

The Autistic Sounds

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The rhythm of presence and absence: working in the emotional orbit.

This is a description of an analyst's imaginative work which proved to be helpful for an autistic child's mental growth, as well as reflections upon the rhythm of sounds that create safe spaces within the interactions between analyst and analysand during their work. What Bion defines as *selected fact* and its phenomenology in the analytic session has to do with the subjectivity of the analyst that renders the *symbolic action* possible by stimulating slight traces of proto-meaning. In relation to this issue, the experience of a meaningful object's presence and absence and the rhythmical interplay between those states is particularly relevant to what the recent post-Jungian research describes as the *emergent mind*.

The issue of presence and absence of the object in relation to the development of the capacity for symbolization is of paramount importance and widely discussed in the current literature.

The baby we have in mind is able to desire, that is, to desire *life*. In principle this implies the ability to represent or at least experience in a proto-representational way the absence of what is desired. Such an ability is by no means genetically ready-made. On the contrary, it is definitely learned and internalised and quite precociously becomes part of implicit schemas of functioning. Such an ability grows out of the emotional quality with which the absence of the object is actually experienced.

It is well known how absence may turn into catastrophe, or Bion's *beta state*. However, absence can become tolerable and thinkable, or symbolized if the absent object can be experienced as present in what I call the baby's *emotional orbit*. (Bisagni 2006) This is made possible by the presence of a mother who is not simply mentally metabolizing but is also emotionally well disposed within the subject-object encounter and able to actively give her child a core sense of existence.

Primal introjection is naturally a fragile process and needs countless confirmations. In particular, it

requires a certain quality of the object. *Mother* is not simply a transformative object, but is rather an object with a very particular orientation of its subjectivity towards relationship and the unfolding of life. If the Self calls for the object, it calls for the entire subjectivity of the object, mainly the object's wish to joyfully give life to the Self. In this respect every object relation is essentially inter-subjective. The good internalized object has to be regarded as a good internalized subject, a mindful and life-wishing object. This is the way we give a foundation to our minds, by discovering that the mind of the other exists, both helping and wishing for life, as is expected by the subject.

Such an expectation – that could be defined as preconception in Bion's terms – is what can be called, by developing Jung's model, the *unsaturated archetype*. In other words, the archetype conveys a series of expectations and orientations aimed at eliciting the object's response, and not complex representations and images (Bisagni 2008). Such an unsaturated archetype is the unfolding voice of the subject in dialogue with the other, and with the other's complexity of representations and identifications.

Anne Alvarez widens Bion's theory of thinking and maintains that thought is generated not only by absence but also by the modulation of presence, which is conceived of as a prerequisite for the acquisition of flexible and articulated, or non-catastrophic, modifiability of the object. The caregiver offers a constantly changing presence, full of dynamic flows and *temporal shapes*. "Modulation and regulation of presence is a task for the infant... which is probably prior to maintaining object constancy throughout absence" (Alvarez 1999, 193-194) This is what I refer to when I speak of absence experienced within the presence, the absent object being experienced within the baby's emotional orbit.

Moving from Alvarez's ideas on the dynamic qualities of the object, Maiello (2001) reflects further on the notion of temporal shapes as intertwined with her speculation on the sound-object (1995). Maiello suggests that the temporal shapes described by Alvarez and their rhythmical qualities "... belong to these deep levels of proto-mental interpersonal experience and have a bridging function in the transition from the state of non-mental, psycho-physical at-oneness to that of mental activity and

symbolic thinking” (Maiello, 2001. p.180)

Rhythm, as seen in the manifold manifestations of mother-infant interactions, shared attunement (Stern 1985), and the timing and prosody of music and poetry between babies and mothers (Trevarthen et al. 1996) are conceivable as the structuring element of temporal shapes and for the internalisation of basic trust.

As Maiello clearly states “... in autistic states, the experience of time is avoided. There is no awareness of a past, or a future, and, therefore, there is no present in terms of the perception of one’s own and the others’ presence...primary interactive rhythmical patterns seem to have broken down.” (2001. p.189)

The issue of rhythm, which is widely described in Stern and Trevarthen’s research, is also implicit in the model of the mind conceived by Michael Fordham. Fordham’s model can be viewed from a “structural” perspective. He described the Primal Self, a concept derived from Jung’s notion of Self, as a somatic-psychic unity in a steady, integrated state, that undergoes rhythmic movements of de-integration and re-integration. Respectively, these movements deal with the opening of the components of the Self to encounter the object and, subsequently, the re-establishment of a state of relative equilibrium and quietness where experiences are assimilated on a cognitive and emotional level.

I find that the structural hypothesis of an a-priori and integrated Self is questionable, both in the sense of conceiving of the Self as “the Archetype of the Archetypes” and in the sense of a saturated representation of “a steady-state Self.” Both look too much like old conceptions that assume a sort of primary non-object state.

Fordham’s deintegration-reintegration model shows its limits exactly in its being rooted in a structural theory that postulates an integrated Primal Self. This is seen as a structure that contains all archetypal potentials and at the same time as the agent of activation of the deintegrative sequences. In my opinion this is not adequate -- the integrated Primal Self is an axiom that is contrary to evidence of the early non-integrated state of the neonate.

Rather, the model of deintegration regards the dawn of new potentialities in individuals within their relational milieus, where the importance of the object in sustaining the process is crucial.

“deintegration and reintegration describe a fluctuating state of learning in which the infant opens itself to new experiences and then withdraws in order to reintegrate and consolidate those experiences. During a deintegrative activity, the infant maintains continuity with the main body of the self (or its centre), while venturing into the external world to accumulate experience in motor action and sensory stimulation.

(Fordham 1988, p. 64)

Let us suppose that such a sense of continuity, or this “centre”, is the outcome of introjection rather than an a-priori structure.

It is my view that by shifting the structural, oversaturated view of Fordham’s model in the direction of a more essentially dynamic conception, new perspectives may open. It is particularly so if we think of the fundamental rhythms of intra-psychic and relational psychic life, including the transference situation.

We should de-saturate the concept of the Primal Self, possibly bringing it closer to the view of Kernberg, who says that it is the sense of Self, with all its introjective determinants, that becomes a structure, i.e., the Self as agent, while no pre-ordinate structure from which the sense of Self supposedly emerges, actually exists.

