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Nanni Moretti

On Nanni Moretti's Movie "The Son's Room". A Discussion

We publish here the translations of three letters published by the German journal *Lettre International* (Berlin), as commentaries on the paper by Sergio Benvenuto, "Die Analyse ist vorbei. Nanni Moretti's neuer Film" (*Lettre International*, 55, Winter 2001, pp. 1-10). The English version of this paper – "The son's room' or: Analysis is over – "was published in the *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, n. 12-13, pp. 163-172.

"The Son's Room", or the Crisis in Psychoanalytic Criticism

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Like tennis, Freud-bashing has long been a popular sport that is not just limited to elite circles. Lately it's become a quasi-intellectual mass movement. One variety of this widespread sport is declaring the end of psychoanalysis. This is popular in the media, but it's also practiced in psychiatry, and in particular biological psychiatry. Of course philosophers have long been practicing this sport as well, although not always so obviously, as they normally prefer intellectual debate to denouncement. Psychoanalysis may be a particular challenge for philosophers, like Derrida, who says, "Let us not overlook psychoanalysis. There are many who would be only too happy to have us forget about psychoanalysis." Derrida sees the wish to forget about psychoanalysis as a reactionary movement, one that may want to eliminate the criticism of subjectivity and rationality by psychoanalysis, like what has happened to criticism on Marx and Nietzsche. Derrida doesn't overlook the lack of philosophical argumentation in psychoanalysis, and he, and others, have contributed to mend this fault. Psychoanalysis has been of prime importance for the evolution of his philosophical reasoning, and psychoanalysis has profited from Derrida, as deconstructionism owes much to psychoanalysis, at least to its Lacanian version. Psychoanalysis is further attacked from a seemingly progressive quarter; one that doesn't oppose the de-centering of the subject by psychoanalysis, but the loss of reality that psychoanalysis is prey to when it denies the impact of outer events through displacing the origin of psychic disorders into an inner world, or when guilt is looked for, not in a perpetrator, but in a victim. The concept of trauma was once an authentic psychoanalytic term that has, in recent years, been instrumentalized against psychoanalysis itself: trauma has become a key term to characterize the psychoanalytic neglect of the outer world, of social or gender-specific repression. And it is in this connection that we now turn to the paper by S. Benvenuto, "Die Analyse ist vorbei. Nanni Moretti's neuer Film"(1), to which the following pages are devoted.

Benvenuto takes Nanni Moretti's film *La Stanza del Figlio* as a departure point for his interment of psychoanalysis. Perhaps because the debate in *Lettre* has been waging all over Europe, it appears of exemplary importance to him. It's a film that won the *Palme d'Or* in Cannes this year, because, according to Benvenuto, it buries psychoanalysis. So because of all this publicity I must respond, particularly because the coffin it's buried in is empty.

What is his argument? Benvenuto tracks three thematic levels, which are interconnected. First there is the analysis of the film, then the analysis of psychoanalysis, and then the analysis of the human condition at the

end of the 20th century. These levels aren't just interlinked; they're also intertwined. He interprets the most concrete level as a metaphor of the abstract: the analyst in the film is a metaphor for psychoanalysis, and his abandoning his profession is an example of the death of psychoanalysis. For Benvenuto the end of psychoanalysis is also a metaphorical reference to the end of modern man, or at least to his crisis. Consequently my response examines his arguments within each level, as well as the soundness of their metaphoric interconnections. I shall deal with the thematic levels one by one, then consider Moretti's film itself, and then its interpretation according to Benvenuto.

The film presents the Sermonti family and their life before and after the sudden death of their son, Andrea, in a diving accident. Before his death, their family life had run smoothly and uneventfully, with only one hitch. Andrea was accused of having stolen a fossil from his school's museum collection. His father, Giovanni, was in the process of trying to prove his son's innocence, when Andrea unexpectedly confessed to his mother that he had in fact stolen the fossil. This doesn't seem like very much of a catastrophe though. Also before Andrea's death, Giovanni was a psychoanalyst, although he seems to my mind surprisingly speechless before his patients. He doesn't even flinch when he's accused and attacked by them, and thus he seems rather helpless. But we're only shown sequences that don't give us an idea of his therapeutic objectives, and we only know he's professionally qualified, so one can't really form an opinion of his competence. But even so, nobody is always excellent in his/her profession, Giovanni is "good enough" and that is all. Benvenuto refers us to this important concept introduced by D.W. Winnicott, that maintains that, if idealization can be excluded, there is no need for excellence; that one only needs to be "good enough" in the fulfillment of one's duties as a parent and in one's profession, which apparently means that this goes for Giovanni, as he's 'good enough'. The mother held a job before the accident, and the sister later on has an important role in the story, but neither has much to do before Andrea dies.

