THE SUFFERING STRANGER

Hermeneutics for Everyday Clinical Practice

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Remember only
That I was innocent and, just like
you, mortal on that day,
I too, had a face marked by rage, by pity and joy,
Quite simply, a human face!

—Benjamin Fontane, Exodus

To my patients,
and
to my sisters and brothers
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My last book, *Thinking for Clinicians*, attempted to bring philosophers into conversation with psychoanalysts and with other humanistically oriented psychotherapists. Now I attempt the project in reverse: to present a group of my favorite subversives in the history of psychoanalysis and to bring them into conversation with Gadamerian hermeneutics and Lévinasian ethics. None of these five extraordinary clinicians—Sándor Ferenczi, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Donald Winnicott, Heinz Kohut, and Bernard Brandchaft—intended to subvert the official program of psychoanalysis, but, faithful to what they were learning from their patients, they became subversives in spite of their best efforts to remain respectful to Freud especially and to remain within the communities that had nurtured them. Their common devotion to the needs of the suffering patient allowed them to question doctrine, dogma, and traditional practice. Thus, for me, they seem kindred spirits to each other.

On the philosophical end, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Emmanuel Lévinas will be familiar to readers of my previous excursion, but I will reintroduce them here, in their specific relevance for this dialogue. My students and colleagues have long extracted promises
from me to write a book on hermeneutics (the theory and practice of interpretation); I hereby repay that debt, while sneaking in what has become a further passion: to understand as fully as I can the ethical and vocational aspects of our profession.

From its earliest years, psychoanalysis has included a strand, often hidden, often quite violently silenced, that offered an alternative to its rationalistic, “investigative,” “scientific,” and more detached and establishment-protecting elements. This voice, the therapeutic counterpoint, often condemned as the *furor sanandi* (passion to heal), became buried under contempt and shame as few found courage to write of their convictions and experiences. The more maternal voices, like Ferenczi, Kohut, and Winnicott, have all faced speculation about their sexuality. Biography apart, they were plainly not tough enough to confront the tradition or their patients—so the story goes, no matter the textual evidence—as we will see later. Many therapists, dissatisfied with psychoanalysis on various grounds, simply found their way into other forms of psychotherapy, though we may now be slowly finding each other again in our common therapeutic project. Unfortunately, psychoanalysis, even in many contemporary forms, has remained a project for the tough-minded, for those who predominantly practice what we will be calling the hermeneutics of suspicion. This book intends to suggest—to psychoanalysts and other psychotherapists—that we can do our work in another spirit, without relegating our more compassionate hermeneuts to the contempt file where they have been too often placed.

The first chapters concern hermeneutics and Lévinasian ethics, followed by five on Sándor Ferenczi, Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, Donald Woods Winnicott, Heinz Kohut, and Bernard Brandchaft.* Recognizing that context generates our hermeneutics (Atwood & Stolorow, 1993) to a very great extent, I begin these five chapters with short introductions to the life and work of the thinker and

* Other candidates, reluctantly passed over for reasons of time, included Ian Suttie, Emmanuel Ghent, and Hans Loewald. I did not consider for this book people who are still working and might have refuted my account of their attitudes!
follow with considerations of the central hermeneutic (interpretive) approach of each. This book does not contain a summary of the important ideas of each thinker, as these are easily available elsewhere, and some are quite familiar to most readers. Nor have I tried to defend these groundbreakers from their critics, or even to avoid selective readings and consider the full complexity of their ideas, as these tasks would have distracted from my purposes. Instead, I want to engage these innovative psychoanalysts precisely as interpreters and as those who have seen the face of the other and heard the voice of the stranger in the ethical sense. If I have quoted them extensively, my purpose has been to let their unique voices, too often silenced, speak out.*

The task of thanking those whose generosity and support have made this book possible for me to write daunts me, not only because I am bound to overlook and injure someone but also because it seems really irreverent to begin or end. Once again my own psychoanalytic communities, Institute for the Psychoanalytic Study of Subjectivity (IPSS, New York) and Istituto di Specializzazione in Psicologia Psicoanalitica del Se’ e Psicoanalisi Relazionale (ISIPSe’, Roma, Milano), as well as my study groups and workshops around the world, are unobtrusive but important, generative, and sustaining contexts. Some to whom I feel deep gratitude I have never met or scarcely know, but they have made the work of Ferenczi available and spoken for him to many of us, in particular Andre Haynal, Judith Dupont, Judith Vida, Emmanuel Berman, and others too numerous to mention. Others—Susanna Federici-Nebbioso, Kathleen Fischer, Manfred Frank, Thomas Hart, Chris Jaenicke, Elizabeth Liebert, Gianni Nebbiosi, Frank Staemmler, Veronique Zanetti—share with me a bond of friendship that supports the risks this book involves. More immediately, thank you to my chapter readers: George Atwood, Elizabeth Corpt, Shelley Doctors, Peter Kravitz, Hilary Maddux, Michael Reison, and Robert Stolorow, whose suggestions made the book much better

