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**On Recognition and its Place in Psychoanalytic Thinking**

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*…when a flit of the foreknown*

*blinked off a sunlit lake near the horizon*

*and passed into us .....*

*Seamus Heaney (Wraiths)*



In his treatise “On Poetics” which is an elaboration on the dynamics of tragedy, Aristotle makes – amongst a variety of other suggestions – the following comments regarding recognition:

Recognition is ... an alteration from ignorance to knowledge to love or to hate ... The finest form of recognition being the  one which involves a reversing transformation [peripeteia]. (1452a: 34)...

Reversing transformation is the alteration of a state of things  to its opposite … in accordance to the probable and the necessary.  (1452a: 22-3)

... Types of recognition … through memory, by the rendering into affective awareness of something perceived. (1455a: 37)

These three sentences condense within them a variety of themes that have for ages preoccupied philosophical tradition but have also been at the very centre of contemporary psychoanalytic inquiry.

Summarily these themes are:

* - Recognition is characterized by an ‘alteration’. It involves a fundamental

modification of the status quo, that is bound to bring about consequences regarding the person’s mental functioning.

* - This alteration is to be located in the areas of knowledge, love and hate i.e. the three basic axes of human relationships according to Bion. He calls them (±) K, (±) L, (±) H.
* - The notion of recognition is linked to the notion of transformation [*peripeteia*]. It pertains to a psychic movement, i.e. a reversal of the familiar and repetitive, sequential cause-and-effect relationships, and their replacement with until now unforeseen correlations between events and experiences. A process that brings to mind the psychoanalytic concept of ‘working through’.
* - It is linked to memory. What is at stake here, is the transition of a lost element from the  space beyond consciousness, to the space of vigilance and consciousness. Irrespective of the fact that we nowadays recognize more than one form of memory (i.e. procedural and declarative) the function of recollection has, since time immemorial, been linked to a sense of identity and the route to self-knowledge.
* - “affective consciousness”. The concept of recognition cannot but be directly linked to an intense emotional (affective) participation of those involved. Without it, no deep modification that the term implies, would be possible.
* - The time dimension. Even though the initial impression is of something immediate or sudden, the fact that it is not specified as such, opens up the possibility of a gradual development and an ongoing process with or without recognisable nodal points.

These reflections of Aristotle’s need to be contextualized within the rich philosophical trajectory that concepts such as recognition, selfhood, memory, self-knowledge, and attempts at identity definition, have had to follow.

Meaningwise, the word ‘recognition’ contains two separate notions that maintain a powerful dialectic tension between them: a) to cognize again something that had once been known and has hence been lost to memory or consciousness (*Wiedererkennung*) and b) to render value and legitimacy, to bestow an identity (*Anerkennung*) [Honneth, 1995]. This double definition and its relation to ‘owning up responsibility’ is first encountered in Homer, where the Self is recognized as responsible for some action, irrespective of whether the action was done willingly (*hekon/εκόν*) or unwillingly (*aekon/άκων*) [Williams, 1993 p. 50-53]. The fact that it is possible that one may have ‘unwillingly’ acted in a certain way, does not absolve one of the recognition of the Self, as the “causative agent”. Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics are very clear on the matter of agency – it is cogently stated therein, that “both virtue and vice derive from within us.” The tragedians, as is well known, follow in this path, and with Aristotle’s Poetics, the link between recognition (in its double meaning) and memory, more specifically active remembrance i.e. the recalling of an event lost from consciousness, is firmly established. Centuries later St. Augustine summarizes the formative link between self-knowledge and memory thus: “*It is I who remembers, I the spirit [ego sum qui memini, ego animus]* (Confessions X. xvi. 25).

In more recent years, the person who focused on this relationship and indirectly influenced Freud, is the French thinker Henri Bergson. Referring to habitual memory (which he distinguishes from memory traces located on the cortex and which are linked to conscious action) he states that the specific process through which one locates the past within the present, is called recognition. Re-cognition, hereafter synonymous with recollection, must by definition imply that something of the original sense-impression has remained somewhere in the psychic apparatus, albeit away from consciousness. (Bergson, 1988) Consequently for Bergson, recognition is tantamount to retrieval of a foreclosed but not entirely lost experience. For Bergson just as for Freud, the past is indelible. Years later, Paul Ricoeur will take this thought a step further, and state that the very recognition of images of the past, constitutes *self-recognition* (Ricoeur, 2005).

Somewhere at the core of personal identity, there exists a psychic matrix connecting experiences, be they ones of chronological sequence, of a cause and effect link, of affective excitation or of anything else. These connections are not just identity indicators, they are also formative, in that they themselves, shape one’s identity. Any new connection between identity and one’s own past cannot but modify one’s sense of identity. Memory inevitably influences one’s sense of Self. Throughout one’s life, one adjusts one’s stance and viewpoint, but also one’s relationship patterns, according to how various (conscious or unconscious) personal memories are activated and how they end up exerting their influence on one’s mental state. The mental connections that manifest themselves phenomenologically as experiential memories, engender what philosophers have called an ongoing subliminal “*affective tendency*”, which as the indelible past, influences both the present and the future. And yet when memories are incompatible or unbearable, the conscious level of these mental connections breaks, and “...the two pieces of knowledge are kept apart: so that [one] comes to live either in a present denied a past, or in a past deemed a present” (Wollheim, 1980 p. 314). A static and durable notion of identity is thus made redundant and replaced by the fluidity and oscillatory movement of a *spectrum of identity* (de M’Uzan, 2013).

