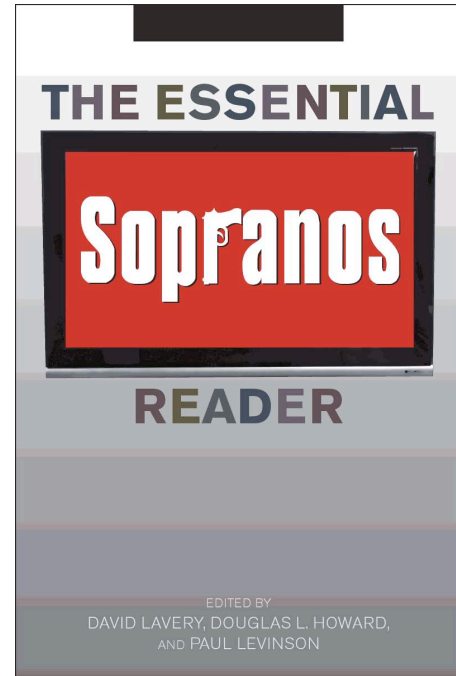


Bruce Plourde

Tony and Dora: Mastering the Art of Counter-Transference

Good Dr. Melfi, quite late in her association with Anthony Soprano, decides that this mobster patient of hers is more trouble than he's worth. Not only is Tony avoiding a sincere examination of his morality, but he is actively manipulating the therapeutic exercise to make himself a better criminal. While the persevering doctor continues to have hopes of accomplishing some fundamental change in the pathology of her star patient, she tolerates his lies, his excuses, and his rationalizations. Up to a point, she can overlook his failings because he delivers occasional glimpses of the exciting life he lives outside the office. While most patients drone on about their dull and petty problems, Tony mingles normal "family" concerns with hints of sex, crime, and underworld intrigue. During those several years of treatment, she gradually deduces that Tony is using her guidance for dishonest ends, and she periodically questions herself about this dilemma. And after she thus searches her soul, she resolutely does nothing about it. Only when she sees herself through her colleague's eyes, and feels the embarrassment of their gaze, does she opt to cut him loose. Publicly exposed before a jury of her peers as a mobster's therapist, she recognizes with horror that she appears an accomplice to his criminality. Judging herself as critically as she believes her circle of friends is doing, she finally produces an act of self-preservation that she could not have accomplished earlier, when the seduction of treating a crime boss trumped her other concerns.



It is that very seduction which has always played significantly into the therapeutic setting, and in more ways than one. Freud claims as much, and documents two kinds of seduction, in the case study of one of his patients he published in 1905. In this study, Freud does not use the word "seduction," simply because he would not verbalize the doctor-patient relationship in those terms. Instead, he uses the word "transference," which he describes as the process whereby the patient projects feelings or ideas onto the therapist. By acting as a kind of accepting surrogate, the therapist can "seduce" the patient into expressing freely the passions, fears, and other psychic energies contained within his or her interior space. Such a playing out of emotions can lead to a remedy of the patient's psychoses, but it can also become problematic, especially if the patient misinterprets the therapist's supportive posture, and blames the therapist for those vented emotions. As Freud declares, "Transference, which seems ordained to be the greatest obstacle to psychoanalysis, becomes its most powerful ally, if its presence can be detected each time and explained to the patient" (108). Accordingly, then, a therapist can seduce a patient into disclosure, as long as s/he then defuses the building emotions by making clear why the patient is feeling as s/he does.

The good Viennese doctor amplifies this explanation of transference in the case study of the young and attractive Dora, imparting to his audience the details of how he had unlocked the secrets of her psyche from a mere two sessions. Allowing her to play out her inner state before him, he diagnoses her main issue as repressed sexuality, resulting in hysterical, bodily responses. Reading her symptoms and her verbalized narrative, Freud deduces that she desires sex, not only with her father's partner, but with her father, too, as well as with the governess who works for her father's partner. She projects her sexual desire onto seemingly everyone around her, regardless of gender or stature. In his assessment, Freud even perceives that this virginal, bi-sexual nymphomaniac feels lust for him. Clinically, he states with professional confidence that "the idea had

probably occurred to her one day during a sitting that she would like to have a kiss from me" (66). In other words, through transference, this attractive teenager has decided to direct at the grizzled, middle-aged cigar smoker all of the sexual desires smoldering within her young body.

