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F.E. VASILYUK

## Prayer, Silence, and Psychotherapy

*A new interpretation of L.S. Vygotsky's "The Tragedy of Hamlet, the Prince of Denmark" and his little-known publication "Traurnye stroki-Den' 9 ava." An essential question (object) of these texts is the secret of genuine human overcoming of suffering. This is also the main problem of psychotherapy. Vygotsky's answer has both psychological and religious significance: the experience of a tragedy is mediated by prayer. Vygotsky's idea creates the basis for religiously oriented, "synergetic" psychotherapy where the main process will be spiritual, including prayer.*

Let me share one of the secrets of psychotherapeutic work with you. The very first phrase a patient utters at his first meeting with

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Fedor Efimovich Vasilyuk is a Candidate of Psychology, dean of the Department of Psychological Counseling at Moscow Municipal Psychological and Pedagogical University, chairman of the editorial board, founder, and first editor in chief of *Moskovskii psikhoterapevticheskii zhurnal*.

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you, no matter how superficial, random, or unnecessary it seems, contains the key to all of the mysterious intertwinings of the deepest thoughts to which you and he will have to dig down, perhaps over months and even years of hard work. The patient's first words are a symbol that, without being aware of it, exposes to us the whole reality of the therapeutic process that still lies ahead.

It seems to me that *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, by William Shakespeare [Tragediia o Gamlete, printse Datskom, U. Shekspira], the first major work by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, whose centennial we are marking these days, offers similar symbolic significance for analyzing his writings. There is no need to summarize the contents of this brilliant work, which was written by a twenty-year-old youth. We remember what Vygotsky was *writing about*: the psychology of tragedy. But what is the ultimate subject of this work? What he calls "the *second meaning* of tragedy: "the *religiosity* of tragedy," "silence and prayer," the dimension where art ends and religion begins (Vygotskii, 1987, p. 290).

Interpreters for whom, unfortunately, there is no mysterious presence of eternity in life but instead there is only "earthly behavior aimed at the social horizons" (Iaroshevskii, 1987, p. 320) tend not to notice this key meaning of Vygotsky's analysis of Shakespeare's tragedy. They attribute the individual passages of a religious nature to the overall mood of anxiety and mysticism that the Russian intelligentsia was experiencing on the eve of the revolution. But here is the author's own testimony: "Not a single word is mentioned *explicitly* about it in the essay [as Vygotsky modestly refers to his work—F.V], although all of it deals with this second meaning. . . . This is the purpose of the entire essay: to probe this second meaning, the rest that 'is silence'" (Vygotskii, 1987, p. 290).

What kind of philosophy does V articulate with his "essay?" A philosophy of tragic solitude and of overcoming it through prayer.

In any tragedy with a tumultuous vortex of human passions, impotence, love, and hatred, we hear behind the pictures of passionate aspirations and misunderstandings the distant echoes of a mystical symphony that speaks of what is ancient, dear, and native. We are detached from one another, the way the Earth once became detached. The melancholy lies in this eternal isolation, in the very "self," in the fact that I am not you, nor everything around me, that everything—man, stones, the planets—are alone in the great silence of the eternal night. (Vygotskii, 1987, p. 289).

Hamlet's tragedy, like the real tragedy of our lives, culminates, according to Vygotsky's intuition, on the boundary, on the threshold of the two worlds. But the meaning of the tragedy ultimately lies not in the dividedness and melancholy of solitude but in the reunification that overcomes this gulf, that mysteriously connects the two worlds. What does restore unity? Prayer, "because wherever there is prayer (fusion)," writes Vygotsky, "there is no tragedy, tragedy ends" (1987, p. 289).

The living symbol of prayer in Shakespeare's tragedy is Ophelia. In the color scheme of the tragedy, Ophelia is the counterpoint to Hamlet. He is black, she is white; he is tragedy per se, she is the prayer that overcomes tragedy; but both of them are outside this world, they are both mad. As Vygotsky discerns:

Ophelia's tragedy is exactly like a lyrical accompaniment that towers over the entire play, which is full of the dreadful torment of inexpressibility, of the most profound, dark, mysterious, and sacred melodies that in some incomprehensible and miraculous way reveal and embody what is most exciting, most allusive, and touchingly important, what is deepest and darkest, but what is most tragic that is overcome and enlightened, and what is most mystical in the entire play. Thus tragedy turns into prayer. Its image, woven together from a prayerful madness, rhythmic tearfulness (i.e., the very essence of tears) and astonishing shadows, a half-desired, half-calamitous death steeped in the mirrorlike sadness of weeping water, of a willow, wreaths, and dead flowers, seems to alter the tone of the entire melancholy of the tragedy, makes it sound different, overcomes and enlightens it; as though with an oblatinal and expiatory and prayerful light, it gives religious illumination to the tragedy. (Vygotsky 1987, p. 280)