The notion of self-recognition brings to the fore the distinction first formulated by Sartre between a) I recognize myself as an object, as a being that is a given and is static and b) I recognize myself as an I (fist person singular), i.e. as an entity which is in a state of constant becoming (Sartre, 1960). It is this second dimension that establishes self-recognition as that crucial condition which can easily spread out into areas of subjectivity. It is a form of knowledge the acquisition of which, alters the very object of knowledge. Myself is/am simultaneously both subject and object of knowledge.

How one perceives the events of the past, will inevitably condition the meaning they carry for the person in the present, whilst at the same time, the precarious understanding one has established, will remain vulnerable to a variety of new influences that may come along, at any given moment. A self-knowledge that enables one to be aware of the causes of one’s actions and reactions, but also permits one to reflect on them freely, will also facilitate the possible transformation of the meaning of those experiences, if need were to arise. Such a transformation may, in due course, retrospectively (*nachträglich – après coup*) modify the entire structure of one’s personal history.

All the above is well known to both the psychoanalytic and the philosophical discourse – they simply bear different names. And that is because self-knowledge, apart from being a philosophical theme, is also a ‘stated high aim’ for every psychoanalytical process. The sought for ‘knowledge’ in the case of psychoanalysis, is a new psycho-affective personal balance, in constant dialectical intercourse with a recalibrated connection network between external and internal reality. Prerequisite for this is considered to be “…. a relative indeterminacy of identities … for the analysand to be able to recognize himself in the interpretation, which then becomes part of his Ego” (de M’Uzan, 2013 p. 60). Given that any established cohesion militates against change however, one would naturally have to be reminded that there will be parallel forces acting against such a development. “Knowing what one feels, is sometimes a matter of painfully acknowledging what one knows, against the pressure of a wish not to know …” writes the American philosopher and psychoanalyst Marcia Cavell (Cavell, 2006 p. 146).

In the psychoanalytic context, recognition is known by its synonym *insight*. Freud, as someone strongly influenced by the contemporary theories of Brentano and Husserl, that defined *einsehen* as a synonym for the direct acceptance of the certainty of a specific knowledge (Kerz-Ruehling, 1986) simply accepted that view and transferred it to the psychoanalytic arena, albeit without naming it as such. As stated above, the aim of psychoanalysis, both step by step and in toto, is the increase of the degree of self-knowledge or self-recognition. Freud summarized this with his famous phrase *Where Id was, there Ego shall be [Wo Es war soll Ich werden]* , and the French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis adds “where I am, there, it too will emerge” (Castoriadis, 1997). This addendum is particularly important, because it rejects simple dichotomies regarding what is repressed and what is not, together with all the possible misunderstandings regarding a putative replacement of what is unconscious by what is conscious (where id, there ego) – i.e. an imposition of a new static order in place of an older one. On the contrary the understanding proposed by Castoriadis, is about the establishment of channels of free communication (*frayages*) between psychic entities, so that the new network that emerges will transform the closed circuit of repression, splitting and compartmentalisation, into an open thoroughfare of recognition and the establishment thereby, of a reflective and self-inquiring subjectivity. Linking the function of psychoanalysis to that of education, Castoriadis envisions parallel maturational routes and aims, which he defines as movements from a ‘heteronomous’ situation (where the subject is under the hegemony of an unknown and inflexible nexus of internal connectivities reliant on a self of the past) to an ‘autonomous’ situation (where there exists self-recognition, cultivation and development of the ability for thinking, reflectiveness, discovery and acquisition of new knowledge, and where change and transformation do not pose a threat). Such a resonant perception of the ways of functioning of both psychoanalysis and education, echoes in a remarkable way, the findings of modern neurophysiology regarding developmental mechanisms involved in psychological and cognitive processes. What Castoriadis calls the opening of new channels of communication between psychic entities, is reflected at the neuronal level as a functional plasticity that allows for the gradual deactivation of the synaptic network that had hitherto existed, between nodes that had been active and functional for years, and the shift to a modified synaptic network whose functionality, because updated, will henceforth be more efficient. In other words, “structural change does not eliminate and does not replace older neuronal networks, on the contrary, a constant influence effects a relative deactivation of the older and a preference for an increased activation of the newer synaptic algorithms” (Gabbard, 2006, Panksepp, 1998).

It is evidence of a truly remarkable meeting of minds, to discover a comparable theoretical proposition in Plato. In his Republic (518d), Plato describes the broader process of character building [*paidea (παιδεία)*] as *an art of the speediest and most efficient transformation [periagoge (περιαγωγή)] of the soul, and not an implantation of a new or foreign body of knowledge in it.* The confluence of these conceptualisations regarding education/upbringing, psychoanalysis and cognitive/emotional brain functioning as described by philosophers, psychoanalysts and neuro-scientists, cannot but make their propositions quite convincing!

It is by now quite incontrovertible that psychoanalytic thinking is to be placed within the long tradition of philosophical and scientific preoccupations with the concepts of recognition and self-knowledge, but this heritage in no way diminishes or overshadows the uniqueness of the psychoanalytic viewpoint and the very special place that recognition has acquired within that context.

Even though he does not mention the term, Freud certainly separates out the phenomenon of recognition as a fundamental aspect of the analytic context, and he raises the alarm as to the possibility of misperceiving/not being aware, that the process may, at times, go awry. He writes: “*Our* knowledge about the unconscious material is not equivalent to *his* [the analysand’s] knowledge; if we communicate our knowledge to him, he does not receive it *instead* of his unconscious material but *beside* it; and that makes very little change in it” (Freud, 1917 p. 436). Consequently recognition in the psychoanalytical sense is not to be understood as the transfer of knowledge from an analyst-transmitter to an analysand-receiver, but as a live recognition experience that the analysand will go through, within the analytic frame, in the catalytic presence/companionship of the analyst. From very early on in Freud’s writings, one can find indicative signs of the notion to be popularized later, that the case is of a special encounter of two subjectivities, and that the role of the Other in the evolution of recognition, is vital.

