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Psychoanalysis and Culture

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Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie française et de langue française, Vol XXVI, No 2 (2018) pp. 81-90

Vol XXVI, No 2 (2018)
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2018.860
www.jffp.org

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Last year I published an autobiographical text in the form of interviews with a young psychologist entitled *Je me voyage*.¹ The title's neologism gives a nod to my foreign status in the French language which has largely determined my psychosexual positioning in research and in writing; the psychic experience has been central to my life's trajectory (which I will not elaborate on here.) In my familial context, culture constituted a world that made life liveable—and I experienced life, due to the importance accorded to language, as survival, as an intimate resistance and an inherent creativity in social time.

Freud's revolutionary theory of the unconscious and the transference/countertransference relationship proposes an overhaul of the dichotomies inherited from metaphysics: body and mind, animal and social, nature and culture. This bold *reshaping* of culture arouses fear not only in relation to the social contract, which rejects it, given that it is based on and structured by dualities, but also in relation to the bipartism of our institutions and the foundational "disciplines" of the educational and cultural system. Psychoanalysts themselves, who practice and refine the reshaping, contribute to the perpetuation of this metaphysical inheritance by isolating themselves in many cases from what is at stake in culture. I have called into question linguistic models, constituted by and emerging out of the signifier/signified and their grammatical and logical articulation. Was it my transgenerational history, my crossing of boundaries within and outside of myself, which led me to do this? It seemed to me important to shake up their grid, cut off as it is from the corporal experience. It was my practice of transference/countertransference and the influence of Klein's and Winnicott's work as well as that of André Green on the psychosomatic drives that motivated me to do so.² I then developed an approach to literary creation and, in fact, all discourses, that stemmed from a language model conceived not as a "structure" but as a *signifiante*, that is, as a process with two modalities, the *semiotic* and the *symbolic*. By *symbolic* I am referring to the psyche, constituted by language--its morphologies, syntax, logic--while the

semiotic is pre- or trans-language: the infraverbal traces of drives, affects, and sensations which impregnate, transform, and sometimes absorb the verbal.³

From the outset I have addressed these zones of interference between nature and culture: the *flesh of words*. Freud himself, evoking Greek mythology and the European Renaissance, from Leonardo da Vinci to Stefan Zweig, said that poets "preceded" us on the royal road of psychoanalysis. This wandering Jew, son of the Enlightenment, inherited from his Jewish tradition the invitation to *listen* in order to *interpret*. Convinced of the universal importance of his discovery, he was able to open it up to history, and beyond the crises of European culture, to the human itself, to *Homo sapiens* understood as *Homo religiosus*. The « primal horde," "totem and taboo," "Egypt and Moses," « war and peace," and « civilisation and its discontents" followed. Beyond Sigmund Freud, the man, this intrinsically religious and political anchoring in cultural memory constitutes the very structure of the psychoanalytical position and speech, both with and through the techniques Freud bequeathed. My efforts in the human sciences inscribes itself in this lineage, consciously or unconsciously, when I attempt to introduce Freudian interpretation into the theoretical models of today, to open them up to the confrontation with the unconscious and vice versa. Yet, this concern to perfect psychoanalytic tools, to make them more relevant in the face of the "new maladies of the soul" ⁴, tense traumatic situations, "borderline" conditions, and other "unbindings," also carries with it the danger of becoming overly involved in highly technical metapsychologies and thus cut off from current social and anthropological mutations.

Psychoanalysis as Discovery or Rediscovery

Psychoanalysis is a constant reinvention—attentive to its foundations and history—on condition that it is continuously re-embodied in the subjectivity of the analyst, herself evolving in the counter-transferential relation with her patient: the *pöetics* of interpretation bear witness to this alchemy. It's a passion that is open both to self-analysis and to the time of history into which the timelessness of the unconscious erupts. The "framework of the cure" is inscribed in historical movement and if analysts forget this, they fail to address psychic life. The psychic life is always situated in time. In this sense, the question of culture, past, present, and to come, is consubstantial with psychic life, understood not as a "device" but as a *life* whose finite nature is embedded in history. My personal trajectory through its challenges, traumas, pleasures, failures, rewards, etc., has taught me this. I've had moments of enlightened understanding, rebounds and luck—or rather chance, as seen through the lens of game theory, not unlike "objective chance" in the "dialectic" of history.

