

London Conference – 4 June 2016

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VOICES OFF: FRAGMENTATION AND THE RETURN OF THE SPLIT-OFF

The great American poet Elizabeth Bishop, whose mother was incarcerated in a mental hospital when she, Elizabeth, was 5 years old, wrote an autobiographical short story, 'In the Village', about her experience of this event (she never saw her mother again). This is the first paragraph of this story:

"A scream, the echo of a scream, hangs over that Nova Scotian village. No one hears it; it hangs there forever, a slight stain in those pure blue skies, skies that [...] seem to keep on darkening [...] around the horizon—or is it around the rims of the eyes?[...] The scream hangs like that, unheard, in memory—in the past, in the present, and those years between. It was not even loud to begin with, perhaps. It just came there to live, forever—not loud, just alive forever. Its pitch would be the pitch of my village. Flick the lightning rod on top of the church steeple with your fingernail and you will hear it."

This paper will be about pitch – the pitch that hangs there forever in the background of my patient's mind, and that comes to the forefront at particular moments in his sessions. Like Bishop's mother, my patient's mother suffered a puerperal depression that caused her to be in mental hospital for several weeks after her baby's birth (her sister, who she was very close to, had died during the pregnancy.) My working hypothesis is that in his case, the Scream – which comes from a simultaneously wounded and accusing object – is the result of the secondary fragmentation (Bion 1967)¹, into tiny particles, of both the mother's and the

¹ "A return to the paranoid-schizoid position [may be] characterised by a secondary fragmentation which is imposed on the already severe primary fragmentation[...] as if the patient, regressing

baby's cries, that coalesce into a cloud of powerful and undifferentiated Noise, which then projects itself into the patient's mind in an extremely persecuting and guilt-making way. I am calling this disturbing and distressing intrusion by these wounded, grieving fragments of the object and of the self the return of the split-off, to differentiate this extremely violent, primitive process from the more neurotic, more whole object return of the repressed.

Colm Toibin (2015), in his marvellous book about Elizabeth Bishop, says that she never wrote a poem explicitly about the experience she describes in her story. But we can see a transformation of that traumatic situation in her poem "In the Waiting Room", which recalls an event from three days before she was 7 years old. Her father had died suddenly when she was 8 months old, and she had been looked after by her grandparents and her aunts since the disappearance of her mother. The poem describes an occasion when she had accompanied her aunt Consuelo (Consolation in English) to an appointment with the dentist. The poem, (of which I will quote some passages) describes her disturbing waiting room experience of overhearing her aunt's scream of pain whilst she is looking at what she sees as horrifying pictures in a National Geographic Magazine:

In the photographs she sees black ashes and red 'rivulets of fire' coming out of a volcano. Then:

"Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.
Suddenly, from inside,
came an oh! of pain
– Aunt Consuelo's voice –

[...] What took me
completely by surprise
was that it was me:
my voice, in my mouth.
Without thinking at all
I was my foolish aunt,
I – we – were falling, falling,
our eyes glued to the cover
of the National Geographic,
February, 1918
I said to myself: three days

from the depressive position, turns with increased hatred and anxiety against the fragments that have shown their power to coalesce and splits them with great thoroughness; as a result we have a danger of a fragmentation so minute that reparation of the ego becomes impossible."

and you'll be seven years old.
I was saying it to stop
the sensation of falling off
the round, turning world
into cold, blue-black space.

[...]
I knew [...]that nothing
stranger could ever happen.
Why should I be my aunt,
or me, or anyone?
What similarities--
boots, hands, the family voice
I felt in my throat, or even
the National Geographic
and those awful hanging breasts--
held us all together
or made us all just one?

[...]
How had I come to be here,
like them, and overhear
a cry of pain that could have
got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright
and too hot. It was sliding
beneath a big black wave,
another, and another."

