

"SIBLING VIOLENCE, TRAUMA, AND REALITY": THE ANALYST WRITES BACK

ANONYMOUS

"Sibling Violence, Trauma, and Reality" left me with a strong wish to respond, and I am grateful for the chance to do so. I write in a spirit of conversation, having made my peace with the infinitesimal risk of disclosing too much about others or myself. I would like to convey a sense of how very odd it is to read a partially disguised and much distilled version of my life, especially on first reading.

The psychoanalytic guild no doubt has its rules, written and unwritten, about what constitutes sound "disguise." The need to preserve confidentiality and the anonymity of all parties is obviously crucial. But are all disguises, omissions, and resulting distortions equally neutral or effective? Do they not add a whole layer of unwitting or implicit "interpretation"? Whom do they serve? These are serious matters, I think. I hope that my raw response might help articulate some of the possible stakes.

I also have things to say about what lingers in my mind, long after the initial disorienting encounter with this paper. Over time, the specific details and distortions have already come to matter less, and the larger, transferable insights about siblings may indeed trump the mild violence done to my particular experience. My "response" to this paper, in short, has evolved over time, and this too might be instructive.

So let's start with my initial reading. I found myself laughing at first, as though I'd been invited to hop onto a ride at the county fair. Part gentle roller coaster, part goofy, homely house of horrors, the kind meant to give a kid a fun shiver, not a real scare, the kind where adults bump their heads and trip, because the scale is Lilliputian. I have been given an amusing disguise that I am not yet used to, and I am about to enter into a script that

titillates a little, in part because it seems faintly familiar. Wait . . . I get it! I have landed in a pop psych mini-bio! It's all that comes to mind at first. I haven't fully taken on board yet the greater gravitas and genuine seriousness of the modern professional psychoanalytic clinical report, already on display in the first few paragraphs. On the threshold of the paper, I'm still finding my feet, and in all likelihood I am reaching for the irony to which I do, indeed, tend to resort. Readers of "Sibling Violence, Trauma, and Reality" may even be expecting it, if they have paid close attention. I'm less sure how I feel about being predictable in this small way. But here, at any rate, is what it feels like to be pared down a dimension or two, lodged in a plot fragment, surprised to find myself looking so very much like those thousands at the heart of the North American paperback self-help genre. Even the names seem familiar. Paula, Dave, and Jim? You have got to be kidding. This is definitely not about me. Out go the linguistic and ethnic spiciness/liminality that feel so central to my daily dealings with the world and have been so since I became aware of language itself. But hang on, this is almost fun. (Almost. I am getting a little nervous, as one does, at the county fair. Will the whole thing come unhinged?) Where, then, will I be going with my new name? To the business world, it seems. Phooey. Couldn't it have been something more dashing? I can't conjure for myself the edgier end of corporate life, with its exposed red heating ducts and buzzing iPads. I picture only drab female "suits" and half-empty water pitchers on fake-wood conference tables. Business world? I can't get into the potential spirit of it. Ho-hum, there goes one of the central choices of my life. This is definitely wonky—it's not even like looking into one of those funny mirrors that squishes, squiggles, or stretches. It's not even my original shape that is being refashioned. Why, I used to write silly poems to pass my late-adolescent summertime in dull business jobs ("My eyes are coated with the short-term outlook"), but getting into a serious, adult anxiety attack over a flip chart? Come on. Not me. So far, so bizarre. But let's forge ahead and see what lies beyond the next bend.

Before too long, I have ceased laughing. I'm getting increasingly bewildered by the disguise, confused about what matters and what doesn't. I'm worried that the distortions are acquiring a life of their own, I'm worried that the tone is all wrong and that this may somehow make a difference to the whole interpretive enterprise. No, *no*, it wasn't like that. My mother *worked*. And she wasn't laid up sick for so long. No, I didn't think she "preferred" him. I thought she preferred men as a whole, without knowing it, even though she loved me (I still think this). Isn't that a different thing? To be the object of unconscious misogyny rather than to be specifically

overlooked as an individual? I think so. (Does that matter? Maybe, maybe not.) What about the sibling left out of the picture entirely? Can a person be so easily airbrushed into oblivion without profound consequence? (And there are others omitted, but I won't mention them. You get the point.) Isn't it equally important to explore sources of resilience as part of the overall picture? No, I didn't cry with pain when stomped on. I was simply stunned and winded. Isn't that enough to convince the reader that this was serious? Why add the vocal expression of anguish when they didn't happen? (Then again, why on earth do I think I remember this? Why do I still somewhat admire the child who didn't cry when stomped on?) For goodness sake, it wasn't a yacht, and my life was never in danger, and I knew I that at the time. I just thought it was bloody mean and not funny, despite what the real-life "Dave's" persistent smirk (omitted here) implied—right up there with the tickling episodes that I may never have mentioned but may be important also. What on earth are the rules for writing up a clinical report, I wonder. How much room is there for outright invention? I feel the analyst's pen getting away from him, the story taking on unnecessary twists, the invented drama casting unnecessary shadows over the real protagonist and her concerns. It's hard to call the analyst on exaggerations, of course, because he's warned us, indirectly, that this is exactly what Paula's adaptations to her trauma would demand. Catch 22, once again. Still, I have faith that my judgment will not be discounted entirely, and frankly, it feels as though my concern springs as much to from aesthetics as from a sense that factual truth has been sidestepped. Mostly I am curious. What does such a report demand of its author, beyond confidentiality? Does it matter that the analysand doubts that she really lies behind the fake nose and glasses?