In my familial constellation, my mother was very present, while at the same time leaving ample room for my father. Modest, warm, she was a Darwinian scientist by training. My father, raised by his adoptive mother,

was a believer, very literary, and tender—in the feminine sense of this drive. Everything was in place for psychic bisexuality to develop. There was another historical event, as random as it was fortunate: Alphabet Day, celebrated on May 24th in Bulgaria, which the brothers Cyril and Methodius invented twelve centuries ago. The cultural and educational milieus went on parade. Everyone sported a letter. I incarnated words, names, sentences. I loved this ritual, linked to history, to culture, which celebrated a kind of transfusion of the person into writing.

It was another piece of luck — or rather chance — to discover Freud and psychoanalysis. Confronting his current debasement, I emphasise in my lectures and writings that going into analysis is an internal experience enabling a person to situate herself in openness. I explain to those I supervise that in the transmission of the analytical act, we are not working in the margins but on the *tangent* between our knowledge and the vagaries of history. The technical framework of analysis is tangential to historical movement. It is of course necessary to maintain the counterphobic method of the framework and theory, given that it enables connections to be made by reconstituting narcissism and the ego ideal in the cure's working through process. At the same time, it is indispensable to open the ear up to what the analysand experiences in the here and now. Our work is not to meet the social demand but to hear the social malaise. Today, civilisation's malaise resides in this threat weighing on psychic space, on "inner life." It's up to analysts to find a relevant *and* acceptable language to pave the way for subjectivation in the transference; but it is equally crucial for us to be heard "outside of our framework." This presents a double challenge because the analyst must show psychic flexibility while maintaining the technical rigour of the framework. If she is fine-tuned in her accompaniment of the patient, she is able to detect new symptoms and generate new concepts. Yes, research does exist in psychoanalysis though it is not sufficiently understood: it explores borderline conditions, the early mother-child relationship, even autism and now "radicalisation." There is also the matter of *translating* the technical side of our savoir-faire and providing key elements of this inner experience we witness to other caregivers—psychotherapists, relaxation therapists, physical therapists, etc. — so that they can have a clearer grasp of the social malaise and thus help their patients, who, although not in analysis, might find other ways of accessing their inner lives. Squeezed by accelerated time and hyperconnection, the interior life becomes suspended in a stressed and stressful daily existence, dominated by media images which encapsulate and threaten to destroy all inner experience. How do we deal with this constant incitement to partake in the Spectacle, exhibitionism, narcissism, social media, *selfies*? This widely shared behaviour is a major social phenomenon that begs to be analysed. In what ways is it both toxic *and* liberating, in contact with the violence of trauma *and* desire? To problematise the present, to find an audible language, and to occupy a freely determined space, such are the challenges

psychoanalysts must face. We have to maintain both poles firmly—new techniques and a double anchoring in both subjectivity and culture.

Psychoanalysis as a Translation of Traumas and Their Trajectory

Allow me a little detour through Europe: it's a very fragile place for many reasons and especially because twenty-three languages are spoken there. Translation is the European language. As a professor directing the theses of foreign students and as a psychoanalyst working with patients whose mother tongue is not French, I have been observing a psychic renaissance expressed in *polylingualism* and *the act of translating*. Given that both analyst and analysand are socio-historical agents, interpreting the unconscious of the analysand, that is, what he says unawares, constitutes *a translation*. One bets on the *translatability* of traumas and thus on their *trajectory*, their *working-through*.

Bringing this knowledge of the psyche to light on the social and cultural stage is not easy. It falls to each of us to make use of the rigorous tools of our respective fields, to confront the social crises (identity, the need to believe, populism, fundamentalism) and the new social agents (adolescents, different sexual orientations and reproductive modalities). It's a question not so much of an engagement as a co-presence, providing a neighbouring *framework* (of the cure) and its socio-historical environment. One begins with the relevant interpretation in the *framework*, then its transmission, understood as a translation-interpretation of historical change, addressed to the social body in movement.