What Freud seems only to be partly aware of, and what Dr. Melfi also seems to dismiss, is that transference works both ways. Even a well-educated clinician has an underlying human interest, and a capacity to project thoughts and desires onto others. Such "counter-transference" can bypass the carefully constructed boundaries erected by the best of therapists, and create feelings and sympathies which arise from the therapist's own interior life. Unwittingly, Freud has documented this second kind of seduction in the "Dora" case study. Does Freud really think that the youthful Dora wants her two-time therapist to kiss her, or is he projecting his own desire onto this girl? And does Melfi really think that she can help Tony, or does she persist in working with him because she finds him so attractive?

The attraction that Dr. Melfi feels for Tony is as enticing as the attraction which Freud feels for his Dora. Freud plays out his fantasy through his therapeutic narrative, just as Melfi has her own moments of erotic supposition. But it is not just sexual appeal which makes these patients so alluring to their therapists. Both professionals in their fields, they also enjoy a professional challenge. Curing Dora of her hysteria would help to validate Freud's groundbreaking work in psychiatry, and suggest that, even if he could never know what women want, he could claim masterly insight into feminine psychology. For Melfi, the challenge lies in leading a Mafioso toward a renunciation of his immoral and pathological character. Should she find a way to convince the mobster that his life is in need of rehabilitation, she could validate her professional life, her talent as a therapist, and her very soul. That affirmation remains an imaginable possibility that stays ever just out of reach for her. Tony can be explosive and threatening, but at other times he can be docile and weepy; he tells stories of violence and crime, but he also expresses genuine love for his "family" family.

In some ways, he is so close to the kind of man who could lead a normal life – he is so close to the “dreamy” Kevin Finnerty – that Melfi is convinced substantive change is possible. As Dr. Margaret Crastnopol declares of such situations,

There might be instances where somebody's psychopathy could be unlocked and undone. And so the temptation of the analyst to try to make that happen . . . could be there and still have it be a worthy temptation” (Branswell).

This temptation is part of Melfi’s self-serving attraction to Tony. But, as Branswell also notes, therapists who recognize their human engagement with patients should be wary of allowing their professional ambition and their ego to influence their prognoses.

Melfi and Freud both rationalize their interactions with their patients as mere professional interest. Melfi, however, experiences a moment of humiliation, which forces her to confront a truth she has for so long resisted. Attending a dinner party with a group of fellow psychiatrists, one of the women present innocently mentions a study she had recently read. She explains that what caught her attention about this study, accredited to Samenow and Yochelson, was the revelation that therapy is ineffective in altering the sociopathology of criminals. In fact, the opposite is the case: therapy gives them tools to make them more articulate in their deceptions. Melfi, upon hearing this summary, feels inept, discovering that apparently all of her colleagues but she is familiar with this study, so pertinent to her own career. The public mention of this study is doubly damning since her confidante and therapist, Eliot Kupferberg, had mentioned the study to her in an earlier session, indicating that her continued work with patient Soprano serves no real purpose. After feelings of incompetence comes anger, as she assumes that Kupferberg has told the others about her situation, and that, in talking about this study, they are talking about her. In a sense, they *are* talking about her, especially after Kupferberg outs her in a drunken moment as Soprano’s therapist. When the specter of condemnation arises through the guise of the Samenow and

Yochelson article, and she feels the unspoken criticism of her peers, Melfi can no longer ignore her willful blindness.

Freud is more successful in his self-delusion. Sitting with Dora for their two sessions, he can persist in denying his own erotic feelings for this girl, even while he realizes that he is writing a study that, by its very nature, contains something of the salacious in it. In fact, he observes, as a kind of warning, that other unscrupulous therapists might read his case study of a young, sexually starved girl “for their private delectation” (Freud 3). Not him, of course, because he is ever a professional. But some of his brethren in the field would surely read his study as a kind of pornography. In point of fact, it does read as such in places, since the details Freud chooses to include read like a graphic coming-of-age novel. For example, Freud asks a direct question, and records Dora’s confession that she masturbates regularly. On further probing, she also admits to a factual knowledge of her father’s ongoing affair with his business partner’s wife, and she concedes that she enjoys the friendly affection she receives from older men. Throughout the text, in fact, there are many lewd and suggestive details which would (in 1905) make for rather prurient reading, and certainly reading unlike the typical case study. If he does manage to couch his reading of the feminine psyche in clinical terms, Freud finally cannot exorcise what lingers in the narrative, which is his own attraction to Dora, an attraction he attempts to disguise by transferring it to those disreputable therapists who would find the study titillating.