If we take Fordham’s model in a dynamic sense, no matter what the “starting point” of the sequences he describes may be, whether a primal integrated or non-integrated state, then we can better highlight the interactive, interpersonal, rhythmic quality of this model.

We could describe a movement that regards the opening of the archetypal, unsaturated components of the mind as waiting for an encounter with the object, and subsequently re-establishing a state of relative equilibrium and quietness where experiences are assimilated on an emotional and cognitive

level.

Certainly Fordham's model could be substantially enriched if we go beyond his structural model and revisit the definition of Archetype itself, which I defined as the unsaturated archetype (Bisagni, 2008).

In general terms, and without either overlooking or underestimating the complex multifaceted causalities, autism can be conceived of as linked to a weak capacity of the Self to undergo the sequences of de-integration and re-integration. This could also describe the fracture of a rhythmic subject-object interplay. Following this hypothesis, which is pathogenetic and *not* aetiological and certainly not exhaustive, the role of the object becomes particularly relevant in stimulating subsequent psychic growth in the autistic subject.

Taking into account the importance of distinguishing rhythmical and stereotyped activities on a clinical level, and considering the onset of rhythm as the first promising awareness of interpersonal, dynamic and temporal shapes, the following clinical description is an attempt to describe such a process within the analytic encounter. The subjectivity of the analyst, in terms of the individual and specific expression of being a "reclaiming object", is at the core of the rhythmic outgrowth.

The contribution of neuroscience for the comprehension of dialogue, empathy and rhythm.

Whatever the causes of autism may be, and however likely they may remain manifold and obscure, autistic children show a peculiar vulnerability. They have an experience of a "liquid Self" potentially dissolved in the object, which typically activates rigid protections that further mutilate emotional contacts and cognitive growth. These children feel invaded by objects, which are experienced as if they could fragment the Self and tear it into small pieces. Aetiologically, the reasons for this are complex and multi-determined, though they certainly include some sort of genetic disposition which is not clearly detectable. Pathogenesis cannot be simplified either. Early traumatic experiences, such as early bonding with depressed or emotionally detached mothers, can occasionally be observed as additional factors of potential relevance, but only rarely can they be

identified - let alone proved - as the core element of the whole story. Micro-multi-traumatic conditions can be evoked as hypothetically involved, together with innate factors. Among multiple factors, we should not forget the short-circuit effect of desperate parents who are actually emotionally and relationally deprived by their unrelated children and cannot develop their parental competence through appropriate parental de-integration. Parents deprived of the amount of attention and relatedness they need, will in turn hopelessly deprive the autistic child and make his state more deeply isolated.

The only unquestionable fact is the huge number of impairments and deep difficulties that usually multiply themselves over the course of the lives of autistic individuals and heavily reverberate in all their relational contexts. Autism seems to be part of a wider phenotype, which is not always easy to describe because it is multi-factorial in essence. Definitely it is a dimensional rather than a categorical disorder, and of course there are a number of sub-categories of autistic-like traits that may be observed in people who are clearly not autistic.

Autistic children do have specific difficulties in understanding what others feel and believe. This obvious as well as mysterious feature has been related to a supposed deficit of the Theory of Mind (ToM) or at least in the imitation capacity, as imitation is a precursor to ToM. ToM becomes robust around the fourth year of life, while autism becomes clinically evident much earlier, so ToM deficit itself cannot be called a primary explanation of autism. Imitation and ToM bear some important resemblances, as both involve the capacity to translate from the perspective of another individual to oneself. When reading the other's state of mind we copy it into our brain and create a second order representation of the other's primary representation. Parallel to this, when we imitate we convert a plan originated from the other's perspective into our own. This is how imitation and ToM can be considered as linked to each other.

The *simulation theory* – as opposed to the so-called “*theory theory*” – is conceived of as the principal model through which ToM operates. According to the simulation theory children learn to

read minds by putting themselves in the other's shoes and then simulate what is likely to occur in the other's mind.

Consequently, we can hypothesize on the nature of autism that considers the centrality of profound damage in the formation of specific representations of the Self and of the Other. This would express itself in early impairments of imitation followed by a cascade of difficulties in emotional and attentive sharing, in the *as if* rhythmic interplay, and in all well known relational problems. Those imitation-like phenomena specifically related to autism, such as stereotyped behaviour and speech, echolalia and mimicked actions, that can be copied without actual links to their real goal and meaning, seem to contradict the hypothesis of an imitative deficit. Instead, as I will explain, they offer clues to the possible underlying neural dysfunction.

In this context there is the fascinating discovery of the so-called mirror neurons in the pre-frontal cortex of monkeys, which seem to be related to the capacity both to represent actions at a *supramodal* level and to bridge the more highly developed areas of visual and motor cortex.

As I mulled over this discovery in relation to my autistic analysand and my psychoanalytic position allowed me to imagine a kind of *dance* between seeing and doing. I remembered that mirror neurons evolved from the *hand being used to support speech* in humans, in what can be defined as a *pre-linguistic grammar of actions*. I found myself taking a totally free-association perspective, miles away from searching for a scientific grounding of my work as a psychoanalyst. Cross-fertilization does not mean epistemic confusion. But such a hand – word connection is rather intriguing in relation to the clinical situation I am about to describe, because the *hand and its sounds* were so terribly important in the development of both a dialogue between my analysand and myself and of his capacity to speak.

As a bridge between perceived and performed action and speech, it has been suggested that the mirror neuron system provides the foundation of the evolution of dialogue. Through processing visual and auditory representations mirror neurons are relevant in the relationship between words and their speaker and in the complexity of language as a whole. In this respect the possibility of

predicting and retrodicting the other's mental state through the construction in the mirror neuron system of the action's mental correlates is of paramount importance; it is what we metaphorically define as putting oneself in the other's shoes. (Gallese and Goldman, 1998).

It is equally relevant that this process requires an ability for controlled inhibition to prevent concomitant execution of the observed action -- an ability that cannot but sound familiar to psychoanalysts. Automatic copying is prevented in high level representational processes and in the meaningful exchange of social information, which does not occur in autism, where mechanic and meaningless repetition of actions and sounds is so commonly observed.

In fact, a wider spectrum of actions and mental states can be related to the activity of mirror neurons. Emotional states linked to mimicry can activate pre-motor firings in the observer and the corresponding retrodicting emotional states. This may give rise to various inter-subjective phenomena, such as emotional contagion, which is well known from the studies on mental functioning in primitive societies and mass phenomena, where, for instance, people automatically take the others' position or mood.

