Performing

Psychotherapy:

Reflections on

Postmodern

Practice

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ESCHER’S NIGHTMARE

We are the teller and the story
The writer and the written
The artist and the drawn.

As one hand sketches us into being
The other erases,
Obliterating the certain boundaries of knowing
That configure a self.

Unheld pencil
Animated only by the drawing
Graphite substantiality
Seeking form.

Drawn eraser
Deconstructing its point of origin
Rubbery resistance
Blurring lines.

For whom is the work (de)composed?
Not the pencil,
Tracing an ephemeral itinerary
From then to now.

Not the eraser,
Opening space for that which
Might yet be.

The shifting image takes form only for
The viewer of the work
The reader of the text
The audience of the story,
For whom the performance of the process
Is appropriated into its own.

When Lois Holzman and John Morss invited me to write a brief commentary on these collected critiques and elaborations of postmodern psychology, I accepted spontaneously—and in retrospect, perhaps somewhat naïvely. What intrigued me was the irreverence, freshness, and vitality of a critical, performative, postrationalist approach to central concerns about the way we typically “do” psychology, whether in the classroom, the conference hall, or clinic. The preceding essays easily fulfilled this anticipation of novelty and challenge. What I was less prepared for was the level of thinly-veiled tension among the different essays, some of which strongly defended a no-holds-barred social constructionism (Morss), while others cautioned that unconstrained deconstruction vitiated critique (Parker). Likewise, some celebrated the transformative potential of (at least some forms of) therapy (Holzman and Newman), while others held “the therapeutic” in deeper suspicion (Parker and, to some extent, Burman).

Although initially disorienting, the occasional contradictions among the contributors also carried a fringe benefit, in effect releasing me from any expectation that I could draft a single “grand narrative” that would encompass, integrate, or critique them all. Instead, with Morss, I decided to engage the “diffuse stimulus” of these postmodern contributions in an effort “to identify what aspects of [their] mood or style [I] want to keep, and which let slip.” The following commentary, then, can be read as the reflections of a self-identified constructivist psychotherapist on the implications of postmodernism for practice. As such, these remarks are positioned not only within the discourse of the foregoing contributors to this volume, but also within the context of my own
developing approach to psychotherapy, of which I will provide passing illustrations.

A word of caution is in order before I begin. Inevitably, I find myself responding to the various dialogues threaded through this book as a kind of “inside outsider”—indeed, I suspect that the editors might have invited my responses for just this reason. On the one hand, as someone animated by many of the same concerns and shaped by some of the same intellectual traditions as the other contributors to this project, I reside sufficiently “inside” a postmodern discourse to make dialogue possible. On the other hand, as someone who is ultimately concerned more with what Ken Gergen terms the “generative” rather than “critical” moments of the constructionist dialectic, I am sufficiently “outside” the frame of molar social criticism to make such dialogue meaningful. Thus, my chief goal in the pages that follow is to draw upon selected arguments of each author in an effort to “unpack” the implications of postmodernism for the practicing therapist and, where possible, suggest ways that therapeutic practices are already being transformed by just such a dialogue. To scaffold my remarks I will organize them broadly under four headings, concerned with (1) deindividualizing the self, (2) reorienting in dialogue, (3) “performing” psychotherapy, and (4) practicing resistance.

DEINDIVIDUALIZING THE SELF

One of the most deep-going challenges to the foundations of modernist psychology to be mounted by proponents of postmodern perspectives is the assault on the essentialized self (Kvale, 1992). Taking issue with traditional conceptions of the self as atomic, autonomous, and agentic, social constructionists argue that the self is constituted in language, understood as a situated and shifting symbolic order that structures our relationship to “reality,” as well as ourselves. Because the very terms in which we construe ourselves are cultural artifacts, our selves are deeply penetrated by the vocabularies of our place and time, expressing dominant modes of discourse as much as any unique personality. Indeed, “like a fetus floating in an amnion of culturally available signs, symbols, practices and conversations, the ‘self’ symbiotically depends for its existence upon a living system that precedes and supports it” (Neimeyer, 1998a, p. 140). In more radical forms, this view of the “saturated self” as populated by the contradictory discourses in which one is immersed
threatens the very conception of the individual as a coherent entity with identifiable boundaries and properties. From this more thoroughly social viewpoint, the pursuit of "self actualization," "self efficacy," "self-control," and the like in the medium of psychotherapy is at best a romantic delusion, and at worst a "cover-up for individualized alienation" (Newman, this volume).