* Emphasis in all quoted text is from the original, unless otherwise noted.
and saved me from embarrassing errors. All provided needed moral support as well. My very dear friend, Lynne Jacobs, and my husband, Donald Braue, have both read everything at least once and have been with me in countless ways through the whole project. Of course errors remain, and these, as well as all the opinions, belong to me. Kristopher Spring of Routledge has warmly supported this book; without his enthusiasm I might not have persevered. To go back to the beginning, George Atwood has inspired my work in the direction this book has taken from the time we met in 1987 and has been my teacher, friend, and dialogic interlocutor, even when we disagree. Bob Stolorow, fellow philosopher, has always believed in me. To come to the moment if not to the end, Don has trusted that this book could be important and has allowed it to take over our lives for months as if I were the suffering stranger to whom he has been responding. Without being a therapist, he embodies everything this book tries to describe, and no words of mine suffice to thank him.
What Is Hermeneutics?

The person who is understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected but rather he thinks along with the other from the perspective of a specific bond of belonging, as if he too were affected.

—Gadamer

Hermeneutics? It may seem strange for someone as allergic to jargon as my students know me to be to embark on a book about an experience-distant term like hermeneutics. Still, I plead for its admission to our conversation on the grounds that it will help us tremendously to understand what we do as clinicians and to discern the different spirits in which we may approach what we do. So let us begin to approach the word itself:*

Hermeneutics, the study of interpretation, historically functioned as an adjunct discipline, first to theology and later to history, literature, and jurisprudence. Richard Palmer (2002), historian of hermeneutics, wrote a genial history of the origins of the word:

Hermes, you will recall from the Iliad and the Odyssey, was the messenger of the gods. He carried messages from Zeus to everybody else, especially from the divine realm and level down to the human level. In doing so, he had to bridge an ontological gap, a gap

* The substantive form is either hermeneutics or hermeneutic, and I use both. The adjective is hermeneutic. To indicate the practitioner of this art, I use hermeneut in preference to hermeneuticist, which I find awkward and ugly.
between the thinking of the gods and that of humans. According to legend, he had (1) a mysterious helmet which could make him invisible and then suddenly reappear, (2) magical wings on his sandals to carry him swiftly over long distances, and (3) a magical wand that could put you to sleep or wake you up. So he not only bridged physical distances and the ontological gap between divine and human being, he bridged the difference between the visible and the invisible, and between dreams and waking, between the unconscious and the conscious. He is the quicksilver god [“Mercury” in Latin] of sudden insights, ideas, inspirations. And he is also the trickster god of thefts, highway robbery, and of sudden windfalls of good luck. Norman O. Brown wrote a book about him titled *Hermes the Thief.* Hermes is the god of crossroads and boundaries, where piles of rocks (Herms) were placed to honor him. As psychopomp, Hermes led the dead into the underworld, so he “crossed the line” between the living and the dead, between the living human world and the underworld of Hades. Hermes is truly the “god of the gaps,” of the margins, the boundaries, the *limins* of many things. (p. 2)

Originally the study of methods for interpreting sacred texts, hermeneutics served theological purposes. From the time of the early 19th-century romantics, it broadened its scope to include history, aesthetics, and whatever belonged to the humanities and social sciences generally. Given Freud’s emphasis on interpretation, it might have seemed obvious that psychoanalysis would have been seen as a hermeneutic study.* Unfortunately, because of his even stronger insistence on the status of psychoanalysis as natural science, our awareness of psychoanalysis as hermeneutics has arrived only more recently, and with some reasonable cautions (Friedman, 2000; Steiner, 1995). Furthermore, other psychotherapeutic traditions, needing to distance themselves from what they have understood—with considerable justification—as an excessively intellectualized interpretive therapeutics in psychoanalysis, have also missed out on what a hermeneutic sensibility can offer.†

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† Gestalt therapists learned, for example, to “never, never interpret,” but now one of their prominent theorists (Staemmler, 2007, 2009) makes extensive use of Gadamer’s dialogic hermeneutics.
In the hands of phenomenologists, first Martin Heidegger but principally Hans-Georg Gadamer, hermeneutics became a general philosophy of dialogical understanding, serving philosophy, the social sciences, and beyond. Now, I suggest, dialogical hermeneutics can become the partner of an ethical clinical sensibility and sense of vocation best expressed in the ethical phenomenology of Emmanuel Lévinas, in whose thinking each of us bears an infinite responsibility to the face of the suffering stranger.