In addition, the capacity for sharing attention is conceivable as a precursor to full ToM. In shared attention, the attentive focus of each individual mirrors the other as he focuses on the object in a specific moment. This is also related to the evidence of deficits in various capacities commonly observed in the early developmental stages of autistic children. For example, the capacity to identify the focus of the other's attention, or to be able to attract the other's attention to the focus of one's own attention is another example of putting oneself in the other's shoes that is so crucial to our reflections.

Previously we were talking about imitation in monkeys where mirror neurons were discovered. Monkeys show a general capacity to understand social behaviour of other individuals. One may speculate that the evolution of imitation in humans possibly incorporated a mirror neuron system, though it may have been used primarily in the context of general elementary behaviour. Certainly in humans the role of mirror neurons in developing imitation and a full ToM is more likely supported

by the development of more sophisticated representational capacities as compared to those we see in monkeys, because of the greater development of cortical areas in humans. (Gallese, 2006)

In any case, whether based upon endogenous or exogenous factors, the hypothesis of an impairment or altered regulation of the mirror neuron system in the genesis of some autistic traits is fascinating. However, there is no simple answer, and nothing can be traced back to unique or simplistic causes. In fact, it is possible that we will never be able to say exactly why *that particular child* has become autistic.

The above reflections began by considering the liquid Self of autistic children and their experience of dissolving into the object unless rigid and even more mutilating defences are developed. Of course, this is if we infer this and metaphorically name what has no name. This is the starting point of Tustin's pioneering work on autism, calling us *subjects* in front of *subjects-to-be*, which remains at the core of our possible dialogue with the autistic children, and beyond any theoretical speculation.

Presently, we have nothing at our disposal except, perhaps, psychoanalytic or neurological metaphors to help us in our attempts to describe and interact with such subtle states of non-mind, and to orient ourselves within the obscurity of numerous and undetectable aetiological factors and pathogenetic paths.

Any scientific contribution to our understanding of human interactions should be carefully taken into account as we try to avoid the risk of placing causalities more and more backwards in time, thus maintaining a dangerously deterministic perspective. Instead, science and its methods should help us become more and more aware of complexity, and of not knowing. What is infinitely small and past is infinitely complicated and obscure. Nothing is elementary in mental life.

Daniel's song-and-dance

Among the innumerable factors involved in autistic states we may refer to that peculiar and complex multi-sensory and mental interaction that Meltzer (1986) calls "song-and-dance", which under

normal conditions enables one to internalise a rhythmic object, made of trust and safety. Upon such a rhythmic object the development of symbolisation and language is founded. Opposed to this, the insufficiency of the internal rhythmic object in autism is linked to relevant damage in what Bion describes as the container-contained relationship.

Daniel, my young analysand who taught me more about autism than anyone else, had been autistic since the age of two. He had developed specific symptoms after his little sister's birth, when his mother remained out of the home with the newborn child for three weeks. When she returned Daniel's clinical situation had become dramatic, and then stabilized over time, fulfilling all the criteria for an unquestionable ICD and DSM diagnosis of Autistic Disorder. When Daniel began his analytic work with me on the basis of four weekly sessions he was four years old. He showed many stereotypical gestures, totally avoided eye contact, had almost no verbal language or any sphincter control, and exhibited prolonged disintegrative crying reactions in response to the slightest frustrating situation. He slept in his parent's bed – exactly in between them - and had developed a series of tyrannical behaviours that made them think of him as a “powerful giant”. His parents lived in a complete state of resignation, in a totally mindless attitude of slavery, which in turn deepened his isolation.

Daniel – as far as I understood over the years – was not a passive-undrawn autistic child, but rather an actively withdrawn child. Somebody who had - if I am allowed to say this – the vital energy to say *no* to life, as if life was more dreadful than death.

Possibly thanks to Daniel's vital inner resources, quite a lot was gained after many years of analytic work. Daniel became able to use a certain amount of verbal language in a non-echolalic way, he developed sphincter control and his sensuousness decreased in his activities. Generally speaking, his play became more symbolic. He is now quite able to recognise that people exist, and are not simply an amoebic extension of his body. More and more frequently moments of a true relationship have come to the fore, in the sense that we commonly define this word in everyday life.

As for me, I think I progressively learned to talk in a better way to him and to better get in touch

with both his mental and non-mental states. Most crucial of all, I learned to bear that I often couldn't understand anything at all.

I learned to tolerate our blind silence, our mutual non-existence, and to avoid certain stereotypical psychoanalytic interpretations that are the language of despair. Here I want to run the risk of looking *naïve*. I must underline how important it was for me to use my developing technical skills as a psychoanalyst more openly, and to overcome the use of certain rigid and old-fashioned meta-psychological dogmas. Most importantly, I learned to both show and use my human experience as a whole, including my cultural passions, my music, my movements, my pain and my joy, and above all my imagination, as an active tool to gently *violate* my analysand's isolation – in other words, whatever could make me be more overtly human. These were the only things I had at my disposal to become a reclaiming object and to host the selected fact without losing my essential psychoanalytic boundaries.

Daniel learned to speak and – more or less – be in relationship. Discontinuity of every acquisition was nevertheless obvious, more than with any other analysand. Always present was the possibility of going backwards in time, or should I say, out of every time.

The medium of our relationship and the vertex from which I will consider the clinical facts I am about to report are *sounds and rhythm* and the extensively variable degree of body involvement and participation in sounds and rhythms. Both acoustic and kinaesthetic levels were intertwined.

I'd like the reader – given the limits of printed words – to try to put him or herself in the same state of mind as when listening to music or watching a dance -- perhaps primitive music, but music nonetheless. Or – if we try to imagine a dance – to conjure up German Expressionism or Isadora Duncan or Mary Wigman, or perhaps some ritual dance of a primitive people. It is my hope that this will make my descriptions a bit more pleasurable to read.

