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The Mirror-phase as formative of the Function of the I

The conception of the mirror-phase which I introduced at our last congress, 13 years ago, has since become more or less established in the practice of the French group; I think it nevertheless worthwhile to bring it again to your attention, especially today, for the light that it sheds on the formation of the *I* as we experience it in psychoanalysis.¹ It is an experience which leads us to oppose any philosophy directly issuing from the *Cogito*.

Some of you may perhaps remember our starting-point in a feature of human behaviour illuminated by a fact of comparative psychology. The human offspring, at an age when he is for a time, however short, outdone by the chimpanzee in instrumental intelligence, can nevertheless already recognize as such

his own image in a mirror. This recognition manifests itself in the illuminatory mimicry of the *Aba-Erlebnis*, which Köhler sees as the expression of situational apperception, an essential moment of the act of intelligence.

This act, far from exhausting itself, as with the chimpanzee, once the image has been mastered and found empty, in the child immediately rebounds in a series of gestures in which he playfully experiences the relations of the assumed movements of the image to the reflected environment, and of this virtual complex to the reality it reduplicates—the child's own body, and the persons or even things in his proximity.

This event can take place, as we have known since Baldwin, from the age of six months, and its repetition has often compelled us to ponder over the startling spectacle of the nursling in front of the mirror. Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and narrowly confined as he is within some support, human or artificial (what, in France, we call a *'trotte-bébé'*), he nevertheless surmounts, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support in order to fix his attitude in a more or less leaning-forward position, and bring back an instantaneous aspect of the image to hold it in his gaze.

For us, this activity retains the meaning we have given it up to the age of 18 months. This meaning discloses a libidinal dynamism, which has hitherto remained problematic, as well as an ontological structure of the human world which accords with our reflections on paranoid knowledge.

We have only to understand the mirror-phase *as an identification*, in the full sense which analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation which takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use, in analytical theory, of the old term *imago*.

This jubilant assumption of his mirror-image by the little man, at the *infans* stage, still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependency, would seem to exhibit in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, before it is objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.

This form would have to be called the *Ideal-I*², if we wanted to restore it to a familiar scheme, in the sense that it will also be the root-stock for secondary identifications, among which we place the functions of libidinal normalization. But the important point is that this form situates the instance of the *ego*, before its social determination, in a

¹ *Translator's note*—'I' is used here and throughout to translate Lacan's '*je*', in '*le je*', '*la fonction du je*', etc. '*Ego*' translates '*le moi*' and is used in the normal sense of psychoanalytic literature. On '*je*', see note 2 below.

² Throughout this article we leave in its peculiarity the translation we have adopted for Freud's *Ideal-Ich* (i.e. '*je-idéal*'), without further comment, save that we have not maintained it since.

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fictional direction, which will always remain irreducible for the individual alone, or rather, which will only rejoin the development of the subject asymptotically, whatever the success of the dialectical syntheses by which he must resolve as *I* his discordance with his own reality.

The Body as Gestalt

The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is only given to him as *Gestalt*, that is to say in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size that fixes it and a symmetry that inverts it which are in conflict with the turbulence of the motions which the subject feels animating him. Thus, this *Gestalt*—whose pregnancy should be regarded as linked to the species, though its motor style remains unrecognizable—by these twin aspects of its appearance, symbolizes the mental permanence of the *I*, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination; it is pregnant with the correspondences which unite the *I* with the statue in which man projects himself, with the phantoms which dominate him, or finally, with the automaton in which, in an ambiguous relation, the world of his fabrication tends to find completion.

Indeed, where *imagos* are concerned—whose veiled faces it is our privilege to see in outline in our daily experience and the penumbra of symbolic efficacy³—the mirror-image would seem to be the threshold of the visible world, if we go by the mirror disposition which the *imago of our own body* presents in hallucinations or dreams, whether it concerns its individual features, or even its infirmities, or its object-projections; or if we notice the role of the mirror apparatus in the appearances of the *double*, in which psychic realities, however heterogeneous, manifest themselves.

