

The Making of Words.

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THE RHYTHM OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE

What Jung describes in “The Psychology of the Transference” [Jung, 1946] helps us to move away from the concept of analysis as the territory of an analysand’s *one-way* projective world in which the analyst uses *counter-responses* as a metabolising Object, and towards a multi-determined relationship in which the analyst enters as a whole and complex Subject. The subjectivity of the analyst is a crucial factor in making *symbolic action* possible by boosting slight traces of proto-meaning.

My understanding of the quaternity (the symmetrical structure of the Holy Marriage as described by Jung in “The Psychology of the Transference”, and which I like to consider as the metaphor of a dance) brings me to the rhythmic features of the primal – and not only primal relationships – in which the experience of *presence* and *absence* and their interplay are essential elements on the paths of the *emergent mind*, and therefore beyond the principle of linear causality.

The question of the presence and absence of the object in relation to the development of a capacity for symbolisation is of paramount importance and has been widely discussed in the literature. The *baby* we have in mind is able to desire (basically to desire *life*) and, in principle, this implies an ability to represent (or at least experience in a proto-representational way) the absence of what is desired. This ability is by no means genetically ready-made, but learned and internalised before quite precociously becoming part of the implicit schemas of functioning, and it grows out of the *emotional quality* with which the absence of the object is actually experienced.

It is well known that absence may turn into catastrophe (Bion’s *beta state*), but it can also become tolerable and thinkable – symbolised – if the *absent* object can be experienced as *present* in what I like to call the baby’s *emotional orbit* [Bisagni, 2006]. This is made possible by the presence of a mother who is capable of not simply *mentally metabolising*, but also being well-disposed (as a *subject-object*) to the encounter and *actively* prepared to give her child a core sense of existence. It is definitely a matter of rhythm.

Primal introjection is naturally fragile and needs endless confirmation. In particular, it requires a certain *quality* of the object. *Mother* is not simply a transformative object, but an object with a particular

subjective orientation towards relationships and the unfolding of life. If the Self calls for the object, it calls for its entire subjectivity, and mainly its wish to give life *joyfully* to the Self. In this respect, every object relation is essentially inter-subjective. A well-internalised object has to be regarded as a *well-internalised subject*, a mindful and life-wishing object. This is how we give foundation to our own minds, by discovering – as we can naturally expect – that the *mind of the other* exists, and helps and wishes life. This expectation (preconception in Bion’s terms) is what can be called *archetypal*, the notion of which – in this light - is completely unsaturated as it has no representational content. [Knox, 2003]

Anne Alvarez extends Bion’s theory of thinking, and sustains that thought is not only generated by absence but also by the modulation of presence, which is a prerequisite for the acquisition of the flexible and articulated (non-catastrophic) modifiability of the object. The caregiver offers a constantly changing presence, full of dynamic flows and *temporal shapes*. [Alvarez, 1999] “Modulation and regulation of presence is a task for the infant... which is probably prior to maintaining object constancy throughout absence” [pp. 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* in which the object is present.

Moving from Alvarez’s ideas concerning the dynamic qualities of the object, Maiello [2001] offers further reflections on the notion of temporal shapes intertwined with her speculation concerning the Sound Object [Maiello, 1995] by suggesting that these temporal shapes and their rhythmic qualities “...belong to these deep levels of proto-mental interpersonal experience and have a bridging function in the transition from state of non mental psycho-physical at-oneness on the way to mental activity and symbolic thinking” [2001, p. 180]

As seen in the manifold manifestations of mother-infant interactions, shared attunement [Stern], and the timing and prosody of music and poetry between babies and mothers [Trevarthen *et al.*], rhythm can be seen as the element structuring temporal shapes and internalising basic trust.

THE RHYTHM OF THE UNSATURATED ARCHETYPE

Rhythm is also implied in the model of the mind conceived by Michael Fordham. In what can be read as a “structural model”, Fordham described the Primal Self as an integrated, steady-state somatic-psychic unity that rhythmically undergoes the movements of deintegration and reintegration. These movements concern the opening of the archetypal components of the Self to encounter the object and,

subsequently, re-establish a state of relative equilibrium and tranquillity in which experiences are assimilated on a cognitive and emotional level.

