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Holding the Frame/Playing the Game: Transference as Political Potentiality

William Mazzarella

If you know Sigmund Freud's book *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), you will probably remember his story about the modern authoritarian leader as a return of the primal father. This is the primal father who was overthrown and killed by his sons, a killing that sets the stage for the invention of law. The killing also establishes the perpetual guilt that from then on keeps the survivors tied to that law—tied more tightly, more insidiously, than they ever were to the living father. The primal father, says Freud, was the original 'superman.' His authority was total, and would brook no autonomy among his sons. He was everything; his people were nothing. What survives of him after the killing is a potent but disavowed charisma of violence that continues to cling to the law.

All this is well known, and was already well known to readers of Freud when *Group Psychology* was published, since that part of the story was really just a rehash from Freud's earlier work *Totem and Taboo* (1913). What is less well remembered is that Freud theorized authoritarian leaders not only as regressive repetitions of the one primal father, but also as revenants of "the first epic poet" (1959 [1921], p. 87)—which is to say the later man who, first among equals, decided to set himself up as the people's leader. By calling him the first epic poet, Freud is suggesting that the leader doesn't just establish patriarchal dominion; he creates a world. More precisely, the leader performs the fetish trick: he makes us

attribute our own world-making powers to him, and credit him with what we have in fact made together. For Freud the leader is, then, at once a throwback and a visionary. He is the occasion for both a massive collective regression and a tremendous collective poesis. He is also, we might say, the occasion for the invention of transference. More on that in a moment.

Freud's story about a long-ago parricide is of course not to be taken literally. The murdered body that haunts democracy may better be understood as what Eric Santner (2011) has called *the royal remains*: an uncanny and unquiet mobile mattering that permeates social life precisely because the sovereignty of the people has no corporeal location, no form of its own. Popular sovereignty is social energy constantly casting around for a body. This is why the leader's body moves so readily into the frame of feeling, giving human shape to this mobile mattering. And this is why the leader's body becomes such a disproportionately fascinating object for both followers and critics. At one level, the modern tyrant is a royal revival—the reincarnation of the excarnated flesh of the king that once was. But at another level, even the erstwhile body of the king was itself only ever a more or less stable ritual placeholder for this restless mattering.

This mobile mattering is not just a feature of authoritarian or exceptional times. Rather it is the stuff that always, in every polity, makes the difference between mere meaning and *meaning that matters* (Mazzarella 2017). It is the substance of charisma, of gravitas as well as of renewal. Of world making images, projects, ideals, movements. This is a fundamental point, then: that the stuff that fires up the authoritarian glow is also what powers the enthusiasms that we like to like. And it is what persists as a founding echo in the law, from where it is always ready to erupt into turmoil again. Freud describes this as an inescapable atavism, a hovering regression: "Just as primitive man survives potentially in every individual, so the primal horde may arise once more out of any random collection" (Freud 1959 [1921], p. 70). But what if

we were to understand this potentiality not as a throwback, not as a regression to a primal or infantile state, but rather as something inherent and dynamic in the relation between the form and force of the social?

What really seems to trouble Freud in *Group Psychology* is the way that the crowd theorists of his time—people like Gustave Le Bon, William McDougall and so on—blithely write about the intense energetics of crowds as if words like *suggestion* and *contagion* explained anything. The way that crowds seem so terribly ready to surrender to a charismatic leader. The shocking violence of which mobs are capable. The way a single image or sound or word can travel like wildfire through a mass of people, turning their attention and their power in a single direction, *just like that* (Mazzarella 2010). The frightening ease with which yesterday's rational and skeptical neighbor might suddenly start spouting the most outlandish, feverish garbage. What's going on there? Freud asked. What makes that possible?

