

From stereotyped acts to language: when the lacking object has been named.

some reflections based on a treatment of an autistic child .

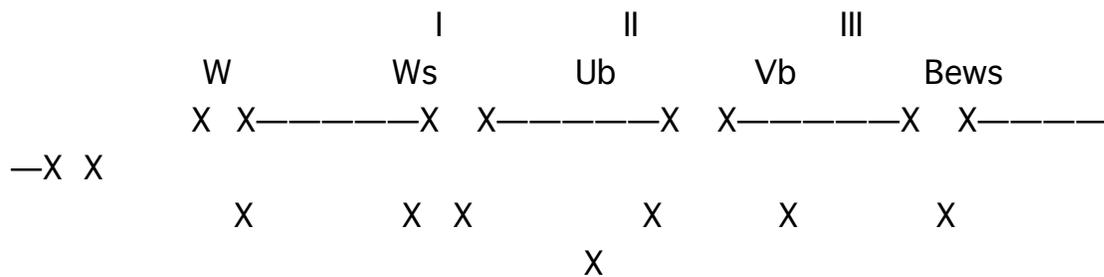
Introduction :

When we meet an autistic child what strikes us, more than his mutism, is the realization that this child does not play. He not only doesn't express any scenario of his fantasies but he doesn't play them out in his games. His capacity for representation seems unexisting; and this occurs because he can't accede directly to the recall of the absent object, and to the recovering of a perception in the memory. In fact, to be able to put on stage small figurines, to be able to play out scenarios one must be able to recall an absent object, to be able to remember the indications of perception, in the actual absence of these perceptions.

On the other hand, in children who can't be classified amongst the precocious psychosis, but who present symptoms of mutism, one is often surprised to note the existence of an imaginative life which expressed itself in the first consultation for instance, by either perfectly figurative drawings or in games with small figurines in which these children show themselves absolutely able to organize scenarios, causing these characters to interact with one another

Let us propose some hypotheses about what could be lacking in the mental functioning of the autistic child:

I won't resort to the lacanian graphs, which are not known by all here. I will start with a model of the psychic apparatus that Freud describes in a letter to Fliess (6/12/1896). In this model memory and perception are mutually exclusive. If this is the case, we can assume that in this apparatus when we are situated beyond the re transcription level, where the memory is inscribed, there is no possibility of evoking the absence or of naming the missing object.



Freud says that

W { (perceptions)} are neurons in which perceptions originate, to which consciousness attaches, but which in themselves retain no trace of what had happened. *For consciousness and memory are mutually exclusive.*

Ws { (indication of perception)} is the first registration of the perceptions; it is quite incapable of consciousness, and arranged according to associations by simultaneity.

{*Unbewusstsein* (unconscious)} is the second registration, arranged according to other (perhaps causal) relations.

Vb {*Worbewustsein* (preconscious)} is the third transcription, attached to word-presentations and corresponding to our official ego.

Freud assumes the idea that there are several levels of registration of memory traces. We know that later on he will insist on the necessity of the double registration. In this model one can say that what is found in the left side of the unconscious corresponds to the phenomena beyond the repression.

Why do I recall this model here? It's because when confronted with the clinic of very young autistic children it seems sometimes that their psychical apparatus functions beyond the primal repression — that means to say beyond registration of the second inscription which Freud calls unconscious.

A clear clinical proof of such a situation can be found in the *autistic retreat*. We know that in an autistic child the perception of any sort of object can suddenly cease, as though the object had never existed and it can happen even in the presence of the object. This presupposes not only a massive retreat of cathexis from the systems of perception, but also a failing of the second inscription in the unconscious, which means a failing in the primal repression. I have already spoken about this questions in another paper (1).

I would like to treat the question of the following inscription, which allows one to recall a perception. This presupposes, says Freud, a word-presentation that realizes it. We will say that it is through a signifier chain or a signifier which can be recalled that the child will be able to remember the indications of perceptions (*Wahrnehmungseichen*). Lacan says that these indications of perceptions are signifiers.