That a *Gestalt* should be capable of formative effects in the organism is attested by a piece of biological experimentation which is itself so alien to the idea of psychic causality that it cannot bring itself to formulate its results in these terms. It nevertheless recognizes that it is a necessary condition for the maturation of the gonad of the female pigeon that it should see another member of its species, of either sex; so sufficient in itself is this condition that the desired effect may be obtained merely by placing the individual within reach of the field of reflection of a mirror. Similarly, in the case of the migratory locust, the transition within a generation from the solitary to the gregarious form, can be obtained by the exposure of the individual, at a certain stage, to the exclusively visual action of a similar image, provided it is animated by movements of a style sufficiently close to that characteristic of the species. Such facts are inscribed in an order of homeomorphic identification which would itself fall within the larger question of the meaning of beauty as formative and erotogenic.

But facts of mimicry are no less instructive when conceived as cases of

³ Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Structural Anthropology* Chapter X.

heteromorphic identification, inasmuch as they raise the problem of the significance of space for the living organism; psychological concepts hardly seem less appropriate for shedding light on these matters than ridiculous attempts to reduce them to the supposedly supreme law of adaptation. Let us only recall how Roger Caillois (who was then very young, and still fresh from his breach with the sociological school of his training) illuminated the subject by using the term '*legendary psychasthenia*', to classify morphological mimicry as an obsession with space in its derealizing effect.

We have ourselves shown in the social dialectic which structures human knowledge as paranoiac⁴ why human knowledge has greater autonomy than animal knowledge in relation to the field of force of desire, but also why it is determined in the direction of that 'lack of reality' which surrealist dissatisfaction denounces in it. These reflections lead us to recognize in the spatial ensnarement exhibited in the mirror-phase, even before the social dialectic, the effect in man of an organic insufficiency in his natural reality—insofar, that is, as we attach any meaning to the word 'nature'.

We are therefore led to regard the function of the mirror-phase as a particular case of the function of the *imago*, which is to establish a relation of the organism to its reality—or, as they say, of the *Innenwelt* to the *Umwelt*.

In man, however, this relation to nature is impaired by a kind of dehiscence of the organism in the womb, a primordial Discord betrayed by the signs of discomfort and motor inco-ordination of the neo-natal months. The objective notion of the anatomical incompleteness of the pyramidal system and likewise the presence of certain humoral residues of the maternal organism confirm the view we have formulated as the fact of a real *specific prematurity of birth* in man.

Let us note, incidentally, that this is a fact fully recognized by embryologists, by the term *foetalization*, which determines the prevalence of the so-called superior apparatus of the neurax, and especially of the cortex, which psycho-surgical operations lead us to regard as the intra-organic mirror.

This development is lived as a temporal dialectic which decisively projects the formation of the individual into history; the *mirror-phase* is a drama whose internal impulse rushes from insufficiency to anticipation and which manufactures for the subject, captive to the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality which we shall call orthopaedic—and to the assumption, finally, of the armour of an alienating identity, which will stamp with the rigidity of its structure the whole of the subject's mental development. Thus, to break out of the circle of the *Innenwelt* into the *Umwelt* generates the endless quadrature of the inventorying of the *ego*.

⁴ See *Essays* pp. 111 and 180.

The Fragmented Body

This fragmented body, the term for which I have introduced into our theoretical frame of reference, regularly manifests itself in dreams when the movement of the analysis encounters a certain level of aggressive disintegration in the individual. It then appears in the form of disjointed limbs, or of those organs figured in exoscopy, growing wings and taking up arms for intestinal persecutions—the very same that the visionary Hieronymus Bosch has fixed, for all time, in painting, as they climbed, in the 15th century, to the imaginary zenith of modern man, but this form is even tangibly revealed at the organic level, in the lines of 'fragilization' which define the anatomy of phantasy, as exhibited in the schizoid and spasmodic symptoms of hysteria.

Correlatively, the formation of the *I* is symbolized in dreams by a fortress, or a stadium—its inner arena and enclosure, surrounded by marshes and rubbish-tips, dividing it into two opposed fields of contest where the subject flounders in quest of the haughty and remote inner castle, which, in its shape (sometimes juxtaposed in the same scenario), symbolizes the *id* in startling fashion. Similarly, on the mental plane, we find realized the structures of fortified works, the metaphor of which arises spontaneously, and as if issuing from the symptoms themselves, to describe the mechanisms of obsessional neurosis—inversion, isolation, reduplication, cancellation and displacement.

But were we to build on this merely subjective data, and should this be detached from the experiential condition which would make us derive it from a language technique, our theoretical enterprise would remain exposed to the charge of projecting itself into the unthinkable of an absolute subject. That is why we have to find in the present hypothesis, grounded in a conjunction of objective data, the guiding grid for a *method of symbolic reduction*.