His answer was that it's all about regression. Crowd frenzy is a reawakening of primal attachments. The truth of these primal attachments cannot, Freud argued, be faced directly. It's too shattering. This is where the leader steps in. As a 'new edition' of the primal father, the leader at once *embodies and mediates* the unthinkable yet potent primal thing: "Even Moses had to act as an intermediary," Freud remarks, "between his people and Jehovah, since the people could not support the sight of God; and when he returned from the presence of God *his face shone*" (Freud 1959 [1921], p. 74; my emphasis).

The power of the leader comes not only from their ability to channel the unspeakable back into a socially palatable form. By being the *one* leader, he also prevents the peoples' identification with each other from becoming murderous. This is a stark theme that recurs in the Freudian tradition: that pure identification has to be mediated by a third term—be it law, language, an analytic third space—in order not to end in universal cannibalism. In order

not to *eat* each other out of radically mutual identification, the people need the leader as a shared external point of identification. Freud writes: "Identification, in fact, is ambivalent from the very first; it can turn into an expression of tenderness as easily as into a wish for someone's removal […] The cannibal, as we know, has remained at this standpoint; he has a devouring affection for his enemies and only devours people of whom he is fond" (*ibid.*, p. 47). Of course at one level this is just quasi-anthropological hyperbole. But it does contain a provocation worth considering: that it is only when the mobile matter of social life can be channeled into third terms—leaders, totems, charged-up signifiers of whatever stripe—that the restless, shape-shifting substance of life can take on the relative stability of love, instead of consuming itself in a frenzy of fighting and fucking.

From a liberal standpoint, the trouble with authoritarianism isn't just that leaders exercise their power in arbitrary ways. It's also that it retards political maturity on the part of citizens. If the authoritarian leader is like a sky-filling father, then the citizen here becomes entirely infantile, crushed into the ground, unable to exercise or even develop their human capacity for autonomous judgment. Consider the absolute importance, to the liberal imagination, of agentive self-determination as the mark of citizenship. In my life as a consumer, I may coyly, even charmingly, admit to having been seduced and overcome by a gorgeous piece of clothing—*I just had to have it*. A guilty pleasure, and I am all the more touchingly human for it. But allowing oneself to be seduced and overcome in the realm of politics is always an embarrassing failure (Mazzarella 2020). There is no ethically admissible guilty pleasure in politics. Seduction in politics is regressive; it means you're weak and suggestible, like a child.

Suggestion, writes Freud in the 1880s, is "a conscious idea, which has been introduced into the brain of the hypnotized person by an external person and has been accepted by him as though it had arisen spontaneously" (Freud 1963 [1888], p. 30). Suggestion

is insidious, since I think I'm thinking and acting autonomously when actually I am being heteronomously manipulated. Marxists would later call this situation *false consciousness*, without much deepening our sense of its psychic dynamics. And in the age of Trump and other melodramatic masculinists all over the world, many continue to ask the question once posed by Thomas Frank: *What's the matter with Kansas?* Apparently right wing talk radio is planting ideas in peoples' heads that can then appear as spontaneous common sense. Curiously, this is love too, because love, for Freud, inherently involves a loss of critical judgment. But whereas the love of the law, the love of stable institutions, is a sublimated love, a higher love, the love that paves the way for suggestion is entirely desublimated, the love of infantile regression.

Ostensibly the choice is pretty simple, as well as heavily moralized: be an adult or be a child. Grow up or regress. Sublimate your eros or give way to whatever floods your primal scene. At that level it sounds like a problem of psychic weatherproofing: build your walls firm and strong, plug your ears tightly enough, and you'll be OK. But here, the psychoanalytic tradition also opens up a more complex and more interesting question.

