

Thomas and the wolf

Drawing on clinical situations, we have suggested since the beginning of our writings that, within the framework of the theory of representation, a conceptual role should be accorded to the experience of the absence of representation (Botella, C. and S., 1983a). At the time, any reference to negativity was subject to lively debate, notwithstanding the English publications of Winnicott and Bion, and, in France, of André Green.

Thomas was a little 4-year-old boy who, up till the age of 20 months, had undergone numerous hospitalisations and surgical operations (his sub-clavicular artery was badly implanted; he choked and had difficulty breathing; moreover, he had a malformation of his urethra). His whole development was slow. When one of us saw him, when he was 4, Thomas could only utter a few, barely intelligible words. Although his parents described him as presenting autistic traits, Thomas had never really lost his appetite for the object, his elan towards the other. He certainly sought contact but was incapable of maintaining a relationship; and he behaved like an affectionate child who quickly drops adults, taking refuge in a quiet corner from where, neither timid nor absent, he contemplates the world. As for the new situation, the new object, that therapy represents for any child, Thomas threw himself into it wholeheartedly. With the ardour of fresh hope, he ran off with a pot of glue, the contents of which he breathed in passionately, like a drug addict, giving one the impression of an extraordinary reunion occurring. At other times, seeking some rays of sunlight, he would lie down on the desk and absorb them with his eyes open, without even blinking. Then, for a long time, his favourite activity was throwing and banging solid objects against the hard surfaces of the room. What interested him was making noise. He would go: ‘grrrr . . . grrrr!’

It is not difficult to guess the sort of construction the analyst made on the basis of these elements – the smell, the light, and the noise – probably sensory traces, perhaps marks left by an early object. In his formulations, the analyst tried to introduce a large quantity of affect: ‘When you were in the hospital where the smell was very strong and the light was very bright, it was difficult to breathe . . . it was as if everything was going to go “grrrr . . . grrrr . . .!”’

At the end of the sessions, Thomas manifested depersonalising anxieties. Interpretations about separation brought him no relief. And yet the analyst was trying to find the right level of interpretation. They all failed, whether they concerned the whole object or the part object; the Oedipal level or destructive envy of the breast or the nipple, hate or depression. Thomas’ state of distress was such that, for his immobilised and absent ego, the word-presentations coming from the analyst had no import; whatever their content, the child was unable to hear them. He was beyond the reach of all usual communication. What was one to do? A mother would take the child in her arms, thereby communicating what words cannot transmit. But the psychoanalyst? Faced with the repeated and bitter

failure of his interpretations, was he simply to resign himself, to content himself with taking the child back to his mother in the waiting room, even though he could not help noticing just how destitute the child seemed? Faced with this pale, immobile, haggard-looking child, the very picture of terror, the analyst himself had, as it were, a nightmare. He then said to Thomas: 'Grrrr . . . grrrr! Are you afraid of the wolf?' And without thinking about it, he spontaneously imitated the nasty beast that bites and claws. Terror stricken, Thomas signalled to him to stop, but his disarray disappeared and he was able to leave. The time after, when the moment came to separate, the analyst repeated the episode of the wolf. Thomas was no longer depersonalised; he propelled himself into the corridor and, wanting to frighten everybody, yelled out: 'Grrrr . . . grrrr . . . the wolf!'

What had the analyst done with this child? Was his first intervention, the 'hospital', a construction of a historic past with 'fragments of truth', as Freud says?

In effect, we believe bits of material reality existed – the smell, the burst of light, the noise of breathing – but we strongly doubt that they had attained the quality of psychic representation. In all probability they remained pure sensory elements. And although there was an attempt at elaboration in the game of making the noise 'grrrr . . . grrrr' or in the fact of becoming intoxicated by breathing in deeply the emanations from the glue or in dazzling himself by exposing himself to the rays of light, these are above all autistic forms of behaviour in search of sensations of dizziness bordering on losing consciousness. Nevertheless, one may wonder if there were an initial stage of psychic representation of these first experiences at the hospital, which was quickly dislocated into the form of their sensory elements. We shall never know. Contrariwise, we do know how disorganising the effect on the child's psyche is of such non-represented sensory elements, just as we know how unfaillingly beneficial the effect is when the analyst can take up these elements in a construction composed of pictorial forms, such as a recollection. This work gives the very ill child the feeling that he exists, that he endures; thanks to this, his suffering will be linked up with the past, his emotions will come together in the form of memory, 'just as a fountain basin collects water', to use Freud's beautiful image (Freud, 1900). And, if Freud says that 'dreaming is remembering', might it be said that in cases like that of Thomas, remembering is dreaming, that the past cannot become memory without a dream-work furnished by the analyst?