The structural hypothesis of an *a priori* and *integrated* Self is questionable in the sense of conceiving it as “*the Archetype of Archetypes*” or in the sense of a saturated representation of “*a steady-state Self*”, which seems to be too similar to old conceptions assuming a sort of *primary un-objectual state*.

The limitations of Fordham’s deintegration-reintegration model lie in its being rooted in a structural theory that postulates an integrated Primal Self, which – inadequately in my opinion – is seen as a structure that contains all archetypal potentials and at the same time activates the deintegrative sequences. The integrated Primal Self is an axiom that goes against much evidence of a neonate’s early un-integrated state of the neonate.

The concept of deintegration regards the dawn of new potentialities within the relational milieu of individuals, in which the object sustaining the process is crucially important. Fordham states that 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].

Let us assume that this sense of continuity or “centre” is the outcome of introjection rather than an *a priori* structure: in this light, new perspectives may be opened by moving from the structural and oversaturated view of Fordham’s model in the direction of a more essentially dynamic conception. This is particularly true if we think of the fundamental rhythm of intra-psychic and relational psychic life, including the transference situation [Bisagni, 2008b].

We should *desaturate* the Primal Self, possibly by making it closer to a certain view of Kernberg, who says that it is *the sense of Self* (with all of its introjective determinants) that becomes a *structure* or *the Self as agent*, and that there is no *pre-ordinate structure from which the sense of Self emerges*. If we consider Fordham’s model dynamically, no matter what the “starting point” of the sequences he describes may be (an integrated or un-integrated primal state), we can better highlight its interactive, interpersonal and rhythmic nature.

Fordham’s model can also certainly be substantially enriched if – beyond the structural model – the definition of Archetype itself is revisited in terms of what I have previously called an unsaturated Archetype.

THE MAKING OF WORDS

In this contribution I wish to present some theoretical and clinical aspects of my psychoanalytic work with an autistic child. My patient, who I will call John, was 4 years old when I began to see him, four sessions a week. Evident neurological damage was not present in this case: at the beginning of the therapy the child did not speak, and had only developed expressions for (perhaps) his mother, father, which he called *ma-ma* and *a-pa*, and pain, which he called *de-de*. He did not have sphincter control, avoided almost all eye contact, and when frustrated cried catastrophically and unendingly. This latter provoked great anxiety in his parents, more than any other symptom. These symptoms became more evident when his mother left for about three weeks after the birth of his sister, who is two years younger than he. However, some symptoms were already present a few months after his birth.

My ideas are largely based on the Jungian models as described above, as well as on the post-Kleinian psychoanalytic approach. In general, I consider Bion's theories on mental functioning, [Bion 1962] and in particular Frances Tustin's studies on autism, above all her last reviews. [Tustin 1991, 1994]

Contrary to what one would expect in autism, John seems rather mobile: his therapy has immediately shown interesting elements, especially regarding object relations and symbolization. These are the two themes that I would like to consider while I present some of the sessions.

Regarding the problem of object relations, I would like to point out the fluctuations between *adhesive object relations* (autistic) and *three-dimensional* ones (normal-narcissistic). The former are particularly tied to a defense against catastrophic annihilation anxiety.

Regarding the problem of symbolization, which is strictly tied to the question of object relations, I would like to point out the fluctuations between symbolic and non-symbolic use of objects, also in relation to the problem of language.

These fluctuations were immediately present from the beginning of my work with John. He revealed not only his use of autistic defenses to cope with catastrophe and annihilation but also his potential for growth and development. The possibility of going through these different states of mind with him in the sessions, giving adequate interpretations at specific moments, allowed for good development.

OBJECT RELATIONS

To state that object relations are present in autism opens the grounds for theoretical controversy. Tustin [1991][1994], as we know, revised her previous theory on autism [1972][1980][1981][1984][1986] in her most recent work and sustains that a physiological autistic phase does not exist. According to the model of the normal autistic phase, clinical autism would have been considered in terms of regression.¹ The Kleinian tradition and numerous observational and clinical studies have contributed to changing the psychoanalytic child into one more involved (even from before birth) in a network of significant relationships with the mother, who has always been the *alter ego*. On the basis of this concept Tustin revises her theory of autism.