Bishop conveys an extraordinarily powerful illustration of projective identification, in a beautiful poem rich with allusions and metaphors of a particularly poignant nature. The poem illustrates what I think happens in my patient's mind, and the source of the confusion in the transference relationship, in which it is never clear, moment to moment, whose pain, whose wound, whose scream it is that creates the pitch in the atmosphere between us, the pitch of his internal world. As the analysis proceeded, the horror of an experience which cannot be fully experienced, which is constantly being destroyed in his mind through a rapid, mania-fuelled fragmentation and projection into the object, creating instant triumph and manic reparation followed by the instant persecution by the split-off fragments trying to get back inside him, became concentrated in his fear of his mother's "horrible screams"; like Bishop's darkening skies around the horizon – "or is it around the rims of the eyes"? – the Not I, not Mine fragments are immediately there, not inside an object in outer space but quickly returned to the "rims" of his ears.

“Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying.”

This is where the scream comes from: the baby’s head and the mother’s throat are wound together by string/wire; the equal but differently pronounced words wound/wound (in the mouth) – as well as the repetition of the ‘round and round’ of the madness in the head and the throat - making it both excruciatingly poignant and extraordinarily vivid. The terror of madness and of depression is everywhere in the fear of falling off the ‘round, turning world’ and the blackness of the “awful hanging” breasts, the repetition of another, and another, black wave.

I am thinking about a small baby whose mother suddenly disappears for what must feel like an eternity, and keeping in mind the confusion between self and object and the need to project unbearable fear and, possibly, as Klein described, having a much too early intimation of depressive pain; how is it possible for this baby to distinguish between his own cries – which leave his throat but at the same time pierce his ears, i.e., come from the *outside* – and the overheard or imagined cries from his mother?

What I’m suggesting is that minute fragments coalesce into a cloud of intensely disturbing lethal Noise that is never integrated and therefore resides on the fringes of the mind (or of a place in the internal world experienced as geographically “just outside”) constantly threatening to invade the self with an intolerable darkness. Bion (1963) described *a mixed state in which the patient is persecuted by feelings of depression and depressed by feelings of persecution*. My patient defends himself against this intrusion by powerful manic attacks which further crush and fragment the object. Quoting Bion again, *The...objects [thus created] are compounded of things–in–themselves, feelings of depression-persecution with guilt and therefore aspects of the personality linked by a sense of catastrophe*. A sense of imminent catastrophe, defended against by a perpetual manic stream that seems to be, simultaneously, suffused with omnipotence and fragile like a whistling in the dark, characterises my patient’s psychological existence.

In a previous paper on the return of the split-off² I used examples from literature to illustrate the cycle of persecution created by the return of the violently split off, fragmented and projected 'other side' of compulsive erotisation (a particular form of idealization of self and object together): the return of the split-off in that case involved concrete phantasies of fragmenting illness, deterioration, putrefaction, frightening ugliness (the plague in *Death in Venice*, gangrene and leprosy in *Madame Bovary*). This paper is in part a continuation of this theme.

This paper focuses on my patient's terror of the screams coming from the terrifying mouth of the object – a mixture of terrible accusations and terrible cries of pain, as well as an amalgam of screams from the baby and screams from the mother (caused by a traumatic rupture of the couple mother-baby). He feels invaded by an atmosphere of darkness suffused by these "voices-off" (just off the stage) caused by unbearably disturbing phantasies of attacks on the wounded object. The "pitch" of this patient's internal world, the dreaded and continually defended against atmosphere which surrounds the self, is a consequence of violent fragmentation that, instead of annihilating whatever is threatening the self, creates a monstrous cloud of dark dust and dark sound.

Klein's conceptualisation of splitting as the central schizoid mechanism made it clear that splitting as a defence happens much earlier than repression: "in this early phase splitting, denial and omnipotence play a role similar to that of repression at a later stage of ego-development". As Petot (1993) points out, in repression "there is a certain permeability in the barrier between the dynamic unconscious and the preconscious." (1952). "*If [splitting] is excessive to the point of becoming mutilating*, it is a sign that it has followed too impervious a binary splitting. Then, instead of a fluid boundary between conscious and unconscious, a rigid barrier arises between them."

