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Thinking, Recognition and Otherness

There was her body, quiet, used, resting: there was her mind, free, clear, shining: there was the boy and his eyes, seeing what? And ecstasy. Things would hurt when this light dimmed. The boy would change. But now in the sun she recognised him, and recognised that she did not know, and had never seen him, and loved him, in the bright new air with a simplicity she had never expected to know. "You," she said to him, skin for the first time on skin in the outside air, which was warm and shining, "you." (A.S. Byatt, Still Life, London: Vintage, 1985, p.114)

Stephanie Potter, in A.S. Byatt's great novel, emerges from giving birth to her first child and sees him there, unexpectedly other than her. In this moment there is both recognition and acknowledgement of unbridgeable difference: "she recognised him, and recognised that she did not know, and had never seen him"; clear-eyed, Stephanie knows what she does not know, and loves her son across the great divide. Slightly later, when her husband Daniel arrives to see the child (this is 1954, and he has not been present at his son's birth), the importance of the baby's otherness is again confirmed.

"It's funny," he said. "I hadn't thought it. I hadn't thought he'd be somebody."

"No. I hadn't either. I was so surprised when I saw his separate bed. But he is, isn't he?" (p.117)

Stephanie's capacity to think in the midst of this intense feeling state means that she can retain her own autonomy, yet also be aware of the reality of the other, return his gaze, see in him a set of possible future unfoldings ("The boy would change"). Unexpectedly to herself (though not necessarily to the reader of the novel, because her capacities for feeling are already well attested to), Stephanie feels a simple, straightforward love for this strange creature. The suggestion is that it is precisely from the acknowledgement of the baby's strangeness, his immediate difference, that the mother's clarity of thought and love arise; this is not a gender issue, but a simple, immediate recognition of the existence of something new in the world. Stephanie's appreciation of the infant's separateness from her is, paradoxically, an indication of how just how much in contact with him she is.

Byatt has said¹ that she was striving in these passages to describe as exactly as she could her own experience of having her first baby and being struck by the separateness of the small creature, and by the love that arose out of that very

separateness. That is, Stephanie's experience is a remembered version of Byatt's own, a testimony to a certain kind of maternal care. It can, therefore, be taken as a personal narrative, a story not "just" imagined, but also revelatory of a psychological process. In this paper, we want to suggest that there is something ideal about this, using it as an image (the most appropriate way to consider idealisations) of what might be the conditions required in order to promote a certain desirable mental capacity. This capacity one might call that of being able to think for oneself, or -more ambitiously- to construct an inner space; the suggestion here is that a sort of privacy is needed for this to occur, and this privacy is a consequence of being able to "recognise but not know". The mother's capacity to see and love the child but not take her or him over, not colonise the child's mental space, may be the key paradigm of how she can be allowed to think.

The Conditions for Thought

What are the conditions under which it is possible to think? In many respects, this is the key question facing contemporary psychoanalysis, and possibly (more importantly) contemporary society as a whole. This is especially so if thinking is extended to mean all those processes of consideration and reflection, of active processing of one's interior states of mind, with which modern human subjects struggle. Perhaps, drawing on research into "theory of mind" as well as "psychic reality" (Fonagy and Target, 1996), one can argue that the distinctive characteristic of human subjectivity is the capacity to reflect, to "think about thinking"; that this is what marks humans out as tragic as well as feeling creatures. In Kleinian terms, for example, it is what makes people capable of inhabiting the depressive position, in which one owns one's thoughts, be they as destructive as can be. The characteristic of paranoid-schizoid thought is that ideas and feelings are thrown out of the mind, projected into the surrounding objects, hence effectively disowned; as Bion (1962) so profoundly shows, they are not thought, but evacuated. With depressive thinking, there is a realisation that the painful ideas emerging within us are real and have cogency; they need facing, and their emotional impact is not only to be withstood, but is also to be understood as what marks us out as alive. The contribution of Kleinian thinking here is its tragic vision of mental processes: in damage and loss, the human subject also finds its reality.