Then Andrea's fatal accident plunges the family into crisis. Now Giovanni can't continue to treat his patients and so he abandons his practice. The mother turns to Adriana, Andrea's girlfriend; Adriana turns up later with a new boyfriend, and when the two of them are hitchhiking to France, the family gives them a lift. After this Giovanni and his wife, who had been quarrelling, laugh together for the first time. Apparently having been faced with the helpless despair of her parents, the daughter had given up playing basketball; she's the only one who makes the effort to keep the family together, she's the only calm one and she maintains a grip on herself. Her completely disoriented parents have simply let themselves go. But the daughter's 'parentification' has its price. The end of the film is left open, as in the morning, down by the sea, after the hitchhikers have said their good-byes, each of the three family members takes a separate way along the shore.

I agree with Benvenuto when he says that part of the film's appeal lies in what has been left open, or in his words "hanging in the balance"(2). The film doesn't evaluate, or generalize, or conclude or judge, although it's not vague. It's clear the audience is meant to wonder about the family's destiny, as all possible variations remain plausible: the definite decline of the family, as much as the reinforcement of common interests, or the strengthening of familial bonds. The film sustains this insecurity while forcing the audience to move along with it. Even the camera is distant, albeit empathic, and here the film comes close to E. Rohmer's movies: enclosed, intimate action, the reaction to bereavement, and involvement with death and dying. Through this kind of "detached passion", and through confining the action to only the four family members, it becomes a criticism of the Dolby Surround hi-tech action films which mass-produce trauma, which use shock as if it could be a constant feature and introduce non-treatment as if it could be a kind of "norm," thereby further aiding the expansion of the so-called fellow-traveler insensibility.

Benvenuto's interpretations of details in the film invite critical comments, mainly because he doesn't explain just what he means. For example, he says of the analyst, "Our man consistently reacts ... just as one would expect an analyst to." Here it is not so important that we may doubt that his statement is correct, but that he tends to refer to undefined norms in making his arguments. This is even more problematic when he typifies reactions to the traumatic event by (mis-)using psychoanalytical concepts (it might be a misuse because psychoanalytic terms should help to describe individual dynamic processes, rather than psychopathological types). For example, he attributes to Giovanni a compulsive elaboration to his mourning, that deals solely with the past, such that Giovanni can only relive the moments of his son's drowning, which leaves no place

for any future. What is remarkable here is that Freud describes this kind of phenomenon as a normal component in the mourning process, visualizing the trauma to help master the affect. However, Benvenuto sees this only as pathology, possibly to direct this argument to his idea of metaphoric mourning. Benvenuto says, for example, of Giovanni, "He does what so many analysts do with their patients: he looks to the past and in so doing robs them of their future."⁽³⁾

In order to justify this typifying, or rather diagnostizing position, Benvenuto is forced to overlook some important details. Benvenuto says that Giovanni, as an obsessional type, can't occupy the future, which is why he can't bear to see his son's girlfriend with a new boyfriend. But if this is so, why does Giovanni drive around with the couple all night? Can this be merely an example of empty frenetic activity? And then, what about Giovanni's ride on the merry-go-round? Can this be that "as a reaction to his mourning, nothing better occurs to Giovanni than to look for an overcrowded fairground and allow himself to be bounced violently up and down in a wire 'cage' "? Can't this be better explained by panic, a kind in which we can recognize a search for his dead son? In the same way Benvenuto sacrifices the individuality of the sister. She's a "classical" phobic-reaction type, who identifies with her dead brother and is thus isolated from social life, which is why, he thinks, she gives up basketball. But, what about her scream in the beach cabin? Isn't it really to prevent her mother from seeing her tears, because she doesn't want to upset her mom? And how then can she be seen as not being socially aware? Also, at the end of the film, she goes with her parents, even though she wanted to stay home and play basketball. These examples are so numerous, because he has sacrificed these details in order to make his argument, which is norm-oriented and typifying, and not at all true to psychoanalysis.

