

**The foreigner and the foe, we saw them both in the mirror<sup>1</sup>: Maturational aspects of the encounter with “the foreign”**

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*Had I known you, I would have possessed you, and had you known me, you would have possessed me. But then you and I would not be.<sup>2</sup>*

Whilst perusing a dictionary in search of an unknown word, I came across a most extraordinary entry. The Arabic word *acem* which has the meaning ‘he who is not cognizant of my mother’s tongue, the barbarian, the foreigner’, appears to derive from the old Aramaic root *agama - ummah* meaning mother. The conventional interpretation would most probably refer to him who is not of my mother i.e. not a brother to me, but an alternative interpretation might wonder whether mother herself, may not in fact be the original Foreigner. The fundamental psychic reality, that the object of one’s earliest, most intimate bonding, indeed the object of one’s self-forming primary identification, is at the same time, a primary representation of both external and internal alienness, is thereby marvellously captured in one single word.

In his *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, published in 1895, Freud attempts to describe a condition he calls the ‘Fellow Human Being Complex (*Nebemmenschenkomplex*)’. He states that this complex is comprised of two components: a) the first (which he names ‘neuron a’) that is a non-variant, evades judgment and hence any possibility of cognition, thereby remaining as ‘The Thing (*Das Ding*)’, and b) the second (which he names ‘neuron b’) that is variable, amenable to cognition through the work of bodily memory and a variety of identificatory processes, and is thereby a product of judgment. Whereas neuron b promotes knowledge derived from perception and bodily experiences and thus constitutes the building block of ego-formation through judgements, internalisations and subsequent identifications, ‘the Thing’ evades judgment and comes to stand for the incomprehensible, the unreachable, the unintegrable, and therefore the forever alien. Lacan has famously correlated *Das Ding* with the *objet petit a* – that mysterious, unreachable primary object of desire, the very quintessence of alterity, which belongs to the Realm of the Real, and which some would suggest can only be invested in retrospectively (*nachträglich*), since it ‘never actually was, for it to be ever lost’. (Lindell, 2001

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<sup>1</sup> George Seferis: *Mythistorima IV, Argonautes*

<sup>2</sup> Mahmoud Darwish: *In the Presence of Absence* p.16

p.21) In fact as a veritable representation of a “lack-in-me”, the *objet petit a* is understood to stand as no more than a prerequisite function, inducing movements of desire towards any (part or whole) object relationships that would follow<sup>3</sup>. It seems to be a notion highly reminiscent of the “negative hallucination” mentioned in a footnote in *The Interpretations of Dreams*. By 1911 though, Freud had come up with a much more succinct formulation of an earlier intimation of his regarding this issue, wherein he clarifies that concordance between the perception and the already internally represented<sup>4</sup>, does act as the signal for the unmediated pleasurable discharge to commence (i.e. elimination of lack), non-concordance (i.e. avowal of lack) in contrast, acts as the sole trigger for the ‘*thinking processes*’.

Attempting to imaginatively reconstruct the inchoate stages of ego or identity formation, we come across a variety of concepts that can roughly be divided into two main categories: a) those highlighting convergence and identity, like symbiosis, autoeroticism, primary identification and primary homosexuality, ambiguity position and syncretistic sociability, environment mother, undifferentiation and unboundariedness etc., and b) those highlighting divergence and dissimilarity from the very beginning, like paranoid-schizoid position based on primary splitting, the originary presence of Das Ding, primary seduction and its enigmatic message creating separateness, primary fantasies as inherent endowments, identification with the father of one’s own pre-history, etc. When considered developmentally i.e. sequentially rather than ontologically, the link between these two major categories, the portage that is, from the “me” to the first “not-me possession” can be thought of as residing within the variously conceptualised transitional space referred to by Winnicott. What needs also to be recognized, that this movement is inevitably enacted within a context where the latter (defined as identity- crystallization) is often experienced as much of a threat and hence to be defended against, as is the former (defined as identity-diffusion). (Searles, 1966)