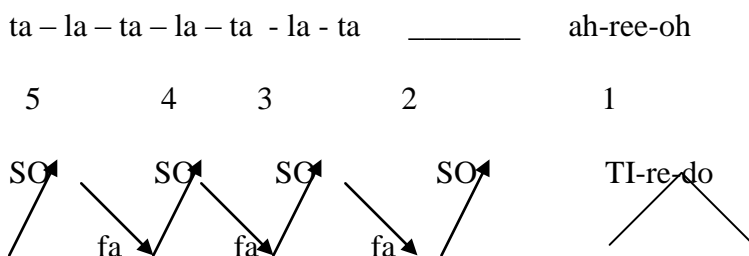
First picture. Rhythmic sounds with no body accompaniment.

At the time of the following clinical vignette my analysand could not yet speak, although he was

already five years old. Only some vocalisations were present and recognisable as proto-words, possibly expressing some elementary emotional states or indicating objects like faeces, urine, mother, pain or discomfort. Every now and then Daniel produced sounds that because of their organizational shape could be defined as “melody”. One organized sound seemed to be typical and I learned to recognize it over time as different from a number of other sounds that remained indecipherable, or from those expressing a clear emotional sense, like *fear* or *rage*, or from others that were openly stereotypical, like the *voice-of-a-scolding-adult*, etc. Obviously, the sound universe of a non-speaking child is variegated and full of voices.

The one that I wish to describe right now is a kind of sound with a *definable rhythmic component*. Repeated hundreds of times and often with an exhausting quality, it seemed to have a *soul* or at least some sort of emotional significance. Some experience with music – or having a keyboard at one's disposal - will help my reader follow what I am about to describe.

First I will try to graphically reproduce this short piece of melody:



Thanks to the fact that Daniel, tireless as only autistic children can be, made me listen to this melody countless times, I gradually realized that the notes were clustered in two series: the first included the succession SO – fa, and after a brief pause, the second included the sub-group TI – re –do.

The first group's rhythm is 4/4 with each note 1/8. The second group has a 2/4 rhythm, with the first two notes 1/8 while the third is 1/4.

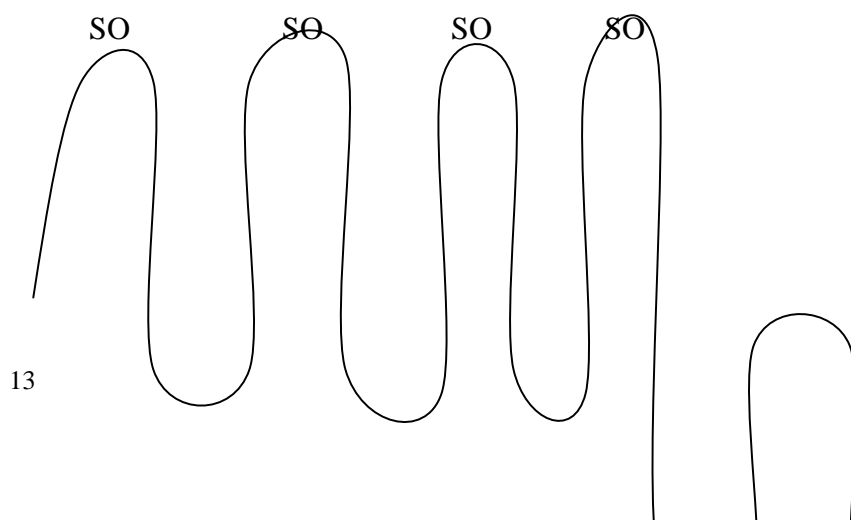
At first it was not difficult for me to reproduce notes and rhythm on my piano keyboard and play the melody again and again. Gradually, I realized the succession of peaks and vales in the first series - precisely four peaks with a concave – convex alternation - sounded quite interesting. Then there

was a pause, a new peak followed by a *fall* to a *definitive* concavity, or the final note of 1/4. Nonetheless, for a long time I could not reach a conclusion that would make sense to me. I asked myself why I called it a *fall*, and if there could be a link between the long *fall* note and Daniel's need to always start the succession of notes from the beginning over the course of many months.

Eventually, after a lot of fruitless thinking, I became quite conscious that I was producing a fantasy that this sequence could be the equivalent of a hand.

To be precise, if one draws the contour of a left hand with the right hand, then starting from the little finger, one can see four peaks corresponding to the fingers with the concavities between them, followed by the pause, which is represented by the big concavity between the second finger and the thumb. Then the other peak (the thumb) followed by a long concavity with "no wall" could potentially represent the anxiety of *falling into the void*, which could in turn justify the need to replicate the whole process within a wider rhythmic succession: "sing – no sing".

For those less skilled than I might be with sounds, I have tried to graphically represent this melody or sequence of sounds. I thought of the hand conceived by the mediaeval artist Guido of Arezzo as a tool to calculate the changes in the hexachord when melodies exceed its extension. At the same time, I was asking myself if psychoanalysis requires the continuous creation of new melodies, without forgetting the previous ones, but with an interplay between similarity and discontinuity.



Pause re
fa fa fa
TI do

Graphically, this is what I could call the *sound-hand* of my young analysand. With no clear answer to my own question, I hypothesized whether or not the difference in the three notes representing the thumb (which were higher than the previous ones) might have indicated the relevance of the thumb, particularly in its prehensile function, and of its possible link with both the containment – feminine features and the operational – masculine ones.

Apart from using the word hand quite frequently with my analysand (mainly in connection with the concept of “help”), this fantasy of mine did not actually result in any specific communication or interpretation I made to Daniel. But to me it was relevant that he had succeeded in making me produce images about him and more exactly, images-sounds-words in my mind that helped me in trusting our capacity to develop communication. Actually, he gave me a hand to give him a hand. It is quite significant that years later, when Daniel started to draw entire human figures, including himself, big and open hands were always present in his drawings, and always in some way in the foreground.

I can hereby refer to what Freud called *Instinct to Master* (*Bemaechtigungstrieb*), which he regarded as a very important aspect of ego organization. By this expression Freud meant a non-sexual drive, which can subsequently get inserted into the psychic organization of sadism and masochism. Its aim is to dominate the object through strength, and it is linked to *the pleasure of mastering one's body*.

More recently, and from a different conceptual vertex, G. Haag reminds us how babies contemplate their hands in the course of the second trimester of life, and how playing with the hands shows manifold symbolic components, such as a penetrating component (thumb and fingers) as well as an enveloping component (the caressing of mouth and nose). The hand and its activities at the

beginning of life represent the totality of the relationship with the nourishing mother. (1988)

We have evidence that this is not just a memory trace of the breast as satisfactory object, either nutritional or sexual. The hand also represents all those visual - affective components and psychic changes that come into play in the communication between mother and child as a whole. The thumb in particular represents both the nipple and the penetrating interplay of the gaze between mother and child. This is clearly part of the more “masculine” element in relation to the breast.