It's true that at one level there's always this concern about undue influence, whether it's the analyst implanting false memories or the authoritarian leader authorizing racist fantasies. But the analyst also knows that it's only because I am *addressable*, it's only because something in me can be activated, can come alive in the presence of certain images and words, that I can be healed. As long as we speak of *suggestibility*, it's as if the image is simply one of holding the line against manipulation. But if we pose the problem in terms of *addressability*, then right away things look more ambiguous. Ideology theorists have not thought about this enough. We may, with Louis Althusser, speak of being hailed, of being interpellated in and by ideology. But how far have we come in figuring out why this image or word or gesture rather than that one actually *addresses* me, causing me to turn around and

assume my subjectivity? Here again, it's not so easy to sort the matter of demons from the substance of angels. My addressability is the matrix of my susceptibility to eros—whether interpersonal or political. As Jacques Lacan once pointedly asked, on behalf of all those analysts who had been made to feel that they were supposed to deliver only gentle news in this department: "Is it our job to disguise Eros, the black God, as the Good Shepherd's curly-haired sheep?" (Lacan 2007 [1958], p. 507)

Psychoanalysis calls my erotic matrix my capacity for transference. The point about transference is that it's where I repeat myself in my libidinal relations with others, but also, and for the same reason, where those patterns can not only be re-enacted but also, in the clinic, transformed. Freud lays it out clearly:

> every human being has acquired, by the combined operation of inherent disposition and of external influences in childhood, *a special individuality in the exercise of his capacity to love*—that is, in the conditions which he sets up for loving, in the impulses he gratifies by it, and in the aims he sets out to achieve in it. This forms *a cliché or stereotype in him*, so to speak (or even several), which perpetually repeats and reproduces itself as life goes on, in so far as external circumstances and the nature of the accessible love-objects permit, and is indeed itself to some extent modifiable by later impressions (Freud 1963 [1912], p. 105; my emphasis).

To reduce the problem of political authority to slavish suggestibility, then, is to avoid the more unsettling problem of the *special individuality in the exercise of our capacity to love*—which is to say our transferential addressability. As Freud himself writes in 1912, it only makes sense to speak of suggestion if by suggestion we understand the "influence on a person through and by means of the transference-manifestations of which he is capable" (*ibid.*, p. 112). Sándor Ferenczi would add: "there is no such thing as a 'hypnotising,' a 'giving of ideas' in the sense of psychically incorporating something quite foreign from without, but only

procedures that are able to set going unconscious, pre-existing, auto-suggestive mechanisms" (Ferenczi 1994 [1909], pp. 84–85).

Reading these words, one sees why Freud's nephew, Edward Bernays, was so very keen to translate his uncle's insights into marketing magic. And one can understand Freud's well-known distaste at the idea. But there's a problem here that goes deeper than any fastidious reluctance to sell out. Freud presumed that the instrumentalization of psychoanalysis, whether in the service of states or corporations, would lead it right back into the domain of pure suggestion. This, he mused, would be the price of any mass extension of its techniques. Speculating in 1919 on the possibility of a future mass psychoanalysis, he writes that such a public extension of therapy would "compel us to alloy the pure gold of analysis with the copper of direct suggestion; and even hypnotic influence might find a place in it again, as it has in the treatment of war-neuroses" (Freud 1963 [1919], p. 190).

This, then, is also where the Freudian theory of authoritarian leadership and crowd submission is weak. In theorizing the leader and the crowd, Freud ignores his own best insight. Because if there is an erotic matrix for individuals that comes alive, that opens up in transference, then surely something like that also happens at a public level. How is it that when it comes to the public sphere, suggestion is suddenly "direct" again, as if the old, melodramatic specter of mind control had a kind of plausibility when it came to mass publicity that it had long since lost in the clinic? If transference in the clinic has the power to trouble any neat distinction between doer and done-to, as Jessica Benjamin puts it, then how is this not also the case in its public, political registers?