Now for the levels of psychoanalytic criticism. The following arguments can be extracted from his text:

- 1) Psychoanalysis can only describe the pathology of mourning, but not "mourning in itself".
- 2) Psychoanalysis has no concept of external reality, all it examines is the intra-psychic origin of traumata, and gives no consideration to contingent events, which may be authentically traumatic.
- 3) Psychoanalysis is only concerned with the past. It would only take one good trauma to wake it out of this fixation with the past.
- 4) Psychoanalysis claims to hold a specific image of Man, the homo analyticus, as an ideal of modern Man; it defends a particular model of affective and social self-realization, which has now become obsolete. It does so in an underhanded way where, as negative psychology, it does not name its own ideal in a positive way, but it only denounces deviations from these ideals in a negative way. The ideal is obsolete mainly because pain and suffering are linked to something biographically meaningful. True bereavements are not taken into consideration.

We can easily settle the first of these objections, since it is bound up with the second. The charge that the process of mourning is given no attention is simply wrong. Just look at Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*, where he differentiates productive mourning from inhibiting mourning. This was a major contribution, and its importance is generally recognized. Even in relationship to trauma, mourning has not been neglected. Psychoanalysis is not, as Benvenuto seems to think, "dead silent" in respect to the mourning of trauma. But mourning is the result, not the starting point of coping with trauma. The main psychoanalytic trauma concepts all argue that the traumatized person has undergone an experience transcending his/her capacity to represent experience, to think or symbolize, therefore he/she cannot mourn. Mourning in the true sense of the word is dependent on the representation of memories, it evokes these representations—and these do not exist or cannot be activated.

This brings us to the second argument. Even though Freud shifted his interest from the external causation (e.g., seduction) to the intrapsychic dynamics, he never ignored external events. Freud differentiates externally imposed traumatization from seduction or abuse in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (), and this inexhaustible text is mainly concerned with the interpretation of trauma. And Freud didn't overlook the traumatization that originated with the First World War, in *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death* (1915). Psychoanalysis has dealt with the question of Nazi terror and the consequences of extreme

traumatization in concentration camps, not just in cases of those directly victimized, but also by tracing the effects on the second and third generations of the people persecuted.

Since this was a special achievement of psychoanalysis as a science, Benvenuto's reduction of psychoanalysis to a theory concerned only with the inner world is misleading. As I understand the field of psychoanalysis, the relation of reality to internal experience is considered complex; internal and external being interwoven in such a convoluted way that what is internal, the fantasies, fears and longings, have been developed as relational experiences; engrams are already mixed structures; the endogenous connections of needs to experiences of exogenous satisfactions (or frustrations) are all mixed up from the start. What is "external" is never just objective reality; it is also the shaping and the putting into perspective of this "external." (That what is not drawn into this perspective remains alien and strange, and as something which is really "other" may retain a special attraction of its own.) In the core of one's own individuality, identifications with important role models can be discovered, which demonstrates that experiences felt as originally "own" are the downpour of "object relations", the imprints stemming from experiences with others. Thus, what appears to be an irrefutable reality can be recognized as a consequence to a trauma that has completely filled the personal perspective and prefigured the world from horizon to horizon (I have coined the term "traumatic screen" to account for this, in analogy to B. Lewin's concept of dream screen). What is "real" therefore (and J. Lacan has conceptually differentiated it with particular clarity and made this differentiation the basis for his outlook on psychoanalysis) is neither to be identified with the imaginary, the inner world of image, nor with the symbolic, the varieties of speech and speech-analogous signs with which we relate to others. The real however is not without the images thereof and not without the symbolic universe that we were born into, just as the symbols refer to the "real" and just as the figurative creations of the imagination are bound to the conventionality of signs and the relation to the world of experience. This complex structure of interpenetration of reality, imagination and representation is manifest, *mutatis mutandis*, in all psychoanalytical conceptions.