No matter how much the devotees of Marxist materialism try to conceal Vygotsky's religiosity from themselves and us, it is perfectly obvious that these words could only have been written by a person with deep personal experience with prayer. We do not know the secret of the religious life of the Mozart of psychology (Toulmin, 1978), but a few paragraphs from his essay on Hamlet are enough to realize that a genuine prayerful encounter with God took place in his life at least once.

What does all this have to do with psychotherapy? Psychotherapy by its designation is emotional assistance to a person who is suffering, so its main epistemological interest is to comprehend the mystery of how a human being overcomes suffering. This is precisely

the point where psychotherapy and religion, psychotherapy and prayer converge. The question of the relation to suffering is the core question of the philosophy of psychotherapy.

Let me quote a few excerpts from a little known piece by Vygotsky (1916), "Lines of Mourning (The Ninth of Av)" [Traurnye stroki (Den' 9 ava)]. In a short, two-page note, Vygotsky provides an extremely profound philosophical answer to the question, "What is historical mourning needed for?" In terms of its significance, the answer goes far beyond the bounds of the Jewish religious tradition. The ninth of Av is considered a fateful date in the history of the Jewish people. Suffice it to say that on this date the Temple was destroyed twice and "the Holy City was plowed over like a field." But,

the Jews saw and preserved more than the sadness of memories and historical mourning in this date. The people have invested their *eternal* sorrow, their eternal lament over their malady and infirmity. . . . [W]hat the Jews saw was not ephemeral and transitory, but supratemporal and eternal, and they cared for and preserved it in this infirmity, illness, and wound; not historical mourning, but something suprahistorical, primal, predetermined. . . . That is why the Jews have imprinted this date so firmly by ripping it out of the cycle of time and forever annotating it with a black mark, a black frame of mourning. That is why they have turned it into a historical symbol, into a collector of grief. As it revolves in the cycle of time, this date sucks up, soaks up and absorbs the sorrow of individual, fleeting days and *elevates* it to the never-fading and eternal. . . . They must *transform* their pain—the living pain of these days—into the unfading grief of this great date, fuse it with the sorrow of that date and elevate it to eternal, undying sorrow. . . . My star in the heavens is marked with sadness.

Here is a lofty philosophy of suffering: not a hedonistic flight from suffering, not a masochistic enjoyment of it, not platitudinous, routine consolation (there is always a silver lining, etc.), but a spiritual sublimation of sorrow, its elevation to "the never-fading and eternal" and its transformation into "eternal and undying sorrow." "My star in the heavens is marked with sadness." Yes, with sadness, not with joy; yes, with sadness, but "in the heavens" and a "star." So the meaning of suffering is not in fleeing from it, but not in its painful fabric, either; it is found in the *elevation* of suffering, elevation on the wing of prayer to God and in its *transformation* in God.

In this formula of the sublimation of suffering lies the key to synergetic psychotherapy, which thinks of man as a creature that lives not only on the level of “social horizons” or in the cellars of the unconscious but throughout God’s world.

Let us cast our gaze at the history of what we might call the “basic theoretical beliefs” of modern psychotherapy. What does the psychotherapist actually rely on, what process of psychological life that, with the aid of the psychotherapist’s art, will enable the patient to overcome his suffering? Freudian psychoanalysts believed in the mechanism of becoming aware: “Where Id was, there Ego shall be” (Freud, 1933, p. 80). Our task is to help the patient illuminate repressed drives and complexes with the light of consciousness, and as soon this goal is achieved, the very fact of awareness will produce beneficial changes in the person’s soul, which will give him back what is most important in life—the ability to enjoy love and work. Behavior therapists thought that it is due to the *mechanism of learning*, learning adaptive patterns of behavior, rather than *awareness* that a therapeutic change has occurred. Sometime around the 1950s, the basic beliefs of psychotherapists began to shift in the direction of the process of experiencing. In order to overcome suffering, it is necessary to reexperience certain moments in life, certain feelings and relationships, to experience them more deeply, fruitfully, in a more thorough way, in a healthier context. “Learn how to suffer, and you will be able not to suffer.” Be that as it may, the main element to which the psychotherapist ultimately owes the success of his work is the patient’s experiencing.