Therefore, the fact that it is a *signifier* doesn't mean that it is able to be recalled. We see that a *signifier* can be found beyond the primal repression — not available and not repressed. That's the process to which Freud refers with the term *Verwerfung*. To make the recollection possible a double inscription in the unconscious will be necessary. A certain kind of *Bejahung* must be supported. I will assume the hypothesis that this *Bejahung*, this affirmation, is a *Bejahung* of a lack and that it must be supported *from the place of the primal Other* of the couple Mother-Child. Why not simply say *mother* instead of *primal Other*? It's true that she often occupies that place of *primal Other*, but it's first a place, which can be occupied by other persons. It's just what occurred in the portion of treatment that I am going to relate to you.

Here is the hypothesis that underlies this paper and which I intend to submit to your appreciation:

In the child-mother relationship, as soon as that *Other*, which the mother incarnates, can recognize herself as stamped by a *lack* the child becomes able himself to name the lacking or absent objects and, at the same time, able to create phantasmic scenarios. We will also observe, at the same time, the disappearance of the stereotyped acts which overshadowed this impossibility of naming the lack.

CLINICAL MATERIAL : THE CASE OF HALLIL

The child was just two years old when he started his psychoanalytic therapy; he is three years and two months old at the beginning of the phase of treatment that I'm going to describe here. I won't speak about the earlier phases of his treatment because they have been discussed in other papers (2,1).

That child had been sent to us by a Parisian hospital - where he underwent a long series of neurological examinations before the diagnosis of autism was asserted, and the child had been transferred to the Child Psychiatric Department. From there he had been sent to us to try an ambulatory treatment. That neurological exploration had been motivated not only by the child's general aspect, but also by his *pavor nocturnus*, which was particularly violent: back arched, terribly frightened, completely indifferent to the presence of any one who could approach, trying to soothe him.

Here is the setting for this therapy: I receive him three times a week. At the period we are talking about here he had at first a session time alone followed by a session time with his mother. Once a week a house doctor was present and thanks to her we have the transcription of what happened and what was said during the session time. Moreover that transcription was very precious because what was said was more often in Turkish, and I realize how difficult it is to retain not only the utterances but even the words in a language where one cannot affix a meaning to what one is hearing. The transcription was necessary for me; I had a need of a trace of the mother's signifiers and later the son's - for rapidly he brought out Turkish words.

It's an orthodox Muslim Turkish family. The mother stays closed up in the house with her children, while the father, working in a Turkish environment, speaks very little French. My reasons for agreeing to listen to this family in the Turkish language, in spite of the fact that I didn't know that language at all, and the repercussions of this agreement on the unfolding of the therapy has been described in an other paper (2).

Hallil is the fourth child of this family, but he is the first child born outside of Turkey. The eldest was a small girl, who died at the age of one month. In the beginning the mother answered the

questions which had been formulated about this occurrence in a quite indifferent way. Afterwards two other boys were born; then came Hallil, who was born in France, at a moment when she no longer desired any other child. *This had been an accident*, she said, an accident related to a period when her husband was deeply depressed because of the death of his own father. If the father's depression could be easily stated the mother, she, showed herself as an extremely courageous woman, complaining about nothing, but her son's illness.

I will only present this case as far as it allows us to spot together the conditions of a beginning of the capacity of presentation of a phantasmic life - which is what we call the unfolding of the *imaginary space*. And by the same token we will think about the preliminary conditions of such an imaginary unfolding. And thus, we are going to examine the material concerning two months of the treatment: October and November 1986.

At this time Hallil has already lost his ability to break off the existence of what existed - it means that the objects of the sensorial world: the things, the beings, the parts of his own body - don't become suddenly cut off (*Verworfen*) for him. As I have said already, it's also at this time we are going to see the disappearance of one of the last stereotyped acts of his repertory.

The child already presents beginnings of language in which the subject of the statement, the I is sometimes present. So we must specify that neither this beginnings of language nor the use of the pronoun subject seems sufficient to permit a representativeness of the phantasmic life which I call the imaginary unfolding.

Session of October the 13th.

At this time I was worrying about the imaginary experience - extremely painful and intense - of mutilation in the autistic children. The day before I had given a lecture about it (1). During the part of the session alone with me, he pinches his finger in the cupboard door and really hurts himself. He cries, as any child would in such a situation. Since it's bleeding, even though it's only a very small wound, I find a reason to interrupt the session.