Just as Freud imagined, those prurient readers are also members in good standing of the APA. In *The Sopranos*, Eliot Kupferberg represents the kind of therapist who serves his own private delectation through the therapeutic situation. At first, he is one of the people who warns Melfi about the dangers of treating a psychopath, and who questions her motives for doing so. He suggests that she is living vicariously through her patient’s narrative, taking part in the world of mob violence and intrigue from the safe haven of the doctor’s office. But therapists can be like Tireisias, the prophet who could so clearly

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"see" the situation of Oedipus while remaining blind to his own condition. After a time, the warnings from Kupferberg dissipate, and Melfi's therapist begins to express concern for her in terms of how she is dealing with her mobster connection. In one scene, while still dealing with the trauma of rape, Jennifer bares her soul to her therapist. Listening to her express her highly charged anxiety, Eliot delivers the standard assurance and consolation before asking, "And patient Soprano? How's all that? ("He is Risen," 3.8). Not long after this moment, when he compassionately introduces mention of subject Soprano as a factor in her mental state, he drops all pretence and begins to ask outright what Tony has been up to lately. Melfi picks up on the change right away, and seems to accept that, in some ways, even her own therapist would be more interested in the mobster's life than in her own, rather conventional one. Later attempts to phrase his curiosity as concern do not deceive Melfi, as in later sessions she refers to Soprano as Kupferberg's favorite patient.

Melfi: As your favorite patient says, maybe I should put my shoe up her ass.

Kupferberg: Which patient of mine says that?

Melfi: Mine, Eliot. Your favorite patient of mine.

Kupferberg: Oh. [Reaching for his water bottle]. He hasn't been in the paper much lately.

Melfi: You miss that, don't you?

Kupferberg: My father was a rabid *Untouchables* fan. Make of that what you will.

("Stage Five," 6.II.2)

The long swig from the water bottle serves to deflect momentarily his patient's observation, but it also serves to confirm his oral fixation, satisfied as much by the flow of water as by the flow of the spoken narrative that includes mobster elements. Rather than answer her charge directly, he rationalizes his interest as a product of his father's habits, not his own. He cannot admit to a friend and colleague, and much less a patient, that her comment bears any truth value. At home, however, with no collegial pressures or judgments, he

trades the water bottle for a wine glass, and gives full vent to his fixation with mobster culture. Watching Geraldo Rivera's update about the possible successors to the imprisoned Johnny Sacrimoni, Kupferberg declares, "This Santoro thing, I called it a year ago" ("Stage Five," 6.II.2). He feels, yet publicly masks, the same intellectual curiosity in the gritty underworld that most anyone, even another therapist, might experience.

His curiosity – and so his humanity – does not make him a bad person or a bad therapist. It makes him normal: the rule, not the exception. Therapists of all stripe, like everyone, are sometimes able to blind themselves to objective reality, even when the evidence lies right before them. That blindness preserves the integrity of their egos by allowing them to affirm their service to the public good. Kupferberg can rectify for himself the conflicting aims of an interest in the mob and his concern for the well-being of Melfi. Remaining largely unexamined, his interests are not in apparent conflict. In the Dora case, too, Freud can label his patient as a frustrated, uncontrollably hysterical young girl with bi-sexual tendencies. At the same time, and with no apparent awareness of inconsistency, he can describe her as talented, gifted, and self-aware. She has an "intellectual precocity" (Freud 13) arising from her natural intelligence and good education. Also, as a young Viennese woman who keeps current with the world around her, she acknowledges a familiarity with Freud's work. As he reports, "She had already done some training in dream interpretation from having analyzed a few minor specimens" (56). She understands much, and exhibits a degree of control through that understanding, a fact which Freud recognizes but dismisses. Blinding himself to his own inconsistencies, Freud cannot see that Dora has made a fool of him by manipulating the very tools of his own profession, feeding him false information, and understanding what he might make of it.