It establishes in the *defences of the ego* a genetic order, in accordance with the wish formulated by Miss Anna Freud, in the first part of her great work, and situates (as against a frequently expressed prejudice) hysterical repression and its returns at a more archaic stage than obsessional inversion and its isolating processes, and the latter in turn as preliminary to paranoiac alienation, which dates from the deflection of the mirror *I* into the social *I*.

This moment in which the mirror-phase comes to an end inaugurates, by the identification with the *imago* of the fellow and the drama of primordial jealousy (so well high-lighted by the school of Charlotte Bühler in the phenomenon of infantile *transitivism*), the dialectic which will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations.

It is this moment that decisively shakes the whole of human knowledge in the mediatization by the desire of the other, constitutes its objects in an abstract equivalence by virtue of the competition of the other, and makes the *I* into that system for which every instinctual thrust constitutes a danger, even though it should correspond to a

natural maturation—the very normalization of this maturation being henceforth dependent, in man, on a cultural go-between, as exemplified, in the case of the sexual object, by the Oedipus complex.

In the light of this conception, the term primary narcissism, by which analytical doctrine denotes the libidinal investment characteristic of that moment, reveals in those who invented it the most profound awareness of semantic latencies. But it also illuminates the dynamic opposition of that libido to sexual libido, which they tried to define when they invoked destructive and, indeed, death instincts, in order to explain the evident connection between narcissistic libido and the alienating function of the *I*, the aggressiveness which it releases in any relation to the other, albeit that of the most Samaritan aid.

Existentialism

They were encountering that existential negativity whose reality is so warmly advocated by the contemporary philosophy of being and nothingness.

But unfortunately that philosophy only grasps negativity within the confines of a self-sufficiency of consciousness, which, as one of its premises, links to the constitutive mis-recognitions of the *ego*, the illusion of autonomy to which it entrusts itself. This flight of fancy, for all that it draws, to an unusual extent, on borrowings from psychoanalytic experience, culminates in the pretention to provide an existential psychoanalysis.

At the climax of the historical attempt of a society to refuse to recognize that it has any function other than the utilitarian one, and in the anguish of the individual confronting the concentrational form of the social bond which seems to arise to crown this attempt, existentialism must be judged by the account it gives of the subjective dilemmas which it has indeed given rise to: the freedom which never claims more authenticity than when it is within the walls of a prison; the demand for commitment, expressing the impotence of a pure consciousness to master any situation; the voyeuristic-sadistic idealization of the sexual relationship; the personality which only realizes itself in suicide; the awareness of the other which can only be satisfied by Hegelian murder.

These propositions are denied by all our experience, inasmuch as it teaches us not to regard the *ego* as centred on the *perception-consciousness system*, or as organized by the 'reality principle'—a principle which is the expression of a scientific prejudice most hostile to the dialectic of knowledge. Our experience shows that we should start instead from the *function of mis-recognition* which characterizes the *ego* in all its structures, so markedly articulated by Miss Anna Freud. For, if the *Verneinung* represents the patent form of that function, its effects will, for the most part, remain latent, so long as they are not illuminated by a light reflected in the plane of fatality, where the *id* is revealed.

We can thus understand the inertia characteristic of the formations of the *I*, and find there the most extensive definition of neurosis—even as

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the ensnarement of the subject by the situation which gives us the most general formula for madness, not only the madness which lies behind the walls of asylums, but also the madness which deafens the world with its sound and fury.

The sufferings of neurosis and psychosis are for us the school of the passions of the soul, just as the scourge of the psychoanalytic scales, when we compute the tilt of their threat to entire communities, gives us the index of the deadening of the passions of the city.

At this junction of nature and culture which is so persistently scanned by modern anthropology, psychoanalysis alone recognizes this knot of imaginary servitude which love must always undo again, or sever.

For such a task we place no reliance in altruistic feeling, we who lay bare the aggressiveness that underlies the activity of the philanthropist, the idealist, the pedagogue, and even the reformer.

In the recourse of subject to subject which we preserve, psychoanalysis can accompany the patient to the ecstatic limit of the *'Thou art that'*, wherein is revealed to him the cipher of his mortal destiny, but it is not in our mere power as practitioners to bring him to that point where the real journey begins.

(1949—translated by Jean Roussel)