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Relieve Anxiety?

Such a question can only be formulated from the position of psychoanalysis. It is a question that is not posed by medicine. It is an evidence, for medicine, that the symptom is something that must be relieved. Anxiety is a just another symptom that must be relieved. Psychoanalysis, on the one hand, only considers as its aim the elimination of symptoms once their function is established and, on the other hand, it distinguishes the function of anxiety from that of the symptom. Posing the question of relieving anxiety immediately separates psychoanalysis from medical care. For the physician, the psychoanalyst masks his impotence behind rhetoric of the function of the symptom. For us, it is not simply a matter of rhetoric. It is the same paradox we find at work in the bungled act. An act never succeeds better than when it is bungled. But this proposition must be modified by a logical adjustment. The proposition is not reciprocal. It is not sufficient to bungle an action for it to be an act as such.

In the psychoanalysis of children the binary pair “induce anxiety/relieve anxiety” structured a debate during the 1930s between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein. For Anna Freud, the child’s ego had to be divided in order for him to take interest in his unconscious. As it is difficult to induce anxiety in the subject, so that there may be a dynamics of the cure, the transference – and the threat of the loss of love that accompanies it – must take hold. The analyst must then become a transitory superego in order to induce anxiety in a child who is not sufficiently anxious, not yet possessing a superego. For Melanie Klein, on the contrary, the subject is anxious from the beginning, assailed by his precocious paranoid anxiety, at a time when neither the ego, nor *a fortiori* the superego, in the Freudian sense, have been formed.

The hypothesis of a precocious superego diverged from the Freudian *doxa* of the times and gave rise to a debate on the “precursors of the superego.” According to the followers of Anna Freud, the signal of anxiety, whatever the age of the child, must be produced by the ego. We cannot then properly speak of anxiety coming from the superego before the full development of the ego and its defense mechanisms. Ego Psychology then put the stress on a theory of development of the ego that only admitted of “precursors” of the superego in connection with the latter’s different phases. This movement remains then at some distance from Melanie Klein’s theory, which opposes the ravaging archaic superego to the civilized post-Oedipal superego. If the principal post-Freudian currents diverged on the question of anxiety, they were on the same side with respect to a second Freudian indication that also differs from the medical position: the subject’s guilt-feelings must not be relieved. The psychoanalytic position thus must be clearly distinguished from any position that pleads for the relief of the subject’s guilt-feelings for humanitarian reasons.

Anxiety poses the question of desire

Why should guilt-feelings not be relieved? It is not only because Freud was very prudent about the unlocking of the barriers of civilization. It is because the division of the subject must be attained through his feelings of guilt. Psychoanalysis has remarked that the neurotic subject is always guilty of partaking in jouissance and existing, that is what Freud designated as unconscious feelings of guilt. In this way Freud separated psychoanalysis from psychotherapy when the latter reunited with the medical ideal in trying to reduce feelings of guilt.

What then is the alternative to relieving anxiety? Doesn't anxiety also indicate a crucial point for the subject? The special status of anxiety among the affects was stressed by Freud, and Lacan formulated it concisely in the following way: anxiety is an affect that does not lead astray. It guides the neurotic subject towards the real. For the neurotic subject, if there were no anxiety there would be nothing but a theater of shadows. The hysteric subject reduces the world to its semblants and its intrigues; the obsessional sees the world through a veil. Both find themselves exiled from the sentiment of life. If anxiety does not lead astray, it is because it poses the right question, the question of desire. We experience anxiety when we do not know what the Other wants of us. It is in this sense that anxiety is not without an object. The presence of the Other as such is in question. Lacan renders clear the evolutions in the Freudian theory of anxiety. From the first studies of anxiety neurosis up to *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, anxiety is the presence of the desire of the Other as such.

Relieving anxiety means both introducing a question concerning desire and interpreting the desire at play. Certain analytical orientations put emphasis on the necessity of obtaining a therapeutic alliance with the subject by means of a contract. The veritable alliance for Lacan is not the "therapeutic" alliance, but interpretation as such, which installs the transference. Lacan shows, in his rereading of the cases of Dora and the Rat Man, that Freud interpreted on the spot, especially anxiety. This inaugural interpretation is set apart by Lacan as what he calls the "subjective rectification." In this sense, "relieving anxiety" is coherent with the orientation given in the "Direction of the Cure," a text published at the beginning of the 1960s. This practice is explicitly opposed to the Anna Freudian orientation.

Relieving anxiety consists then in bringing the question of desire into the open. But how? We could say that the royal path for interpreting desire is making the symptom consist. It is all the more possible to relieve anxiety if we manage to make the symptom consist. On the contrary, when the symptom does not consist, it cannot anchor anxiety. Let us take a few examples.