The return of the repressed includes a time-dimension – the repressed can be imagined as located in the past (or in the place in the internal world – always in the present – which is

² *Imparadised in Hell: Idealisation, Erotisation and the Return of the Split-Off* (Sodré 2015).

experienced as “in the past”). The return of the split-off is always experienced as in the present. I think one tends to imagine repression as a *pushing down into the unconscious*, and splitting-off as *pushing out* (into the object, or, more schizoidly, into outer space - i.e. massively denied or annihilated). Thus whatever comes back from repression may be experienced as unwanted, but “mine”, whereas the split-off is more alien, more “not-mine”; it is repelled more violently. In phantasy, the repressed and the split-off therefore occupy different geographical positions in the internal world; the repressed experienced as burbling away under the surface, hidden inside the self, whereas the split-off threatens to come from the “outside”, invading adjacent territories and breaking the boundaries of the self.

In Bishop’s poem the boundaries of the self are broken by the horrible pictures and the sound of a scream of pain; her experience as a little girl is of a double violent introjection caused by fragments projecting themselves into her eyes and into her ears; this violation of boundaries causes a concrete confusion of identities: she hears the “oh!” of pain – Aunt Consuelo’s voice: “what took me by surprise was that it was me: my voice, in my mouth”. The “oh” is much too familiar, and so are the supposedly “foreign” babies and breasts: her own baby head wired together with her aunt/mother’s throat, her off-stage scream.

My patient lives permanently on the thin line at the threshold of the depressive position. In a recent joint paper, ‘The Terror of Loving’, (2014) Priscilla Roth and I described our two patients, apparently very different but both inhabitants of this world. In a previous paper, “Pity and Disconnection: the Misuse of Metaphor” (2013) Priscilla linked her patient’s pathology to Klein’s (1930) analysis of four year old Dick where she shows how his lack of capacity of symbol-formation should be understood *not as an absence of meaning, “but as the uncontrollable proliferation of meanings.”* Dick had formed a too early “identification with the object attacked”, and could not bear his own aggression. “This too early identification led to a premature empathy, resulting in a confusion between persecutory anxiety and early feelings of guilt”. My patient is endlessly overwhelmed by his sense of having horribly damaged his object.

In 'Notes on some schizoid mechanisms' (1946) Klein states:

"In states of frustration and anxiety the oral-sadistic and cannibalistic desires are reinforced, and then the infant feels that he has taken in the nipple and the breast in bits. Therefore in addition to the divorce between a good and a bad breast in the young infants' phantasy, the frustrating breast – attacked in oral-sadistic phantasies – is felt to be in fragments; the gratifying breast, taken in under the dominance of the sucking libido, is felt to be complete. The first internal good object acts as a focal point in the ego. It counteracts the processes of splitting and dispersal, makes for cohesiveness and integration, and is instrumental in building up the ego. The infant's feeling of having inside a good and complete breast may, however, be shaken by frustration and anxiety. As a result, the divorce between the good and bad breast may be difficult to maintain and the infant may feel that the good object is in pieces."

The clinical material I will present illustrates my patient's position in relation to his object: his terror of his own aggression, the oral-sadistic origins of his phantasies about it, his need to fragment it as a way of getting rid of his terror of the damage inflicted on it, the consequent fragmentation of his own mind, and his endlessly failing attempts at making reparation.

Bion (1963) described "aspects of the personality linked by a sense of catastrophe". This sense of catastrophe haunts my patient: darkness and destruction seem to surround him, he reacts phobically to anything in himself and in his object that evokes any depressive feeling, and tries to get rid of this by constant manic defences which are themselves attacks on the damaged object. My patient has a whole life's job of trying to prevent the Split-off from violently projecting itself into him: he can't make it Not-There, so makes it Not-Mine. Since the problem is persecution by depression, and not just by persecutors – and since this could never be properly repressed, chronic hypomania, and persistent idealisation of an object he is fused with, or inside of, or clinging to – can't be dismantled. So: the only solution is cure by manic reparation, which never works, because it constantly kills the object (as well as part of his mind).