The second intervention, the 'wolf', was not a story in images or a psychodramatic enactment, but a flash of the analyst, a work of figurability giving a meaning to Thomas' disarray and relieving the analyst of the sense of torment and disappointment resulting from the failure of his usual analytic methods. But, then, why did he evoke this single, terrifying figure? When Thomas remained terror stricken by the separation, it was not, in our view, a state triggered by a

precise problem, for instance, oral. The traumatising power of separation, and Thomas' limited possibilities for elaboration, meant that once his protective shield was broken, his whole system of representation, which was already precarious, was completely swept away. By naming and mimicking the wolf, the analyst was not evoking the meaning of a phantasy in the face of loss, but was soliciting in the child a psychic work comparable to his own, the double, as it were, of the evocative force of his own work of figurability; Thomas used the wolf as a real representation weapon against the distress of *non-representation*. At that moment, the effect of the image 'wolf', had, above all, the function of containing distress that had not been represented and was provoked by the menace of losing the object and less that of a specific content, for instance, oral, i.e. of being devoured. If, nonetheless, one really wants to refer to a content, one might consider that the image 'wolf', for the analyst, makes use of autistic elements present in the sessions, that is, the fixed gaze of the child absorbing, without blinking, the sunlight; the importance of smell, the child inhaling noisily, the child yelling and so on. The question now arises: what was it that mobilised the analyst's psyche, without his knowing it, in the direction of such a psychical work? Would it be directly those sensory elements characteristic of Thomas or the effect that these elements had on him, a worry, a sense of uncanniness appealing to a universal reference, to typical dream images and to children's fairytales? In any case, it was only later, after the event, that the representation of the wolf would make it possible, if necessary, to make customary interpretations such as, 'When you have to leave me, you are so angry that you would like to claw me, to eat me like a wolf' and so on.

In fact, the analyst did not formulate a latent content that he had discovered behind a manifest content, but in the absence of both he advanced preconscious formations susceptible of attracting, one day, other representations, of serving as manifest content. A sort of analytic process in reverse in which the analyst promotes the child's preconscious. Under the effects of the captivating power of the analyst's figurability, we see emerging in the child the rough outline of a world of representations.

But, then, why does the child analyst's so often produce a work of figurability akin to a nightmare? We think that the functioning of sick children such as Thomas subjects the analyst's mind to severe ordeals. Not only is the analyst deprived of his setting and his tool, interpretation, but, in addition, he feels uneasy owing to the vagueness of the representations that the child awakens in him, until he is himself menaced by the worst, that is, the absence of any representation. Thus tested and weakened – just as the sleeper's ego can be weakened by the narcissistic regression of sleep – and menaced by *non-representation*, the analyst's ego will react. Of course, in order to defend himself, he could cease to invest his function, or worse, the child, or alternatively, over-invest his capacities for intellectualisation, for theorisation, concluding, in an assured tone of voice: 'He is autistic!' We think that in Thomas' case, the analyst's

ego, 'sapped' by the failures of his habitual interventions, found the solution in the figurative images of a nightmare. Thus, if the hypothesis we have put forward concerning the function of the nightmare is sound, there are grounds for thinking that an affect, signalling the danger of *non-representation* that was almost awakened in the analyst, immediately 'created found' a figure, an adequate representation. The formal regression and the fluidity of the analyst's libido enabled him to come up with the figurative image of a ferocious beast relating to his own infantile sexuality. His psychic work continued by adopting a mode adapted to his special relationship with the child; the analyst then introduced his 'nightmare' in a form charged with the pleasure of a game.

Once the figurability nightmare had been expressed in gestures and words, the 'wolf' became, as René Diatkine has suggested, a fairytale. Indeed, experience has taught us that, with young children, the dynamism of this type of intervention is comparable to that exerted by the telling of fairytales: in a tender context, the adult evokes representations, highly charged with instinctual drive activity, situated elsewhere and in the past of a 'real' story, since it can be evoked at will. The representations thus conveyed awaken the child's own capacity for figurability and diminish the disorganising pressure of the pre-represented instinctual contingent. In the communication between the child and the adult, the fairytale forms a real bridge, leading the intensity of the child's unstable, fleeting experience, which cannot easily be represented in a relationship with his real objects, towards the universe of the stable and representable relations of a story. From the terror of the nightmare to the marvellous world of the fairytale, the fundamental distress of *non-representation* is demolished.

Thérèse

Thérèse, a little 8-year-old girl, was regarded as 'bizarre' by the nuns at the convent where she had been since she was 3, the date of the sudden death of her father, who had brought her up until then, her mother being unable to take care of her. During the first meeting, Thérèse approached the analyst as if she were having an hallucination of him instead of looking at him. Light footed, she glided towards him, enveloping him with her beautiful, sombre and feverish expression. She said to him: 'Do you know that the earth is round? . . . The sky is everywhere . . . my dad is dead . . . he talks all day long to God.' 'What do they say', the analyst asked her. 'Poor Thérèse, she is all alone . . . I would like to be very nice so that I can go to heaven quickly.' Following this encounter, session after session, Thérèse would say: 'Tell me about the first time!' And each time, the analyst would repeat for her the tale of their first encounter. For Thérèse, there was no question of breaking the continuity of her work of figurability. Settled into the universe of her images, with time suspended, within the confines of the perception-consciousness already open towards hallucination, she blocked