It is perhaps ironic that in a period in which the study of reflective psychic processes has become a concern of psychologists and psychoanalysts, actually managing to be reflective about oneself seems to be an increasingly difficult task -for individuals and for the societies of which they are members. As has often been noted (e.g. Frosh, 1991), this is a

distinct difference from the position when Freud was first writing about psychoanalysis. Then, at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the trouble with which people found themselves faced seemed to revolve around how to control the depths, how to manage the intensity of their feelings, especially in an ostensibly repressive society in which "free expression" of emotion or thought was severely circumscribed. Early psychoanalysis aimed both to give voice to these intense feelings and ideas -to repressed desires- and through doing so to increase the capacity of the individual to live at peace with them, both by accepting their impossibility and also by utilising at least some of the psychic energy bound up with them in the service of more everyday tasks -the famous Freudian "work and love". When one reads about Freud's patients now, a hundred years on, it is very striking to see how they seem to live such passionate lives, intimating such yearning and such need; they are intelligent on the whole, but overwhelmed by the restlessness inside them. In contrast, modern patients seem to be characterised more by flatness than by depth, by a trouble not over how to manage their feelings, but over how to feel anything at all. A generation ago, Guntrip (1973, p. 148) offered a characteristic description of such patients:

They are the people who have very deep-seated doubts about the reality and viability of their very "self", who are ultimately found to be suffering from various degrees of depersonalisation, unreality, the dread feeling of "not belonging", of being fundamentally isolated and out of touch with the world... The problem here is not relations with other people but whether one has or is a self.

This account predates the penetration of psychoanalysis by postmodern thought, but was part of a struggle with a narcissistic or schizoid mode of being which was understood as pathological rather than the contemporary norm. Given how the situation has escalated, if postmodern writers are to be believed (e.g. Jameson, 1991), it is not surprising that narcissistic and borderline states have proved to be of enduring interest, because they describe both the phenomenology of the shallowness endemic to personal and social life, and the sense of panic associated with this shallowness as people see their own lives passing them by (Lasch, 1979, wrote one especially influential piece of "cultural psychoanalysis" on exactly this topic). Now the question is not so much how to survive in a repressive social environment, as how to come alive in the first place. If the indications from nineteenth century novels are anything to go by, people then (at least, privileged people) were bored with what the world could offer them, when measured against what they felt they could do, what enjoyment they could have. Nowadays, people are more often bored with themselves.

The recent interest in social manifestations of "melancholia" is perhaps an indication of something changing, a "deeper" time beginning to stir. The most interesting cultural commentator on this is Judith Butler, who sees in Freud's (1917) Mourning and Melancholia a kind of blueprint for the problems of identity construction, especially in regard to sexual identity. Stressing the difference between mourning as a process in which loss is acknowledged and worked with, however difficult that may be, and melancholia as a state in which the loss itself remains unacknowledged, rendering mourning impossible, Butler (1997, p.147) suggests that modern patterns of sexual identity-construction arise from a melancholic process of divesting oneself from the "never loved". That is, there are certain aspects of desire and identification which trouble the social world profoundly and which, as a consequence, are so doubly repressed that the trace of their very existence is wiped out. Homosexual love in a context of what she terms "compulsory heterosexuality" is the key instance with which Butler works: not only is homosexual desire repressed, but its existence as desire itself is obliterated. Hence, gender is formed on the basis of occluded desire, as a melancholic incorporation of what once was and yet could never be.

When the prohibition against homosexuality is culturally pervasive, then the "loss" of homosexual love is precipitated through a prohibition which is repeated and ritualised throughout the culture. What ensues is a culture of gender melancholy in which masculinity and femininity emerge as the traces of an ungrieved and ungrieveable love; indeed, where masculinity and femininity within the heterosexual matrix are strengthened through the repudiations that they perform. In opposition to a conception of sexuality which is said to "express" a gender, gender itself is here understood to be composed of precisely what remains inarticulate in sexuality. (Butler, 1997, p.140)

Taken more broadly, a divide is being indicated here, in which knowledge of one's own "depths" is hampered by the inability to engage with the sources of loss. Each of us becomes haunted, as a consequence, by some sense of incompleteness, without being able to place (or face) its source.