Mainstream political theory remains entirely caught up in the normative assumption that good, responsible citizenship means thinking for yourself, acting autonomously, reaching your own mature judgments. But if any kind of social engagement that has even a little bit of enthusiasm in it—a little bit of eros—is relational and grounded in transference, then what does that mean for the

assumption of the citizen's normative autonomy? When it comes to citizenship, we seem to have no sense that in the world of politics there could be a stance other than freedom or submission. Or better, although we recognize that things are never so simple, it's as if, in our analyses of any given phenomenon, we want to place it along a spectrum where freedom is at one end and submission is at the other. Or if we find evidence of submission in one area of social life, then sustaining political hope means scurrying around trying to find evidence of freedom in another. Although many of our most cherished liberal ideals are of egalitarian intersubjective process, our models for what this might look like remain premised on individual subjects arguing with each other from within more or less fortified positions: Habermasian communicative reason or something like it. Is there a way that we can remain 'realistic' about power relations while at the same time theorizing political relations as a question of addressability (as opposed to agency) and what it may yield—good and bad?

Remember how Freud characterizes the leader as not only a return of the primal father but also as the world-making first epic poet? I'm interested in how the transferential relationship has this poetic capacity, this world-making potential. Or rather, perhaps I should say world-*disclosing* potential. Drawing on the Kleinian object relations tradition in psychoanalysis, Betty Joseph (1985) argues that what emerges in transference is not just the patient's pattern of love, as it were, but much more than that: what emerges is a whole *scene* of attractions, aversions, and attachments, nothing short of a "total situation." A kind of psychic living space, a virtual dwelling in which every piece of furniture, every knickknack is a clue in the rebus of my addressability.

I use the word *scene* deliberately, because I think there's something interestingly theatrical about the transference situation. Not just because it's a re/enactment. Also because the relation is a kind of *true fiction*. It's as if the analyst silently says to the patient: *I know very well that I am not really your object of desire,*

but nevertheless, if I sustain the play of this transference without 'playing into it,' the real enactment of your love can have real transformative effects. We could perhaps extend this scenario to the public field, and imagine the citizen silently replying to the leader: *I know very well that you are not really the object of my desire, but nevertheless, insofar as you stand in for it, I can really live and thrive in the scene of my love.* Thinking about it this way has the added benefit of not having to go round in circles about whether people 'really believe' in the leader or not, or about how they could possibly be so naïve or so blind or so racist as to be deceived by their leaders, etc. (Mazzarella 2015).

The big difference between the clinical and the political scenes, of course, is the ethical position required of, respectively, the analyst and the leader. The analyst has to undergo a kind of askesis, a sort of labour of renunciation. The analyst must not refuse the transference; at the same time, they must not be drawn into it. Many a leader, on the other hand, will—consciously or unconsciously—feel the tremendous power and potential of the transference, and will have few scruples about playing into it. But to blame the leader for what might happen to us in this exploitative situation is surely to fail to take responsibility for the effects of our own response-ability. Again, this is another reason why manipulation models of authoritarian leadership are so unhelpful. Either we believe that suggestion without transference is possible or we acknowledge that political maturity means taking responsibility for the transferences that are activated in public life. And that requires a different kind of political work, a work that is at once public and intimate.

Perhaps we could connect Freudian thinking on transference with Walter Benjamin's messianic-revolutionary historiography. In the Freudian tradition, the loose affect that hovers around a repressed conflict flares up in the transference and seizes on the person of the analyst, just as the royal remains might seize on the body of a new leader. A short-circuit occurs between the

past and the present, activating and intensifying both of them in unpredictable ways. Similarly, for Benjamin, potentials embedded in the past flash up into the present, through a kind of wormhole in time, with revolutionary or catastrophic consequences. These are often moments of intense collective political activation, when crowds stream into public spaces, take over streets, and perplex liberal commentators with the intensity and apparent aimlessness of their affect.