In the third point of his criticism, Benvenuto refers to a very common cliché. His criticism runs as follows: of all three time levels, past, present and future, psychoanalysis is oriented solely to the past, just as he supposes Giovanni is oriented in the film. The reason why this criticism is a cliché is because it ignores a central element of psychoanalytical theory and technique which, although used and applied in many ways, has almost migrated to everyday psychology: the concept of transference. Indeed transference means that past and present are bound up with each other. The past as such is out of reach, but the unconscious storehouse of experiences that has been installed early in our life history is lived as if present. They cannot simply be narrated; they are produced by associations and through transference; they do not pre-exist! So the past cannot be known at all without being repeated in the present, nor can the past be worked through directly without its actualization in the present. Freud continued to stress the fact that one could strike at an opponent not as an effigy, but only in real presence. Psychic change can be initiated only where affects are active in the actuality of the therapeutic relationship. Psychoanalytic praxis does share this important thesis with Moretti's film: certainly, the future is not left out of account, but it is left open, not preformed in advance. What the analysand does with his analytic experience is left up to him, he is free to form or shape his future and, if all goes as it should, he may become more autonomous and less subjected to the repetition compulsion, after the end of analysis. Psychoanalysis aims at the future, but it does not colonize it.

Connected with this is a further characteristic of psychoanalysis, which leads us to the final point of the criticism. Psychoanalysis is in fact a negative psychology, at least in a certain sense: it is based on a critical theory of the subject; it investigates the forces that hinder the subject from leading an autonomous life, but psychoanalysis does not make any positive suggestions for a new design. It will detect meaning, sense and finality in symptoms, blockages or ailments which may appear sick or deviant to the subject himself or to his surroundings. Thus psychoanalysis is not negative in the sense that it only criticizes, or negative in the sense that it does not recognize the subject's capacities—quite the contrary. But it does reject an over-appreciation which could lead to a dethronement of the analysand: the analyst can do no more than offer his knowledge, experience and willingness to help the analysand arrive at an insight; as an analyst, he does not possess the competence to intervene in the way the analysand plans his life. The positivity of mapping out a design for

living is up to the analysand himself.

There can be no discussion about the third level of the criticism. The topic of the crisis of modern Man is not explained by Benvenuto at all; it is presented as if it were already widely understood and accepted. To some extent, however, it is still understandable, owing to the idea, familiar in philosophical debate, that certain ideologies no longer have a validity that is not open to contradiction, just as the "great narrations" (Lyotard) can no longer lay claim to general validity. But the conclusive comments are not suitable for discussion, as there is a lot one can think about this, but one can also leave it be:

But even when we have not lost a son we all disperse, bewildered, on the threshold of the new millennium that has come upon us -with only emptiness as our sole companion. There is no more Marx, no more Freud, neither revolution nor analysis, neither authenticity nor progress that we can turn to for comfort. We stand all alone facing an empty, and at the same time fascinating, menacing ocean, that not only holds out prospects for life, but also for death.

This personal avowal is not amenable to discourse, I am afraid.

So it only remains to look at the connections between all three levels. Benvenuto says the film is a metaphor for psychoanalysis, and psychoanalysis is a metaphor for the present condition humaine. And investigating this connection takes us to the central point of the criticism, and to the root of one of Benvenuto's misunderstandings about psychoanalysis as far as we can see. Since his is such a widespread misunderstanding, however, it may be worthwhile looking at it closely. Employing this three-level metaphor is treacherous since it is not so much a question of metaphor in the narrow sense (U. Eco tells us that, in the final analysis, a metaphor is based on the principle of infinite semiosis. If I present something as something, then I use an image to characterize a set of facts, which is created out of a universe of [speech] signs. One sign should illustrate, complete, visualize, etc. the other. Essential for this procedure is participation in a community of language, a symbolic order that will provide this store of signs, among which there are possible substitutions. In principle the metaphorizing process knows no limits, because one metaphor never fully characterizes the object concerned. One speech sign depends on other speech signs; it does not strive for reality [a fact] per se. This is why semiosis, the process of selecting metaphors, is infinite.) Now Benvenuto does not have this sort of referential relationship of signs in mind. The levels do not comment each other. They do not supplement one another, but they relate to each other hierarchically. And the graduations are made, as it were, upside down: the concrete level of the film does not enrich the more abstract levels (of psychoanalysis or of the condition humaine). On the contrary, the more concrete levels are treated as mere realizations of the more abstract or general levels. What he has found is not metaphor, but allegory, in the sense Goethe has used the term:

There is a great difference between whether the writer seeks the particular in order to generalize, or whether he sees the general in the particular. From the former allegory is derived, where the particular is no more than an instance, an example of the general; but the latter is the nature of poetry: it expresses a particular, without thought or reference to the general. Anyone who vividly understands this particular, understands the general along with it without realizing it at the time, or even later on.