The hands playing with each other represent and re-play the whole mother-baby relationship. One hand is the mother, the other is the baby.

Around four or five years of age, drawing the hand contour becomes particularly important. In deeply disturbed children we notice how hand drawing may increase the working through of early traumas.

The function of covering the object can be envisioned as an envelope, with its prototypical meaning as container. This in turn can be understood as relating back to the original experience of the skin as linked to the formation of mental space, and the building up of the internal skeleton, which is the core-structuring foundation of the unfolding Self

We may imagine the adventures with the thumb: the thumb as nipple-eye, the phallic thumb as baby-penis, and so forth, with the skin having a main containing feature and the thumb a prevalent projective quality.

According to Haag, autistic children show a peculiar lack of finger *contour*, a lack of continuity, and the presence of holes, which may be traced back to the experience, for whatever reason, of a maternal container experienced as damaged.

In contrast, rhythm and continuity are signs of a stable internal container, which is the foundation of a cohesive and solid sense of Self.

In order to better clarify the issue of rhythmic and springing language versus autistic withdrawal, I would like to comment more directly upon another of Daniel's clinical vignettes from the sound vertex.

... meanwhile, Daniel moves to the wash basin and after a few attempts he manages to open the water tap. He watches me as if needing help to open the tap, saying "a...te..." , at times more clearly "water"... I comment on his wish to find his water again ... and to find me, too... after so many days of not having seen each other...I realize I take too long helping him open the tap.

... the situation changes and after having opened the tap he seems to be markedly isolated. He apparently loses contact with me, and suddenly I do not know where to find him...

He "sings" ...making sounds with an ecstatic quality, in terms of a melodic, acute succession of notes (two notes: high-low) while slightly touching the water and wetting his hair. In the meantime he grasps some hard plastic animals, holding them tightly.

While this sequence slowly takes place I make a sort of vocal accompaniment ... and I have a distinct feeling at that at the moment I do not exist for him ... if I went out of the room, possibly he would not even realize my absence... but I assume it might not be completely so, and (almost without realizing it) I myself start singing ... "water... water... soft... soft water..." (making high notes) and "hard...hard animals..." (making low notes).

Notwithstanding my attempts, my *making sounds* does not produce visible effects on this occasion. So I find myself confined to echolalia and isolation. Something – and, of course, it is quite difficult to say exactly what – goes wrong between the two of us, beyond my will. However, Daniel seems not to completely lose the experience of some *sense*, placed in some *place* that I do not know and that I am not able to reach. *My problem.*

My understanding of the effective beginning of this session, when Daniel was assertively trying to have his water, and eventually got it and named it, was that he was "present" and that I was present for him as well. Had he had words at his disposal, he might have said something like... "I want *you* (as a) *breast*... I want to drink *you*..." So I assume here quite a complex object relation, in the context of tri-dimensionality, where projective identification may be inferred as the prevalent mode of

functioning.

I hypothesize that I possibly waited too long in helping him to open the water tap, similarly to a mother who *narcissistically* waits for the baby to be the *totally* active one in searching for the breast. In fact, satisfaction does not work, and things suddenly change. Daniel starts to use water as a soft protection, with an uninterrupted extension of the surface contact from the inside of his mouth to his face skin and his hair and hands. Adhesive identification seems to prevail here. The hard toys in his hands work to provide a sense of solidity for him; the animals are not chosen for their representational meaning.

However, a complete dismantling does not seem to be operating at this point in time, which I think may be relevant in relation to my subsequent stress on the ecstatic element as described below.

As I understand this situation, there is not a deep or extreme fragmentation into perceptual bits, which might be massively denied and evacuated. I fantasize, in fact, that if Daniel had had words for this second situation, he might have said “something”. Something and *not* nothing. Something like: “*I am (in) a liquid fog... Fog sings two sounds*”.

This is linked with my impression at that particular moment in the session: I felt as if I was vanishing for him as he was going away, going to *some place that I did not know*.

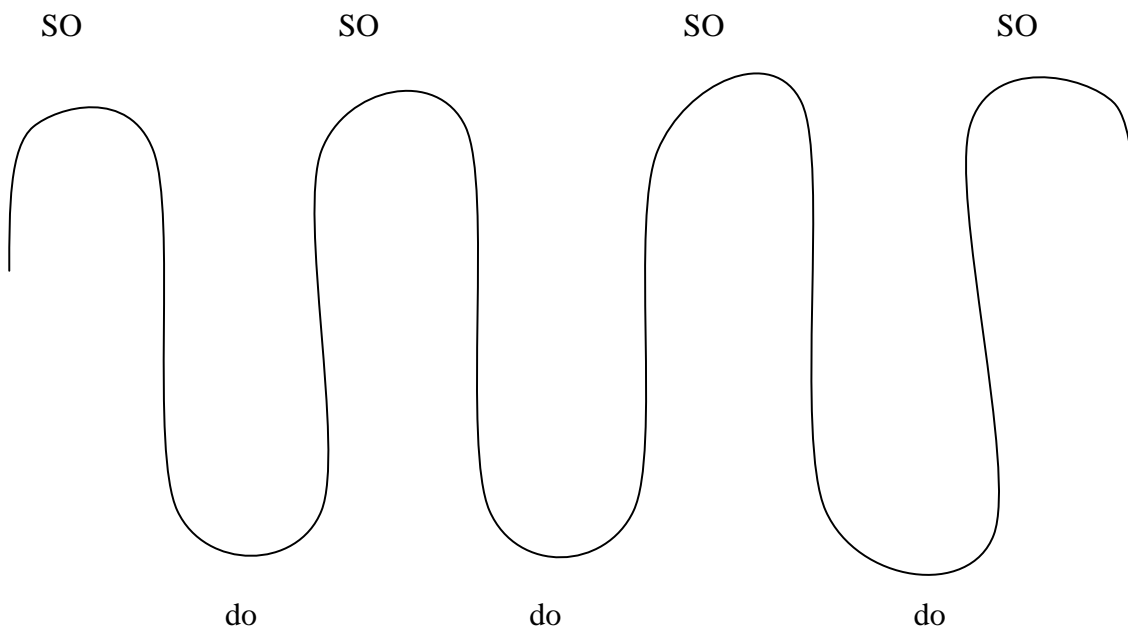
As I wanted to expand my understanding of this piece of analytic interaction, I now considered and re-examined the sounds.