Tustin sustains that an autistic child does not have an internal world made of objects, at least in the proper sense of the term, since the idea of a separate space between the self and the mother is lacking. She describes *autistic shapes and objects* not as psychoanalytic, multidimensional objects but only in terms of *surfaces and sensitive qualities of the object*. Tustin in this respect does not seem to completely solve the problem of the presumed *non-object state*.

Judith Mitrani [1994] suggests a theoretical synthesis. On the basis of the concept of *adhesive identification*, already described by E. Bick [1968][1986], later developed by Meltzer [1975] and by Tustin herself [1972][1980][1981][1984][1986] she describes the quality of object relations with autistic shapes and objects as *adhesive pseudo-object relations*. They are differentiated from *normal-narcissistic object relations* in the sense that the former have a prevalently defensive function against extreme annihilation anxieties that arise when the sense of illusory and absolute *at-oneness* with the mother's body abruptly falls. [Grotstein, 1990]

The sensuous use of the (external) object is inserted in a system of defensive needs, where *the quality of the object, and not the question of its rhythmical presence or absence is important*.

There is no doubt that *adhesive-pseudo object relations* are functional in obliterating the vital space between the self and the object, as well as in substituting *dependency* with *appendancy*. [Mitrani 1992] Lastly, although they contain flattened traces, deprived of a recognizable *sense*, of the vital qualities of the object, they work at the service of the failure of any possible psychic growth.

Therefore in describing John I would like to show the diverse *quality* of the object relations, at times more adhesive, at others more *three-dimensional*. However, with the idea that an object (maybe in its primordial, archetypal form) exists, even if reduced to crust, to undifferentiated movement of atoms or

¹ The (dismissed) theory of the normal autistic phase can be seen as an expansion of an early Freudian concept: it implies a pre-objectual, autoerotic phase that pictures the first psychoanalytic child as an *instinct - child*, living in the eternal present of its absolute pleasure.

primordial sound. In these clinical situations, this has precise implications on the quality of the *transference and - on certain circumstances – its interpretation.*²

Fluctuation between these different qualities of the object relation, which is a characteristic of this patient, can be seen from the beginning of his therapy: I will therefore present a synthesis of two sessions during the first weeks of work.

John is crying as he comes in, and continues to cry for the first few minutes, with varied intensity, with at times acute points...he is very anxious...a lot of mucus drips from his nose...he attempts to search in the toy-basket, a puppet falls which he doesn't attempt to pick up...he searches but isn't able to take anything...he moves to the center of the room, sits, then lies down, then sits, always crying intermittently. He begins to kick.

When he cries intensely he covers my words with his cries, I am able to tell him, with difficulty, that there is a bad sensation in him that he would like to get rid of.

...He continues to cry, slowly he seems to indicate with his hands imprecise directions, making sounds like "ih, ih, ih..."imperatively, after a few attempts he takes some dinosaurs and some domestic animals, he holds them tight and lets them go and then retakes them.

After telling him about his trying to hold these animals tightly and feeling safe, he starts to handle the domestic animals, above all the couples, he plays around with them, at times he makes one touch the other, brushing the horses' heads softly against each other. Now he isn't crying anymore and as he plays he makes sounds (iii - uuu) with a singing intonation (evoking amazement, sweetness, it sounds like a Chinese melody) ...

In an incongruous way he makes sounds as if he wants to make animal sounds...I comment on this touching, caressing and his sounds as something that calms him and I link this to his wanting to feel this way with me, as a baby with his mom...

