

Strategy, Tactics and Standard Treatment

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In ‘The Direction of the Treatment’, Lacan formulates the principles of interpretation in terms of strategy, tactics and policy. Although much of his discussion involves a critique, often implicit, of Bouvet’s theory of distance, the terms ‘strategy’ and ‘tactics’ are linked to a larger debate in the International Psychoanalytic Association on the issue of standard treatment. By the end of the 1940s, there was general agreement that psychoanalytic practice involved something more than classical interpretation, and hence the problem of defining and classifying its variations and formulating criteria as to the nature of interpretation itself. What other non-interpretative technical devices were in use and what justified their introduction? At what stage of the treatment should such devices be introduced and with which clinical structures? And, crucially, what were the technical consequences of the programme of ego psychology in relation to these problems?

The Standard Treatment

The debate on variations would focus on questions of time, the frequency and regularity of sessions, the role of dependency, the use of the couch and the function of insight. At the Zurich congress in 1949, Balint, Glover and Nacht would all put in question the relation of current psychoanalytic theory to technique, and a research committee was set up including Glover, Anna Freud and Heinz Hartmann. Its quiet dissolution soon afterwards is perhaps not unrelated to the diversity of its composition: it would disappear, as Glover said, “unwept, unhonoured and unsung”. Glover and Hartmann, however, continued to address the problems of analytic intervention, and at the London Congress meeting on therapeutic criteria in 1953 Glover asked the question of what modifications in technique can take place “without forfeiting the right to use the term psycho-analysis”, contrasting the “flexible” treatment urged by Alexander with the current notions of “standard treatment”.

But despite Glover’s tenacity in trying to rid therapeutics of their mystique, his conclusion simply replaced one standard with another: “Without some reliable form of standardisation of technique there can be no science of psycho-analysis, for if we cannot standardise the behaviour of the patient, we must at least be able to standardise the behaviour of the analyst (1)”. Although Glover singles out as a criterion of real analytic functioning the role of association, he shies away from an investigation of the properties of speech, even when it seemed to many that the question of variations was ultimately a question of the function of language. Summing up the American Psychoanalytic Association’s panel on variations, Greenacre claimed that “the differences in technical procedure appear to be clearly related to a basic difference in respect to one point, namely, the extent to which analysis may be carried to a successful conclusion by verbal methods directed towards the acquisition of insight (2)”. Or, as Lacan would put it, the debates on variations should be reduced to their common root: the place of speech in psychoanalysis (3).

Although the so-called ego-psychologists are today generally cursed for their ignorance of the problem of language, Hartmann, Kris and Loewenstein were all sensitive, in their own ways, to the function of speech. In 1951 Hartmann tried to formulate what he called “the technical implications of ego psychology”. The “standard analytic technique” would consist in interpreting from the surface down,

using interpretation mainly for pinpointing resistances and making them conscious to the patient. He concluded his discussion with an invitation to study "the structural implications of speech and language in analysis", but rather than turning to contemporary structuralism for his material, he evoked the once popular *Sprachtheorie* of Karl Buehler (4). Both Hartmann and Loewenstein saw language as divided into two central functions, adapted from Buehler: the expressive and the cognitive. When the speaker articulates something about himself the function is expressive and when he talks about knowledge and the description of objects the function is cognitive. The expressive function of speech will allow an element to pass from the unconscious to the preconscious or conscious. Thus, although both Hartmann and Loewenstein urge the study of language in psychoanalysis, their perspective differs radically from that of Lacan, as there is no notion of the signifier, a concept that would render the expressive-cognitive distinction obsolete. If a linguistic item takes on its value in relation to other elements, it can have no intrinsic expressive or cognitive powers: as a signifier, it needs to be put in relation to other signifiers in the work of association. It is thus less a question of passing from the cognitive to the expressive, as Hartmann envisages, than of passing from one signifier to another. Similarly, separating the cognitive and the expressive supposes that the analyst can tell when speech is cognitive and when it is expressive, and therefore that he can supply meaning to the terms used by the patient, an error that is reinforced when Loewenstein attempts, a few years later, to develop his ideas on the role of language. At the Symposium on Technique held in London in 1957, he argued that "the function of representation in speech elicits images and representations in the addressee which are similar to those used by the addressor" (5), a view echoed by Rycroft at the same meeting, who emphasised the similarity of associations between listeners to a speaker's words (6). Despite a trip to the Old Vic for an evening of Shakespeare arranged by the Symposium's organisers, their views about the univocal function of meaning would not adjust.