Although a more profoundly socialized conception of self no doubt lends support to the communally-based, politically aware practices advocated by Holzman, Newman, and Burman, I find myself questioning whether this vision is antithetical to the conduct of individual (gasp!) psychotherapy. In particular, I find myself drawn to precisely the image of selves as "multiple partials," in Ken Gergen’s apt phrase, constituted by a shifting and provisional coalition of "voices" echoing the sometimes dominant, sometimes nurturant, and often contradictory discourses in which we are enmeshed. Far from vitiating psychotherapy, such an image can vitalize it, fostering the exploration and enactment of several relevant internal voices that might otherwise be subordinated to the demands for a falsely "unified" conception of self.²

An illustration of this was provided in my single session with Susan, a forty-two-year-old woman "haunted" by her "powerlessness" in the face of her mother’s lingering death by cancer some three years before. Acknowledging in experientially vivid language both the "ludicrous" part of Susan that battled against her mother’s inevitable death and the new "take charge" persona that emerged in her in the crucible of the caretaking, I suggested that she "reopen the conversation" with her mother about what still might need to be discussed with her. With encouragement, Susan not only symbolically sought her mother's understanding of her limitations in caregiving, but also "lent her mother her own voice" and enacted the litany of concrete complaints and demands that Susan had failed to meet. What evolved, as Susan moved back and forth between her own chair and her "mother's,"³ was a more complex, ambivalent, but also more emotionally resonant and touching dialogue than had been possible as her mother lay dying.

Equally important, Susan came to realize with some astonishment that her own newfound strength as a person was partly an appropriation of her mother's voice into her, which we formulated as a way of "honoring their connection, not merely with [Susan’s] words, but also with [her] life."
Significantly, we also "historicized" these valuable new developments in Susan's sense of self in the previously unfulfilled "expectations" of her held by not only Susan's mother but also her "strong and independent" daughters, and further anchored her shift in the reactions of others to her "new garment" of authority. In summary, therapy became a stage on which an old drama could be (literally) reenacted, in a way that permitted new themes to be consolidated and new character development to occur. Deindividuating Susan's identity in this way made possible the realignment not only of the relations among her "internal" cast of characters but also of her contemporary relations with the living others who populated her ongoing life.

REORIENTING IN DIALOGUE

Accompanying this deindividuated image of self is a postmodern affirmation of relationship as "the matrix from which meaning is derived. It is in the generation of coordinations—of actions, words, objects—that human meaning is born" (K. Gergen, this volume). Drawing especially on Bakhtin, Shotter in this volume argues eloquently that: "we continuously and spontaneously shape, build, or construct our performance in our daily affairs as we 'act into' opportunities offered us." Meaning, in this view, is what we achieve together in the course of coactivity that is dialogically-structured—even in its internalized form.

This "participative" approach to meaning construction is highly congenial to the practice of a "responsive" psychotherapy, one that seeks, in Shotter's words, to develop a "well-oriented grasp" of the therapy relationship as well as the "grammar" or "style" of the client's way of relating to others. An example of this arose in my work with Kaylin, a thirty-eight-year-old woman torn between her commitment to her husband, Kent, and her love for Thomas (Mascolo, Craig-Bray, and Neimeyer, 1997). In one therapeutic moment, Kaylin summarized her impasse in terms of a frozen metaphor, describing herself as "stuck in between," not feeling fully connected to either man. I spontaneously elaborated her description in more deeply-etched metaphoric terms, drawing upon a rock-climbing image that had been part of her experience with her "outdoorsman" husband. Like a climber facing a "wall" too high to negotiate in a single, unbroken climb, I suggested, Kaylin hung suspended in a hammock attached by petons to the sheer rock
face. Tired and uncertain as darkness fell, she was unable for a time either to continue her climb toward the summit, where she hoped that Thomas awaited her, or to descend to the familiar ground that was once her marriage.

Kaylin fell silent for a long moment, and then elaborated poignantly on her emotional dilemma: to let go of the marriage, which paralyzed her with fear, or to relinquish the relationship with Thomas, which felt like "giving up being alive." Significantly, she found herself returning repeatedly to the image of "dangling from the rock" in the ensuing week, and opened the next session with a discussion of the "precariousness" of her position and her sense of new stirring, though she was as yet uncertain in which direction it would take her. The joint elaboration of such therapeutic metaphors illustrates Shotter's recognition of the "impossibility of being able to trace the overall outcome of any exchange back to the intentions of the individuals involved in it." Meaning, in this case, arises in the intricate dialogical braiding of perspectives in our prreflective engagement with others, not in the solitary consciousness of client or therapist alone.4

PERFORMING PSYCHOTHERAPY

The ironic but liberating insight that the basic "reality" of human beings is that they are "pretenders" lies at the heart of Newman's and Holzman's performative approach to social therapy. As Holzman notes, the "capacity to be who we are and who we are not at the very same time is central to our practice." This nonessentializing stance undermines the totalizing identification of self with any given role, and gives impetus to activity-based initiatives that prompt communities of persons to transcend the limiting scripts they are offered by dominant social institutions. In Fulani's words: "despite how rare and undervalued performance is in our culture, we human beings can, fortunately, reinitiate our performatory capacities with surprising ease. It is the social identities that lock us into acting certain ways because 'that's how we are' that stand in the way."