At this point, I get side-tracked, remembering the tickling. My brother would force me down onto my back, sit on my waist, locking my arms outstretched over my head, and tickle me as I laughed/begged him to stop. This might amount to funny wrestling between the evenly matched, or with the weaker on top, but it was decidedly less funny with the small person underneath. Did he think it was OK as long as I was still laughing, at least a bit? Even though I was overpowered and couldn't wiggle out without hurting myself? Anyway, it seems characteristic of the flavour of what I experienced: that uncomfortable edge—between teasing and torture, the imbalance of strength.

And on that score, take the stuff thrown at me. Doesn't it matter that there was always a surprise-game-like quality to what was happening? The projectiles were not thrown in vicious anger—an icy snowball, a hard little fruit picked off a nearby tree. Always on the edge of a joke, a game, a little

performance, at any rate, the pleasure of seeing a younger kid squeal. If done to someone the same age, the same strength, and with a bit of give and take, it could, like the tickling, also have been funny. I guess this is the thought that I clung to. What was happening to me was always *almost* funny. But not quite. I was indeed a fair bit younger, knew that it was absolutely impossible to retaliate, and that I could never credibly claim to be “just joking” myself if I dared launch a projectile of my own.

Shouldn't the “clinical report” capture this atmosphere? There seem to be yet more details to tweak. The fact that I was always on a confusing, precarious edge, worried that I was about to get hurt, a fool caught in a Bugs Bunny–Road Runner show endlessly repetitive trap? And Paula/me, stoical? I suppose that fits. Quiet? Definitely, at least at home. I wouldn't have dreamed of ratting. Everyone seemed to agree. Here was a prickly person you just had to handle, and it was best to treat him as borderline funny, always. Often his real jokes *were* funny. It was such a relief to have a genuine laugh. It relieved endless tension.

And while we are at it, surely it is important to separate the personal from the larger, cultural, political forces at work? (The person who has experienced trauma will dissociate, minimize, raise “distraction defences.” OK, OK, guilty on all counts.) So much interpretive burden placed on a single family, so little placed on the larger forces. Here I pause, thinking of the best fiction and its power to illuminate through particular stories. It doesn't create plots out of abstract social forces, even if they are present, but out of people. Above all, the story has to persuade, has to be life-like. Again, does it matter if it doesn't persuade me? Is it only the professional readers who need to be persuaded? In any case, I am not completely persuaded by the choices made here, and I am also aware that it must be awfully difficult to decide what/where to disguise and how much detail to include. It strikes me as a problem of writing as much as a problem of interpretation or explanation. It's all the more difficult, given what seems to be the hybrid kind of writing on display here: doing justice to an individual story, with all its lavish complexity, versus displaying a particular but generalizable set of adaptations and defences. Interpreting, or is it diagnosing? Paula isn't me, Dave is definitely not my brother, but they are plausible enough, in their own fictional universe. Perhaps that is all that matters?

As I continue to read, I feel increasingly trapped. I become positively distressed and dismayed, especially with the picture of Paula's present. It becomes harder to muster bemused detachment. This is me, and I don't like it one bit. I have nothing to say or to amend when it comes to the portrait of interactions with my husband. Except that it is partial. My words

appear verbatim and strike me with considerable force—some combination of empathy for the anguished Paula, for the trials of the long-suffering Jim, and impatience with the life behind the portrait. For goodness sake, Paula, give the man a break—give yourself a break! To some degree, I feel impatience with the portrait itself. Beyond this or that specific invention or strategic disguise, I experience the paring down of a life to its moments of distress or anxiety, or to its defences, as a somewhat unfair move. It certainly isn't pretty. I feel a tad claustrophobic. Where is the oxygen, where is the life in this life? What was our initial bargain, anyway? Am I really a client? A *patient*? Does all this make me mentally *ill*? Or am I someone working out the logic of her soul in dialogue with an experienced other? Paula definitely looks, talks, and acts like a patient in these pages, and my "medical" expense claims tell a similar story. (Really, Paula isn't as bad as she seems. Really, she is a loving, interesting, lively person. I hope you can tell. I certainly can't, reading this. I wonder what my accountant thinks.) I console myself by thinking that perhaps readers of the journal, with their years of clinical (*clinical*—that word again . . .) experience, and years of reading journal articles, don't imagine the protagonists in the same way as I picture this Paula. They will know how to decode shorthand, inside language. (Like doctors, when they talk metonymically about the kidney in room 14. They don't really mean it, do they?) For present purposes, Paula/I is/am the sibling, trauma case at the heart of this particular clinical report. So far, I'm perhaps the only one who has been surprised by the roller-coaster ride from irony to distress. The potential analyst-reader may well expect Paula, on cue, to transfer her older-brother-troubles onto a well-meaning colleague. The most sympathetic readers might put themselves in the shoes of the analysand. Is it really an unmitigated pleasure to see one's traumas and defences front and centre with all the rest left out? Do actual analysts perform this thought experiment as they write? Would it make a difference if they did? Should it?