Loewenstein's contributions to the debate on variations on the standard treatment reflect this particular conception of how language works. To move from cognitive to expressive will involve the shift from preparatory work to interpretation proper, or, in Loewenstein's terms, the move from intervention to interpretation. Intervention is defined as the work which aids the strengthening of the conflict-free sphere of the ego, lessening the defences and facilitating transference. Interpretations, on the other hand, are "those explanations, given to patients by the analyst, which add to their knowledge about themselves", given in instalments, rather like a loan, to be made "complete" late in the analysis. This notion of completeness and the idea of using "terms corresponding exactly with the thoughts and affects of the patient" (7) produces its comedy in Loewenstein's practice: as a patient responds to what he has just said with a 'It's almost that, but not completely so', he modifies his wording progressively until the patient would finally agree 'That's it'. The symptom would disappear...temporarily. Instead of searching for division in the technique of interpretation, the emphasis of Loewenstein is on identity. The words have to match the thing named, an idea which Lacan responded to with his own theory, in 'The Direction of the Treatment', of the virtues, and the necessity, of a practice of allusion.

Intervention and Interpretation

Loewenstein's discussions on technique are a response to Hartmann's call for a formulation of the technical consequences of ego psychology, in the sense that the new programme presupposes a link with the conflict-free part of the ego as a preliminary to interpretation. For an interpretation to be digested properly, there

needs to be a half-decent ego there to digest it. Since people that go into analysis probably have something wrong with their ego, interpretation cannot be introduced immediately and hence the preparatory work of analysis will strengthen it. Once the ego is done, the interpretation will have a listener. When Lacan introduced his notion of “rectification of the subject’s relation to the real”, it was no doubt intended as a corrective to this notion of preparatory intervention, and his discussion is juxtaposed with a commentary on Kris’ appeals to reality (his groundwork) with the Fresh Brains Man (finding out if he really was a plagiarist or not).

Loewenstein’s distinction between interpretation and intervention was by no means uncontroversial within the IPA itself, and a number of other terms were proposed to describe changes in technique. Bibring preferred the term ‘clarification’ (8), Devereux ‘confrontation’ (9), Nacht “the presence of the analyst” (10) and Eissler ‘parameter’ (11). The latter term was defined as a deviation from pure interpretation necessitated by a problem in the ego structure of the patient. A question or, in a case of phobia, an injunction, would be examples of parameters of technique, and Eissler thinks that parameters are only to be used if they eventually lead to their own “self elimination” (12). By the end of analysis, parameters are abolished and one is left with an 0 parameter, assuming that the ego had attained its “integrity”. Thus, for Eissler, an unmodified ego will be the perfect partner for “standard technique” and an ego with structural defects will cause the introduction of variations. Note that while Eissler, Hartmann and Loewenstein all refer to “variations” on the standard treatment, Lacan opts for a different term, variants.

This detail is important, and the term ‘variants’ is opposed to the term ‘variations’ in the sense that, as Lacan stresses, it does not mean adaptation to the variety of cases, as Hartmann and Eissler suggest, but rather the wish for a greater ethical rigour or purity (13).

Strategy and Tactics

Although the binary of strategy and tactics that Lacan discusses in ‘The Direction of the Treatment’ has its place, as we shall see, in the ego psychological discussions, its first formulation is in Freud. In ‘Zur Dynamic der Übertragung’, Freud would use the military metaphors he was fond of (14). Describing the relation of resistance to transference, whereby the transference idea put forward in fact satisfies the resistance, he points out that the portion of the complex put forward is defended with the greatest obstinacy, and then, in a note, he adds the following: “This, however, should not lead us to conclude in general that the element selected for transference-resistance is of peculiar pathogenic importance. If in the course of a battle there is a particularly embittered struggle over the possession of some small church or individual farm, there is no need to suppose that the church is a national shrine or that the house shelters the army’s pay chest. The value of the object may be a purely tactical one [*Der Wert der Objecte kann ein bloss taktischer sein*] (15).” There is thus an important reference to tactics in Freud’s discussion of transference, a reference that Loewenstein would take up in the early 1950s and map onto the contemporary debates on the standard treatment. “Pursuing Freud’s simile”, he writes, why not distinguish between interpretations that have “tactical values” and those that aim at “strategic objectives” (16). He refers to Kris’ (unpublished) concept of the “positional value” of an interpretation. Although the latter term is absent, as far as I can see, from the 1950s debate, the binary of strategy and tactics would reappear in several places.

