, to the extent that it can be said to have an 'essence', is always arbitrary and fragmentary.

Baudrillard's argument has been seminal for postmodernist theorists of this persuasion. He claims that interpretation is by nature mistaken, that 'getting beyond appearances' is an impossible task, because every approach that attempts to do this – including psychoanalytic and other depth-psychological approaches – becomes seduced by its own terms, forms and appearances, until it becomes a kind of play on words, a set of investigations devoted not to uncovering 'truth', but to persuading, deceiving or flattering others. And it is this 'seduction by appearances' which is, according to Baudrillard, a central mechanism of the postmodernist process, a mechanism that works in the opposite direction from the interpretive project. Interpretation is carried out in the belief that there exists some truth or 'real meaning' under the surface, which one can aspire
to uncover; but the drive to interpret is in fact a response to the glittering surface itself, that suggestively hints at something which does not exist.

For we needn't search in some beyond, in a hinterwelt, or in an unconscious, to find what diverts discourse. What actually displaces it, 'seduces' it in the literal sense and makes it seductive, is its very appearance. (Baudrillard, 1979; p. 149)

Avoiding integrationist interpretations, postmodernism of this kind emphasizes the fragmented nature of contemporary experience—fragments which are exciting but which are also meaningless in their interchangeability and lack of significant relationship to one another. One might say, to risk caricaturing some postmodernist family therapists, that when people speak they do not reveal anything 'true' about themselves, they merely construct another intriguing (seductive) story.

It can perhaps already be seen that this vision of the postmodern enterprise could be profoundly nihilistic: no one thing matters more than anything else, the search for meaning is an illusion, appearance is all. Optimism can only be rescued by stressing the dimension of 'enjoyment'—that is, investment in the fragmentary thrills of surface and image, and appreciation of the continuing creativeness of human activity and narrative capability. 'Playing' with language and storytelling may be one version of this procedure, a version taken up in some 'postmodern family therapy'. However, there is another dimension of postmodernism which needs more emphasis, to counter the sense that all there is to it is a celebration of fragmentation, playfulness and relativism. The postmodern opposition to depth interpretation is well understood—the claim that looking underneath the surface for a true meaning is a misguided and potentially authoritarian activity. But another characteristic of the postmodern vision, its focus on space, is something the implications of which are only just being spelt out.

To follow this point, it is necessary first to recall the importance of rationality in modernist thought. One characterization of the modernist project dwells on its concern with finding a way of living with the extraordinary rapacity of the contemporary world—the processes of modernization, for example—and eliciting meaning from them, or finding meaning within them (Berman, 1982). In large part, this involves the scrutiny of phenomena which appear irrational in order to identify their structure and function—hence appropriating them for

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rationality. So when Freud presents dreams, mostly his own, as the founding act of psychoanalysis, it is to show how they are interpretable, intelligible as the discourse of the unconscious. They may be irrational in their content, but they are not so in their form or function. Similarly with hysteria: listening to the word of the woman, Freud colonizes it to create a kind of science, to make sense of what is in other contexts thought unreachable. The 'cure', such as it is, consists in this: to draw a boundary so that what is irrational is nevertheless known, thus appearing in the arena of that which is symbolizable, and can be contained. The project of most therapy is of this kind, making meanings out of what appears to be meaningless.

To be rational, however, one must cultivate distance: the interpretive potency of the modernist therapist relies on standing outside, being other than that which is being observed. The medical gaze and the analytic attitude are in this sense summaries of rationality and realism – their capacity to make sense of phenomena is to a large degree predicated on the possibility of maintaining a thoughtful distance, something which is still usually called 'objectivity'. Postmodernism, however, claims something different: it suggests that distance from the object is no longer possible, that the traditional subject–object (subjectivity/objectivity) divide no longer exists. Many discussions of this point have stressed the impossibility of calling on any absolute standard in order to judge 'objectively' the phenomena at hand. In one of the best-known critical accounts of postmodernism, for example, Jameson (1984) uses contemporary architectural examples to evoke the experience of being 'lost in space', of being unable to get one's bearings. However, this is not (as it might have been in modernist descriptions) only because there is nothing there to guide one – because of alienation from agreed or traditional values, for instance. Rather, the experience Jameson evokes is that of the 'filled and suffused volumes' of space (p. 87) – its confusing and overwhelming fullness. Differentiation of self from other, of subject and object, is problematic because the postmodern landscape is crowded with bewildering, fragmentary and unpredictable events.