Having accepted as axiom, an initial psychic stage of absolute union with the mothering object, which he calls the autoerotic stage, Freud describes the process of ego formation, as proceeding through repeated bi-directional psychic movements between the inside and the outside – somehow already recognisable – which lay the foundations for the lifelong processes of projection and introjection. Innumerable instances of this psychic shuttle, result in Freud’s memorable conclusion that the character of the *Ich* (Ego) i.e. of who I am, is but the precipitate of abandoned object cathexes i.e. elements of the Other residing within me !! A prime example of this proposition is what has been called the melancholic identification, where the ‘shadow’ of the narcissistically invested lost object is said to have fallen upon the Ego, thus obscuring the differences between the Ego and the object. Correspondingly in manic identification – says Karl Abraham – it is the ‘shine’ of the object that falls upon the Ego with an equivalent obliteration of the differences. A similar elimination of differences between the ego and the object, is alluded to, by N. Abraham and M. Torok, in their proposed notion of *endocryptic identification*, where it is suggested, that the (not-me) object is ‘*carrying the Ego as its mask*’. The process entails the

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<sup>3</sup> Philosophical tradition would recognize this situation in human experience, where “the desirable object solely triggers desire, instead of offering satisfaction” , (Levinas, 1971 p. 42) as the core element of ‘the desire for the Infinite’, in other words, ‘the quest for God’.

<sup>4</sup> Even when, as Freud (1938 p.152) reminds us, by quoting Émile Zola in French : ‘*....en attendant toujours quelque chose qui ne venait point [always waiting for something that will never turn up] ....*’

exchanging – through identifying empathy – of one’s own identity, for a fantasied persistent mourning state (for having lost the subject) which is believed to characterise the departed object, as the object continues to exist in a life beyond the grave. (Abraham & Torok, 1975) Coming from a different tradition, Ron Britton mentions instances when there is fusion between the ego and the percept which, together with massive projection of hostility, results in an “*alien internal object*” infused with aggression that is then is recognized as *even if it does not feel like me, it must be me*. (Britton, 1986)

Adding to these confusions, Freud in 1923 makes reference to Groddeck’s proposition that we are “*lived by*” un-subjugate-able forces unknown to ourselves. (Freud 1923 p.251) Interestingly, current Affect Theory postulates a comparable internal pre-subjective, non-conscious experience of intensity, conceived of as a moment of unformed and unstructured potential, lacking in motivation, which cannot be realised in language and yet is transmitted unmediatedly and subliminally from one body to the next. This powerfully determining experiential template, labelled ‘affect’, remains forever alien to consciousness and yet governs and shapes the freedom of one’s volition. The functions of judgement and intentionality according to this model, come into being only *ex post facto*. (Alford, 2015)

Lacan has given a memorable description of the profoundly alienating, yet psychically formative encounter in the mirror, with the alien that happens to be myself. He named it the “mirror stage” and conceptualised it as an ‘*alienating identification*’ process, whereby the ego is bounded by means of an externally imposed ‘orthopaedic armour’ and is thereby functionalised via its introduction into the realm of the representable. (Lacan, 1949 pp.452-3) So it’s through a process of castration that the move is made from the primordial state of no boundaries and no differentiation, to a state where distinctions will predominate and where the so-called *spectrum of identity* – a species of representation, will make at last, its presence known – albeit always immersed in uncertainty, ambiguity and aleatory flexibility. This work of *psychisation*, as it has been called (de M’Uzan, 2009), has, in its structuring potential, been often compared to our more familiar *dream work*.

Last but not least, mention should be made of the contribution of Jose Bleger (2013), who points out that individual identity is always to be conceived as being embedded within a context of an undifferentiated (*syncretistic*) group or rather a social cohesion background, often referred to as *habitus* – a silent and unrepresentable not-me part of me. It is only the gradual processes of representability which ensue, that will enable aspects of individuality to eventually emerge – albeit only partially – from this all-encompassing impersonal collective magma.