This book therefore has a double task: (a) to explain and illustrate the richness of a hermeneutic clinical sensibility and (b) to illustrate that such a sensibility responds well to the ethical imperative of hospitality to the suffering stranger that we find described in the challenging writings of Emmanuel Lévinas.

This project thus approaches hermeneutics in three ways: (a) it attempts to trace the history of hermeneutics in a user-friendly way so that humanistic psychotherapists of all traditions can recognize their work as hermeneutic and make use of the resources that philosophical hermeneutics offers, (b) it studies work of several especially humanistic psychoanalysts—because this is my own tradition—to show both how these clinicians developed a hermeneutic therapeutics and how a dialogic hermeneutics understands both persons and texts, and (c) it links a dialogic clinical hermeneutics to an ethical concern, shared by these clinicians and by the philosophers Hans-Georg Gadamer and Emmanuel Lévinas, for the voice and the face of the other.

HISTORY OF HERMENEUTICS: SCHLEIERMACHER

Let us begin with the hermeneutics of the courageous romantic-era theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), German theologian and philosopher, contemporary of Goethe and

* For my appreciation of Schleiermacher, I am indebted to philosopher and scholar of the early romantics Manfred Frank, who often told me stories of Schleiermacher’s personal courage.
Beethoven, an important resource for the so-called hermeneutic turn in contemporary psychoanalysis.

The contemporary or post-Freudian psychoanalysis to which I refer includes British independents and American relationalists, made up, broadly speaking, of interpersonals, psychoanalytic self psychologists, as well as phenomenologically oriented inter-subjectivists and many clinicians worldwide inspired by various relational ideas. We have largely turned away from Freud’s natural-science-based psychoanalysis whose “interpretations” explained to the patient* his or her instinct-based complexes and conflicts. The analyst used to be the silent and distant expert authority on the patient’s unconscious conflicts over sex and aggression, the archaeologist/excavator of the depths. Now, instead, most of us work dialogically, hoping more to understand suffering via its background in lived intersubjective experience than to explain or translate unconscious “mental” contents. We believe that our groping together for words for whatever we can come to understand becomes a healing and a liberating process. We realize that the analyst’s personal history, our own intimate Selbstvertrautheit (Frank, 2000),† is involved at every moment in our effort to contact and to understand the suffering other (Orange, 1995) and that the other in turn is always affecting us. Our thinking and our practice has changed profoundly from the distant and impersonal world of what we often call “classical” psychoanalysis.

So what has Schleiermacher to offer us, beyond the example of a man who was willing to place himself at risk for people‡ whom

* Throughout this book, as in my other writings, I use the word patient (from the Latin patior, “to suffer, to undergo”) to refer to the human beings with whom I work. Clients would be people with whom I primarily have business relationships. Patients are fellow sufferers.

† I am using his very carefully defined concept loosely here. He speaks of unmediated familiarity (Vertrautheit) and says, “One is conscious of how one feels (or of ‘what it is like’) even when one does not know in the slightest how one should classify the feeling. (It could happen that I am in love even though I lack a valid theory of love, or even lack the concept itself)” (Frank, 2000, p. 194).

‡ See, for example, his letters on behalf of the emancipation of the Jews in Prussia (Schleiermacher & Schmidt, 2001).
What Is Hermeneutics?

others considered less than fully human? I have chosen three themes: (a) his recognition that understanding is hard, if not impossible, work; (b) what I would call his proto-fallibilism; and (c) his insistence on holism, or what today we might call complexity, an attitude that resists the enticements of reductionism that continue to tempt clinicians.