Much of the substance of the Dora study involves the interpretation of two dreams. In the case of the first dream, her recitation of the details sounds sincere and honest, if brief. Her entire re-telling consists of five short sentences, leaving ample room for

Freud to fill in the gaps with interpretation. In those lacunae, he perceives that the young girl masturbates to excess, and that she wants to have sex with her father. Her response to his comments, as Freud tells us, is often "I knew you would say that" (54). At several points in his assessment, which he shares with Dora, she claims to have anticipated him. Later, during their second and final session, her narrative does not seem as unrehearsed as the first one. Dora relates the details of her second dream, rich in symbols and details that she assumes Freud will pick up on and interpret in a suggestively symbolic way. A letter, a train station, the woods – Dora includes several elements in which the author of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) would surely be compelled to find meaning. As Freud asks for clarifications while she relates the dream story, she interjects further, explanatory details, guiding him toward the reading of her narrative she hopes he will create. If she anticipates him during her telling of the first dream, she leads him down the royal road of deception in the description of the second dream. Then, after toying with him, she leaves, never to return. She has, for all practical purposes, ridiculed his methods and himself, but Freud never admits to this conclusion, interpreting her disappearance as fear of the truth.

Tony is playing out the Dora scenario through a longer time period. He learns a great deal about psychology over the years of sessions with Melfi, and admits as much to her in one of their sessions. Between the two feminine presences in his life (namely, Carmela and Melfi), he can piece together a better awareness of the issues which might impact his career. For example, he perceives, and interprets correctly, the latent hostility Christopher expresses for the boss in his film *Cleaver*. Thinly veiled as Tony, the mob boss of the film commits the egregious act of seducing the fiancée of a capo, and goes on, before film's end, to catch the avenging blade of a cleaver with his forehead. Melfi plays devil's advocate, suggesting that the movie might not be the wish fulfillment Tony makes it out to be.

Melfi: Without invalidating your feelings, is it possible that on some level you're reading into all this?

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Tony: I've been coming here for years. I know too much about the subconscious now.

("Stage Five," 6.II.2)

Like Dora, he has learned enough about the rules of Melfi's game to read with confidence the hidden impulses of his associates, which proves an asset in his life's work.

Dora is interested merely in playing a joke on Freud, a possibility that Freud himself admits to more than once: contemptuous of the authority of doctors, she may simply be "taking revenge" upon him, he writes. Tony, however, learns that he can sidestep his therapist's probity while taking something of value from her work with him. Early on, he applies the new ideas she shares with him – for example, allowing a man like Uncle Junior to think he is in charge – to improve his business situation. Manipulating the rules of the psychology game, he delivers what half-truths he must reveal to Melfi, while taking her sincere gestures of psychological insight as instruction for stabilizing his position as the don of North Jersey. He finesses therapy, like every other venture he is involved with, to create an opportunity for maximized return. For the opportunistic Tony, there is no other way to see human interaction but as a chance to gain an advantage.

Melfi: You can't control everything that happens.

Tony: But you can get pissed off.

Melfi: And then what? Lose control?

Tony: Who said anything about that? You direct your anger where it belongs.

Melfi: You have panic attacks. Panic occurs when feelings of anger, revenge, whatever overwhelm you. That's where behavioral therapy comes in. It can teach you to control those trigger points.

Tony: Then how do you get people to do what you want?

("Employee of the Month," 3.4)

Getting people to do what he wants is how Tony achieves ascendancy in every potentially beneficial situation, including psychiatry.

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Only after Melfi gets her wake-up call from her colleagues does she read him – and herself – most critically. In the session with Tony following her public humiliation, he begins to tell a story about his son, whose suicide attempt is costing him a fortune in private hospital bills. That story, for the now aware and watchful Dr. Melfi, soon turns into a clear example of the deceit and manipulation practiced by the criminals who inhabit the Samenow and Yochelson article. When he resorts to the old pose of the concerned father who would do anything to prevent the suffering of the children, and the crocodile tears make their appearance, Melfi has had enough. She is on to him, and she is tired of pretending. Dora abandons Freud after her second session, allowing him to continue to believe in his own genius. Tony, however, stays with Melfi long enough that she realizes the extent to which this man, whose luxurious life is built on the broken backs of others, has been playing her. In their final session, she reviews the substance of their previous years of therapy, consolidating his fabrications into their essence. In anticipating him, she bluntly reveals something that she has long withheld: that she knows the rules of his game as well.

Tony: He's really hurting, AJ.

Melfi: And you?

Tony: Well, you know, maybe, you know ... you know what? Forget his hurts. Maybe I should have just ...