Crucial to the understanding of what it is that is threatening to project itself violently into the self is Klein's differentiation of two kinds of splitting of the object: that between good object and bad object and that between the whole good object and the fragmented good object. Whilst the introjection of a whole object is essential for healthy development and

integration, the internal fragmented object causes a fragmented state of mind; repairing the fragmented object is essential for recovery. But, as Rosenfeld (1950) discovered,

“the reparative processes may be interfered with [by] the aggressive impulses [which] prevent the pieces from being sorted-out and put together correctly. In the worst instance, the objects and the ego become pieced together but in a completely mixed up and faulty way.”

In my clinical material I will illustrate my sense that the fragments which are invading the self – creating the horrible scream - are a combination of bits of self and bits of objects, as well as of bits of the persecuting bad object and of the persecuting good damaged object – that is to say, the amalgamation of two different kinds of confusion.

The terror of the scream creates the need to attack the mouth and throat of the object – a terrible wound appears when he is in omnipotent projective identification with a bizarre object created by the amalgamation of a manic penis and a nipple needing to be sucked. In Rey's (1994) conceptualisation, “in the manic state it is the penis that is needed by the subject for the task of reparation.[...] The more the maternal object is destroyed by the subject's attacks, the more the penis has to become omnipotent, and the subject by identification become omnipotent also.” What he calls the identification with “the immeasurably grandiose aspect of the erect penis”, with its contemptuous treatment of the object, makes reparation impossible.³

³ “On the one hand the role [of the manic state] is a defence against the anxiety of disintegration and of schizoid persecution, and on the other a defence against the pain of the depressive state. [...] I believe that in all depressive states the object with which the subject has a relationship is, contains, or symbolically represents the maternal breast, which as a partial object represents the mother who is destroyed, emptied or poisoned, and thus is in a depressed state. The subject feels that this is his fault, becomes identified with this depressed object, and consequently depressed himself.

In manic states or in the manic defence we are not concerned with the maternal breast but with the penis [...] which is needed by the subject for the task of reparation: through it he can regain the destroyed object either as a direct substitute by identification or by recreating the contents of the mother, for example, by making her pregnant by filling her empty breasts and so on. The more the maternal object is destroyed by the subject's attacks, the more must the penis become omnipotent, and the subject by identification become omnipotent also. In this manner, the destroyed state of the object is denied. There is no reparation proper [...] However, in the manic state there is a partial identification with the immeasurably grandiose aspect of the erect penis. The manifestations of this object are omnipotent, contemptuous, and persecutory as well.” (Rey 1994)

Originally there is a wound *in between* mother and baby, caused by the premature separateness. Because of confused identifications, and the part-object nature of the interchanges, the location of the need/scream moves around rapidly: does the nipple need the baby's mouth to make the breast full, or does the mouth need the nipple to make the baby's tummy full? When primitive despair comes to the fore, and reparation seems impossible, a repellent wound appears which is like Philoctetis' wound with its intolerable stench.⁴

Elizabeth Bishop's story and poem deal essentially with the same situation as my patient's: a small child's loss of a mother due to mental illness, and the incurable wound this created:

"Babies with pointed heads
wound round and round with string;
black, naked women with necks
wound round and round with wire
like the necks of light bulbs.
Their breasts were horrifying."

Powerful poetry creates a horrific vision of what happens to the breasts when the baby's head and the mother's neck (where the scream comes from) are joined together by a bizarre identification. A symbolic representation of what in my patient's mind is horrifyingly concrete, creating a state of confusion and horror. Wounds wound together, round and round, by string and wire.

Bishop suffered from this loss all her life. Her brilliant rendering of her tragedy in its two literary versions forms part of the process of transformation, (which must start with a *symbolic* reparation in internal reality) now into works of art, of the raw material of an experience beyond understanding. In a letter to her friend Robert Lowell, she wrote "Since we do float on an unknown sea, we should examine the other floating things that come our way carefully; who knows what might depend on it?" (Toibin 2015). All of us, here, who have chosen to devote our thinking lives to floating on unknown seas, have reason to be

⁴ In Sophocles' play, Philoctetis is abandoned in an island for 10 years, because the stench of his wound and the sound of his horrible cries are unbearable. But he needs to be rescued (i.e. integrated back after being "split-off" and exiled) because only he has the bow will make it possible to win the war. (Sodré 2005)

grateful for her careful examination of her own extraordinary mind.

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