Read in this way, melancholia is a recipe for shallowness which does nevertheless allow for the possibility of deep, if deeply hidden, feeling. It is therefore related to, but distinguished from, a cognate state of what one might call continual mourning. This is the state of mind which absolutely recognises the existence of a loss, but also -realistically, one might say- sees this loss as always present, as something which cannot be resolved by mourning. Loss of this kind,

perhaps definable as traumatic loss, is clearly a "depth" process, in which the psyche is always attuned to the something-missing, and is never consoled. In the conversation reported earlier, A.S. Byatt described how she felt a part of herself had died when her son was killed in an accident. From that point, she said, she has lived on two time lines; the first stopped with him, the second continues without him. Whilst this might under some circumstances shade into pathological mourning, in which grief is so oppressive that it destroys a person's life, it might also be considered a mentally healthy process of recognition of the enormity and absoluteness of loss -the recognition that loss goes on for ever. In some people, such a state of mind can be maintained whilst also engaging intensely in "the rest of life", as if one part of the psyche, invested in the lost object, stops at the moment of the loss, preserving it and maintaining constant vigilance over the memory (the state of continual mourning), but also effectively freeing the rest of the psyche to carry on. This does not mean that the loss is a source of creativity or energy, along the lines of the Kleinian theory of reparation (Segal, 1981); it merely (but significantly) allows loss to continue, the lost object to be treasured and mourned for ever, but -being encapsulated- without preventing the person concerned from re-entering life. Butler (2003, p.12) expresses something akin to this in her evocation of how loss binds us into living reality, whilst also revealing the falsity of any belief that one can maintain a walled-off self.

So when one loses, one is also faced with something enigmatic: something is hiding in the loss, something is lost within the recesses of loss. If mourning involves knowing what one has lost (and melancholia, originally, means, to a certain extent, not knowing), then mourning would be maintained by its enigmatic dimension, by the experience of not knowing incited by losing what we cannot fully fathom.

Something has been lost "in" the loss itself; it is this that is unrecoverable and irreplaceable, that cannot be substituted for by anything else and hence that attests to the uniqueness of the lost object. Some notion of what might be termed the "sacred" has become implicit here, as that which is felt to be untouchable, transcendent, protected and of intrinsic value. Thinking in terms of inner space, perhaps it is the possession of something sacred in these terms that allows one to feel depth, and to engage with the reflexiveness which is otherwise so hard to sustain. The kind of enduring loss described above, however painful, keeps one in contact with the real -with something more severe and more intense than the everyday, paradoxically shutting off and preserving a deeply felt private life. It need not be through loss, however, that this occurs, although in the prevailing conditions in which it is

so hard to maintain a sense of inner reality, it may be that the traumatic conditions of loss are the most potent means to produce it. Love, too, could be part of the story, not just hopeless love (a good paradigm for melancholia, mourning and loss, as psychoanalysis has always recognised), nor even passionate love (though this might again be the kind of "trauma" that enlivens). Secure love, "enduring love", is what has been focused on in post World War Two British psychoanalysis at least -the kind of love that enables an infant to internalise a vision of the world as essentially benign, capable of holding and containing her or his destructiveness and offering a reliable and robust container for anxiety. This benevolence on the outside allows risks to be taken with the inner world; without such benevolence, there is no safety, no prop upon which the internal self can lean. Leading theories of borderline and narcissistic states have drawn upon this model (e.g. Kernberg, 1975), asserting that the failure to form a secure self is a consequence of the inability of the "environment" to offer suitable conditions for it; instead, inner life is plagued by the sense that too strong a feeling, too powerful an impulse, will lead to the world collapsing, with selfhood and everything else destroyed. The lesson seems to be that a strongly beating heart needs to exist at the core of subjectivity if an inner life is to be sustained; this beating heart may have the attributes of the tragic or of the sublime, each of which can in any case turn into the other, because they are based on the premise that things matter, and especially that relationships matter, that lost objects are not easily replaced, that love, as Freud clearly knew ("a love that does not discriminate seems to me to forfeit part of its own value, by doing an injustice to its object" -Freud, 1930, p.102), is a specific and hence a vulnerable affair. The sacred therefore becomes a flame, an altar of holiness, connected to sacrifice (in its Hebrew form, sacrifice denotes the condition of "bringing close"), which keeps something alive.

To think, then, one needs an inner world in which something is kept sacred; some pulse must be allowed to beat in an internal space. This must be robust enough to survive, no easy task when it has to operate in a psychosocial environment in which there are both internal and external forces conducive to dissipation and destruction. One possible form of this sacred space is that of enduring loss, another is of enduring love; the two are intimately related, after all. This returns us to the question, however, of how it can become possible to "think more deeply" in this way, to utilise the sacred and the sublime in order to create a more reflective personal space, and with that a potentially more reflective society. One does not wish to promote traumatic loss, nor rely totally on the conditions of perfect early mothering, as the sole route into

this, however much they may serve as certain kinds of model.

