

Theodor Reik: Memory and Appreciation

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Jorge Luis Borges (1998) echoes psychoanalytic insight when he writes, *...both forgetfulness and recollection are creative* (p. 386). My memories, as well, are subject to the same fate – despite my conviction that my internal images truly reflect the experiences of a young psychoanalytic student who, with his classmates, took the last course Theodor Reik taught at the Institute he founded, the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis.

We were welcomed, for our first class, into an office on the upper west side of New York – a plain office, white walled, with many book cases and even more pictures, mostly of Freud, but some of Reik's family and some of the noted personages he had met. His thick-framed glasses focused my attention; I noticed what I could only describe as his interested eyes. As I sat on the fold-up chairs he had ready, I registered, to my surprise, that he was wearing a white medical coat, behind which his thin frame betrayed his age and physical condition.

His manner was genial; he asked, as best I recall, that the students present issues on the cases they were treating. But it soon became evident that such a didactic procedure was subordinate to his memories – memories

of Vienna, of Freud, of the Princess Maria Bonaparte. That such memories would intrude on his case comments was not just a function of his age; anyone familiar with Reik's writings would know that such a free associative process was his tool for hearing the unconscious. A few years before this class, I had read *Listening with the Third Ear* (1948) diligently; I usually got to my analyst's office about a half-hour before my session, that was my favorite reading time. Reik's relaxed confidence that the unconscious could be heard only when one lets go of a conscious investigation, his conviction that a complicated metapsychological description of psychic functions was more a hindrance than a help, and his enticing invitation to take note of the smallest remnant of a patient's offerings struck me then, as they do now, as basic to any psychoanalytic enterprise. What I quickly concluded was that there was no cold, neutral analyst here. Genial with both his students and his patients, Reik represented to me the best of European, or should I say Viennese, graciousness and civility; a graciousness that did not seem to be the standard in the New York analytic world of the 1960s. It has taken the analytic world forty years to catch up with him, with little acknowledgement from all the *new schools* teaching the importance of an analyst's human contributions. Forgetfulness, sadly, is a more effective weapon than a sword.

Psychoanalytic uncovering of what one forgets, of what one may have turned one's eyes away from, of what haunts one's actions and one's dreams makes us humble and is a good counter-point, Reik reminds us, to the narcissism of the conscious self. For Reik, technique was subordinate, for both analyst and patient, to the surprise of such discoveries. Technique, as it was taught in the 60s, was highly regulated and circumscribed by a powerful professional superego – neutrality and abstinence were its hallmarks; consequently, Reik's approach, as well as his remembrances of Freud, came as something of a shock to us students. On one occasion, I recall him advising a student that if a young woman who may have suffered from depression came into one's office in bright fine attire, the analyst should comment and compliment her. Was this European charm? Was this supplying a possible developmental need? Perhaps both. But it was shocking to us then – it no longer is.

The one story Reik conveyed that I remember vividly, and which I have repeated many times, was of his chance encounter with *the professor* – crossing a street in Vienna. Reik related that it was a chance meeting, around noontime and Freud was clearly hurrying. When asked why the rush, Freud responded that he had a patient who was returning from a trip and he always brought Freud a present; Freud was scurrying to buy a gift to give him in

return! No comment – but in the 60s and beyond it was clear how the Berlin school had influenced psychoanalytic practice in America. Self-aware technical correctness was not and is not the framework by which Freud created psychoanalysis. Despite some of his “Recommendations to Physicians Practicing Psychoanalysis” (1958), one has only to read the writings of HD and her remembrances of Freud to confirm this very human story of Reik’s.

There were other memories Reik shared with us, some had to do with the Princess Maria Bonaparte, some seemingly unconnected with what the class was discussing – as if memory was claiming him. While I now work within a much narrower notion of the unconscious than Reik espoused, his sensitivity to how we hear and respond to the unconscious is still with me. Reik ends *Listening with the Third Ear* with a chapter entitled “The Courage Not to Understand,” anticipating again, an analysis of clinical interaction that Francois Roustang (1982/1983), fifty years after Reik, has discussed.

Before Reik’s course ended, a few of us asked if we could bring in a photographer for a class picture as well as for individual ones. Reik agreed. He had a picture on his desk of Freud at his desk – we asked if we could photograph that also. Reik was more than willing and he signed each picture with a personal inscription to each student. And so, on my wall, next to my

various professional plaques, there are three pictures that I look at daily: one of Freud at his desk, one of the young student analyst I was, sitting next to Reik, and one of him alone...looking at me all these years above his shaken signature.

I have wondered why, although we might, I suspect, differ somewhat in how we practice psychoanalysis, I have kept his pictures so close to my daily functioning. The answer came to me as I paged through his text in preparation for this short tribute, a text that I had valued so highly in my studies, and it came on its last page. Reik wrote of the oncoming generation of psychoanalysts...of those who were already on the scene and how they represented its future. And then, echoing Freud's words to him when they parted for the last time, he wrote: *We do not know them, but we feel close to them. People need not be glued together when they belong together* (p. 514).

Analysts need not be glued together ideologically either – that's the work, all too often, of religious organizations. If we belong together, we can reach for the civility, graciousness and good manners that are the ingredients of any community. With those givens, theoretical and practical disagreements can and must flourish – but as possible advances in science rather than personal triumphs. I am well aware that Freud himself was not always

capable of such an approach to those who disagreed with him; Reik did not respond to those who disagreed with him in the same manner.

The course ended and we had our photographs and our memories; thirty-five years later I have decided to reread *Listening with the Third Ear* – confident that there is more that Reik can teach me.

References

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