These endless identifications within the ego, resulting from a constant exchange with the Other-than-me, cannot but create constant modifications of the ‘*I am*’s’ constituent components. The illusory and deceptive state of unity that we are used to calling ‘identity’ turns out actually, to be in a state of perpetual fluidity, as one attempts to partially and temporarily manage a multitude of varied and at times conflicting internal objects derived from previous internalisations of, and partial identifications with, external objects - objects other-than-me. Academically motivated attempts to distinguish the vicissitudes of the identificatory process as either nuclear or orbital identifications in the constitution of the ego (Wisdom, 1962), remain inevitably, rather jejune. It is no surprise then, that some authors refer to this protean porosity-towards-the-Other manifested by identity, as (*à la* Winnicott) the area of the

“*transitional subject*”. Mainstream philosophy has only belatedly come to acknowledge that individual consciousness is but intersubjective, founded as it is, on mutually empathic – at times even relinquishing identity distinctions – recognition of the Other. (Scheller, 1954, Thompson, 2001)

However meaningful and theoretically convincing this enmeshment may be, it inevitably leads to a dead end. Such a seamless complementarity points towards a collapse of the external perceptual - experiential into the internal representable i.e. the collapse between the symbolized and the symbol, in other words, the external object having lost its separating element, ends up being reduced to the intrapsychically fixed fantasy object representation. Alterity has given place to Familiarity, hence the signifying line separating the Signifier from the Signified is gone – no language is possible and hence no thinking. Pleasurable discharge i.e. drive satisfaction, being the embodiment of the static, inevitably impedes any development towards subjectivation. As the American psychoanalyst J. Benjamin is reported to have deftly put it: ....*with myself I can be, with a stranger-to-myself I can become.* (mentioned in Gordon, 2004 p.33)

If movement, i.e. psychic becoming is to take place, if desire and reparation is to be instigated, there is a pressing necessity for an irreducible potential space – a space for non-possession, for alterity and non-representability, a space for not-knowing, and for the forever non-knowable and un-integrable, to be urgently introduced. Otherness that is not internalizable and therefore not ending up being incorporated into the *Ich*, but standing before it, turns out to be a *sine qua non* for the very commencement of psychic and mental growth. An astute theoretician Piera Aulagnier, having meticulously deliberated on the Freudian perspective, reaches a position where she can convincingly argue that any attempt at abolishment of the identificatory conflict between me and not-me, i.e. the establishment of a non-conflictual state of seamless integration between these two entities, cannot but be motivated by “*a desire to kill off thinking*” – inevitably in the service of the Death Drive. (Aulagnier, 1979 p.245) This of course, is a contention with which Bion, who comes from a different tradition, would most wholeheartedly agree.

Where Freud includes the non-representable as an integral part of the Mother experience, Le Guen (1974) develops this idea further, by stating that the Stranger stands for the non-mother aspect of mother: absence of mother is, according to him, the very same as the arrival of the Stranger/the Non-mother. This thought is even further elaborated by Levinas who states that: “this absence that is co-terminous with the Other, is exactly his presence as Other.” (Levinas, 1979 p. 89) Intriguingly, this Other/Stranger seems also to correspond to Mother’s desire, that is however, addressed to the Not-me Object, to what has been called ‘*the Other of the Object*’.

The classicist J.P.Vernant, (1985) writing about the cult of Orthia Artemis in Ancient Greece, defines her as the Goddess of the Threshold, i.e. of the encounter with the alien to the humans, the other-than-human, the unknowable alterity. Based on Aristotle’s assertion that even the self-sufficient man is in need of an Other, if he is to get to know himself (Magna Moralia Bk 2 15:8) Vernant claims that the ancient Greeks firmly believed that if the Self were to remain folded in within itself, with no Other to engage with, no thinking would be possible<sup>5</sup>. It is a view echoed by Julia

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<sup>5</sup> Experiences of profound trauma have crystallized the inverse formulation too, i.e. whenever there is no actual Thou to act as addressee, one cannot say Thou even to oneself. (Laub, 1991 p.81)

Kristeva too, who characterizes the stranger as the philosopher's double, his alias, and adds: "... [the stranger] is a metaphor for the distance from ourselves that we need to take, if any rekindling of the ideological and social transformation dynamic, is ever to take place." (Kristeva, 1991 p. 196)