Schleiermacher taught that understanding, whether of texts or of people, was hard work and always work in progress. Because every child learns a language, and because so much of daily life passes without our noticing misunderstandings, he had to tell us explicitly that “misunderstanding occurs as a matter of course, and so understanding must be willed and sought at every point” (Schleiermacher & Kimmerle, 1977, p. 110). In contrast to what he called the “lax practice” of hermeneutics, which assumes understanding (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998), the “rigorous practice” or “strict practice” always required this hardworking attitude. In my clinical experience, patients are often greatly surprised and relieved when I quote this to them; they have expected themselves to understand their spouses and their partners to understand them, and likewise their analysts or therapists. To see that understanding requires hard effort, and that this should be expected, is already a start in hermeneutics. This work requires, Schleiermacher taught, constant attention to both content and feeling tone of whatever we seek to understand. Moreover, this rigorous practice is a no-fault enterprise: “Non-understanding is partly indeterminacy, partly ambiguity of the content. So it is thought of without any fault on the part of the utterer” (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, p. 227). He seems to have believed that if I want to understand I must go toward the utterer, not force the utterer to come to me. Not surprisingly, then, my interest in hermeneutics helps me to work with patients who suffer from dreadful, even suicidal, forms of shame: If everything is just something to understand, not to despise or to blame, my patients’ self-hatred sometimes gives way to a more self-forgiving Selbstvertrautheit (self-familiarity, sense of being at home with oneself).
Even the psychotherapist’s struggles to understand patterns of seemingly intractable misery can become more bearable in light of this “rigorous practice.” My patient who seems to have everything, including everything that I have never had, but continues to return to a truly abusive partner, one who throws hot soup on her in anger and rages at her in front of friends and family, confounds me. Then I remember that understanding is a difficult practice and that there is clearly something we have not understood together yet. Yes, Schleiermacher helps.

Indeed, Schleiermacher claimed elsewhere, no one, strictly speaking, can understand another person. What can this mean? Schleiermacher held that the art of hermeneutics had two indispensable elements, the grammatical and the psychological:

In order to complete the grammatical side of interpretation it would be necessary to have complete knowledge of the language. In order to complete the psychological side it would be necessary to have a complete knowledge of the person. Since in both cases such complete knowledge is impossible, it is necessary to move back and forth between the grammatical and psychological sides, and no rules can stipulate exactly how to do this. (Schleiermacher & Kimmerle, 1977, p. 100)

This brings us to our second theme. He replaced confidence in Cartesian “clear and distinct ideas” with awareness that all our understanding is partial and fallible, that it comes piece-meal and in degrees. It may be that Schleiermacher’s famous or infamous method of intuitive understanding embodied this proto-fallibilism. If, perhaps, he meant that the interpreter makes a reasonable guess, taking historical and other forms of context into account, at the meaning of a text, and then tests it out, this would be very similar to the method of hypothesis in Charles Sanders Peirce (1931). Taking a dream as a text, for example, a clinician might ask whether being chased feels like anything in previous or current life, and work from there. One always intends interpretation as tentative and fallible. Schleiermacher even
termed his oscillating intersubjective search for truth—in Plato’s spirit—dialectic.

In clinical work, we work in this spirit hundreds of times a day, testing, discarding, and provisionally keeping our hunches. The famous “squiggle” game of British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott (1971), in which both patient and analyst added lines to a drawing until something emerged, was a form of hermeneutic play, I think. Many of us psychoanalysts probably do the same thing with words as we wonder together about symptoms, dreams, daydreams, bits of traumatic memory, and such. Whenever the understanding seems adequate for the moment, or unable to be taken further for the moment, we let it go for the moment. In this way both patient and analyst become fallibilists, less obsessive about being right and certain, less caught in traumatically generated either-or positions (Orange, 2011). Knowing gradually becomes disengaged from the search for certainty and becomes a shared project.

In Schleiermacher’s own words, in his explanation of the “psychological” aspects of hermeneutic understanding, we find the following, written at least 130 years before Winnicott’s squiggle or before Gadamer’s dialogic hermeneutics:

If we consider a conversation, this is first of all a completely free state, which is based, not on any specific objective intention, but only on the mutually stimulating exchange of thoughts. … But the conversation does easily get fixed on something and that is even striven for by both sides. In this way a common development of thoughts and a particular relationship of the utterances of the one to the other arises. … But a conversation also allows breaks. … The task is to get to know the genesis of such breaks. … We must go back to the psychological and seek to explain what determines precisely the free, or rather involuntary manner of combination. In doing so we must base this on our own observation of ourselves. … The most natural thing here is to think of oneself in the state of meditation in such a way that a certain tendency towards the distraction of thoughts is present as an inhibition … here it is a question of that free play of ideas in which our will is passive though mental being is still active. (Schleiermacher & Bowie, 1998, pp. 124–125)