Three Anthropological Changes

Never has humanity known an anthropological mutation as radical and widespread as the one we are experiencing today. Technology moves forward with dizzying speed. Communication has never been so global, extraordinary in its diversity and heterogeneity.

1) Our relation to *time* is both hyper accelerated and suspended. It becomes suspended in melancholy or in borderline conditions, and also in drug addiction and jihadism. It's a time of sacrifice, a maniacal narcissistic exaltation which literally explodes both the traumatisers and the traumatised. But it's also a suspension of *jouissance*, lived out as the drive-based avidity experienced by the consumers that we are. We can equally consider this suspension in a more abstract, mathematical way, given that cosmologists claim time doesn't exist in interstellar space, in the multiverse and other dark matter. Never has temporality been so paradoxical and yet accessible. But *who* has access to these different facets if not the analyst and her analytic process where the dynamics of transference, repetition and finitude inscribe themselves in a *beginning*, without end? This process encompasses

transgenerational clusters as well as reticular adaptation fantasies and flashes of sharp idealisations along with sacrificial hallucinatory holograms. Only analysts have access to all of the above expressed through singular experiences. That is to say, by way of an extended rationality aligned with analytic rationality. Philosophers, ethnologists and politicians simply do not operate on this level. In my last novel, *The Enchanted Clock*, I try to sublimate in fiction these complex subjective temporalities.⁵

2) *The reordering of sexual difference.* Psychic bisexuality is omnipresent but articulated in different ways. I ended my essay on *Feminine Genius*⁶ by affirming that there are more than two sexes and that we invent our sex in our intimate life: this process is always a creative act. The end of an analysis opens up the capacity to make connections, to play, and, adopting Winnicott's words, to recreate one's psychosexuality continually, with or without a partner, with Love, or in the shadow of that "big fat Love," to quote the great Colette whose connection to plants and animals enabled her to thrive. The process occurs as well in the caring professions, like psychoanalysis. Although repression also returns with galloping speed, despite and alongside marriage equality and other praise for "enjoyment without restraint," there is in addition the tendency to free sexuality from inhibition by restoring its creativity, and psychoanalysis participates in this movement, which plumbs the depths of psychic and trans-psychic structures inaccessible to the sociologist, anthropologist, or philosopher.

3) The third change has been that of "the religious." The current global resurgence of religion came to me as a surprise: I consider myself one of the rare atheists remaining on earth. As a psychoanalyst, I observe the importance of what I call the "need to believe," a universal and pre-religious anthropological need, which I examine through the lens of what Freud calls a cathexis—*Besetzung* in German. The *need to believe* and the *desire to know*, never one without the other, are the universal conditions for human beings to be able to talk and relate to each other. Psychoanalysis is alone in its ability to lift the denial weighing upon this *need to believe*. It does so in order to take the measure of the sexual dimension in it and to interpret it in the transferential and counter-transferential relationship. Without compromise.

The Need to Believe

One cannot be content to say that Freud reduces religion to an illusion and a source of neurosis, and that the analytic experience itself is not a stranger to "belief" in the broad sense of the term.⁷ Steeped in the Jewish tradition, but atheist, and conscious of the anthropological place of the religious, Freud is at the same time a child of the Enlightenment. According to Sartre, atheism is a "cruel and long-term experience." In *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud makes Moses an Egyptian: this is a cruel deconstruction of the arrival of Judaism, making Egyptian monotheism its starting point. One can also read this as an invitation to inscribe the Torah in the history of

humanity. An intransigent atheist, Freud underlines in "The Resistances to Psychoanalysis" that "Nor is it perhaps entirely a matter of chance that the first advocate of psycho-analysis was a Jew. To profess belief in this new theory [notice the 'need to believe' in this reflection, which I would call testamentary], called for a certain degree of readiness to accept a situation of *solitary opposition*--a situation with which no one is more familiar than a Jew."⁸