Recognising the Other

Much attention is currently being paid to the idea of recognition, for example as it appears in the work of Jessica Benjamin (1998):

in the intersubjective conception of recognition, two active subjects may exchange, may alternate in expressing and receiving, cocreating a mutuality that allows for and presumes separateness. (p.29)

What is being traced here is a particular form of relationship between selves and others, a certain handling of the trope similarity/difference, in which neither is collapsed into the other. Indeed, Benjamin's approach specifically seeks a balance between theories that emphasise difference and those that promote a vision of (especially maternal) subjectivity as involving a disappearance in the other: recognition staves off the absorption of self into the other just as it prevents the other being colonised by the self; rather, the possibility is raised of allowing difference yet also appreciating structural similarity. Benjamin's notion of recognition seems at first glance to describe exactly the experience of the mother, Stephanie, in the quotation at the beginning of this essay.

Mediated by symbolic expression, identification can become not a collapse of differentiation, but a basis for understanding the position of the other. The kind of separation that allows this symbolic development is predicated not merely on a boundary set by an outside other (an abstract idea of limiting the omnipotent self) but rather on a maternal subjectivity that is able to represent affect and hence process the pain of separation between the mother and her child. (p.28)

"You," says Stephanie, mediating her relationship with this strange other, her baby, through the use of the word, recognising his existence and building a bridge towards him. Recognition of this kind is not a merely cognitive event, nor is it a passive reflection or mirroring of what is already somehow "in" the other. It is, rather, something actively reaching-out that makes what it finds, yet also lets the other be; it is, in this sense, to redeploy the motif of the sacred used earlier, a process of sanctification, in which what is found in the other is also cherished specifically for its capacity to be different, its otherness.

Building on the rather contrary work both of Winnicott (to whom Benjamin (2000) states herself to be deeply indebted) and of Lacan (to whom she is mainly opposed), the argument can be restated as a privileging of the role of respect for the other as other, with whom one has connections, but whose inner space cannot be colonised. This is a surprisingly difficult aspiration to make material, even in theory: in many

psychoanalytic accounts, for example, the highest point of an intimate relationship is a process of identification or even incorporation, rather than recognition of the otherness of the other. Clearly, just seeing the other as different, is not the solution: that can be a defence against recognising relatedness where it exists, of noting and experiencing the similarity of human experience. There is plenty of circumstantial evidence, indeed, that this kind of "othering" can be a source of social hatred, especially when "different" is cast as "alien" -for example, in ethnic and racist hate (Frosh, 2002). Rather, the idea of recognition embraces the acknowledgement of existence of the other as other in the context of relatedness: there is a real difference, yet this difference is not necessarily marked by preference, it is "just" difference. There is an other who or which cannot be made "same", but that does not mean that there is a lack of connection, only that this connection is for the sake of bridging, not for invasion or incorporation. The Benjaminite idea, read this way, suggests that becoming "real" is premised on the situation in which one's otherness is noted and acknowledged, and valued for what it is.

This notion seems contrary to the idealised version of mothering as a process built out of primary maternal preoccupation, feeling linked in oneness with the baby (Winnicott, 1958). It is not necessarily at odds with other psychoanalytic formulations, however. For example, the Kleinian insistence that the infant fantasises a corporeal absorption in the mother, so that the mental processes of each can intertwine, does not of itself rule out the possibility that the mother herself will be able to see the infant as other. "Reverie", as Bion (1962) puts it, is a state of mind in which projections can be accepted as projections; that is, the analytic stance -the stance that promotes the growth of thought in both infant and patient- is built on acceptance of the way one might be used as an object, or as a container, without losing one's own sense of autonomy.

Reverie is that state of mind which is open to the reception of any "objects" from the loved object and is therefore capable of reception of the infant's projective identifications whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad. In short, reverie is a function of the mother's α -function. (Bion, 1962, p.36)