The theoretical understanding of the psychoanalytic situation and of the dynamics involved in it has not remained static over the many years of its existence. Starting from a very particular reading of the works of Freud that allowed for the prioratization of a single-person psychology, this understanding later moved to the acceptance of a two-person psychology, and the current paradigm centres on the analytic third. These scientific developments have fundamentally influenced the way we understand and make use of such basic principles and concepts as recognition/insight, psychic change, the role and significance attributed to the interpretation (language), the analytic frame, the limits of transference etc. The initial stance – heavily influenced by the technique of hypnosis and the cathartic paradigm – was based on the model of a revelatory emergence of a repressed personal truth, to be brought about by the verbal intervention of the analyst. This would permit the conscious Ego to occupy the space where once the unconscious Id used to reign. The manifest outcome, one would hope, would be a cathartic/cleansing type recovery. Freud’s above mentioned admonition, was all too easily bypassed. The well known analyst Anton Kris, who remains loyal to the one-person psychology, links recognition to a shift from the free energy characterizing the primary process thinking, to the bound one characterizing secondary process thinking. Analytic work, according to him, liberates energy which up until that moment had been used to keep material repressed, and through recognition, this liberated energy can now be bound to the secondary process (Kris, 1956).

Another contemporary representative of this one-person psychology Mitchell Wilson, defines the moment of recognition as an instance wherein the subject experiences the emergence from within, of an element that is alien to the self – what he calls the *Otherness Within* (Wilson, 1998). Recognition in psychoanalysis has, in his view, a dialectic character. It involves a pendular movement from a position of opening of the psychic space – potentially destabilising the existing psychic balance, to a position of closure and coagulation around familiar nodi of knowledge. The author describes in detail, this movement between the discontinuity and insecurity in the face of the alien and illogical within, on the one hand, and the well integrated and compromised balance of security on the other. This balance is only possible as a result of toleration, working through of internal conflictual situations and a variety of reparation processes, that would eventually lead to the acceptance of the “alien elements” within, as legitimate parts of the self. What he does not address is the fact highlighted by the French analyst de M’Uzan, that “the moment of recognition does nourish the resistance secondarily, by transforming itself into a single piece of knowledge blocking other eventual possibilities for cathexis … interpretive activity thus has a very singular vocation of shaking up the subject’s sense of identity [not excluding that of the analyst] and of inducing in him or her a state of mourning” (de M’Uzan, 1983 pp. 798-800).

With the gradual incorporation of object-relations thinking into the psychoanalytic theory, we have come to start making use of the propositions elaborated in James Strachey’s seminal article on the “mutative interpretation” (Strachey, 1934). This article places itself on the borderline between a) the one-person psychology and the use of interpretation as the sole bearer of knowledge and instigator of transformation on the analysand’s unconscious, and b) the perception of the analytic field as bipartite, which includes the acceptance of the inevitability of the unconscious participation of the analyst in the transferential *mis en scène*, as well as the definition of the function of an interpretation, as no more than the verbalisation of the here-and-now transferential dynamics between analyst and analysand. Verbalisation (i.e. language) remains for Strachey, just as it does for the majority of analysts today, the valued compass needed for the analytic journey towards recognition and psychic change. The more recent conceptualisations regarding the countertransference, together with the imperative for a mutuality in recognition between the analytic participants, have not in any way diminished that paper’s importance. To use Thomas Ogden’s erudite argumentation, ontological psychoanalysis cannot exist without epistemological psychoanalysis, and vice versa (Ogden, 2019). Contrariwise, some other, long established propositions, have now been abandoned as a result of which, the more inflexible aspects of the one-person psychology have gradually been replaced by an understanding of the psychoanalytic condition as a “binary field” (Baranger, 1990). In the two-person psychology that followed the initial phase, recognition can only be approached and retrospectively cognitively consolidated, through an elaborate and hardly conscious route, generated by the interactive matrix of a binary field. Such a viewpoint, defines the analytic condition as an unequal but equivalent engagement between two subjects who together relate, think, converse, have emotions, enact roles attributed, identify and dis-identify, appear lost and occasionally find their way together. There exists a surface of consciousness, and a much larger depth of non-conscious space, where the essence of the intercourse between these two human beings is constantly taking place.

In such an Odyssey, the contribution of the interpretation – of language, that is – in the creation of recognition and psychic elaboration, is that of a navigational compass. Our more recent understanding of transference allows us to picture the psychoanalytic condition as a very special stage wherein a highly personal intersubjective drama from the past is being enacted. The participating subjects are initially not consciously aware of the texture and quality of the compulsively repetitive nature of the drama. For them, this is *reality*. And it is only through some spontaneous experiential flashes of insight, that the atmosphere will begin to clear, before it clouds again in anticipation of the next clearing at a higher level.

A multitude of authors have studied this complex drama and have given it different names, like: ‘transference neurosis’, ‘total situation’, ‘temporal circularity’, ‘role responsiveness’, ‘concordant or complimentary countertransference’, ‘bastion’, etc. and a variety of defence mechanisms have been identified as contributors to its creation and maintenance. The theoretical notions of interpretation, recognition/insight and working through, are intricately related to these flashes of clarity that occasionally upset the predictability of the rhythm, and transpose the interaction to different levels of functionality. The route is naturally not linear, and only over time and retrospectively can it begin to assemble a certain psychic integration. Thomas Ogden, echoing the words of de M’Uzan quoted above, describes this phenomenon thus: “Each insight, however valuable, immediately constitutes the next resistance in that the new knowledge is already part of the static known, and must be overcome in the process of freshly knowing.” (Ogden, 1989 p. 1) In other words, instances of insight are by their very nature transient, and should be constantly paving the way for the subsequent upheaval in knowledge, if the “forever-in-search” quality of Bion’s *K* is to be maintained.