I then realize I am being induced to experience a state of utter helplessness incommensurate with the wound which is minor, as well as with my normal reaction in such circumstances. What I suppose is that, at that moment, in my relationship with the child, I find myself held in an Other place, which doesn't belong to me.

As it is not possible to explain here my ideas about this kind of induction phenomena, (3), I will simply say that in certain circumstances, for instance, in a certain kind of work with psychotics, one can be led to experience and to say things as if one were harnessed to the unconscious of an Other. Why write this *Other* with a capital? Because the question is not about an other person with whom I would be in a intersubjective and direct relationship, in that example my patient, but something beyond him. If we think in terms of a primal mother-child couple, I was induced to experience certain things from the place of the primal mother. The latter has certainly links with the child's mother, but the *Other* is more a matter of place governed by certain kinds of determinism. I call that being caught in the determinism of the *signifier chain*.

In the present case, the disproportion between Hallil's wound and my internal experience, allows me to assume the hypothesis that here we are confronted with this sort of phenomena. In my own notes I found traces of this anxiety; I have written as a title "Session of the cut-off finger". As though this minimal wound could

spoil something in the body image which should remain absolutely intact. Through this helplessness something of the maternal Other expresses itself inside me: every flaw in the narcissistic image remains unrepresentable for it. And it's inside me that the building of the representation has had to be done.

Second part: the mother and child session

A plaster has been put on Hallil's finger; the plaster hurts him; he tears it off, he shows his pain and, for the first time, he looks for consolation in his mother's arms, where he falls asleep. It seems that he has dreamed because he wakes up beaming and transformed.

Following this occurrence a quite strange symptom of the child is going to disappear : he presented occasionally cataleptic states of sleep - from which he could be awakened only with difficulty .

While he is sleeping in her arms, his mother told about her daughter, who died at the age of one month, and she associates with the fact that she herself was the eldest of four children, and the only girl; and that situation has always been quite painful for her. She had never told me spontaneously about her dead daughter nor about her position as a daughter. And here, while her son with his small wounded finger is sleeping in her arms, she told me about it. It's the first time she is able to evokes something about her own wound.

Session of October the fourteenth

The next day, during his session alone with me, he shows once again interest for the empty space behind the back of his

armchair. When he looks down into the emptiness behind his armchair it's as though it is an abyss which fascinates and terrifies him. This abyss he has been trying for some time to fill up , first of all by pretending to throw himself inside it, then by throwing felt pens, but in vain. But this time , what he throws in it, is a word, its even a fragment of *signifier chain*:

"al lamba"; then he adds: "**yoko,yok**".

al lamba, can be literally translated by: *take lamp*. That *lamba* (lamp) was a shore for his baby's glance, staring at the ceiling lamp above his crib, as he used to do it. Later on, when he became able to name objects, he used this statement to fill up holes. The child pointed with his finger towards this disturbing place saying: *take lamp*. This statement didn't intend to represent the rift, but to fill it. Nevertheless one can wonder if this didn't allow him to spare the autistic retreat which beforehand had been his way of answering to anguishing situations.

It's not the first time he introduces into the emptiness of this abyss that lamp which doesn't appear in it. What is new is what had followed: this *yok,yoko*. The word *yok* means *inexistent, absent, lacking, there is none*; the word symbolizes for the very first time the lack.

A little later in the session, he joins me on my armchair and vocalizes touching my hair.

I name what he is pointing at with his gestures: Mrs. Laznik's "saç" and Hallil's "saç", which means *hair*.

H. : **Bize**, which means *ours*. I will only know that translation one week later. Later on you will see why.

I comment on what he is doing: one can hide behind Mrs. L.aznik's saç, we can put together Mrs. Laznik's and Hallil's saç.

H.: "Kedede, kirelde... kis küçük"

Which can be translated by: *broken ... little girl.*

As, at this moment I can't remember the exact translation, I ask the house doctor: "küçük means little or big?"