The power of the mother/analyst in this model is derived from her or his capacity to "dip into" the mind of the patient, to become utterly connected, whilst also retaining a separate existence, coming out of mental sharing in order, for example, to make an interpretation or bring a session -or an entire analysis- to an end. Winnicott's (1971) idea of mirroring, when extracted from the absorption of the mother in the baby, is also a powerful one often used as both a developmental and

analytic ideal: the maternal task is to recognise the baby as she or he is, and not to impose onto (or into) the infant the mother's own needs; "the mother's role is of giving back to the baby the baby's own self". What sparks the child's "true self" into being is supposedly just that experience of being recognised, setting in train both a degree of security about the acceptability of the self that makes creativity possible, and also a lifelong expectation that there will continue to be recognition of this kind. The benevolent cycle here is one in which feeling oneself to be acknowledged but not impinged upon, allows one to think of oneself and one's inner processes as having value rather than being disparaged and inadequate or destructive. This promotes the formation of an inner world, providing a source upon which one can draw, a resource for thoughtfulness and reflective activity. Winnicott's (1965) paper on the capacity to be alone expresses this idea persuasively: drawing on the mother's thoughtfulness and her capacity to convey to the child the state of being thought about, the child feels free to be alone, to think her or his own thoughts, even troubling ones, to follow something through. The safety net is there; even if the child falls, nothing will be broken.

There are difficulties here, however, which have not gone unremarked and which are connected with the elision in the previous paragraph between the mother's subjectivity and that of her child. This is both a theoretical problem and a reflection of a broader issue, that of how to avoid irritably seeking after the other -taking the other over- as a way of stabilising the self. How does the mother know what is the "actual" otherness of her child, rather than what she imagines to be the child's nature on the basis not only of her experience, but of her wishes? In psychoanalysis, how does the analyst, steeped in the theories, observations, transferences and practices of the analytic community, differentiate between the patient's inner world and the way she or he (the analyst) names it? When analysts claim to be able to distinguish between those feelings which belong to them (the analyst's transference, let us say) and those which genuinely are put into the analyst by the patient (the countertransference), how sure can they be that they have it right, that the latter is not always reducible to the former? Many a colonial war has been fought in the name of liberating the natives. This is a version of the Lacanian critique of Klein, that however inspired her clinical practice -inspired mainly by her willingness to look every appalling reality in the face- it is too quick to assume the possibility of actual, true knowledge of the other. As Lacanians say about interpretation, this renders the other as subject to the desire of the analyst, constructed in the light of analytic theory and supposed knowledge (see Evans, 1996, pp.87-9). The analyst as "subject

supposed to know" here mistakes him or herself for the one who actually does know, and in so doing abandoning the analytic position. The Lacanian suggestion, antagonistic to the idea that "unconscious to unconscious communication" ever really occurs, is that all communications are mediated by language, and this means that at some level they always fail. Misrepresentation, mistranslation, misconstruction: these are the stuff of human contact, and believing otherwise is yet another aspect of the colonising venture, in which one mind fails to see another as sufficiently strange.

The Lacanian narrative has its own tragic element, proposing that there is always a fissure between one and the other, that connection between human subjects is intrinsically flawed. As with the comedy of the mirror phase, this also means that when one is most confident that one is thinking for oneself, there is the greatest likelihood that one is actually engaging in a process of self-mystification. Humankind abhors a vacuum, or an infinity of space, so something has to bound it, and this something is the imagined security of the other's gaze. "In reality" -or in the Real- what has to be faced is the capacity of the subject to disappear inside itself, the fragmentary nature of drives, the uncertainty that there is any progression towards autonomy at all. However, there is another side to this threateningly despairing vision: in claiming that no subject can be fully known by another, Lacanian theory sustains a space for difference, for remaining other, that preserves subjecthood from being demarcated solely by another's wish. Being positioned by the desire of the other is one thing, operating in the symbolic, but in the Real such a wish can have no purchase. The responsibility of the analyst is consequently to promote the patient's free associations, to keep the stream of signifiers unblocked; her or his interpretations are "interruptions" aiming merely to stop things settling down. The promotion of thought in this model - not unlike that to be found in Bion (1962)- involves learning the difference between a question and an answer: answers stop things happening, questions keep them going on.

If Lacanian thought marks communication as impossible, Laplanche's turn of this screw is to conceive of the inner world of unconscious desire as somehow placed in the child unknowingly by the parent, in the form of the "enigmatic signifier", the residue of the process of unconscious seduction passed on through the generations from parent to child. This adds a further strand of "alienness" at the core of subjecthood: inside each person there is an unconscious dimension, as we know, but this unconscious does not "belong" to the person, but rather comes inside through an act of miscommunication, a mode of unwitting seduction, in which the parental desire excites the child, without being understood.