We now come back to Freud who claims that it is hatred, instigated as it is, by the non-satisfaction caused by the eventual recognition of the separateness – the non-possession of the object, that stands as the necessary and sufficient condition (preceding love in object relatedness), for the facilitation of reality testing and for eventual emotional growth. Dis-identification movements (Greenson, 1968) then run in parallel with the establishment of the H & L links with the non-identificate object. Given that separateness is by definition synonymous with a link of some sort, it is the engenderment of the curiosity-link and of the wish-link (desire) to pursue the as yet (or forever) unpossessed and unknown that had up till now been causing hatred, that inaugurates the emergence of, and gives structure to, one as a stand-alone subject. As the philosopher J. Butler has put it: "Recognition [of one's own limits] becomes the process by which I become other than what I imagined I was till then, so cease to be able to return to what I was. There is then a constitutive loss in the process of recognition.... The act of recognition alters the organisation of the past and its meaning at the same time that it transforms the present of the one who receives recognition." (Butler, 2005 p. 27) Recognition then, because it does not insist on wholeness and absolute knowingness or total narrative integration, ends up being a process by which a return to the status quo ante is impossible – for the recogniser as well as the recognisee. An element of generative ambiguity and opacity resulting from the impossibility of total knowledge, by providing creative space for the unknown, can only promote psychic growth. The alternative, what George Steiner has so memorably called the '*nostalgia for the absolute*', is a space where no genuine recognition is permissible, pertaining as it does, to a vision where otherness is being radically eliminated – either through total ousting or through total assimilation. The result is a state of stagnation, and of no growth. A much more insidious manifestation of such a dystopian massification, is to be detected in our current – apparently benign and democratically sanctioned – globalisation initiatives, carrying within them as they do, elements of collective immediate gratification which, by eroding all nuclei of individuality, simultaneously abolish all otherness as well.

This notion of an essential de-centredness and elusiveness of the human subject, forms the basic tenet of Laplanche's concept of Primary Seduction. (Laplanche, 1997) Propounding what he calls the Copernican versus the Ptolemaic view of psychic development, Laplanche suggests that the indubitable primacy of the Other (*der Andere*) with her/his mysterious sign-making invitation, in the subject's constitution, guarantees the establishment of an internal Otherness (*das Andere*) that we would otherwise recognise as the Unconscious. An alien body, placed inside oneself by an Other, and which maintains its alterity uninterruptedly, ends up destabilising any permanent sense of selfhood or indeed any self-knowledge, privileging instead, the humility of an ethical not-knowing. Given that Laplanche defines Identity through the internalisation of alienness, if the unknown enigmatic thoughts and desires of the Other have entered one's being, including one's dreams, one is – even at an unconscious level – beset by the otherness of the Other. At this point, J. Butler would remind us, that given that our very formation implicates the Other in us, it is our own alienness to ourselves, that ends up being the very source of our ethical connection to others. Being addressed by, and in turn, us addressing the

alterity of the Other, established as our primary human obligation, can at last be acknowledged as the foundation of ethics. In his well known book entitled *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur argues a similar proposition. Having elaborated the inexorable links between selfhood and otherness, he concludes – in agreement with Levinas – that the dialectic tension between Same and Other, perforce ends up defining the ethical responsibility of the Self towards an Other. Acceptance of responsibility is after all, but an attestation of selfhood, he claims. (1995 p.340)

Talking of Otherness, one can by no means overlook the ubiquity in human history, of the relationship to the Great Unknown, the “Wholly Other”, often referred to, only through the employment of the negative (*the apophatic*). This “Wholly Other”, the mysterious, never to be known, that causes Terror and Fascination (*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*) is thought of as both transcendent and, according to St. Augustine (who addresses Godhead as *interior intimo meo* [*deeper within me than I can reach myself*]) as an Alienness placed at the very core of our being. (Confessions 3.6.11) Once again, the issue of an alterity beyond, in tandem with an alterity within, is at issue.

Finally a most convincing manifestation of the maturational function of the Otherness of the Other, is to be found in Winnicott’s notion of the ‘use of an object’. It is the very survival of the object, despite the subject’s ruthless destruction of it, that helps the subject recognize her/his limits when facing the beyond-me. It is the reconciliation with the presence of the unknown, the unreachable and unpossessable, even the very non-representable, that gives one the chance to slowly advance towards subjectivity.

As young Hegel has presciently summed it up, as early as 1801: “*Comprehensiveness necessitates a notion of identity of the identical and the non-identical, combining thereby, divergence and concordance all in one.*” (Hegel, 1801 p. 61)

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