Žižek (1991a), writing from the slippery vantage-point of a deconstructing Yugoslavia, conveys well the sense of the impossibility of rational distance. He argues that what is most terrifying about postmodernity is not just the gaps and absences in people's lives – a phenomenon perhaps most poignantly evoked by modernist visions of alienation – but the way everything is wrapped up together so closely that distance is disallowed. Here is a passage by Žižek concerned with
the difference between modernism and postmodernism in which what is expressed is something rather far removed from the therapeutic advancement of narrative and story-telling described earlier. Whereas modernism focuses on loss and on the difficulty of finding meaning in things, postmodernism suggests that arbitrariness is the *essence* of experience, and that this arbitrariness, uncertainty and irrationality is something from which we cannot escape.

'Postmodernism' . . . consists not in demonstrating that the game works without an object, that the play is set in motion by a central absence, but rather in displaying the object directly, allowing it to make visible its own indifferent and arbitrary character. The same object can function successively as a disgusting reject and as a sublime, charismatic apparition . . .

(1991a; p. 143)

Žižek presents Kafka as exemplary here. For instance, the Court in *The Trial*, claims Žižek, does not indicate some absence – an absent God, which would have been characteristic of the modernist vision. Rather, it is full of a lascivious presence, in which the Law operates mischievously, corruptly, playfully. Postmodernism in this regard is full of such an overwhelming presence, producing anxiety not out of lack, but out of being too close to the object, face to face with its horror. It is this aspect of the postmodern condition, the way everything is wrapped up together into a space that disallows distance, which may be its most disturbing attribute. Žižek notes,

Living subjects can no longer be considered prisoners of a dead cobweb. The dead, formal character of the law becomes now the sine qua non of our freedom, and the real totalitarian danger arises only when the law no longer wants to stay dead. (1991a; p. 150)

The problem is one of *intrusion*: the Law and its corruption are bound up together, they live side by side and entangled one with another. Irrational as reality is, it interferes with us all the time.

There is an immensely important contrast here between different attitudes to experience. The modernist approach is as much about language as is the postmodernist; the difference is that modernism espouses the *possibility* of making sense of experience by achieving at least some rational distance. Even something so confusingly on the borders of the modernism/postmodernism divide as James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* has this structure implicit within it. Žižek comments,

*Finnegans Wake* is, of course, an 'unreadable' book; we cannot read it the way we read an ordinary 'realist' novel. To follow the thread of the text, we need a
kind of ‘reader’s guide,’ a commentary that enables us to see our way through the inexhaustible network of ciphered allusions. Yet this ‘illegibility’ functions precisely as an invitation to an unending process of reading, of interpretation (recall Joyce’s joke that with *Finnegans Wake*, he hopes to keep literary scientists occupied for at least the next four hundred years). (1991a; p. 151)

Reading the Bible is a project of the same order: some readings stress the possibility of making sense of the text, reading every letter (and the gaps between them, in some traditions) for its meaning. However fluid the text might be – and its fluidity is part of its power – there is a mind at work behind it, with an intention which can, in principle, be understood.

Compared to the rationalism of interpretive readings of significant texts, postmodernism’s disavowal of distance places it closer to mysticism. For mystics, at the heart of the holy narrative is a secret which is immune to symbolization, and the aim of the mystical enterprise is to penetrate it and become one with it. What is ‘real’, in this regard, is the moment of failure of symbolization, that which is left behind when all interpretation is over. So too for postmodernists: the ‘real’ is that which breaks through the curtain of words and narratives to overwhelm us with its disruptive potency. What might seem to be an empty space is actually full to overflowing with contradictory and dangerously arbitrary impulses, producing in people both the dread of being sucked into something uncontrollable, and the excitement of encountering the life and energy of highly stimulating and irrational experience. The most significant feature of this aspect of postmodernism is its overwhelming immediacy: no space is allowed for rational scrutiny and doubt, or for the symbolizing process of putting experience into words. It is, therefore, to the insufficiency of language that this insight of postmodernism attests – the way something always slips out from the margins of what is symbolized, something left behind yet with the power to excite and destroy.