So we have the reality of the message and the irreducibility of the fact of communication. What psychoanalysis adds is a fact of its experience, namely that this message is frequently compromised, that it both fails and succeeds at one and the same time. It is opaque to its recipient and its transmitter alike. (Laplanche, 1999, p.169)

It is no longer a matter of intention; these things speak for themselves. What comes from the one to the other is something unknown to both, yet intense in its effect (and affect). The infant is invaded by an unconscious message, its private spaces inflicted with the sense of "something else", something excessive and too strong, always hinting at its own existence without ever letting itself be fully known. The adult, too, holds an alien message inside: there is something no-one can ever properly know. If this model has force, it is very difficult to imagine what a personal, inner space can be; however "deep" we go, we find the other already there.

Gazing at the Other

A continual question with which people are faced -perhaps especially analysts, amongst others who take up "helping" and pedagogic roles- is, "What do they want of me?" The answer is always, "Too much", and the pressure this generates militates, once again, against thought. How can one think when all the time there are questions being asked, especially when these questions come from within yet are themselves the products of the other? What price silence and a space of one's own? No wonder there is so much rage against others, when the other will not let one alone. It takes a mighty effort of ethical resistance, such as that to be found in Levinas' philosophy, to make the other primary in this, to hold onto the trajectory of recognition rather than revulsion. The existence of a sphere of otherness within does possess the virtue of linking us with every subject, as we are all the same in this regard and can never claim our subjecthood as autonomous and whole, but then how can our demons be faced, how can the depths be reclaimed? In what follows, we want to suggest that Levinas' unrelenting attitude towards otherness displaces the psychoanalytic tendency to elide the personal and the intersubjective, and may provide an admittedly harsh and "impossible", yet also fascinating and provocative, model of what could be involved in having a private, interior space.

Here is a lengthy quotation from Levinas' (1991) Entre Nous on "the face".

In my analysis, the Face is definitely not a plastic form like a portrait; the relation to the Face is both the relation to the absolutely weak -to what is absolutely exposed, what is bare and destitute, the relation with bareness and consequently with what is alone and can

undergo the supreme isolation we call death- and there is, consequently, in the Face of the Other always the death of the Other and thus, in some way, an incitement to murder, the temptation to go to the extreme, to completely neglect the other -and at the same time (and this is the paradoxical thing) the Face is also the "Thou Shalt not Kill". A Thou-Shalt-not-Kill that can also be explicated much further: it is the fact that I cannot let the other die alone, it is like a calling out to me. And you see (and this seems important to me), the relationship with the other is not symmetrical, it is not all as in Martin Buber. When I say Thou to an I, to a me, according to Buber I would always have that me before me as the one who says Thou to me. Consequently, there would be a reciprocal relationship. According to my analysis, on the other hand, in the relation to the face, it is asymmetry that is affirmed: at the outset I hardly care what the other is with respect to me, that is his own business; for me, he is above all the one I am responsible for. (pp.104-5)

This primacy of the other has given rise to a great deal of philosophical debate, and it is not clear that all its implications stand up to scrutiny, particularly in connection with what is called in the same source the "face of the executioner". However, there is something robust to be admitted here: nothing contingent is assumed in relation to how the other will treat the self, there is no expectation of the effectivity of "love of one's neighbour". Being responsible for the other does not mean that something reciprocal will occur, it exists simply as an ethical imperative, as that which makes one human. Indeed, Levinas makes it clear both here and elsewhere that this relationship of responsibility -this ethical relation- is in his view primary, rather than following on from something pre-existent. It is not the case that the human subject exists and then engages in ethical relations; rather, ethics is the defining feature of subjectivity itself.

I speak of responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity. For I describe subjectivity in ethical terms. Ethics, here, does not supplement a preceding existential base; the very node of the subjective is knotted in ethics understood as responsibility. I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face. (Levinas, 1985, p.95)

By fiat, aspiration or observation -it is not really clear from which domain this comes- Levinas insists that responsibility for the other comes before the subject can even know what the other is; it is, consequently, an absolute

given, and the recognition which is part of it is as non-contingent as can be. Indeed, the term "recognition" is inappropriate within the Levinasian domain, because of its implication that somehow through the act of recognition, the other becomes known. Realising that one "does not know and has never seen" the other, yet that the other exists and is revealed in the figure of the face, is not the same as recognition in the conventional sense. Rather, it is an absolute refusal of the impulse to believe that the other can ever be brought within the realm of the self -including what can be understood by the self. Even more so, "at the outset I hardly care what the other is with respect to me"; knowledge of what the other might be, what use or reciprocity might derive from it, is irrelevant; the other is not any specific "person", but that which is outside what can be claimed by the self. Knowing the other would be part of the colonising act of reducing it to the same; in the Levinasian confrontation with the face, as opposed to Benjaminite intersubjective recognition, the otherness of the other is always maintained.