In this first part of the session it is clear how this glimpse of the catastrophic crying recalls a pervasive condition of *nothingness* and of *dissolving*. More than a persecutory condition (if this term indicates a state that already presupposes a split, and therefore a *prey-predator* position) we are dealing here with the appearance of annihilation anxiety, with the epiphany of an imminent state of dissolution. It is significant how the child attempts, by kicking, to use a defense based on expulsion and splitting, where

²If, differently from what would happen within a non-objectual model, I assume the presence of an object even in the deepest and most isolating of autistic protections, there is space for me in the interpretation.

the *good* can be kept separated from the *bad*. He probably fails and together with the aspect of taking-letting go that resembles the confusion regarding the nature of the object, autistic protections appear: now the animals are not used for their symbolic quality, but just for their solid consistency, in order to provide for a sense of *being* and of *solidity* and for their *tranquilizing softness*, their caressing and soothing quality. The voice adapts itself to this protective task, and here *the sound cannot be linked to the representative (symbolic) features of the animal*.

During the same session, a little further on:

He moves onto the mattress carrying the various animals with him, both domestic and wild, above all dinosaurs. He doesn't look at me and as he continues making sounds he starts to separate the domestic animals from the wild ones...meanwhile he continues to touch the domestic animals caressing them as before...

I try to use his sounds and say-sing "bad ugly animals on one side" (with a low voice) and "nice and soft animals on the other side" (with a higher tone)... "You, John... want to feel safe... safe... "

He moves to the door of the room holding the dinosaurs, making wild animal sounds, he attempts to close the mouth of one of the dinosaurs with the tail of another, then the two dinosaurs bite each other. I say (always with an intonation similar to his vocalizations) "angry mouth ... wants to bite ... very hungry.."

When I tell him the session is ending, he restarts to hold several animals, at random, that he would like to bring away with him...

The attempt to establish a *splitting* is carried on here more successfully and lasts a few minutes, half way through the session. The *bad* seems to allude *but is not identical*, in this moment, to the initial annihilation anxiety. It seems, instead (in this moment that *a sort of opposite can exist*) that the *good* is adjacent, even if *not identical*, to the caressing softness of the object's surface, perhaps welcoming and not only soothing. In this flash of elementary differentiation (a prerequisite to words), the bad animals' *sounds can be adequately tied to the corresponding objective form*. At the end of the session, which I think the patient realized was approaching and experienced as a non-dimensional *ending of contact*, we see the return of the autistic use of the animals, now prevalently used with a non-symbolic protective function.

So, in terms of object relations, we can first see the autistic (adhesive) use of the object, as a mother turned to (or not developed from) a soft surface or a reassuring exoskeleton. This is a kind of pre-personal object, that seems to carry some *vital - sensuous* proto-qualities.

But we can also see, in the more developed functioning, the oral quality of the relationship: biting and devouring on one hand, but also an attempt at naming.

This is still evident in the second session:

There is an initial phase of confusion...fragmented contacts between the animals...a muffled and dull atmosphere develops, the impression of something amorphous and without sense...

Then in a more legible moment, John holds two or three animals tightly together in one hand, which I comment on telling him (trying to make my intonation as melodious as I can) that he has to...

“...hold something hard, tightly... tightly ... so John feels safe...”

Later again there is an exchange between the two horses, nuzzle to nuzzle, ... and sweet caresses and sounds...I say ... “horses like you and me, mouth and voice... mouth and voice... you and me...” ...

After a while there is a persistent smell of pooh, ...I say that ... “pooh has come out of his tummy ... pooh on the skin now... pooh and smell ... like a caress ...”

In this short example the aspect of confusion is observable, to such a degree at the beginning as to make a state of *mindlessness* palpable even in the countertransference: it seems that even the annihilation anxiety, at least recognizable as such in the catastrophic crying, is here turned into small particles, making it invisible and undetectable. We both emerge, in the sense that I myself can begin to think and name a content, when John uses the autistic defense of holding hard objects (in a non-symbolic way) tightly in his hands. Then the soft contact between the *two* horses, even in the area of autistic shapes, seems to show a slightly more developed quality of relationship, which leads me in the countertransference (and then in the interpretation) *to name myself more directly as voice-caress*.

The contact with the feces then reoffers a sense of a possible contiguous space between the internal surface of the abdomen and the external one, where in particular the tactile and olfactory quality of the feces, used for self-protective purposes, are mostly important.