The theoretical proposition of Strachey and many others, puts forth the argument that the agent of psychic change in the psychoanalytic condition is the ‘mutative interpretation’, irrespective of whether the frame is thought of as a one-person frame as in the past, or a two-person one (which presupposes the constant background existence of an imaginary Other/Third), as is currently accepted. It is the analyst’s cognition – reaching the analysand through the verbal route, and after due incubation, given at the chosen moment – that will render the analysand consciously cognisant of what, up until that moment, was only unconsciously known. The transference interpretation will be illuminating by putting into words, the unconscious bi-personal enactment that is being lived through, in the here-and-now of the analytic situation. The assumption is that if the timing is correct, the analysand will have the experience “*of being understood by an Other*” and this will lead him to self-knowledge / self-recognition. Such experiences are followed by extended processes of working through, so that these new insights can grow roots and be integrated within the psychic structure thus establishing a relative shift in one’s conscious sense of identity. Some authors have suggested the view that recognition, as a process of re-signification of a memory (according to Freud, every memory has more than one registration in the psychic sphere) and also because of the retrograde character of its chronicity, could be seen as having affinities with the Freudian concept of *Nachträglichkeit – après coup* (Sodré 1997). It stands to reason therefore, that recognition as a process of re-arrangement of internal object relations, rendered possible only through the advancement to a more mature level of development (oedipal level, depressive position, etc.), is to be identified with the mutative element of the analytic / therapeutic endeavour. Just like in a kaleidoscope, where whilst the constituent shards remain the same, the picture resulting from the movement applied on it, differs fundamentally, so here too, it is not some hitherto unknown new information that will bring about the new arrangement / understanding of the past, but a re-arrangement of what is already there. Plato’s *periagoge* mentioned above, indicates the universality of this process. It may appear as if the past has changed, but in actuality what has changed is the relationship the subject is currently having, with the many versions of the past that he has kept alive inside his inner world. Hans Loewald called it *not a new object but a new relationship with the object*. After all, recognition, irrespective of whether it is understood philosophically or psychoanalytically, is an event as a result of which, a “return to the Self” is rendered impossible.

The encounter with the recognising Alterity (represented by the analyst’s words) triggers a mechanism that can no longer be reversed. The philosopher Judith Butler expresses it like this: “recognition [of one’s limits] becomes the process by which I become other than what I imagined I was till then ….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). Winnicott writes that that is the moment when “something happened after which, nothing is the same again.” (Winnicott, 1965 p. 51) One could argue therefore, that recognition, après coup, and mutative occurrences, are in fact different readings of the same phenomenon. It pertains to the element that renders the innate uncertainty of the psychoanalytic journey somehow more bearable, without ever totally extinguishing it. It is inevitable that one phase of recognition will always be followed by new zones of internal anxieties and conflicts, which in turn will prepare the ground for still newer recognitions and thus the psychoanalytic process will evolve (Blum, 1979). The course of the recognition process is thus proven to be in effect spiral. The truth of every new awareness is never established forever – *sub specie aeternitatis*. The *nachträglich* re-signification is always waiting round the corner, thereby preventing any dogmatic petrification from ever being established.

If the above stands as a preliminary description of what takes place, it nevertheless raises a number of questions as to the ways through which language and recognition are in a position to bring about psychic transformation i.e. questions regarding the suitability of timing as well as the share attributed to the so-called non-verbal processes. Some authors have focused on the ‘violence of the words’ (Joannidis, 2005), thus highlighting the power of words in both dismantling and reinforcing resistances, be they as elements in the destruction or the construction of a *bastion* (Baranger, 1990), or of a *symbiotic situation* (Bleger, 1981), or as representatives of *envy*, *-K*, or *attacks on thinking* (Bion, 1963). These authors thereby emphasize the urgent necessity for vigilance regarding the equivocal ends to which the words of the interpretations could be forced into, thus determining whether a space for the newly crystallising structure, can gradually be opened up or shut down. A non-analyst thinker contributes to this point of view, by realising that: “… interpretation [is] that which, by shattering the appearances and the games of the manifest discourse, brings out meaning, by re-making connections with the latent discourse” (Baudrillard, 1979 p. 77). And it is up to a Winnicottian analyst like Christopher Bollas to remind us of the life-enhancing quality of destruction. He argues that the analytic process is one in which “each participant destroys the other’s perceptions and rhetorical rendering of events, to create that third intermediate object…” (Bollas, 1992 p. 112). Others bypass aggressiveness, and adduce the containing function of verbalisation (Segal, 1957). Others still, by focusing on the power of recognition (whether as a consequence of an interpretation or not), underscore the forcefulness of the new structure emerging from within, which will render the incumbent, closed and compulsively repetitive dynamic, obsolete. André Green as one of them, claims that “…. the tempered ideal towards which analysis tends, has no other meaning than that of *recognition of the Other* as an irreducible limit to the subject’s subjectivating aim” (Green, 1990 p. 292). Finally there are those who place both interpretation and recognition to a secondary position and accentuate the principle role of working through, which they understand as consisting of internalisations and introjections of a reflecting and recognising Other, i.e. the gradual unconscious identification with the containing function of the analyst, which again, subtly alters one’s sense of identity (Bion, 1963). In this model, the interpretation is no more than a symbol for the containing Other, and it is the presence of this recognising/containing Other that triggers the recognition processes in the analysand, thus opening up channels of communication with cut off aspects of his inner world.