**Psychotherapy under postmodernism**

What are the implications of this material for theory and practice in psychotherapy, particularly family therapy? As described earlier, those therapists calling themselves ‘postmodern’ have focused mainly on the constitutive or performative nature of language – how language creates its speakers, positioning people as subjects in relation to one another, and to something over and above themselves. Postmodern
therapists emphasize 'polyvocality': the way every meaning space is full of multiple voices, all chattering away in contradiction and disparity, and sometimes in conflict. 'Making sense' in the sense of finding the real meaning, the 'truth', gives way to a 'restorying' enterprise, a means of enabling articulation of suppressed or subjugated discourses so that the actual polyvocality of the modern environment can be more fully experienced and entertained. Instead of making what they see as the modernist error of searching for the absolute truth residing in any one story, these therapists recognize that the complexity of the world is such that there are many alternative stories that might hold meaning; more forcefully, it is only in the act of constructing a story that meaning comes into operation at all.

But does this language-centred approach to therapy really deserve the title 'postmodernist'? For one thing, there is a partial essentialism operating within it which to some extent undermines the polyvocalsits' claims to postmodernist status. Creating polyvocality is often presented as a stage towards selection of an alternative narrative from that which is presented by the individual client or family as the source of their distress. So the problem is 'reframed'; the problem-saturated universe is undermined through 'externalization'; or the suppressed voice of the other is allowed its turn to speak. Implicit in this procedure is the idea of selection and of some capacity to make choices. What this implies is that there exists a faculty, in the family or in the therapist or in the system which they create together, that can stand outside the flow of voices and choose between the narratives which they construct. This faculty is an essentialist one in the sense that it is not itself created by the narrative process (it is not produced by the stories, but stands in judgement over them) and it is also rational in that it possesses an interpretive capacity (it can appreciate the meaning of the narratives); it consequently restores the hierarchy of insight and truth.

From within the domain of postmodernism it seems unlikely that a therapeutically rational appraisal of alternative renderings of personal experience can be sustained. The personal and political optimism implicit in modernism, despite its dire analyses of the contemporary condition, is that each one of us has the potential to take hold of our lives, as ethical if not necessarily as political beings. We can make some kind of choice, become some kind of self. Postmodernism is not pessimistic in tone; indeed, some of its success as an intellectual and artistic movement has been due to its exuberance and playful passion.
But it does not recognize the executive faculty implied by modernism: no truths reside below the surface of these bubbling voices, no detective can unlock the clues to find the real murderer. Everything is bound up together, all positions are provisional, slipping away as we hunt for them. Hence the borderline status of Finnegans Wake: there is no beginning and no end, the washerwomen turn into tree and stone as night falls, flow of their words flowing into the river. Postmodernism might indeed leave people with alternative narratives that make their accounts of experience more provisional, or with a disrupted relationship to what they previously experienced as 'true'. But the promises of a better narrative, a more constructive way of being, or a fuller and more developed self are not available under postmodern conditions.

To leave things at this point is probably too nihilistic to bear consideration, as well as being unfair to the complexity of psychotherapeutic positions calling themselves postmodernist. I want, instead, to return to the tension outlined earlier in this paper – between the attempt to appropriate the Other and the capability of recognizing it, of identifying with it and admiring it. In her description of what it means to her to be a 'Postmodern Family Therapist', Hoffman (1993; p. 142) quotes the following aphorism from Steve Wright: 'I have a seashell collection. I keep it scattered on beaches all over the world.' Žižek's (1991a; p. 80) counter-example is the well-known joke about a psychiatrist to whom a patient complains that there is a crocodile under his bed. The psychiatrist tries to convince the patient that this is just a hallucination, that in reality there is no crocodile under his bed. At the next session, the man persists in his complaint and the psychiatrist continues his efforts at persuasion. When the man does not come for the third session, the psychiatrist is convinced that the man has been cured. Some time later upon meeting one of the man's friends, the psychiatrist asks him how his former patient is doing; the friend replies: 'Whom do you mean exactly? The one who was eaten by a crocodile?'

It is not enough to be content with storying or restorying: the crocodile's bite still hurts, whatever construction one places upon it. But for me the important contrast between these two stories – the seashells and the crocodile – lies in the relative capacity for imagination and identification that they reveal. Assuming, perhaps unwarrantedly, that Steve Wright does not believe himself to be God, his 'seashell collection' becomes not something which he owns, but something which he admires – which he recognizes in all its manifestations, scattered around the world. He can be part of this,
acknowledging its beauty and pathos, satisfied that it is not really his ‘collection’, not in his power. The psychiatrist, on the other hand, takes rather too much control of the truth and consequently misses the point – although his patient, to his cost, does not.