This throws into a certain kind of relief the subjectivity of the analyst/parent as it emerges in the encounter with the patient/infant. Reciprocity may ensue from the recognition given to the infant, but that is neither predictable nor necessary (and it seems likely that love of the child for the parent will be much more ambivalent than the other way around). Winnicott (1971), for one, realises this, with his emphasis on how the infant uses the mother, the importance, for example, of her willingness to submit herself to the infant's aggression, and her capacity to survive. What makes a subject of the parent is the parent's assumption of responsibility, a non-contingent assumption which comes with unexpected simplicity, an act of altruism -as Byatt's Stephanie realises in the cataclysm that occurs late in Still Life. Despite everything, that is, what is being demanded is a "thinking-aboutness" that creates the possibility for thought; this constitutes the ethical relation with the other, the taking of responsibility, through which the subject's own subjectivity is formed.

The capacity to sustain an ethical relationship with the other becomes here the condition of human subjectivity. To be able to think deeply, it seems, one has to be able to assume that there is something else outside, worthy of being -demanding to be- thought about. Perhaps the story goes something like this. The "weakness" of the face creates an incitement to impose on it one's own desire; as Levinas puts it in the quotation above, "to murder, the temptation to go to the extreme, to completely neglect the other". Psychologically, this is an incitement to colonise the other, to make that inner scene one's own. Resisting this temptation involves taking

responsibility by standing clear, remaining in a distant enough relationship to allow something separate to flower, yet also in sufficient connection to not "let the other die alone". This taking-responsibility humanises the self, creating an inner space which exists precisely because it is so aware that there is something else which is "other", which cannot be reduced or owned. Certainly, if Laplanche is right, this awareness will be contaminated by the unconscious desire of the other, so that some excessive restlessness will always be there; that seems to be unavoidable in the human context, and this "excess" is exactly what psychoanalysis deals with all the time. But this is not the same as reducing it to the intersubjective, where self and other feed off and negotiate with each other until they reach a balance of sameness and difference. What Levinas emphasises is the irreconcilability of difference, the absoluteness of the other with which we are yet required to be in relation, a situation which is truly "impossible" both logically and psychologically.

The starkness of this may in important ways seem too much. However imaginary the relationship of intersubjectivity might be, psychoanalysts tend to aspire to contact with their patients, and can reasonably claim that they have an ethical responsibility to do so. The slippage, mentioned earlier, between the subjectivity of the mother and that of her infant is another example: one seeks always to know, "what will this produce, what good will it do?" Yet there is, arguably, an important aspect of the analytic attitude that does not allow this particular ethics -the ethics of making contact, of doing good- primary status. Discussing the trend towards "narrativism" in psychoanalysis (as in other social sciences), Laplanche (2003) argues that making a coherent narrative can be seen as a defensive process, repressing knowledge of precisely that "otherness" which is contained in the enigmatic message. Summarising, Laplanche makes a point that can be taken as a general comment on the relationship between psychoanalytic therapy and psychoanalytic understanding.

The fact that we are confronted with a possibly "normal", and in any case inevitable defence, that the narration must be correlated with the therapeutic aspect of the treatment, in no way changes the metapsychological understanding that sees in it the guarantee and seal of repression. That is to say, that the properly "analytic" vector, that of de-translation and the questioning of narrative structures and the ideas connected to them, remains opposed in every treatment to the reconstructive, synthesising narrative vector. (p.29)

Limits to making sense, to making connections, have to be set. In the context of this paper, this means that thinking is deepened when the otherness of the other is acknowledged first of all, when "strangeness" and difference are seen as the

essential elements in human subjectivity. This is not an isolationist philosophy; quite the contrary, it suggests that the other is needed in order to make the subject exist, but it is needed in its ethical proximity as other, not for what it can provide or reciprocate, but as something at which one must look. This other, this "face" and the demand it makes simply by being there, inaugurates an inner space which, for once, is not constituted through seeking after self-esteem or security. Instead, the answer to the question, "What are the conditions under which it is possible to think?" might just be, "When one accepts that the other exists."

Note

1. "Novelists in Conversation with Psychologists: A.S. Byatt and Stephen Frosh", University of Leicester, 19 March 2003.

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