This conceptualisation is a direct application of the well-known Hegelian proposition that “*self consciousness is in and for itself, while and as a result of its being in and for itself for an Other, i.e. it is only as a being that is being recognised*” (Hegel, 1907 p. 123). The psychoanalyst Hans Loewald on the other hand, gives the following description of this phenomenon: “Psychoanalytic interpretations are based on the analyst’s self-understanding, and self-understanding is reactivated in the act of interpretation to the patient… Interpretation is an activity in which the analyst mediates or conveys self-understanding or its possibility to the patient, something the patient then is enabled to make his own or internalize as an intrapsychic activity” (Loewald, 1979 p. 165). Two of Loewald’s students use a most elegant expression of their own to convey this predicament: “Analysts learn more about who they are, by participating in the ‘dance’ of the moment” (Gabbard & Ogden, 2009 p. 323). Whenever the analyst feels (self-) recognised, the analysand feels recognised, and thereby a therapeutic step has been achieved. As a consequence, recognition cannot but be a process of mutual involvement, a very special kind of encounter of two psychic worlds. Distancing oneself from the intersubjective *here and now* of the analytic situation would only lead to what T. S. Eliot (in a totally different context) has called “instead of insight you get a fiction” (Eliot, 1932 p. 20).

The grave danger inherent in this approach however, is the possibility of subliminally twisting the authenticity of the power dynamic in the binary field, through the legitimization of a contrived, unidirectional so-called *technique of intimacy*, rather than maintaining a degree of mutuality, that would provide some level of equanimity to the intimacy of the analytic encounter with alterity. Such interactions, where no mutually transformative encounter is possible, because the participants have been deprived of the freedom to escape from their pre-ordained repertoire roles thus annulling all traces of subjectivity, have been duly acknowledged as the trademarks of perversion (Kureishi, 2011 p. 4).

Psychoanalytic authors tend nowadays, to discern in the analytic condition what philosophers have repeatedly voiced over the centuries i.e. that to recognize and to be recognized is the very same process. The intricate interchange between subjectivation (self-recognition) and intersubjectivity is best expressed in Winnicott’s elegant, concise phrase which says “when I look I am seen, so I exist” (Winnicott 1971, p. 114). The resonance of this statement with Paul’s message to the Corinthians that *now we see through a glass darkly but then face to face: now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known*, is remarkable. In a separate text Winnicott suggests – lest it be forgotten – that the awareness of one’s body too, is inextricably related to the environment-individual set-up (Abram, 2022 p. 16). Similar views are found in a variety of other contemporary authors as well. Starting from the aesthetic experience of coming face to face with a piece of art, the German philosopher Hans Gadamer argues that understanding / recognition of the truth embedded in that piece of art is “a genuine experience induced by the work, which does not leave him who has it, unchanged” (Gadamer, 1980 p. 86). The experience of the recognition of a truth, he goes on to suggest, is transformative of the self, based as it is, on a constant process of owning up and integrating, in which each member of this idiosyncratic dialogue shifts his original position, without however, ever abandoning it. Peter de Bolla, a more recent aesthetic philosopher, clearly influenced by Gadamer, writes:

“ … intense moments of *aesthetic* experience feel as if they are in the orbit of

knowing, as if something has been barely whispered yet somehow heard. Yet

what I learn nevertheless needs to be carefully and patiently teased out of the

experience (and may, for example, only become known to me after repeated

exposure to the object that occasions the experience, or even at a time long after

the experience itself). One way of putting this is to note that these experiences

often may help me to identify what it is I already know but have yet to figure to

myself as knowledge. They point toward the limit of my knowledge *that*, make

visible what is unknown or unknowable. And when this happens I project into

the object this unknown or unknowable knowledge. I sense the artwork as containing

something I strive to uncover or appropriate. These forms of experience make *this*

known to me ….” (de Bolla, 2001 p. 12)

The poet Rilke on the other hand, uses an expression of much greater immediacy to represent the same condition. Addressing one’s encounter with a piece of art, he writes: “*… for there is no place there, that does not see you. You must change your life*.”

The affinity between the aesthetic experience, as it is described above, and the psychoanalytic recognition, as we have come to understand it, would easily support the proposition that a moment of recognition within the psychoanalytic frame, is nothing but an aesthetic moment – with all the unexpected consequences that such a hypothesis would entail.

The experience of knowing / being known is infused with affect (Joseph, 1984 p. 269) and it is these affects, activated by the verbal communication from a transference object, that act as catalysts opening up channels between the past and the present, between emotion and thinking, between the conscious and the foreclosed, thus retrospectively (après coup) offering a new affective meaning to the “memory in action” that was being expressed through repetitiveness of the enactment, both within the analytic frame and without it. This psychic movement defines an alternative rendering of meaning which bears the potential for disentangling a thus far inhibited / fossilized mourning process, and subsequently for finally initiating the intricate processes of healing and reparation of the traumatic. This affective experience of trying to know oneself through an Other, is put forward by Bion as the very definition of ‘*thinking*’ (O’Shaughnessy, 1981 p.181).