Again in the same session, a few minutes later:

...he moves towards the sink holding the two dinosaurs, turns on the tap and makes the two animals drink, then he brings them towards his mouth to suck them, which I comment on, telling him that it is like ... “drinking good water ... feels very good...” ...he continues to drink, I tell him that ... “...me too like good water... a lot of water to feel calm and full...”

...progressively he laughs and becomes excited, he jumps and shouts, he seems to enjoy the water on his skin. Some drops fall on his face and on the table, which he then rubs his hands into. He makes various ecstatic sounds...

...(later)...he becomes more excited and markedly, almost frenetically...he jumps and laughs, he takes off his sweater and tries to take off his pants, then he puts his hand in his diaper and begins to suck some feces...

The oral implication here is rather evident and along with it the use of water as a part object in its nutritional function that includes but is not equivalent to sensuous soothing. The initial quality of excitement is prevalently ecstatic, perhaps with a more introjective nature while later it takes on a more excited feature. Here the object is probably *lost* in the state of excitement. Anne Alvarez [1992] points out how important it is to differentiate manic phenomena, recognizing and distinguishing ecstatic aspects from the grandiose and hostile ones, these latter being probably more functional in maintaining autistic protections.³

In the course of my work with John these two characteristics became progressively more clear. In one case the patient shows marked excitement, he shakes his head, gives me the impression of being a *blender* that grinds everything; the sounds he makes are excited and alienating or he masturbates ostentatiously: in the other case he seems to dream a blissful pleasure and absolute fullness, and even if he is unable, I think, of recognizing the source, he seems to *meet* (*the sensuous traces of*) *someone*.

³I remember the little girl that I saw in my second *baby observation* who at the sight of her mother had that typical reaction of diffused joy, of frenetic movement of her arms and legs, of brightness in her eyes, of happiness, as if the appearance of her mother turned on all her senses at the same time in unlimited ecstasy. I wonder if there is a relationship between this way of reacting to the appearance of an object, and what studies on the phenomenology of religion describe as the *epiphany of the sacred*: for example it is interesting how Kerényi (1976) comments on iconographic material of the Minoan period in which man positions himself with his arms raised to ecstatically enjoy the appearance of the Great Goddess of nature and life, and describes this state in terms of encounter with objects, with *the other in front of oneself*. The (sacred) dance instead represents a state of at-oneness with the deity, of annulment of the tension between the self and the-other-in-front-of-onself.

SYMBOLIC MOMENTS

The material presented can be considered in terms of the capacity for symbolization. In autistic children objects can be used in a totally non-symbolic way or in terms of *symbolic equations* [Segal, 1957], more rarely as *symbols proper*.

The different use of real objects should be considered and distinguished, namely if objects are used for their surface sensuous qualities, or not. To an observer, such a sensuous relation with the external object may *look meaningful*, but in fact it has nothing more than a protective and soothing function. Differently from what we see when more symbolic and complex modalities occur, this modality corresponds to the absence of internal space and fantasy (Tustin 1991). The clinical material seems to point out that non-symbolization in autistic protections implies the absence of conscious *fantasy*.⁴ However, it is possible to assume, at least hypothetically, that rudimental aspects of unconscious *phantasy* exist, at least if we consider the *clusters of sensations* as traces of a *proto-gratifying* relationship between the self and the object⁵. The notions of pre-conception and archetype may support this hypothesis.

In John the fluctuation between the two modalities, autistic and symbolic, was always very evident. This is the first session where John was able to pronounce a “real” word, reaching – for a while – a full representational capacity. Which was – as expected – followed by renewed autistic functioning.

(John, who has come into the room happy, progressively becomes angry, grinds his teeth and makes aggressive sounds: I comment on this as wanting to make me see that he feels something in his mouth, as anger in his mouth...)

...he takes, after having searched for a while through the toys, two dinosaurs, makes various roaring sounds, turns to me showing one of the dinosaurs and roaring (he looks at me)... then after a while starts a fight between the two dinosaurs, with various bites, always accompanied by gestures with roars...