Too much should not be made of this. It would be contrary both to postmodernism’s ebullience and to its pessimism to rest content with a therapeutic approach based solely on admiring what exists. Sometimes the primacy of polyvocality does seem to reduce to this: allow everything to be said and, through being acknowledged, people will feel differently about themselves and their lives. Appreciation of the complexity of postmodernism, its playfulness and verve combined with its evocation of anxiety, leads in a slightly different direction. This is towards encounters that open up a space for multiple identifications in which the subject enters into possible engagements with other ways of being. Actively becoming one with the other – as Freud does in his analytic explorations of his own dreams, or perhaps as does Shakespeare (who, according to Žižek, had ‘beyond any doubt’ read Lacan) – demands both a recognition of difference and an attempt to uncover the way ‘otherness’ (that which might ordinarily be repudiated) resides within oneself. It is this imaginative identification that might span the wilderness between masculine and feminine, Freud and hysteric, self and other. When psychotherapy tries to appropriate the other – to make things rational and find the ‘truth’ – it is engaged in a colonizing enterprise which has more to do with control than with movement. When, conversely, it restricts itself to letting the other speak, it avoids confronting the anxiety generated by real experience under the conditions of modernity. Psychotherapy under postmodernism needs to go beyond each of these alternatives.

Postmodernism is not, in this reading of things, a licence for superficiality, nor is it an invitation towards endless ‘restorying’; it is rather an argument that all the words in the world can serve only to keep us apart, misperceiving each other in our narratives and storylines. Consequently, it is words which are, literally, superficial. Becoming one with the other, identifying with the symptom – ‘enjoying’ the symptom in the sense of actively engaging with the other’s existence – this is what is made possible by postmodernism’s recognition of the arbitrariness of who we are and how we come to be.

But let us, finally, think through the implications of this rendering of postmodernism for supposedly postmodernist therapy. I have argued throughout this paper that when therapists call themselves ‘postmodern’, they seem mainly to be referring to their focus on
language, often from within a social constructionist framework, and their concern to reduce or at least make obvious the asymmetries of power present in traditional therapeutic interactions. Both are laudable enterprises and they are clearly linked to aspects of the postmodernist vision. But the focus both on language and on egalitarianism are also aspects of modernism, itself defined in part by an awareness of the breakdown of received wisdom and an emphasis on the democratizing consequences of the valorization of reason. As rationality is pushed to the fore, so truth becomes defined in terms of argument and democratic judgement. Where postmodernism takes matters on further is in its deconstruction of reason – its analysis of how irrationality is a crucial element in the coding of experience. So, postmodernism shows how it is no longer possible to regard language as transparent; rather, it is imbued with passion and its rhetoric is part of its meaning. Again, reason itself is seen not to be some essentialist element in the mind, but a construction which has effects – such as the marginalization of women and non-Western groups, the repression of emotion and the denial of the significance of the body. At its most general, however, as the crocodile and the seashell jokes both imply, postmodernism – despite all its emphasis on language – is concerned with those moments when language breaks down and the Real breaks through.

I am suggesting that so-called ‘postmodernist therapies’ are not really postmodernist at all, but are, rather, modernist, with a heightened awareness of the slippery nature of ‘truth’ and of the dangers of abusive uses of power in the service of, for example, sexism and racism. This awareness is taken from postmodernism, but that does not make the approach itself postmodernist. However, I am also suggesting that the inability of psychotherapy to keep up with the times may not be a failure of therapy itself. Rather, the attempt of therapists to claim postmodernist status may represent a failure in our ability to stay with what we know. In this context, what we know is that it is generally helpful to make the best sense we can of our experience and to try to imagine alternatives. What, in contrast, might it mean to emphasize, in postmodern mode, the irrational components in therapy over the rationalist enterprise of finding words to express things? What could it be like to ‘identify with the symptom’ in the context of therapeutic work, or to constantly push for the breakdown of language? Psychotherapy as a verbal procedure – the clichéd talking cure – is concerned with ways of symbolizing experience, of making new metaphors to deal with the breakdowns of
symbolization with which, as therapists, we are faced. We might recognize the power of the postmodernist critique of this position – the dangers of ignoring the crocodile’s existence – but if we are to avoid the kind of psychotic celebration of irrationalism advocated by some postmodernists, we have to keep on trying to help people live as if meaning can survive.

References


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