The psychoanalytic interpretation as an agent of recognition in the hands of the analyst, establishes links between the psychic spheres of two individuals, whereas for the analysand it serves mainly to establish links between the disconnected aspects and levels within his own psychic sphere. This becomes possible, only through a matrix of bilateral introjective identifications that permeate the analytic field. A matrix that is, that presupposes firstly the unconscious receptivity on the part of the analyst, so that nodal points of subjective sensitivity can be triggered in order to bring to the conscious surface what is commonly known by the term *empathy* (*Einfühlung*) – i.e. shared affect / shared pathos. And secondly, it presupposes the psychic receptivity of the analysand who, as a result of the interpretation will feel both constructively destabilised and recognised, and who will subsequently feel ready to introject the recognising function of the analyst (what Bion has called containment). With the manifest intention of highlighting the spontaneity of unconscious procedures involved in the creation of recognition-promoting interpretations, J-B Pontalis writes: “*An interpretation that comes from what I know and not from what strikes me, is not an interpretation. [It is] a deafness, a blindness brought about by knowledge*” (Pontalis, 2000 p.96).

A neuroscientific correspondence to this phenomenon could possibly be detected in the recently discovered “mirror cells” in the brain. These are cells that get activated equally, by both the volitional motor activity of the subject and by the passive observation of motor activity in another subject. The neuronal connections however, are not with the optical cortex (i. e. conscious sight) but with areas of the parietal cortex, involved in functions like memory and affective integration (Iacoboni et al., 1999).

At this juncture, it may be important to underscore the differences between a) communication through unconscious channels (projection / introjection) that promote and safeguard a phantasy symbiotic condition through the use of the Other as a *subjective object* and b) recognition as the transformative element that promotes the shift from the syncytium (what Bion would call at-one-ment) to differentiation, from the parasitic relating to the commensal relating (Bion), from the unified to the shared, or (to use winnicottian terminology) from object-relating to object-use. In order to bring about this transformation something alien to the status quo, something uncanny is vitally needed. As the Italian philosopher Gemma Fiumara has stated, no subversive discourse can ever be “canny” (Freud’s *heimlich*). Only a force that is alien to us, and that we permit it to enrich us, is ever capable of disentangling us from a restrictive system of thinking and being (Fiumara, 1990). What is fundamental in recognition and hence the value of interpretation that promotes it, is that analyst and analysand are no longer defined through complementarity but by the fact that they participate as subjects willing to be changed, in a shared experience – it is thus, not an interlocking but an encounter-with-the-different. In such a condition of recognition, both analyst and analysand are simultaneously in contact with one another and with their own selves – together and apart, or to use Winnicott’s felicitous phrase, *alone in the presence of another*.

Recognition is the point at which the joint efforts of analyst and analysand manage to bring to consciousness and to formulate the very symbiotic situation that had been enveloping them, up until that moment (Baranger, 1990). Consequently recognition allows for the return to their source, of the elements that had been projected by both participants onto the analytic field, and had thereby created the symbiotic (transferential) condition. The ‘repatriation’ of the, till-then-‘exiled’-elements, inevitably transforms the analysand’s internal object-relation dynamics, but also, perhaps to a lesser extent, those of the analyst’s. As Winnicott has courageously admitted: “I cannot help being different from what I was, before this analysis started” (Winnicott, 1975 p. 280).

Variations on this theme have recently been expounded by the American psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin. Starting from a philosophical position, she makes use of the term ‘recognition’ in order to reiterate and revalidate the well established acknowledgement that the process whereby the subjectivity of the Self can be established, goes inevitably through the establishment first, of the subjectivity of the Other. Only subsequently can the subjectivity of the Self be established. The nascent subject is in foundational need of an external “already-subject” for its own eventual subjectivation. The sufficient and necessary condition for this Hegelian “being recognised by the Other” is contingent on the Other’s subjectivity being recognised by the Self, first. For the mother (or the analyst) to be in a position to offer recognition to the infant (or the analysand), the infant (or the analysand) needs to go beyond the self-object (or subjective-object) stage of psychic development (the Winnicottian object-relating) and recognise the mother (or the analyst) as an autonomous, separate, whole object (the Winnicottian object-use) with its own alterity and subjectivity. Seen as a case of binary mutuality though, the situation soon traps itself in a chicken-and-egg dilemma. The (M)Other’s subjectivity needs must be both autonomous and at the same time, dependent on the recognition given to it by the nascent subject-to-be. Otherwise, as Laplanche’s admonition reminds us, any recognition of the Other’s subjectivity, by the very fact that it is inescapably reliant on the self’s representation of it, cannot but be mediated, i.e. be part of the *self’s own mentation*! (Laplanche, 1977 p. 659). Michel de M’Uzan too, addresses this point when he writes: “The Other is never completely other, since he can only be encountered through his representation which is situated in the ego of the subject and thus narcissistically cathected” (de M’Uzan, 2013 p. 61). Unless thirdness is introduced at this point, to upend the putative symmetry of mutuality, otherness remains an attribute my mind chooses to ascribe or not to ascribe, to the object. As philosophers have repeatedly pointed out, genuine Otherness cannot but be what forever eludes me, and therefore what delimits my consciousness (Husserl, 1973 p. 144 & Levinas, 1979 p.83).

On the subject of these complex processes permeating the analytic situation and which both entangle and liberate the two subjects involved, Bion is very clear. He states: “I propose that the work of the psychoanalyst should be regarded as transformation [not representation] of a realization (of the actual psychoanalytic experience) into an interpretation ... An interpretation is a transformation; to display the invariants, an experience felt and described in one way, is described in another” (Bion, 1965 p.6).