Loewenstein takes up the Freudian reference once again in his paper ‘Some Thoughts on Interpretation’ to emphasise how the interpretation of an apparently isolated defence is not to be underestimated, given its links with a whole defensive constellation. And Kris, in the very text that Lacan takes up in ‘The Direction of the Treatment’, refers to the distinction between “the ‘strategy’ and the ‘tactics’ of therapy”, a distinction which derives directly from the debate about variations which we have been discussing: if analysis involved techniques which were not reducible to classical interpretation, their role could be considered as means to an end (17). When Lacan reformulates these problems in the 1958 article, his position is very different from that of the IPA discussions: rather than supposing that there is a split between the subject and his defence, Lacan argues that in fact the subject *is* the defence. And strategy and tactics have become linked to the combinatory of games theory: the battlefield is now a formal one. Indeed, it is at exactly the moment that Lacan encourages his students to reformulate their notions of interpretation in 1958 that the IPA debate, rather than focusing itself on the real issues, seems to fade away. After 1958, there is little discussion of variation. What happened to all the debate? Something very precise: when variations had been discussed, their use was linked to defects in the patient’s ego. After the Paris congress in 1957, the problem of intervention-interpretation became the problem of ego-distortion, with its flower, the borderline. A rich set of questions about technique would thus become more a matter of interest for the historians than a problematic of everyday practice to be debated. Lacan did not see these questions as being extinguished by this passing of interest, and it is at exactly this moment that he would invigorate the debate on interpretation with ‘The Direction of the Treatment’.

ENDNOTES:

- (1) ‘Therapeutic Criteria of Psychoanalysis’, International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 1954, p. 383.
- (2) Panel Report of American Psychoanalytic Association, ‘The Traditional Technique and its Variations’, Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 1953, pp. 526-537.
- (3) Écrits, Paris, Seuil, p. 332.
- (4) ‘Technical Implications of Ego Psychology’, Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 1951, p. 42.
- (5) ‘Some Remarks on the Role of Speech in Psychoanalytic Technique’, in Practice and Precept in Psychoanalytic Technique: Selected Papers of Rudolph M. Loewenstein, Yale University Press, 1982, p. 62.
- (6) ‘An Enquiry into the Function of Words in the Psycho-Analytical Situation’, International Journal of Psychoanalysis, 1958, p. 414.
- (7) ‘Reflections on the Treatment of a Case of Obsessional Neurosis’, in Practice and Precept, op.cit., p. 119.
- (8) ‘Psychoanalysis and the Dynamic Psychotherapies’, Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 1954, p. 745.
- (9) ‘Some Criteria for the Timing of Confrontations and Interpretations’, Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 1951, p. 32.
- (10) ‘Comment Terminer le Traitement Psychanalytique’, Revue Francaise de Psychanalyse, 1955, p. 509, ‘Technical Remarks on the Handling of the Transference Neurosis’, International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, 1957, p.196.
- (11) ‘The Effect of the Structure of the Ego on Psychoanalytic Technique’, Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association, 1953, pp. 104-143.
- (12) Ibid., p. 111.
- (13) Écrits, op.cit., p. 324.
- (14) cf. Lecture 28, for example, of the ‘Introductory Lecture’ (G.W. XI).
- (15) G.W. 8, p. 369
- (16) ‘The Problem of Interpretation’, Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 1951, pp. 1-14.
- (17) ‘Ego Psychology and Interpretation in Psychoanalytic Therapy’, Psychoanalytic Quarterly, 1951, pp. 222-9.