But not all performances need to be as communal as the All Star Network, or as audacious as Mary Gergen's "Woman as Spectacle" to be liberating. Indeed, I would argue that a perspective on 'identity' as improvisational rather than impositional can inform individual, couple, family, and group therapy as well as more public performances. An
example of the power of performance was provided by my therapy with Bill, a divorced and remarried man seemingly unable to maintain anything beyond distant contact with his teenage daughter, Cassie, who lived in another state (Neimeyer, 2000b). Over the three years of his new marriage, Bill had reacted to Cassie’s reluctance to be in the presence of his new wife, Delanie, by carrying on a somewhat superficial but furtive correspondence with his daughter, though he found himself strangely “panicked” by the prospect of actually visiting her. This panic had intensified as Delanie had become increasingly insistent that Bill “put his foot down” and include her in his “secret relationship” with his daughter by mentioning her in letters, permitting her to add a note, or even arranging a “whole family” get-together.

As Delanie’s demands reached the level of a desperate ultimatum, Bill still found himself “unable to move,” even at the risk of “destroying” his marriage. Therapeutic movement was only made on this issue when I asked Bill to close his eyes and visualize Cassie and Delanie together, engaged in some routine activity in the home. After sitting quietly for a moment, Bill visibly winced, then opened his eyes and said, “I wanted to say it was wonderful, but I immediately imagined a fight between two stubborn people.” Rather than discussing this intellectually, I further guided Bill to reenter the scene and notice if anything else came up. Eventually, he reported an unbidden memory of Cassie at the age of nine, snuggling with him as he lamented her coming adolescence, when she would no longer want to sit on his lap and have him tell stories to her. In Bill’s memory, Cassie hugged him around the neck and reassured him that “whatever happens, I’ll still be your little girl.” Tears accompanied this recollection for both of us, as we sat quietly with this new connection.

Speaking slowly, I then attempted to capture the “emotional truth” of Bill’s current impasse in a sentence, which I wrote out on an index card and asked him to modify until it “ranged true” for him. Accepting my formulation without amendment, Bill then visualized Cassie’s nine-year-old face as she sat on his lap, and with my prompting, slowly repeated the scripted sentence to her: “As painful as this present standoff is, I would rather suffer this terrible distance from Cassie than to have her walk away, and never feel her arms around my neck, never hear her say, ‘I’m still your little girl.’” Choking on the word “arms,” Bill stammered out the sentence, and drying his tears, quietly noted that inhabiting this
position consciously "made me understand the things I’ve been doing in a whole different light."

The first steps toward mending the relational ties in his compartmentalized family spontaneously followed. Of course, a performative approach to constructivist therapy can also characterize group work, as exemplified by Sewell’s "multiple self awareness groups," in which members enact various roles scripted to reflect their internal "community of selves" with other members (Sewell, Baldwin, and Moes, 1998). As in Newman's social therapy, the therapist in this case functions neither as a psychoeducational trainer of the members in preferred skills nor as a passive interpreter of the group process, but as an active "organizer or facilitator of the group's emotive labor." The result is commonly a developmental process that, while not wholly predictable in advance, prompts new possibilities for relating to self and others.

**Practicing Resistance**

If there is a spirit that animates all of the contributors to this volume, it is one of resistance against the oppressive institutions that constitute "modern" psychology. Parker is particularly vitriolic in his denunciation of the "psy-complex . . . that dense network of theories and practices inside and outside the academy and clinic . . . [which constitutes] a dangerous and pernicious regulative apparatus." Burman adds to this critical thrust with her analysis of the methodological "fetishes" by which psychologists aggrandize power at the expense of their clients and subjects, and convert their political resistance to dominant discourses into individual psychopathology.

Not surprisingly, this critique is accompanied by an endorsement of social therapy as revolutionary activity (as in the work of Holzman, Newman, and Fulani), but also by a deep suspicion of individual psychotherapy as a purported aid to those in distress. Parker again states the case most baldly in his caveat that: "therapy operates as a domain in which critical reflection all too often turns into decontextualized 'reflexivity.' Reflexivity proceeds from within the interior of the self . . . [whereas] critical reflection traces subjective investments to networks of institutional power." From this perspective, the only ethically appropriate stance for the psychotherapist would be to resign her or his practice and take on the role of community organizer.
Upon (critical) reflection, I see no reason that this should be the case. Indeed, I am struck by the marginalization of fertile possibilities implied in Parker's binary distinction between "interior reflexivity" on the one hand, and "institutional critique" on the other. Altogether missed in this rhetorical dichotomy is precisely that relational field so capably cultivated by Kenneth Gergen and Shotter: the reflexive engagement in dialogical activity with concrete others. Surely, if a postmodern rebelliousness has wide relevance, it should be capable of inspiring such dialogical encounters, even in the medium of psychotherapy.