I settle into trying to relax and to learn from the outsider's-eye view of my life, as reported to a professional audience. Abstractions are convenient, useful, necessary, aren't they? What can you do in 20 pages, after all, but pare things down to their partial but most relevant essence? Think physics, think biology, think Occam's razor. We can't have a theory or a story, for that matter, that is as complex as reality, or the math or the prose would become impenetrable, the picture too cluttered. Still, doubts niggle away. And statistics come to mind: what if the omissions, the measurement errors, as it were, are systematic, not random? The story indeed will

be biased, in the most technical of senses. Maybe it then won't be of much use to anybody, not even to me?

Trauma. That is for others. For those who experience holocaust, the Holocaust. For survivors of Pol Pot, residential schools, for victims of pestilence or neglect of biblical proportions. Relax. The word can have less dramatic meanings. Cutting your skin with a paring knife while chopping vegetables is a little trauma, to the skin at least. But a person who has experienced trauma is a kind of person, isn't she? Am I that kind? "What kind is me?" asks a famous philosopher of science, sensitive to our interactions with such kinds. (He was musing about biotechnology and its effects on our sense of self. But he also writes also about the categories created to talk about the mind, especially in its more unpleasant guises.) The labels take on lives of their own, when we take them on, as does the larger world around us. I won't of course, let this happen, since I have read my philosophy. Or won't I? Just how deeply or permanently has all of this unpleasant stuff taken up residence in my "psychic structure"? I spend the next couple of weeks after reading this paper behaving very much like a traumatized person. I feel terribly alone. Who on earth can I talk to about any of this? Briefly with my husband, but we both decide this is not healthy. He doesn't need to know everything. That is why I see an analyst in the first place! I am distressed, my skin feels paper thin, this doesn't feel like a liberating revelation. For awhile, everything seems just a little bit poisoned. Little room left for mysteries, grace, no spaces left for shaking off this weight. So much time lost, frozen pain locked in, apparently by "defences" of which one is hardly aware. Defences. So much packed into the word.

It is true. It is exceedingly hard to make meaningful sense of repeated traumas, even ones relatively minor in the overarching scale of human suffering. It does, I suppose, require that one be in dialogue with a committed, trustworthy interlocutor. (One could drive a spouse crazy, and heaven help a child, or children, in such situations). Shouldn't everybody be? It's seems grossly unfair that only those with money to spare should have the chance. It is so much the better, then, if analysts are alert to how important sibling relationships might be, both to those whom they analyze, and, as Brian Robertson reminds us, to the analyst himself or herself. I am surprised, I confess, that sibling interactions seem to have had so little place in psychoanalytic thinking. I have certainly always been aware that this was a central dimension of my life—though I guess I can say now that I didn't quite understand what this meant, beyond the persistence of discrete memories. Some of these could even be trotted out as humorous war stories from the distant past (You wouldn't believe what my brother did to me when I was

ten). They performed the function of affirming one's present, robust, stolid sense of self. Yes, I am indeed a valiant person, am I not, and you can certainly depend on me in a crisis!

As I gain a necessary bit of distance from its alien twists, which don't "fit me" so comfortably, Paula's story ends up resonating. It certainly throws possibilities into relief for me. There is work to be done coming to terms with "my defences" (Who me?), and perhaps "Paula" can help bring others to this same point of readiness and insight. That a child's adaptation to difficult circumstances may wreak havoc in later life still seems so strange, so counterintuitive, and I imagine that it can be so for others. Surely one would never *manufacture* new forms of pain to protect oneself from past, real pain? This continues to seem such a profoundly odd proposition, so at odds with the real power of current emotions. And yet one must decode one's own sense of guilt, inadequacy, etc. as clues to a different way. When the emotional tempests dissipate, if not when in the middle of them, the storm makes retrospective sense, or at least sort of. A kind of hopeful sense, especially if you have faith that what is then called for is not so much heroic willpower as greater, continuous attention. Just seeing something intimately familiar in a drastically new light seems good enough, even if it takes getting used to.