Consider how, in Ferenczi's description of transference, there is an initially puzzling affective disproportion. The analyst, Ferenczi writes, "becomes convinced that the apparently motiveless extravagance of affect, the excessive hate, love and sympathy of neurotics, are also nothing else than transferences, by means of which long forgotten psychical experiences are (in the unconscious phantasy) brought into connection with the current occasion, and the current reaction exaggerated by the affect of unconscious ideational impulses" (Ferenczi 1994 [1909], p. 36). An archive is activated, powerfully, disturbingly, perhaps transformatively. In these moments all bets are off. The distance between repetition and renewal has never been shorter.

In the orthodox psychoanalytic view, it's the conflicts arising from our first object choices—our Oedipal situation—that fuel later transferences. Later object relations theorists expanded the scenario, such that each of us is understood to have assembled a complex psychic scene that includes not just the first conflicts, but also subsequent layers of introjection: objects that we invest with our desire and then absorb into ourselves, installing them in vital and yet often troubling locations amid the furnishing of our inner worlds. Again, if we're thinking about how all this might be expanded into a social or political analysis, it's not a stretch to imagine that persistent social conflicts, conflicts that are 'structural' if seen from a social science standpoint, also shape the layout of our capacities for desire, attachment, and aversion in the world. And if the transference that is activated in the therapist's office

tends to disclose a "total situation" that is markedly domestic in character, a scene in which Mama and Papa tower like giants, then perhaps the "total situation" disclosed by political transference might make other investments and conflicts visible.

But there's something else to think about here as well. In Freud's story the resolution of the Oedipal conflict basically means that desire becomes fungible. This is what parents are supposed to do for their children to help them grow up: parents are supposed to use the children's love for them to convince the children that in order to function in the world they will have to love others. They will have to accept substitutes. They will, in other words, have to become capable of transference. *I know very well that you are not my father/mother, and yet nevertheless…* But in truth, what we're talking about here is more than substitution, regression, or re-enactment. Transference is more than a repetition; rather, it brings into the disenchanted present animated elements of early experience. Not because those elements are inherently numinous, but because they were once absorbed through a child's senses: haptically, mimetically. "New inventions," writes Susan Buck-Morss in her magnificent meditation on Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, "conceived out of the fantasy of one generation, are received within the childhood experience of another" (Buck-Morss 1995 [1989], p. 273). Benjamin observes: "A generation's experience of youth has much in common with the experience of dreams. Its historical configuration is a dream configuration. Every epoch has such a side turned toward dreams, the child's side" (Benjamin 1999, p. 388).

Considering the way that liberal political theory tends to frame any kind of surrender as childish, and therefore as a failure of citizenship, Benjamin's political redemption of childhood experience is radical. For Benjamin, every generation carries the unchosen task of absorbing their parents' historical epoch in a mythical, mimetic mode and then carrying forward the potentials of that enchantment into their own disenchanted adulthood. The

task of childhood, Benjamin writes in the 1930s, is "to bring the new world into symbolic space. The child, in fact, can do what the grown-up absolutely cannot: recognize the new once again. For us, locomotives already have symbolic character because we met with them in childhood. Our children, however, will find this in automobiles, of which we ourselves see only the new, elegant, modern, cheeky side. […] Every childhood discovers these new images in order to incorporate them into the image stock of humanity" (*ibid.*, p. 390).

Again, the reason this interests me here is because it opens up some reasons why thinking about transference could be productive in social theory. It's one thing to say that there's something numinous about the image of the primal father that seems to hover above every two-bit tyrant like a profane halo. But it's quite another to extend the question of transference to the social field more broadly, especially to consider the ways in which it animates the concrete forms of historical experience in ways that are at once highly intimate and undeniably collective. This would mean considering how every generation of adults carries the 'dream' or 'child's side of their parents' historical present into their own moment of maturity. Not just, as it were, the 'mythical' glow of this early experience, but also—thinking psychoanalytically—the attachments, conflicts, hopes, and humiliations that attach to those early epic scenes. And then turning the Benjaminian insight back onto the psychoanalytic literature, we would have to consider how the re-enactments of transference, indeed the 'total situations' of transferential scenes, are prepared by the uncanny enchanted/disenchanted doubling of historical experience.