Melfi: Put a shoe up his ass?

Tony: Yeah. Yeah, frankly. Ahh, we've talked about this.

Melfi: And talked about it.

Tony: Huh? Anyway, Carmela ...

Melfi: Mollycoddled him.

Tony: My old man ...

Melfi: Are you a shining example for the huge collection of wingtips and loafers that must be lodged up your lower bowel?

Tony: What's the matter with you? Is it because I said that about being divorced?

Melfi: You were saying? ...

("The Blue Comet," 6.II.8)

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As the discussion continues, Melfi is moved to avenge her anger by doing to Tony something he had done repeatedly to her over the years. Frustrated with herself, she projects that frustration onto Tony, and then immaturely criticizes him for her own crass behavior.

Tony: What's with the tone? You sound like you're glad I'm taking it on the chin.

Melfi: Maybe you're projecting hostile feelings.

Tony: Bullshit. If we had instant replay, you'd see it in two seconds.

Melfi: Well, we don't have instant replay.

Tony: I know that. Jesus Christ, you sound like my fuckin' wife.

Melfi: Your fucking wife?

Tony: You know what I mean...

Melfi: I don't think I can help you.

("The Blue Comet," 6.II.8)

Over the years, both Tony and Melfi have threatened to end their relationship, but this exchange makes explicit the fact that Melfi is sincerely done. The Dr. Melfi who had long validated her patient's feelings and indulged him in his whims has retreated into the woodwork of her office, replaced by this woman scorned. The statue of the female behind her, usually expressing Melfi's own open and accepting posture, is likewise replaced with a female statue assuming a closed, aggressive pose. With this angel on her shoulder, the doctor puts an end to their association with a brutal coldness that stuns even Tony, who, without any sense of irony, criticizes her for being "immoral."

If Tony is hypocritical, he is also right. Melfi, by processing and acting upon the emotions all people are prone to, finally takes pleasure in violating the social compact she has previously gone to pains to uphold. If she were to rationalize her actions, as Tony makes a practice of doing, she might claim her act one of just desserts. This action takes the shape of violating the trust of her patient, an act of poetic justice because it betrays the betrayer. Melfi exults in finally acting out the same selfishness and egotism she has watched Soprano exhibit for years. Despite the barriers and boundaries established by

professionals to prevent their loss of better judgment or their sense of proportion, they are finally people, too. As Svetlana Kirilenko put it, "People are people" ("The Strong, Silent Type," 4.10), even therapists. Every human relationship is, in psychological terms, a process of transference and counter-transference; every human ego requires some level of self-delusion and projection. People cast their own desires and dreams onto those closest to them, often failing to see the real persons instead of the persons they have conjured from their own expectations. As well trained as therapists are in reading the human condition, they can be misled, and they can persist in their denial. In Freud's case, he refuses to believe that Dora is manipulating him. As for Melfi, she has always known that Tony has lied to her, right from the first, when he explains a leg-breaking incident as "just having coffee" ("The Sopranos," 1.1). Over the years of truly trying to make him confront his most deep-seated issues, she has only been helping him find new ways to validate his worst sins. On realizing that her work for the good has been in the service of evil all along, the best remedy – for her, not for him – is swift and total closure.

As Melfi goes, so goes the nation: seduction turns to repulsion. The good therapist, who for years has embodied the audience's own reading of this provocative figure, cannot continue to tolerate her patient's bad behavior, and neither finally can we. We have (as David Chase states in an interview with Brett Martin) been allowing Tony to serve as our alter ego for years, living vicariously through his adventurous immorality. Yet, as the seasons progress, and we learn more about the character of Soprano, the creator Chase clarifies with ever more vividness the profound darkness of Tony's character, the selfishness and conceit which drive him, and the appalling lack of humanity which insulates him. We persist in watching and wondering, until Melfi allows us to recognize more clearly the relentlessness of this man's depravity. When she finally has had enough, we discover at long last our own intolerance. Our pleasure, and our attraction, has likewise turned to disgust, not only with him, but also with ourselves for our own complicity. With that realization comes our own

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embarrassment, and our subsequent abandonment of Tony. By the end, we acknowledge Chase's gesture to *The Godfather's* assassination scene, and we are willing to give him up. Dr. Melfi, our reader of Tony's true self, leads the way for us, turning from him with contempt, and refusing to be a partner any longer.