In the spirit of the Enlightenment—Goethe and Diderot—he joins Nietzsche who proclaims that it remains for us to place "a big question mark at the most serious place," that is, God, precisely, but also all *identity*, value, or system of meaning. *The Future of an Illusion* and *Moses and Monotheism* invite us to pursue reevaluating this religious cultural legacy, with which secularisation cut the strings. Certain analysts have responded, for instance, Fethi Benslama with Islam, Daniel Sibony with Judaism. For my part, I have probed Catholic mysticism with Teresa of Avila's texts as the point of departure.⁹

Adolescence and Unbinding

In my article of January 2016, "How Can One be Jihadist?"¹⁰, following the killings in France (*Charlie Hebdo* and at the Bataclan), I raise the question of how to stop the unbinding when adolescent ideality illness leads to nihilism. At the Home for the Adolescent (Maison de Solenn), at Cochin Hospital, a co-ed and multicultural team in ethnopsychiatry admits young people struggling with depression and a solitary destructivity which they cannot put words to or share with anyone. They are at risk for suicide attempts, anorexia, and radicalisation. Those prone to radicalisation repress the injury of exclusion while appearing "normal"; they are ready to take off for jihad. Without judging or diagnosing, the team listens, aware of the need to understand and interpret religious memory. My seminar on "The Need to Believe" (first at the University of Paris-VII and for three years with Professor Marie-Rose Moro at the Maison de Solenn) flushed out harmful behaviour--the faithful Muslim submitting to "mass orthodoxy"¹¹ (see Abdennour Bidar) which, by ignoring the individual, by reducing women to prey, spreads a culture of death throughout Islam. The intense desire to transcend oneself, so common to adolescents with their frustrations, can, in certain circumstances, be perverted into "radical evil." By listening to them, we can help adolescents in the grips of "an ideality illness" succeed in "finding flesh in words" and "thinking on their own" in an intercultural space to regain confidence and become invested in the desire to live.

I'm not setting up an opposition between the analytic cure and the therapeutic practices of social work. I'm putting them side-by-side. To speak of our findings in psychoanalytical practice to the larger public requires a discursive flexibility that takes into account the listener's ability to understand.

At the Maison de Solenn, the therapeutic container is provided by the intercultural ethno-psychiatric team while I offer a Seminar open to the caregiving staff who have the desire and curiosity to know the religious facts, to engage with the texts and interpretations they arouse, especially those based on clinical psychoanalysis.

Radical Evil and the Secular

Enlightenment's secularisation refashioned morality which was until then dominated by religion. For Kant, free will itself has a shadowy side: it becomes "corrupted," losing the sense of the moral distinction between good and evil. This is the "radical evil," which Hannah Arendt diagnoses in analysing totalitarianism and the Holocaust, when certain human beings declare others superfluous. Pogroms, religious wars, ethnic conflicts, colonialism, *amok* . . . Here we're touching on not only "threats to freedom," but also on what I will call the *malignity* of the psychic apparatus: destructivity, giving free rein to the death instinct--hallucinatory states, the move to savage acts, decapitations and kamikazes--in short, an inherent dimension of the human psyche. This malignity may be to different degrees sublimated, worked through or contained in neurotic structures, explosive borderline conditions and "as if" personalities." Religions, which in the past, and in the best of cases, utilised and ritualised these states of unbinding, are now incapable of dealing with them. Whereas the secular State needs strengthening, its "de-radicalisation centres" are virtually powerless.

At the Collège des Bernardins, a panel of religious and non-religious intellectuals have created the Montesquieu Circle to discuss our experiences and convictions regarding recent world events. In this setting, I've spoken about my perspective on adolescents, unbinding, and the work we do at Cochin. Borderline cases dominated by negativity do not spare female psychosexuality. Some women cover themselves in burkinis, others are ready to procreate, or indeed, become human bombs themselves. Our research on hysteria straddling psychosis, perversions, and false selves, among other illnesses, has not entered into the social arena, which remains unaware of or refuses to discuss it.