There are tremendous creative potentials in these historical short circuits—as well as, of course, the potential to get locked into slavish repetitions when all that dream energy gets mapped onto new father figures. The point is that transference goes both ways. It can be the dead end of compulsive repetition and submission. But it's also the very principle of poesis. Peter Sloterdijk

makes an argument about the creative potential of transference that, crucially, paints it as both temporal repetition and as spatial expansion. For Sloterdijk, transference is, again, a question of a total situation, of a *scene*: "one must insist that transference is the formal source of the creative processes that inspire the exodus of human beings into the open. We do not so much transfer incorrigible affects onto unknown persons as early spatial experiences to new places, and primary movements onto remote locations" (Sloterdijk 2011 [1998], p. 12). Sloterdijk proceeds playfully to rework what Ludwig Wittgenstein famously said about language into a kind of transference credo: "The limits of my capacity for transference are the limits of my world" (*ibid.*, p. 13).

In the analytic situation, the analyst is the medium, the occasion of the patient's transference. Can we imagine a form of political leadership that would enable and encourage non-regressive transferences in a collective field? I expect that some will think this an irrelevant, perhaps a reactionary question. Do we even need leaders? I don't know. I do know that we have them, so perhaps it might be interesting to imagine how they could be otherwise. Ferenczi describes the role of the analyst as *catalytic*. A catalyst in chemistry is a substance that increases the rate of chemical reaction without itself undergoing permanent change. And one sees what he means. Even though Ferenczi advocated a 'warmer,' more involved stance on the part of the analyst than Freud did, the metaphor of catalysis underlines something crucial about the analytic situation that also applies to political leadership. A good leader, like a good analyst, must be capable of *holding the frame* without *playing the game*. 'Holding the frame'—I borrow the phrase from an essay by the analyst Jessica Benjamin (2004)—means providing and sustaining the ground or scene in which the transference can come alive.

But the *not playing the game* part is crucial too. In analysis this means that the analyst is conscious of their own countertransferences, and that they don't make the mistake of thinking,

for example, that they really are the true object of the patient's transference-love. A good leader, likewise, must not take the people's enthusiasm and love as a personal tribute, while also not discouraging or blocking the revolutionary energy it contains. To follow Thomas Ogden (2004) and Jessica Benjamin, the transformative potential of transference lies not in the potentially codependent and coercive dyad of the analyst and the patient, but rather in a collaborative "third," an unfolding to which they both must surrender. Similarly, in politics the authoritarian relation is rife with regressive identification and narcissistic mirroring, whereas openings to creative change depend on holding the frame of a third space, an imaginal opening in which leader and people are not constantly poised to psychically swallow each other.

Freud is very clear that holding the frame of transference requires a strict and, as it were, *active* renunciation on the part of the analyst. A renunciation for which nothing in ordinary life has prepared us. "It is […] just as disastrous for the analysis if the patient's craving for love prevails as if it is suppressed. The way the analyst must take is neither of these; it is one for which there is no prototype in real life" (Freud 1963 [1915], p. 174). The transformative force of holding the frame lies in the tenderness of its inhuman artifice. And in part, this tenderness requires refusal. Lacan wrote: "If I frustrate [the patient] it is because he is asking of me something. To answer him, in fact. But he knows very well that it would be but words. And he can get those from whomever he likes" (Lacan 2007 [1958], p. 515). Freud put it this way: "As far as his relations with the physician are concerned, the patient must have unfulfilled wishes in abundance. It is expedient [for the analyst] to deny him precisely those satisfactions which he desires most intensely and expresses most importunately" (Freud 1963 [1919], p. 187). Some complain, Lacan later notes, that the analyst is *only* frustrating, withholding. But the analyst's refusal to *play the game* is generative; it takes place "in order to allow the signifiers with which the [patient's] frustration is bound up

to reappear" (Lacan 2007 [1958], p. 516). What reappears may be signifiers, but they are lively, visceral ones. They amount, in Lacan's words, to "the here and now of an incarnated problematic" (*ibid.*, p. 512).