First of all, the sound of Daniel’s music showed a very simple melodic feature, a sort of “binary” quality... *high-low...up-down*.

Secondly, the music was able to evoke in myself an emotional response in the area of “exclusion”. Daniel seemed to be present in a *somewhere* that I did not know, rather than in a meaningless *nowhere*.

Thirdly, although it was repetitive and poorly varied, it was definitely pleasurable to listen to, and not at all boring. As a whole it showed the emotional quality of “ecstasy”.

The binary oscillation may be graphically expressed like this:



If I remember correctly the interval between the notes was *a fifth*, possibly indicating a proto-representational potential for a sufficiently amplifiable space. Such an interval was constant, and my impression was that the succession of notes might have been potentially endless. Circularity was clearly perceivable and tended not to leave room for the perception of the void (the latter being the element that was possibly dismantled)

Every possible space of absence was not representable, perhaps as a consequence of the frustration Daniel experienced because of me as a real object when I waited too long to help him.

This marks a meaningful difference compared to the previous sound-drawing of the hand, which was endlessly repeated as a defence against an intrinsic perception of void-fall. It is important to note that repetition is not simply a defence; rather, it is the rhythmic search for an adequately responding object. The final note in the *hand* succession was prolonged but ended abruptly just where the thumb came to a potential nothingness, and there was a pause between the first set of notes and the three final notes.

In this second example circularity is more evident and the denial of the void more massive. We may

notice a precise rhythmic alternation which shows some kind of “organizing” quality, which is very different from both the chaotic and amorphous noises and the more typically stereotyped sounds.

Such a view may be supported by my counter-transference, that evokes the sense of a *subjectively undetectable somewhere*, and not of an *objective* meaninglessness. The quality of ecstatic pleasure indicates the nature of such a “*somewhere*” where the patient *is* at that particular moment. *He is there*, not me. So where is he?

What kind of object is supposedly implied in this peculiar state of mind?

Of course, such an object is unknown, and definitely not representable. So we may just try to say something *par approximation*.

It seems quite clear that the object here has the quality of an *absolute*, where *absence* is denied, and that it has an undulating – pulsating character within a circular, temporal dimension. The sound does not describe fractures; rather, it includes a possible forecasting of the future.

One may know and possess what comes next. In other words, the *absolute and eternal mother*, which is the only absolute future we can fantasize.

Of course, the use of the term ecstasy may sound totally inappropriate, and it certainly is inappropriate if we refer to the sophisticated symbolic representations of mystics and shamans. But the word *ecstasy* actually comes from the Latin *ecstasis* and from the Greek *écstasis*, meaning *distraction of the mind*, which in turn is derived from the verb *existemi*, “coming out of oneself”.

The term describes a state of isolation or mental widening within the individual, who becomes absorbed in a dominant idea or a special emotion. For the mystics this is the state where the soul comes into direct connection with the supernatural. The “spirit” seems to be out of the world, and out of the body itself, so that it is no longer prevented from being in touch with the ultra-mundane elements.

Therefore, perhaps the term ecstasy is not that inappropriate if we think of the overwhelming beauty and joy that may accompany the encounter with the object, as witnessed by innumerable psychoanalytic observations of small infants when met by their mothers. This *is* ecstasy, describable

in terms of being *brought out of oneself to a foundation of oneself*, other than what previously existed.

Given the fact that we are talking here about primitive states of *mentalisation* that possibly come into being within the analytic encounter, and more specifically, that we are considering the specific transference phenomenology of an autistic child, we may perhaps talk of “*écstasis from nothingness*.” This may mean to be brought out of the liquid – dismantled state, in order to potently meet an object which potently solidifies the Self through sound rhythms and temporal predictability, where the absolute is a requirement for any possible growth.

I wish to stress that I am not speaking in terms of omnipotent fantasies. This is “simply” a potency of the mind, at times able to repair the most extreme and fragmented conditions we may experience. Again, this potency is not based upon a specific “interpretation,” but rather upon an imaginative effort on my part, as I tried to better attune myself with Daniel, and as I attempted to provide representations to his manifestations, and tried to better understand his different linguistic and proto-linguistic levels.

Second clinical situation: radial dance

Maiello describes how the rhythmic elements of song-and-dance have a containing function, while at the same time introducing some patterns of discontinuity and change. If we assume – following Meltzer – that the first manifestations of imagination in the prehistory of mankind may have manifested themselves through music and dance, then, as Maiello hypothesizes, this can be true also in each individual’s prehistory, or pre-natal life. From this perspective, mental development is grounded in a basic trust of a rhythmic object that must be internalized safely in order that joyful

and creative variations might take place. (1995)

According to Maiello, the perception of rhythmic maternal sounds during pre-natal life may constitute the basis upon which the foetus gets prepared to receive the sound and rhythm of the maternal voice, together with its enormously complex articulations of colour, volume, timber and rhythm. The maternal voice conveys her emotional states moment by moment, as well as the complexity of her very being, which is the outcome of multiple identifications and multi-generational relationships. This voice contains the melody line and the linguistic pace that will become the child's mother's tongue, his original reservoir of verbal representations, which will be able to tell and to hide innumerable emotional stratifications and experiences throughout life.

Of course, these proto-typical experiences of rhythm in foetal life become more articulated after birth. This happens every time the mother rocks her baby, sings a lullaby or simply interacts with the baby in the back and forth of presence and absence, within the complexity of visual-affective attunement, and within the interplay of sudden fractures of relationship as compared to moments of good contact between them.

Returning to autism, where we assume that such fundamental interplay is damaged, it becomes essential to observe the unfolding of rhythm within the analytic relationship, and to distinguish vital and structuring rhythm from all kinds of meaningless repetitions.

I will now describe two different situations where there was a great deal of body movement.

Daniel moved around in the analytic room in many different ways, of course. One situation was quite frequent, and to some extent, considering his vocalizations and mimicry, it may be defined as frankly "manic". The issue of "mania" in psychic development is terribly important -- and particularly important in autistic children.