...he continues in this way for a while, till he finds a string, he puts it in his mouth and pulls it with both hands and grinds his teeth...Then he takes a cow, makes gentle sounds, he shows me the cow and

⁴Tustin states in these terms, and with this writing: “...fantasies are not present...”(1991 page 589)

⁵In accordance with the model in which *to desire* a gratification signifies *fantasizing it* and that this activity is an *a priori* of mental functioning.

then wraps the string around it...I tell him that “the cow is like mom ... mom tied to his mouth... no more anger now...”

...he moves towards the sink where he makes unsuccessful attempts at turning on the tap...at times he comes to me for help, he moves as if he wants to take my hand and says, once, “a-t...wa-t...wa-ter”.

I say that he wants me to give him water and that was able to name it and that now that he has got it he feels like a happy baby that has mummy’s milk. (he immediately welcomes the water making a pleased ecstatic sound)

...He continues for some time, with ecstatic and rhythmic sounds, in a dreamy atmosphere... I follow his rhythms and sounds and sing “water... water...”

Instead, in a session a few days later:

...he is holding a small plastic glass in which he is putting various animals indifferently...He tightly holds the small glass with the animals in his hands, now it is a sheep, and makes everything drop altogether (hand-small glass-animal) onto the table making some noise or he turns it around in the air, progressively he becomes more keyed up, a little excited, he makes loud sounds, appearing forceful, but at the same time inexpressive. Meanwhile he seems to isolate himself a lot and I have the impression of being annulled. (The sounds are a quite confusing and disorganized)...

He puts the horse’s head through a roll of tape and moves it as he did before with the sheep and small glass...I tell him that the horse has this hard thing around its head and so he feels strong and nothing can hurt him

In the first sequence the symbolic use of the objects seems very clear, and so is the expressive congruousness between mimicry, movements, voice and the kind of animal he uses, as well as his moving towards me as a precise object of his fantasy. We can also notice the shift between the fantasy of biting (with a certain mixture between biting to destroy and biting to grasp) and the fantasy of (continual) filling and satisfaction. The voice is modulated and expressive. Lastly we see how the momentary absence of water stimulates the ability to re-evoke it symbolically, and adequately name it. In the second sequence we can instead see the interchangeableness of the objects, their use with a protective function as solid elements that give the illusion of strength and stability (when John prevalently uses autistic protections he is often unsteady and moves with difficulty, as if he did not have a skeleton): this occurs also through the contiguity and non-distinction between animal – glass

and hand. The noise produced by the rhythmic beats on the table mixes with the noise produced by his voice, and the tone of his voice is quite inexpressive (except in giving an elementary sense of *strength*) and repetitive. The countertransference describes a sense of annulment of myself as real object. However the presence of traces, even in this *hard mixture* of hand-shell-animal-voice, of the *preconception* of a relationship between *container and contained*, along with the fragments of a *realization* undoubtedly on the whole unsuccessful, but however traceable, cannot be excluded. (Bion 1962)

CONCLUSION

The notions of pre-conception (Bion) and of archetype (Jung) are greatly helpful in working with autistic children and, in general, with those analysands who suffer severe impairments in their capacity for symbolization. These notions actually help the analyst in assuming that some proto-trace of representational potential is always present in the individual, and may be appropriately developed if the object is able to provide its fundamental action as a complex and multi-determined subject, deeply involved as a reclaiming object in the analytic relationship. Such a role is essentially played in the function of transforming adhesive bi-dimensional identifications into projective tri-dimensional identifications, which results in a move from the use of reality in terms of autistic shapes and autistic objects, towards a true symbolic use. Such a transformative action can be defined as the prototypical work of the Transcendent Function.

The rhythmical element in the analysand-analyst interplay is of paramount importance. The analyst needs to pick up and give value to the various rhythmical expressions in the analysand, distinguishing them from one another, as well as from all other disorganized sounds and movements. The construction of the temporal shapes, the modulation of presence and absence, and the rhythmical *absence in the orbit* are relevant in the capability to progressively naming the external reality as well as the subjective experience.

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