The fact that the scene of transference holds a fiction is what allows truth to appear in it. In a truly wonderful passage, Freud acknowledges the profound difficulty of this work but concludes that the play is necessary because, for demons to be overcome, the actor—or rather the signs by which his desire announces itself—must *really appear*: "It is undeniable that the subjugation of the transference-manifestations provides the greatest difficulties for the psychoanalyst; but it must not be forgotten that they, and they only, render the invaluable service of making the patient's buried and half-forgotten love-emotions actual and manifest; for in the last resort no one can be slain *in absentia* or *in effigie*" (Freud 1963 [1912], pp. 114-115). Again, the actor must *really appear*.

In analysis as in politics, then, there is an opportunity to *resist giving answers* for long enough that the urgent form of a desire becomes visible and, perhaps, tractable: again, the here and now of an incarnated problematic. In the authoritarian relation, by contrast, the underlying problematic is never addressed but constantly displaced—and thus incarnated in the most violent ways: in the bodies of others who must be injured or killed. Cornel West once observed that Donald Trump isn't charismatic, but he is cathartic. Josef Breuer, with whom Freud collaborated early on, used to call the method they were inventing 'cathartic,' whereas Freud came to prefer 'analytic.' Perhaps Freud already sensed the ambiguity of catharsis, its proximity to terrible violence. And why not catalysis, after all?

The authoritarian leader is the one who is ready with an answer before the question has even been asked. The one who cannot resist appearing as the revenant father or mother. The one who doesn't want to hold the frame, because who knows what might appear in it? Besides, there's just too much noise, too much

chatter in the public sphere today. Holding the frame means being able to be silent, and attentive to what silence may provoke. But silence is an impossibility in the contemporary media; dead air is its definition of dread. Silence appears only as the sign of emergency. What would happen if instead of the so-called news, we had two minutes of silence?

Consider the 2015-16 US presidential campaign of Senator Elizabeth Warren. For all her agility and intelligence on the stump, wasn't there something deeply oppressive about her catch phrase, *I have a plan for that*? Didn't it signal an anxious misunderstanding of what the moment required? As if, faced with the biggest bully ever to occupy the White House, the need of the hour was to hurtle ahead, problems and solutions already predefined, preplanned, predigested. Technocratic authority has its own way of covering its eyes and hurrying past the here and now of an incarnated problematic. But it's worth thinking a bit harder about what holding the frame—in analysis or in politics—might actually make possible.

In one common version of the story, psychotherapy is basically an extension of the project of Enlightenment. Which is to say it's the pedagogical project of making citizens capable of making their own choices. Mature, upstanding human beings, autonomous and self-reliant. As the analyst Thomas Szasz put it in the early 1960s, this is all about "the value of self-determination and responsibility, and the fact that, however difficult to achieve, non-coercive human relationships are possible" (Szasz 1963, p. 278). This all sounds very solid and impeccable. But everything hinges on what this non-coercion actually looks like.

From very early on, Freud's thinking about therapy was bound up with a pedagogical impulse. The analyst's job was to provide room for the transference; but the patient's job was to be educable. This, for example, was why at certain points Freud insisted that narcissists couldn't benefit from therapy, since their libido was all tied up in themselves and thus not available for

transference: "Observation shows that sufferers from narcissistic neuroses have no capacity for transference or only insufficient residues of it. They reject the doctor, not with hostility but with indifference" (Freud 1966 [1915-17], p. 556).