An illustration of this arose in the course of my therapeutic conversation with Alan, a young counselor who had felt a "stab" of malaise when he said to a recent client at the end of a session: "It's been good visiting with you." Noticing a slight trembling in his jaw when he repeated this expression, I asked him to close his eyes and attend to any "felt sense" in his body associated with this experience, and to describe it in an appropriate image. Alan offered a depiction of an "anxious, tight ball" in his chest, which when I invited him to loosen it, brought a tearful recognition of the "guilt" contained in its tangled mass. Further processing this tacit meaning, Alan placed it in a larger narrative whose central theme was his lack of "genuineness" in relationships, and the way this was painfully accentuated by his initial attempts to conduct psychotherapy.

As we "tacked" from this self-narrative to the social dynamics that sustained it, Alan linked his sense of insufficient genuineness to stern injunctions delivered during his early graduate training to maintain professional distance, which in turn replicated broader disciplinary and cultural discourses of psychotherapy as a scientific procedure delivered with a minimum of personal involvement. With our own emotionally intimate encounter as a salient counterexample, I then joined Alan in critiquing the dominant narrative of psychotherapy as an impersonal technical intervention and in exploring the hopeful possibility that his experience as a counselor might actually become a setting in which he could deepen, rather than constrain, his engagement with others.

Thus Alan's initially vague awareness of an anxious discrepancy between who he was and who he wanted to be had functioned as a "unique outcome," representing the first emergence of resistance against a dominant script of self-monitoring and restraint (Monk,
Winslade, Crocket, and Epston, 1996). Alan's case therefore serves as a reminder that a critical, emancipatory attitude can find expression in individual therapy as well as broad scale social action. It also underscores Shotter's warning about "the danger of focusing too narrowly on speech communication alone to the exclusion of the larger context of our involved bodily activity," where the first murmuring of protest might be "heard." Other practices of resistance in the context of psychotherapy can include such boundary-blurring acts as sharing respectful, change-affirming progress notes with clients, or directly challenging the pathologizing forms of diagnosis that reinforce professional authority while disempowering clients.

CONCLUSION

Like the meditation on Escher's Drawing Hands with which this essay opened, social-constructionist accounts have begun to deconstruct the image of the self as autonomous and self-created, achieving ever greater substantiality and depth as it inscribes its own identity in apparent isolation from the social world. In the place of this modernist dream, critical voices, drawing on a myriad of literary, philosophic, political, and feminist sources, have offered an image of deindividuated selves buffeted by the crosscurrents of the multiple discourses in which they are embedded. But as the more "affirmative" contributors to this volume have noted, these embattled subjectivities are also sustained by the relational engagements through which they find meaning, direction, and the prospect of mutual development. I hope that this same postmodern vision, and the spirit of performance and resistance to which it gives rise, continue to infect and inform the practice of psychotherapy.

NOTES

1. This meditation was inspired by M. C. Escher's familiar work entitled Drawing Hands, in which two hands achieve three-dimensionality as each sketches the other. The "nightmare" materializes as one hand takes up an eraser in place of the pencil. A visual exploration of the same theme has been provided by the graphic artist J. D. Hillberry.

2. This deconstructive moment in the dialectic of self-development is artfully captured in the lyrics of "Segnali di vita" [Signs of life] by the Italian singer, Franco Battiato: "Il tempo cambia molte cose nella vita/Il senso, le amicizie, le
opinioni/Che voglia di cambiare che c’è in me/ Si sente il bisogno di una propria
evoluzione/ Sganciata dalle regole comuni/ Da questa falsa personalità.” [Time
changes many things in life/ One’s direction, friendships, opinions/ That want to
change that which is within me/ It senses the need for its own evolution/
Unchained from the communal laws/ Of this false personality.]

3. For a constructivist discussion of “chair work” in therapy, see Greenberg,
Watson, & Lietaer.

4. Shotter is one of a small group of constructivists and social construction-
ists (Butt, 1998; Mair, 1989; Neimeyer, 1996) developing what might be
referred to as a “relational phenomenology,” drawing on the work of Merleau-
Ponty and Polanyi, as well as more familiar postmodern scholars.

5. This sort of visualization and enactment of the “pro-symptom position” is
artfully developed in depth-oriented brief therapy, a constructivist approach
that utilizes various forms of experientially-oriented “radical questioning”
(Ecker & Hulley, 1996).

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