In a text I wrote some time ago, I proposed to think through an adolescent structure, outlined by Helen Deutch: a fragile structure, a revision of the Oedipal one, entrenched in puberty's drives.¹² But, when the belief in the absolute, the quest for an ideal, fails, this adolescent structure reverses itself in a destructive force against the self-with-the-other. No link to any "object" survives for these "subjects" who are not subjects, only the death drive triumphs.¹³

Better than other approaches of the religious sort, the secular perspective is able to assure the passage from the *need to believe* to the *desire to know*—provided it has access to the proper means and tools. Our priority

must be education, combined with a substantial increase in the status of a "teaching and training corps." This arrangement would provide individualised support for psychosexual malaise, from the *need to believe* to the *desire to know*, in order to create a true path forward above the deepening abyss and the threat of war. Media, culture, and politics should be offering new and attractive civic ideals. Indeed, this should be the top priority of our hyperconnected globalised world; this alone — through shared cultural diversity — can protect humanity.

The Abject and Abjection

In the case of the adolescent, the *desire to know* goes hand in hand with the *need to believe*. This adolescent *desire* to invest *the primal scene* of the parents — a sexual curiosity and fulfilment — is demonstrated in the affirmation of homoeroticism and in the discovery of *genitality*. Here, too, religions exercise their domination. At the same time, parenthood today all too often exposes adolescents to severe psychic solitude, despite, or rather, because of the normalisation of hyperconnected information.¹⁴ *Unbinding* also resonates with the history of *abjection* in my practice. This is a history I explored as early as 1980 in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* and at the time of the Louvre exhibit, *The Severed Head: Capital Visions*.¹⁵ In this context, "the image may be the only link with the sacred remaining to us: with the *horror* provoked by death and sacrifice, with the *serenity* flowing from the pact of identification between sacrificed and sacrificers, and with the *joy of representation*, which cannot be dissociated from sacrifice, its only possible trajectory."¹⁶ "Abjection" or the abject is what is neither subject, nor object but unceasingly returns, disgusts, rejects, fascinates. It is near but not able to be assimilated. Different from the uncanny, "abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognise its kin."¹⁷

But there are many manners and degrees of unbinding. A very conflictual relationship with the primary maternal figure often precedes the unbinding of adolescent structures: submission, a swallowing up by maternal domination, a reduction of the subject to a hallucinatory state desiring avid satisfactions, on the border of psychosis and delirium. There may be maternal domination and submission, which is, at one and the same time, rejected, fled, and also sought after, in order to be recovered once again in an all-powerful tyranny that is divine, irrevocable, and unquestionable. What some call the "mass orthodoxy" of fundamentalist Islam finds in this its archaic cornerstone, so to speak.

I was listening to a desperate mother who lamented, "I was so close to my daughter, she told me everything, we were on the phone 24/7 and, all of a sudden, she disappeared. She left to have a thousand children for jihadists"—is this not a flagrant example of abjection? The young girl and her mother, too, have been invaded, cannibalised, without realising it—the daughter cannot stand this blurring of subject and object, which makes her "abject." She

believes she's saving herself by giving herself over to abusive males, who reduce her to a motherhood that is imperative, absolute, and without doubt, victimising. She will thus be every bit as devoid of subjectivity as before: abject.

The abjection that is the Bataclan tragedy (in November 2015, Paris) derives from the gangster fundamentalism of our ghettoised suburbs. This delinquency, prime for radicalisation (so common in prisons) reveals that the religious treatment of revolt has discredited itself. These young people do not adhere to the cultural values and republican ideals of their country. Suffering from a lack of identity and social marginalisation, troubled youth might first embrace a "native identity" and, subsequently turn to forms of extremism. They are struggling with affective crises out of our reach, with no recourse to the questioning made available through language and thought. Torn in pieces, they can no longer distinguish between good and evil. Such a state destroys the possibility of gaining a sense of self and of the existence of others. The avidity for absolute satisfaction then takes the shape of the destruction of everything that is not this satisfaction--annihilating the boundary between self and other, interior and exterior: "*je/te tue--il/me tue.*" Murder and suicide become blurred, as they did at the Bataclan.