H.: "Little!" And he throws into the hole, behind the armchair, all the pages of a magazine, saying: "ata,ate": *you throw away, he throws away.*

A little later he finds a hair on the floor, which always interests him very much. He brings it to me and I tell him that its Mrs. Laznik's hair. I am surprised to hear myself telling him this. In fact, I am loosing a lot of hair at that time, but he brings it to me in such a way that I hear myself saying that it belongs to me.

H., looking at the hair: "Al lamba". There is something anguishing about this.

He finished this session by putting some little plastic fences through the cupboard door as though he were feeding it, saying:

H.: "al agiz". *Take mouth.*

This day, when I receive the mother she starts by complaining about the stereotyped act which worries her: Hallil spits

and plays with the threads of spittle. The only thing I was able to hear was the phonemic and causal contiguity link between *salia*, the saliva, and *saç*, the hair. And this because often, during the session, while he was pulling out a doll's hair he presented this stereotyped acts with threads of saliva. I also observed that he often used the thread of saliva to fill up the hole of the wash basin, or to cover up the surface of something broken, a fracture line on the window's pane, for example.

Some moments later, he finds yet another thread of hair on the floor.

H. : "Biz, biz, bizi".

The mother listens but this term doesn't seem to mean anything to her, which is one of the usual difficulties with autists' mothers. It's I who, some days later, will find in the dictionary, its signification: *our*, which was however quite clear, considering that he had been playing with my hair and his towards the beginning of the session. The fact that the child will afterwards employ this term regularly during the sessions, allows us to assert that there had really been an intention to signify, but it had only made sense once I had received the message for the first time.

Mrs. to her son: "Birak!" (*leave it*).

I then declare that I am losing my hair .

H., bringing me the hair: "Al! atum, ana al!" (*Take, I throw away, take mummy!*). And he points to a place where I always used to put a car - which I had forgotten to do this day - saying : "con-con", which corresponds to the *car* , but in baby-talk.

We can wonder about this apparently disjointed statement: "*take ! I throw away, take mummy*" ; does this statement concern the lack that I've already mentioned? Perhaps it would be more suitable if the mother could also support this lack. It's only now in the deferred action of the subsequent sessions that I can pose this question.

When the session is ended, the following sequence takes place in the waiting room: he shows his mother a picture of a little girl, her head on the floor, and he says to her: "sana kûçük kis" (*for you, little girl*).

That little girl had been for him a first image of identification. In the picture we could see her putting her head on the floor, and once he told her not to knock her head, a sentence which he had often heard his mother saying when he used to knock his head on the floor.

Session of October the seventeenth : second part with his mother

In this session, they will show themselves able to play at fighting. There is a box that Hallil is very fond of whose lid shows a couple enlaced; his mother laughing and speaking to him tries to take it away.

H. protesting says to her in Turkish: "*I'm holding, I'm holding* " while they both pull each other back and forth with an evident pleasure. The play ends with him kissing his mother twice and saying:

H. : "optum" (*I'm kissing*).

Session of October the 28th.

A second external event marks this period of the treatment. Just before the session a very precious object had been stolen from me. During the session I am rather overwhelmed by this loss while he speaks very much.

In the second part of the session, where the mother is present, he is very occupied by the lid which shows the couple. He examines it very carefully and then he knocks his head with it. His mother asks him anxiously to stop because she thinks he is presenting again a stereotyped act of self-mutilation, as he has often done previously. I tell her that it may be something else and I propose that we let him go on with it. Several times he throws the lid-with-the-enlaced-couple on the floor, saying:

H. : "ate" (*he throws*). Then he piddles in his diaper - which his mother points out to us - and he declares : "atum" (*I'm throwing*). He throws the couple away several times into the waste paper basket, takes it out again, and declares again that he is throwing it. Then he comes close to the mother puts his finger on her nose than on her blouse, and takes his finger quickly away. He says : "djus djus" (which means *its burning, it's burning*), at the same time he cuddles her. Then he looks at the lid and I say him they are together, he translates it in Turkish: "beraber... anne, baba, adam" (*together ... mammy, daddy, man*). Then he hits the lid, looking at his mother.