At that time an international trend to elaborate new psychotherapies founded on Christian anthropology arose. A good example is a project initiated by Werner May, “The European Movement for Christian Anthropology, Psychology, and Psychotherapy,” and a periodical of this movement *The Journal of Christian Psychology Around the World*. A Christian approach to psychotherapy might be called “synergetic psychotherapy”—to follow the terminology of modern Russian theologian and philosopher Sergey Horujy who is elaborating synergetic anthropology (Horujy, 2010; Khoruzhy, 2003). Without denying or minimizing the importance of becoming aware, learning, and “perezhivaniia,” the synergetic approach regards prayer as the primary belief. There is an intimate connection between *perezhivaniia* and prayer. *Perezhivaniia* begins in a *situation of impossibility* when the world does not allow me to satisfy

my needs and aspirations, to practice my values, to perform my duty. Until a situation of impossibility has set in psychologically, I have faith that either the world—through a change of circumstances or other people's actions—or my own actions will eventually lead to the attainment of my goals and to my satisfaction. When a situation of impossibility sets in, however, this means that I no longer have faith in the world, in my own actions, in the actions of others or a favorable confluence of circumstances. That is when *perezhivaniia* begins. But that is also when the best conditions for prayer occur: I have nothing to believe in here, no one to rely on, nothing to expect in the world, and my eyes turn up to heaven: "Lord, help me!" At the point where an irreligious person or one who has not yet accepted his religiosity returns after this spontaneous exclamation with his mind and emotions to the world, to people, to himself, and continues to go through his *perezhivaniia*, alternately sorting over and over through possible solutions, sinking into despair, and lighting up with hope, there the believer begins to pray. His *perezhivaniia* does not cease, but it turns into prayer, infuses it with the sincerity of pain and absorbs from it the liberating spirit of God's grace, gradually transforming the inner experience itself, the soul and then life. The transformation derives from the fact that precisely where the *perezhivaniia* alone saw nothing but a dead end, prayer throws open a window through which God himself can come not only into the *perezhivaniia*, the soul, and life, but into the material circumstances of life themselves. And that is why the maxim of synergetic psychotherapy is, *Where perezhivanie (experiencing) was, there prayer shall be.*

The core of the method of synergetic psychotherapy is *silence* (our presenter today, A.F. Kop'ev [1990], writes profoundly about the importance of the principle of silence in psychotherapy). Something authentic can happen in psychotherapy only when an encounter takes place with the mystery of a personality. The mystery cannot be discerned, or tracked down and exposed Freudian style, or caught in a net of logical definitions; the mystery can only be allowed to express itself and to manifest itself as it is, without losing its living mysteriousness. The environment in which this is possible is an atmosphere of reverential, prayerful silence. The similarity between prayer and psychotherapy lies in the fact that on the surface they are both words, words, words, but the apex of both is silence, attentive listening, reverential silence, in which the voice of the other and the Other comes through. A colleague of ours shared his personal

way of psychotherapeutic tuning in preparing to listen to a patient, he imagined himself as a valley in the mountains—peacefulness, stillness, the motionless surface of a lake—and at the slightest sound the entire valley responds keenly to it with an echo, a rustling of leaves, a ripple in the water. Purity and stillness give place for an ability to hear the mystery and respond to it, an ability to swing open the dead ends of inner experience to prayer, to heaven.

Let us return to Vygotsky. In the 1980s, when his works finally began to be recovered and his collected writings were published, no space could be found in six volumes for a reissue of *The Psychology of Art* [Psikhologiya iskusstva]. When an unannounced, additional seventh volume was issued in 1987, an early version of “The Tragedy of Hamlet” was printed in it as a separate appendix, and in a small font to boot—that is, in the same way that a person who does not want to be heard utters words unintelligibly, in the momentary illusion that they will not be noticed. Whether for ideological or censorship reasons, there was a desire to conceal this work, which was suffused with the spirit of prayer; it did not fit into the official Marxist portrait of Vygotsky. As it turned out, though, the volumes of Lev Semenovich Vygotsky stand on the shelf—his words, words, words—and in the last volume the last thing that Vygotsky said to us was about Hamlet, about Ophelia, and about prayer. The rest is silence.

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