Given that Bion advocates that the primary reality of the session, i.e. the O of the emotional experience, in other words *the* *psychoanalytic object*, is unknowable and hence ineffable – if anything it is a perceptual experience (both inner and outer) – to be using language to describe it, both concretizes and impoverishes it. After all, verbal communication in the form of an interpretation, reminds us Lacan (in the 4th lesson of his 13th seminar on “the Object of Psychoanalysis”), should not inform, but only evoke. Resonating with this, is Kutrin Kemper’s notion of “*interpreting through the use of allusions*” which refers to unsaturated, associations-triggering, incomplete interpretations (Kemper, 1965). Laplanche on the other hand, points out that given the irreducible alienness of the Unconscious, any interpretation cannot possibly be a point-for-point corresponding translation of the primary process fragments into the secondary process discourse of consciousness – it can only be a “making of a sign” (Laplanche, 1997 p. 660). Isn’t it thought provoking, that what Heraclitus attributes to the Lord at Delphi, is directly intimated as being spuriously enacted in every analyst’s ordinary hermeneutic intervention.

Transforming into verbal rendition (and ineluctably only as a crude approximation) what was initially a lived, aesthetic experience (the psychoanalytic object) is astonishingly the very definition of a technical term from a totally different discipline i.e. poetics. “*Ekphrasis* [*έκφρασις*]” is defined as the description through poetic language of a visual image – at the same time highlighting, the inevitable non-identity, non-dovetailing between the description and that which is being described. The affinity between psychoanalytic and poetic dynamics is remarkable. A prime example of this phenomenon from the analysand’s perspective, would be the dreaming of the dream and its recounting in the session. The jarring discrepancy between the two is often commented on. Bion who uses the term ‘publication’ for this process, and who recognises that “that which exists before publication is therefore private to the individual”, insists that all the preverbal associations that precede the movement into language “….. are stripped from the word that is the name of the scientific deductive system, so that finally only the name remains” (Bion, 1962 p. 101).

The emotional experience in question, is naturally one shared by the two Unconscious Realms present, and Bion feels the need to point that out. He writes: “Any O not common to both [analyst and analysand] is incapable of psychoanalytic investigation. Any appearance to the contrary depends on a failure to understand the nature of psychoanalytic interpretation” (Bion, 1965 p. 49). On the matter of interpretation too, affinities can be detected between his views and those of Winnicott. Winnicott states “ … the purpose of interpretation must include a feeling that the analyst has, that a communication has been made, which needs acknowledgement. The analyst reflects back what the patient has communicated” (Winnicott, 1989 p. 208). And Bion responds by indicating that “Strictly speaking interpretation draws attention to an existing emotional state, but it produces the emotional state of awareness of an emotional state [as well]” (Bion, 1965 p. 34 f.1).

Finally, the idea that a mutative interpretation (one that culminates in insight) generates a fundamental transformation in the psyche, is evidenced by Bion’s statement that: “Any interpretation may be accepted in K but rejected in O: acceptance in O means that acceptance of an interpretation enabling the patient to ‘know’ that part of himself to which attention has been drawn, is felt to involve ‘being’ or ‘becoming’ that person” (Bion, 1965 p. 164).

Winnicott on the other hand, talks of the integration into the whole self, of the already existing, but dissociated part of the self. The mutative event, where the O of mutual recognition is instanced, is given by him (as reported by Masud Khan) the appellation “sacred moment” (where infant researchers have used the term ‘moment of meeting’ or ‘moment of recognition’) and he believes that it entails “…. the [analysand] and the [analyst] both suddenly becoming aware of the exact nature of the emotional and psychic predicament the [analysand] is struggling with” (Winnicott, 1975 p. XXVIII).

Moving to non-psychoanalytic domains once again, the famous psychology pioneer William James, in his treatise called “Varieties of Religious Experience” selects these four elements as defining the mystical experience (James, 1982 p. 380-1).

* - ineffability
* - noetic quality (states of insight / knowledge)
* - transiency
* - passivity / loss of volition (grasped and held by an outside power)

Observing the similarity in the constituent elements of these two experiences, the analyst faces the temptation or challenge once again, of conceptualising the psychoanalytic entity of recognition / insight as a special case of a mystical event!

Doesn’t Plato describe a very comparable phenomenon when, whilst detailing how the knowledge imparted is received, he writes: “*…after a long sojourn on the subject, and its due elaboration, suddenly, like a spark jumping out of an open fire,* [*understanding*] *settles inside the psyche and starts feeding itself*” (Seventh Epistle 341c-d)? A similar metaphor is used by Walter Benjamin who writes: “In the areas that concern us, recognition exists ever only as a bolt of lightning. The text is the long awaited thunder that follows ” (Benjamin, 1982 p. 570).

Recognition is fed by, and correspondingly feeds into what has been called by researchers like Fonagy & Target (1996), the process of *mentalisation*. It pertains to the development – through the experiential apperception of one’s own and another’s emotional state – of an ability to differentiate internal from external reality. Mentalisation as an outcome of recognition, creates links or bridges a) between representation and the represented, and b) between language / thought and the experienced, thus preventing coalescence or enmeshment. Recognition in concert with mentalisation, enforces on the self, the acceptance of a mind that belongs to an Other, and who as a separate entity, delimits any narcissistic omnipotent symbiotic phantasy the self might wish to indulge in.

Writing within a totally different context – man’s relationship to God – the contemporary Greek thinker Thanos Lipovats suggests that language as the bearer of the Divine Law, by establishing distance and thereby restraining the seducing power of the illusory transcendence of all differences, renders the Absolute unreachable, and thereby establishes Lack. Consequently, he claims, the delimiting Commandments, not only do they not stifle, but they actually support desire and hence the very process of living. The word acts as a means for symbolisation and incorporation of desire instead of repressing it, or of denying its existence via the illusion of an oceanic feeling of union (Lipovats, 2006). Language in the service of the Life Drive therefore, and not in that of the Death Drive.