My text on abjection came to me in the course of my analysis and through my scholarly writing. I was in the process of preparing a book on Céline.¹⁸ It was hard to get a handle on the abyss opening up between my revolt against his anti-Semitic violence and the emotion which his fiction aroused in me. His novels, from *Voyage to the End of the Night* to *Castle to Castle*, are a veritable "force of nature." Borderline states, idiocy and brothel-speak, all are swept up in a prose as precise and classical as it is vernacular, musical, and vulgar. Sentences persists in the ellipses, flooded by sensation, affect, and drives both horrible and sublime. But how to name this power of horror? My mother was visiting France. She took care of David who was teething and not sleeping at night and, for that matter, neither was I. I'm on Ilse Barande's couch: "I don't know how to manage all of it, the baby, my mother, and this Céline, with his *Voyage to the End of the Night--tu parles!*--all massacre, horror, abjection." My analyst responds: "That's the word for it." I leave the session relieved, with a feeling of deliverance more than the certainty of "mastering my subject." It's the mother/child confusion, attraction/repulsion, the uncertainty of subjectivation and objectivation. Sublimating or working through? Clearly both. Mary Douglas, the ethnologist, studied soiling and purification rites in so-called primitive societies. So I took the word *abjection*, and tried to elucidate food taboos in Leviticus, Christian sins . . . even Céline.

Ilse Barande deserves to be better known. Her writing on primary avidity, perversion, "*mère-version*" and also *Le Maternel singulier* should be reprinted. My analyst, who was a German Jew, *understood the word*. Yet, neither of us spoke French as our native language. Analysis takes shape in the lived experience of transference/counter-transference, if and only if it opens

us to a way of life and of thinking that is increasingly personal, attuned to the senses. This was to lead me to write novels.

Translated by Carol Mastrangelo Bové and Anne Marsella

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Je me voyage: Mémoires, Entretiens avec Samuel Dock* (Paris: Fayard, 2016).

² André Green, *La Déliaison* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1992 [1971]).

³ Julia Kristeva, *La Révolution du langage poétique. L'avant-garde à la fin du XIXe siècle: Lautréamont et Mallarmé* (Paris: Seuil, 1974).

⁴ Kristeva, *Les Nouvelles Maladies de l'âme* (Paris: Fayard, 1993).

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *The Enchanted Clock*, trans. Armine Kotin Mortimer (New York : Columbia University Press, 2017).

⁶ See Julia Kristeva, *Arendt, Klein, Colette* (Paris: Fayard, 1999, 2000, 2002).

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Cet incroyable besoin de croire* (Paris: Bayard, 2007), 28.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, "The Resistances to Psychoanalysis," in *Historical and Expository Works on Psychoanalysis*, vol. 15, ed. and trans. J. Strachey (London: Penguin, 1993), 273.

⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Teresa, My Love*, trans. Lorna Scott Fox (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Julia Kristeva, "Comment peut-on être djihadist"? Philippe Sollers, Retrieved Nov. 24, 2018 from <http://www.pileface.com/sollers/spip.php?article1673>.

¹¹ See Abdennour Bidar, *L'Islam sans soumission: Pour un existentialisme musulman* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2012).

¹² Julia Kristeva, "Les secrets d'une analyste," reprinted in *Les Nouvelles Maladies de l'âme* (Paris: Fayard, 1993), 294.

¹³ See André Green, *La Déliaison*.

¹⁴ See Julia Kristeva, "Métamorphoses de la parentalité," *Revue française de psychanalyse* 5, no. 77 (2013): 1650-1657.

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Visions capitales: Arts et rituels de la décapitation* (Paris : La Martinière, 2013 [1998]).

¹⁶ Kristeva, *Visions capitales*, 11.

¹⁷ Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection* (Paris: Le Seuil/New York: Columbia University Press, 1980/1982), 9,13/1,5.

¹⁸ Julia Kristeva, *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*.