As I laugh and say that perhaps that's the reason why they had hit Hallil some minutes before, the mother tells us that lately when Hallil sees a man in the street he says: " *çirkin git !* " which means " naughty go away! ". And she adds, laughing, that he comes and does the same thing to the father the morning in bed.

Session of November the 25th (*Some days before he had succeeded again in making me recognize that I am loosing my hair*)

Right from the beginning he speaks about dede, which means: *grand-dad*. (You might remember my mentioning earlier that the grand father had died just before Hallil's conception).

In the second part, with his mother, he brings ,from the waiting room, a musical clock. The day before he had already pointed out that the hand of the clock was broken. While tilting the clock back and forth so that the loose hand appears and disappears within, he says "Dede", and then he plays a rather complicated game of hide and seek giving a ring to his mother and to me saying:

H.: "where is grand-dad". Then, very tender on his mother's knees he says in Turkish: " he came, the little boy came". Then he goes to the cupboard and brings back a small book, on the cover of which there are lots of tiny little people. He shows then and says " dedel, dede, dede, a vi dede pati dede". (*grand-dadl, grand-dad, grand-dad, sa(w) grand-dad, we(n)t grand-dad*). He was speaking in a mixture of Turkish baby-talk and broken French.

I can't help thinking of this grandfather, in whose house the mother has lived with her two other children while the father came alone to France to work. The child's conception is connected , for the mother, with the father's depression following his own father's death - whose tomb that man will only be able to visit when Hallil will be eleven months old.

While I am thinking these things Hallil, on his mother's knees, is very tender with her and tries to lift up her shawl , that she always wears tied up tight around her face like the orthodox Muslim that she is. And I hear myself saying instead of the child: "Has mummy got hair?"

And his mother answers: "No , a little bit, not much, they have all fallen! Before Hallil I did, but not afterwards. My husband says he would like me to have, but I answer: what's the use?"

In the next session, she takes off her shawl an instant, showing a serious case of alopecia , near-baldness.

Hallil plays with a plastic snake which he is very fond of because it can be taken to pieces and says : "İlan güzel" (*nice snake*).

The mother will agree to go and have a treatment for her alopecia, and some weeks later, when he finds the snake again he will say in Turkish:

H. : "I love snake ... I love my mummy"

Conclusion

It seems quite evident that, little by little, through the sessions, phantasmic links are woven between the child and the mother, the child and his therapist. These links are expressed not only in plays, but also in words. The links go drawing an *imaginary space*, from which a certain kind of oedipal rivalry doesn't seem to be excluded. We gradually find ourselves in front of a quite common material in child's treatment.

What has allowed this slow blossoming of what we call the *Imaginary*? Let's take up again the movements of this set of sessions:

I- His little cut finger:

It's I who had to face an image of mutilated body, of incompleteness, an image quite hard to stand when at that moment I found myself in the place of the *Other*. But while I try to elaborate this unbearable feeling, the mother is allowed to accede to an identification with the analyst, an identification of a specular type, which will permit the mother for the first time to speak about events connected for her to the loss and the incompleteness.

II- From thereon a new relationship between Hallil and his analyst is born. He will weave goings to and fro between:

the silent question he addresses to the analyst about her falling hair which he brings back to her each time, as if he were expecting her to say something about it. Acknowledgment of loss

seems to function as an assessment of the lack, like **Bejahung** of the lack .

These *Bejahungen*, at which I was confronted as a subject were assertions stated by negative sentences;

I haven't any
I haven't any more.

I remind you that for the statement of these lacks I will be strongly led by the circumstances. But as I become able to state these lacks there emerges in the child

a) a possibility of a statement of the lack - "yok" : *there isn't any.*

b) a possibility of naming the absent object, pointing out his absence "*con-con* ": the truck.

c) to end up with the naming of the mother's imaginary lacking objects: first, the little girl, then the grand father - grand-dad : "*dede* ".

III- The child's questioning turns then towards the mother to the exact point where she really lacks an over-determined object: the hair in a veiled woman. Its character of a fallen part, of *phaneros*, of an essentially separable part is quite evident in the sequence : hair - lost object/ dead child - hair. I suppose there must be a displacement between the question of that hair, the lack of which is bashfully hidden by her Muslim orthodox veil, and the question for her of the feminine castration.

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