In other words, Benvenuto must be doing violence to both the film and to psychoanalysis, as has been demonstrated. The violence lies in the typification: the detail, the particularity is pursued in the service of the general, to which the particular must be made to fit, or cut to size, in order to follow the general trend of his argument. In the first place, it is not a question of film criticism, nor is it really a question of psychoanalytic criticism, but actually a specific diagnosis of our day and age, a diagnosis Benvenuto does not substantiate. He has summoned both the film and the end of psychoanalysis as crown witnesses for a finding on the present day, but this he withholds from us. Psychoanalysis must come to an end because it does not fit in with present times. Its potential for criticism, its persistence towards the particular which unceasingly refuses to let itself be subordinated to the general, its insistence on the individual as well as its search for meaning where there no longer seems to be any: all this fails to fit in with the diagnosis of the collective emptiness Benvenuto speaks of. This diagnosis of emptiness can readily be exploited politically; it can serve as a

blueprint for all the economic and political monstrosities that can be rationalized by reference to such seemingly anthropological concepts. Benvenuto does not say that psychoanalysis is outdated. There has been much debate over this specific lack of applicability in regard to present times; being outdated, this may be the fault of psychoanalysis, but it may well be the fault of socio-political developments. Here, psychoanalysis is presented as one-sided and crudely distorted, so that its inner contradictions, its reductions, and its concepts that do not go far enough only lead to its breakdown, and this breakdown is declared as a symbol of breakdown in mankind.

We can be grateful to Benvenuto for providing us with such a clear model of (ideologically loaded) criticism, his model is so typical, and it reveals the main components of the argument: the reversal of induction and deduction, and the mix-up between metaphor and allegory (in the Goethean sense, cited above). A prejudice (“emptiness as his sole companion”) is placed at the beginning of the criticism, and it’s elaborated as the result of an (intellectual) analytic process, as though it were an (empirical) fact; the “facts” being so arranged that they become “fit for prejudice”.

Psychoanalysis, which is still cynically used for the “nosography” and for typifying the characters in the film, does not stand on the side of allegory as Goethe describes it, but on the side of poetry. It does not seek to make psychoanalytic technique the cure in cases of application (or should one say: traps for application?)(4), but maintains an open outlook on the strength of the individual in facing his individual destiny, which is never made fully clear in his imputations.

It lays stress on the concept of practice, concerning treatment, cure, the encounter between analyst and analysand in the field of experience where the latter is not simply subordinate but constantly has an effect on the former. Patients’ destinies are not allegories. But in this sense Moretti’s film is also poetic. It cannot be—without some blunt distortion—read as a comprehensive statement about psychoanalysis and modern Man. Its provocative significance—Benvenuto has in fact recognized this, but immediately put it aside—lies in the fact that it hangs “in the balance.” Through this it is creative, and not through baggage dragged in from outside that threaten to annihilate it. In a certain sense Moretti has participated in these distortions of interpretation; since he has chosen a psychoanalyst as his leading character, he has also joined in the fashion for Freud-bashing; he has swum along with the others on a wave that threatens to wash him across to the other shore. However the film would have lost none of its impact had Giovanni been a lawyer or a philosopher, whose training had made him only “good enough”.

Translated from the German by Adrian Cook

Notes:

1 *Lettre International*, 55, 2001, pp. 7 – 10. English version: “‘The son’s room’ or: Analysis is over”, *Journal of European Psychoanalysis*, n. 12-13, pp. 163-172.

2 Benvenuto, cit., p.7.

3 *Ibidem*, p.9.

4 Translator’s note: a pun in German; the words for “cases” and “traps” are almost identical except for an umlaut.