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Abstract

"The Alchemy of the Word: Toward a Levinasian Poetics of Therapeutic Discourse"

What is the character of therapeutic discourse while patients engage with unresolved topics in session? How can the philosophy of Levinas, which Kunz (1998) has argued is applicable to the therapeutic context, assist in answering this question? Inspired by portions of deidentified transcripts excerpted from my own clinical work, I suggest that the discourse of trauma is a dialectic of silence and an extraordinary form of speech. According to a tradition traceable from Loewald (1960) to Stern (1983), this form of speech is aptly described as poetic. Yet this description complicates an effort to articulate a Levinasian account of therapeutic discourse, because the dominant interpretation of Levinas's aesthetics by Robbins (1999) and Hart (2008) states that Levinas is critical and even dismissive of any kind of art as a potential mode of articulating truth. Drawing on an alternative interpretation inspired by McDonald (2008, 2010) as well as a fresh investigation of Levinas's essays, I argue that Levinas's philosophy is in fact compatible with a "poetics" of therapeutic discourse. My ethical responsibility as a clinician arises, as Kunz (1998) has argued, unmediated from a "third dimension of height" (Levinas, 1987, p. 95), but this does not preclude the possibility that poetry, like art in general, may be the highest human mode that any of us has at our disposal to convey the tragic aspects of life which might otherwise remain unarticulated.