Whereas initially recognition was understood as a momentary, delimited and accurately detectable occurrence in the midst of the disorderly flow of the analytic process, contemporary authors, never denying the aforementioned dimension, tend to widen the concept by adding duration and diachronicity to it. This new dimension makes recognition less linear and creates affinities with a variety of other disciplines trying to study change. Recognition is nowadays conceptualised as a unique psychological operation that has a complex temporal relationship with reversal and re-organisation of the internal / psychic status quo, i.e. the established meaning structure of the self, and of the personal history narrative, as well as the way one currently relates to and experiences living. It is as if recognition contributes to both a) the groundwork for and b) the final and relatively abrupt upending of the enveloping theoretical paradigm or indeed the raising to a higher level, of the functioning modality of the system. And that, by establishing new ways of perception, comprehension and relating.

The neuroscientists’ discourse (Edelman 1987) as well as the complex systems theorists’ one (Thelen, 1994) present change as the step-by-step increase in the functionality of certain neuronal networks to the detriment of others, until a certain threshold is reached. Crossing that threshold activates the sudden imposition of a new and clearly higher-level organisation of the system. Such a chain reaction metaphor (reminiscent of Kuhn’s well known paradigm shift dynamics) has seeped into the psychoanalytic community too, and is employed widely. On the other hand, propositions derived from developmental psychology, that deploy the concept of the so called “implicit relational knowledge” as the central agent of change in place of verbalisation of the transference, are received with caution and suspicion by psychoanalytic thinkers. Theoretical propositions such as the latter, which promote the latent non-verbal relationship instead of language, as the agent of change, even though well known in the past under the name of “corrective emotional experience” (and given only limited acceptance), pose once again, a challenge that psychoanalysis cannot easily dismiss. Borrowing terms from developmental psychology, the proponents of this view, make reference to the so called “moments of meeting” (Stern, 1998) or “moments of recognition” (Sander, 1992) that seem to be triggered suddenly, on a groundwork laid by gradual, piecemeal cracks appearing in the familiar and steadily and predictably repeated dynamic of the psychoanalytic field. These moments are meant to define the intersubjective recognition of a shared subjective reality, created transferentially, by the personal and spontaneous engagement of two subjectivities, irrespective of the verbal context.

According to their proponents, these moments influence the stepwise transformation of the existing implicit relational knowledge, which is a primary, pre-verbally established pattern of relating to the Other. This after all, is considered to be the space for and the object of change, in any therapeutic endeavour. The claim is also made, that it is the Other’s presence, and the relating that ensues from that presence, as opposed to the mutative interpretation, that acts as the factor leading to recognition as a transformative experience. What is being suggested is that here too, just like in “great poetry”, effective communication between two parties can occur, independent of conscious cognitive apperception. Irrespective of whether one fully agrees with such a view or not, the fact of a link between the importance of the lived analytic encounter including the verbal / rational recognition and its memory connections that the current psychoanalytic thinking advocates, becomes undeniable. It is true that no one is talking about remembrance as a mere recollection of a specific forgotten event in past external reality any more, instead one understands memory, as the bringing into consciousness of a latent relationship pattern which, because of the repetition compulsion characterising it, tends to automatically emerge in the transferential relating between the two subjects engaged in the psychoanalytic situation. If the claim is being made that memory is nothing but a pictorial representation of emotional states, these emotional states can only emerge in the context of a relating. And the analytic condition is one such, in which implicit relational knowledge is enacted. But it is verbalisation alone, that will have that unique chance to upend it.

The fact that these phenomena are detected and studied by a variety of disciplines, alerts us to the ubiquitous possibility of them going awry i.e. of mis-recognition. The philosopher D. Armstrong is very clear when he writes: “Perception may be erroneous ... it is equally possible for introspection [internal perception] to be erroneous. This does not mean that introspective awareness may not in fact, satisfy the conditions for *knowledge*” (Armstrong, 1994 p. 111). At the same time, psychoanalytic literature frequently mentions instances where the very same moment of recognition acts by defensively subverting the analytic process. Such instances pertain to dynamics whereby it is through the very process of recognition that a transference enactment gratification is being obtained – a certain kind of symbolic mutual seduction with the full unconscious participation of the analyst (Smith, 2006). Such phenomena function in the service of the –K principle (forces against or perverting knowledge, according to Bion) and undermine genuine recognition by replacing it with a deception. Masud Khan was being particularly honest when he wrote: “… I always talked a lot and often quite insightfully, but my language, spoken, was always other to me” (Rodman, 2003 p. 209).

The impressive similarity of views between disciplines that has been presented so far, whilst recognizing psychoanalytic discourse as equal to that of other fields, runs the risk of wearing away its significance and rendering it redundant. It is vital therefore, to point out that even if psychoanalysis touches upon phenomena adequately studied by other disciplines, its own language remains unique and unmatchable, as it addresses in a rigorously scientific manner, what is most personal, what is part of the special self-shaping historical narrative, what constitutes for me what I know myself to be, in other words, subjectivity itself.

Returning to Aristotle’s definition mentioned at the beginning of the paper, we could easily claim that he is already and with great concision describing all that subsequent authors discovered in their own right. If we were then to add Plato’s intersubjective take on recognition that states : “*…..if an eye is to see itself, it must look at an eye…. And if the soul is to know herself, she must surely look at a soul*” (Alcibiades I: 133), we would have to concede that even if externally distorted, because of philosophical and psychoanalytic interventions of some thirty centuries, the wisdom of past eras continues in its diachronicity, to flourish in the present.

… laborious psychoanalytic investigation can  merely confirm the truths which the philosopher recognised by intuition.

Freud (S.E. XVI p.16)

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