Despite the pedagogical impulse, this is a crucial thought: that the first barrier to transformation through transference is not resistance but indifference. A state in which no relation, including a relation of resistance, is activated. In which all kinds of words might be exchanged, and all kinds of prompts and provocations might be attempted, but in which there is no resonance, in which nothing comes alive, nothing new is in motion. The absence of eros. Two subjects confront each other, self-contained, speaking words that change nothing. And as Lacan observed, the demand for words requires no yielding; in general, it is simply the desire to be told what you already know. Meaning without affect; meaning that doesn't matter, except as evidence of a reassuring inscription. By contrast, holding the frame allows the "total situation" to appear as a space of open-ended enactment—as painful and as exciting as that can be. An enactment that is at least as much about entrainments, rhythms, and resonances that are not in the first instance grounded in language. As Jessica Benjamin puts it: thirdness—the scene that emerges out of the relation between analyst and patient—"begins with the early nonverbal experience of sharing a pattern, a dance, with another person" (Benjamin 2004, p. 16). The third space isn't just a project to be built out of nothing. It's a place to play with addressability. Benjamin elaborates: "we might say that the third is that to which we surrender, and thirdness is the intersubjective mental space that facilitates or results from surrender" (*ibid.*, p. 8). Surrender, following Emmanuel Ghent, is to be carefully distinguished from submission. And so, writes Benjamin: "Surrender implies freedom from any intent to control or coerce" (*ibid.*).

It's easy to roll one's eyes at terms like non-coercive intersubjectivity, especially when it comes to our political present. It can

sound starry-eyed and naïve. As if we really could just get down to talking to each other, taking each other into account, changing and being changed. As if there were not structural obstacles and injustices and inequalities that always already condition what counts as a recognizable body, a legitimate desire, a valid claim. As if it were just a matter of everyone agreeing to put down their weapons and re-entering the public sphere (and not just the analyst's office) with all good intentions. Yes of course, if that was all it was, none of this would make any difference. If that was the case, we would be right to be indifferent.

And yet of course we are not. We are not indifferent. We are profoundly invested, but often in ways that keep us locked into self-defeating patterns of enjoyment. *Cruel optimism*, Lauren Berlant calls it. Jessica Benjamin has some good things to say about the trap of dyadic relations, which she calls the 'complementary' structure. She's talking about intimate interpersonal relationships, but consider the way, for example, that Trump-lovers and Trump-haters are locked into a kind of codependent love-hate fascination with each other's sore spots. In analytic terms, this is how Benjamin describes the dynamic: "In the complementary structure, dependency becomes coercive; and indeed, coercive dependence that draws each into the orbit of the other's escalating reactivity is a salient characteristic of the impasse" (*ibid.*, p. 9). In this codependent frenzy, there appear to be only two available positions: either you are the doer, or you are the done to. Either you are acting or you are submitting. It's like Hegel's master-bondsman dialectic accelerated to the dizzying, flickering, sickening pitch of a whirling zoetrope. Each party to the dyad is pre-invested in the other as the place of their truth and their pain. And so it goes, round and round, compulsively playing the game as the desperation grows.

Holding the frame puts things on pause, slowing down the flicker, while at the same time not demanding that anyone *be reasonable*. In fact, the ethos of the transferential space is that there

is nothing *mature* or *composed* about it. For that reason, among many others, the liberal longing to return to a rational public sphere, to restore long-lost canons of civility, entirely misses the point and the opportunity of the present. Which is not the opportunity to remind anyone of a lesson they were supposed to have learned, but to make non-coercive room for the here and now of an incarnated problematic.

In that regard, the authoritarian gesture consists of offering the premature finality and false reassurance of an indubitable word, a master image, a deathless body—as if to say: don't worry, this is your foundation. This doesn't change. This doesn't go away. The impossible promise that parents make to their children. The allure of authoritarianism has deep roots, as Freud knew. Its promise seems to reactivate the very *first* promise, a promise made in gestures as much as in words. But it also stages the prospect of its own overcoming, just as—ideally—the parent is supposed to teach their child how to love another. Holding the frame rather than playing the game.

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