"... he frantically shakes his head, and runs across the room with no aim or precise direction... like a ball... he looks unstable and uncoordinated... at times he knocks against the furniture and the walls and seems not to realize it... his movement seems aimless and endless... he has a fatuous smile, at times he laughs loudly and vocalizes incongruously... he looks quite excited and conveys a

sense of being confused and unreachable, almost mindless ...”

These kinds of situations are manic in a generically phenomenological sense. Mania, in the strictly psychoanalytic sense, is quite a sophisticated mechanism that implies a certain representational level, a certain mixture of paranoid or depressive anxieties with those complex correlates of object relations that involve the triumphant, despising, omnipotent attitude waiting for the object to be drawn back to life after having been easily annihilated, and so forth. All this implies quite a developed ego and quite a complex representation of the object, which is frankly hard to assume at Daniel's stage of development in the session I described above.

But beyond these theoretical foundations and following Alvarez's speculations, I definitely understand manic states as having potentially great therapeutic and developmental value, in addition to the states of illusion and grandiosity. The bursts of happiness, idealised states and glimpses of ecstasy often describe a vital turning point within the analytic encounter, in terms of a here-and-now experiencing something *new* getting-in-touch with a live and reclaiming subject-object. The manic-like position of the analyst is equally essential in this respect, where a certain amount of *idealizing transference* towards the analysand is an ingredient we actually cannot avoid, if we want to keep trust alive.

As compared to Daniel's ecstatic *two-note* song, his supposed manic behaviour of frantic movements and disorganized sounds should be understood in terms of dismantling, as Meltzer defines it. In this process, bits of the perceptual apparatus are disconnected and uncoordinated and move within and along the motor system in a non - inhibited way. This could be described as the reversal of what - according to Freud - happens in dream work. In that context adhesive identification is prevalent, while in manic mechanisms, which actually include projective identification, only secondary bi-dimensionality is observable.

The counter-transference response here tells me that he is not *somewhere else*; rather he is *nowhere*, confined in a sort of an endless and shapeless *no-place* of senseless bits of body and mind.

In order to further clarify the ecstatic - organizing quality of sounds and dances and their

evolutionary potential, I now want to describe a situation that looks rather different, which repeated itself many times in the course of Daniel's analysis.

"...he moves around with quite a happy expression... some sweet vocalizations... as if he were singing, though I cannot detect any precise melody... the sound resembles a caress that accompanies his movement... he seems to describe a particular and organized movement... back and forth... close to me... distant... then close again... like moving along a continuous series of bends, keeping me as the fulcrum of his radial movement..."

Again I try to describe this movement graphically.

Daniel's movement in the room





Analyst

Daniel's movement is always from the left to the right, and he repeats it many times from the beginning, over and over again. I rhythmically accompany Daniel's movement by saying "...*you go away from Francesco.... You come close to Francesco... come and go... come and go...*"

Again his ecstatic expression is quite evident, with the same features that I described above. The quality of his movement, its pace and gentleness, makes it possible to define it as a dance. This is the dance made of closeness and distance, rather than confusion and expulsion. This is the recreation of the *orbit* where absence and presence are balanced.

The analogies with the sound line that I previously described as a hand seem to me to be quite clear. Of course, and again, this is according to my fantasy. Certainly I think it is particularly meaningful that I am the hub of this radial dance, a sort of stabilizing fulcrum. One may hypothesize a correspondence between the primordial element reached through ecstasy, and myself. This is the transference *in statu nascenti*.

In the SO-do sequence the musical component seems to describe continuity rather than discontinuity, the immobile constant rather than the transformative. This is quite similar to what in Baroque Music was the *Basso Continuo*.

The radial movement as a whole was a variation, representing discontinuity against chaos.

The emergent mind.

Without overlooking differences and specificities, as well as the different stress upon the intra-psychic versus the inter-personal dimension of object relations, my attitude is to give value to the cross-fertilizing contributions of post-Kohutian Psychoanalysis and the Bionian approach to object relations. Some post-Jungian contributions also seem to me to be particularly valuable, after the pioneering work of Michael Fordham on autism and the *defences of the Self* (1976). In this frame of reference, defences are seen as lame tools to cope with the danger - safety spectrum that the Self continuously experiences in response to the object's attitude. Again, the entire position of the object, whether external or internalised, is deeply involved.

In addition, I am particularly referring here to the more recent Jungian speculations on the issue of the *emergent mind*, which is linked to the research in the field of neuroscience. (Cambray, 2006 - Wilkinson, 2006)

When exploring the phenomenology of psychic facts beyond the epistemic limits of the causality principle, the notion of the emergent mind has much in common with Bion's *selected fact*. This has deep implications for the definition of development as a whole, both in the conceptualization and clinical use of interpretation, as well as the role of the analyst's subjectivity.

Emergence is a concept drawn from Complexity Theory of dynamic systems. It refers to the interactions between agents which produce results that operate at a level of organization above that of the agents themselves, and beyond that which can be explained by study of the individuals involved. Such self-organization does not require a pre-formed template, nor does it depend upon direction by a supraordinate entity. It arises spontaneously out of the interactions of the component parts.

According to this frame of reference, the mind is conceived of as emerging from the underlying neural processes in the body, with a set of properties taken as being more than that which could be obtained by reduction, yet less than a full separation or duality would yield. Emergent processes

generally operate optimally at the edge of order and chaos, and are seen as the locus for the coming into being of psychic life.

It can be clinically relevant to take ourselves out of a rigid deterministic perspective, and if we want to place our analytic work beyond the concept of *development*, we must take into account the principle of self-organizing emergent qualities, with their ongoing creation of new and unexpected meanings and psychic agencies. As is quite evident to those who dislike being called Gnostics, *self-organizing* does not mean that everything happens magically in some spontaneous, mystical or automatic way. Most of all, it does not mean that it works without a reciprocal dialogue between subject and object.

As I said, emergence seems to operate on the subtle edge of chaos and order, where chaos is not a shapeless and confused random state, but rather, a non-detectable complexity. The mind is continuously born out of a complexity whose boundaries and features are always beyond our limited knowledge, with neither simplistic nor random causalities.

Chaos may be depicted as complex and evasive -- not at all pure and untouched. Chaos implies that humans are complicated and undetectable beings, with millions of traces working now silently and now loudly as one -- or one against the other.

Order is – in the first instance – the mothers' wish that their babies live with sufficient trust and joy. In essence, emergence is relational as well as highly sensitive to, and dependent upon, the slightest qualities of interpersonal exchanges, whether conscious or not.

If I have to try to describe chaos *in front of*, or *together with*, or *within a shared abyssal distance from*, the autistic analysand, I would probably say that we sail in some way blacked-out, sounded-out, smelled-out, rhythmmed-out ... and certainly *symbolled-out*. Nevertheless, we are also invaded by bits of images, lights and sounds, smells, movements, fractures and encounters, limping closeness and eternal moments of absence. And all this is supported by a certain amount of trust that some sense may eventually grow out of it all.

Certainly we do not look for solutions, considering that Jung himself warns us that the most

important problems of life, in the context of all self-regulating systems, are essentially insoluble.

Rather, we look for a reasonable *emerging synchronistic outgrown*.

We look for an acceptable degree of outgrown-- not mistaking chaos with our death, and not mistaking senseless repetition with our subtle death of faith, or with our subtle burnout syndrome.

If our healthy megalomaniacal position with the autistic analysand fades away for too long, then we have to start getting seriously worried. In this case, it is better to refer our analysand to a younger colleague, someone who hasn't yet been killed by reasonableness and who still has some physical and mental endurance.

Is it a matter of faith? To what extent? Faith in *O*, as Bion stated? In the unreachable thing-in-itself? In its generative potential?

Faith in the constructive nature of the unconscious, as Jung continuously states? Faith in the subtle edge between chaos and order where the emergence springs out?

Or faith in children? In their mothers and fathers, when occasionally they *subvert* a destiny that appeared dark?

Rather than a mystic, I would define myself as a man of faith: a faith that juxtaposes *knowledge and transference* in a mutually untamed relation of truth, a faith that is able to produce unexpected effects.

From many diverse perspectives authors stress the critical importance of the internalisation of *real* experiences with the caregivers. Real experiences (though psychoanalytically is not that easy to define what *real* really means) very soon become part of implicit memory, and are turned into internal schemas that give shape to the apprehension of further experiences, until the Self's needs and the world of otherness provide the opportunity to modify those schemas. Such a relational interplay requires ongoing adaptation to the continuously changing needs of both Self and object. Negotiation and reciprocal adaptation of increasing complexity seem to be the essential ingredients of psychological organisation.

This is the relational *milieu* that renders emergent self-organizing processes possible, through which humans cope with the unavoidable partial maladjustment in their early (and not so early) encounters. In this view, unconscious fantasies themselves are the emergent outcome of the metonymic and later on the metaphoric work produced by internalised subject-object interplay. Regarding their representational content, unconscious fantasies cannot be considered as genetically determined. Rather, they are the result of the repeated internalisation of clusters of preconceptions-realizations that progressively take more and more articulated shapes. They are always dual and very early in origin, and their precursors can be observed in very primal relationships. They soon become part of implicit memory.

Although we can and must trust our preconceptions and innate expectations of healing encounters, we realize that even the most elementary mentalizations are the emergent outcome of internalized, actual interactions.

This is particularly important when dealing with autistic children, especially when we consider the relevance of the role the object plays in stimulating emergent processes. The analyst's subjectivity is crucial in determining the specific quality and personal "style" of being a "reclaiming object." This is especially true when the complexity of the analyst's personal vicissitudes interact with the innate predispositions, even in the most "locked up" autistic children. Autistic children need to be, and supposedly expect to be, *delicately violated*. The subjectivity of the object has to be delicately imposed upon them, with the most gentle violence possible, and with the object continuously expressing aliveness and relatedness. The analyst's *personal equation* comes into play in various ways, and the analyst's neutrality itself can be understood as a way of interacting in what I like to call "relational solitudes in development", or two lonely subjectivities engaged in mutual growth. I like to use this apparent oxymoron to describe the paradoxical nature of human interactions.

The clinical material I presented above shows how a possible creation of meaning is the outcome of personal elements which come into play with a reasonable number of arbitrary mental productions that are definitely subjective and not at all scientific. My passion for music, either played or danced,

was crucial to this work, including the fact that music had been part of my own resources when coping with certain difficulties in my life as a small child. Other analysts would have used different personal tools to understand this analysand, and certainly other analysands would have used other specific ways to make their analyst curious and involved. Analysands search for certain responses that – as a matter of fact – are not so different from the ones the analysts had found for themselves as children.

No doubt music was an important ingredient in my interest and in my connection to this analysand. No doubt many analysands of mine use this privileged channel in their communication with me, without knowing anything about me in a conscious way whatsoever.

In this light the Jungian concept of amplification may be revisited and considered. Originally conceived by Jung as a method opposed to the Freudian free association in interpreting dreams, amplification essentially employs a procedure using metaphors to proceed from the oneiric image to the complex symbolism of the collective unconscious. Amplification is operated essentially from the analyst's mind.

I personally understand amplification as a preconscious widening in the analyst's mind of the verbal and non-verbal derivatives provided by the analysand. Such a process uses the analyst's entire complex subjectivity, including the personal determinants and the individual cultural patrimony. Amplification is a cure within the word activated by the complex and multi-determined subjectivity of the analyst; it is a making wide that which has tended to become narrow and lifeless.

If we have pre-representational traces of disposition to the encounter (as we defined the Archetype) that the word turns into meaning and sense, we can affirm that *free amplifications* nourish the emergent mind. In this light interpretations themselves are the foundation of new identifications and not simply a way to reveal causes and antecedents.

Bion states that there are two moments in the unfolding process: the *interpretation*, which deals with *reparation*, and the *selected fact*, which relates to the subject's *discovery* of how to proceed constantly in life. Both have in common the fact of being alpha. (Bion, 1992)

Bion's preconception-realisation model itself strongly implies that the subject not only bears pre-representative raw elements (beta), but also is mainly the one who lives in expectation of encountering the object. And I would add in expectation of *that specific* encounter. That nipple for that mouth, that milk for that hunger, that mind for that catastrophe, that smile for that darkness, that sense for that cold, that hand for that fall, and so forth, through continuous thinking and doing. Jungians might say Archetype when talking of expectations. *Archetype ad personam*, I would add, just to reaffirm that each child waits to be continuously and specifically brought to life, by mothers and fathers he has always known to exist.

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