Anxiety anchored by the symptom

First case: a man comes to see an analyst with different anxieties and ruminations. The subject is tormented by a question that a teacher asked him: "could it be that you're homosexual?" How could his anxiety be relieved? By favoring the systematization of the obsessional symptom and questioning him on his thoughts, his ruminations, thus obtaining that the symptom be brought into function and the anxiety be warded off. This allows the subject to meet a woman. He finds he is impotent and subject to premature ejaculations, which brings back his anxiety. The memories he evokes in analysis revolve around his father who had abandoned him when he was young, leaving him in the hands of the women of the family. The father later

fell prey to alcoholism. The subject incessantly brings up the question of his abandonment with the woman he met. He hesitates about beginning a sexual relationship. The weight of the demand falls then on his partner, and this demand of the Other encounters his absence of desire. The question of his abandonment is posed within a halo of culpability. His mother had told him that all men were cowards. He is thus afraid he will flee as his father did. He finds himself in the infernal clutches of the multiple commandments that paralyze him. His love object becomes the index of an impossible desire. He wonders if he is not saying all that to please me and the problem of his homosexuality comes back, in a slightly different place since he now thinks he is a masochist. He changes his partner and the symptom is notably diminished. He authorized himself to abandon without abandoning his analysis and his analyst then becomes the encumbering object. This deposit onto the analyst by transference alleviates his anxiety and his feelings of impotence.

Anxiety fixed by the fantasy

In a second case, the consistency of the symptom is articulated to the construction of the fantasy. A subject came to see me, some years ago, troubled, he said, by the unfortunate mania he had of choosing as a love object women who were “already taken,” which complicated his existence, exhausting him in relations of rivalry, sometimes bringing into the open impulses to assault the other with knives, which were his passion. This aggressiveness was aimed, at the horizon, at his father. The paradoxical effect of this had even brought him, at the moment when he was going to take the final exam that would permit him to exercise the same profession as his father, to be overcome by relentless vomiting attacks, an obstacle for the employment he was to have. Of course he wanted me to recognize in this rivalry the latent homosexuality that unconsciously inhabited him.

It is soon clear that what is troubling him is precisely that this unconscious homosexuality is for him very conscious inasmuch as he was seduced, at the age of nine, by a youth counselor, a friend of his parents, in a scene that took place in a bucolic setting, with an axe present somewhere for cutting wood, apparently. This seduction – it consisted in mutual masturbation –, this encounter with a desire, had provoked in the subject a response that gave rise to a compulsion to wear a plastic raincoat (which up till then had always been unbearable for him) – that his mother always wanted him to don as soon as there was the slightest threat of rain – and to masturbate behind this screen. This practice has continued ever since, and remains his consolation, a universal remedy for the traces his existence inflicts on him. He does not complain of this. We have then a well-constructed fantasy, and we may wonder how we might construct it with him.

Here is what analysis brought to light and which begins with a dream in which he responds to the intrusion of a gaze by producing a piece of dung. The analysis of his relation to cleanliness and dirtiness reveals a screen memory: at about four or five, he surprises his mother, or his sister – probably his sister, he thinks – opening the shower curtain to appear naked. At that moment he catches a glimpse of feminine castration. In a corner of the room lies a plastic bathing cap of the same material as the raincoat.

From then on, the transference is manifested on its aggressive side. A debt he has towards me is the occasion for him to pose the question in session of why he is jingling his coins about in his pocket. A song comes to mind in which a sailor is doing the same thing, a song that ends with the paying of the sailor’s debt by a stabbing. This tender thought for me was first interpreted by him in the sense that he came essen-

tially to get under my skin (*me faire chier*)¹ in other words to fill up in my consulting room, as elsewhere, the different caps and raincoats that people his life.

This discovery that he was coming to fill the Other with his being in this way provoked in him an uneasiness, even corporeal, which brought him to consult a doctor. In effect, during the two weeks that followed this little incident, he was preoccupied by his “doubtful dejections.” He had the impression that his stools contained a white substance, like sperm. Once the subject was reassured by the medical Faculty, the symptom quickly disappeared. We can see there how the moment of transference – a stasis after the first phase of subjective alienation during which he finds the screen-memory – we see how this transference-stasis is at the same time the moment at which the object appears in its anal form.

The transference work

Subsequently, and this would continue for some time, he does not understand why each time he calls up the screen-memory in the bathroom, he sees a knife pass by, in the middle of the scene, the same knife he said had always to be there in his pocket, in case there were a fight. A dream came to give him the solution: he is at his aunt’s and he sees the surroundings with the very vivid precision the effect of the real can carry in dreams. But, there as elsewhere, it is not about any reality – no more than in the light of the dream “Father, don’t you see that I’m burning?” In this dream at his aunt’s, on the other side of the wall, in another room, there are three women present: his mother, his aunt and his sister. He is rummaging – something forbidden – in a trunk full of feminine clothes, and he pulls his hand out of it full of blood.

He analyses this dream carefully, extracting what there is in it of an encounter with castration. He discovers finally why he could no longer call up this screen-memory without the presence of the knife: it was in fact the transfer of the axe of the seduction scene onto the veritable traumatic scene, the discovery of the absence of a penis on his sister. He needed to apprehend the moment of encounter in the forbidden act of rummaging under his mother’s skirts in order to elaborate his position and be separated from the aggressive fantasy concerning the other and the anxiety that accompanied it.

Three steps, then, in his relation with the Other. He first puts forward his rivalry with men, with the idea of the knife always to be found in his pocket. Then, in the transference, there comes a separation from what he has in his pocket: on one side the knife, the axe, which are the signifiers through which the ($-\phi$) that haunts the structure is evoked, the cut that is always possible, the phallic value; on the other side, the necessity for him to always have in his pocket the feces necessary to maculate the impermeable screen that the Other extends to him. It is then, in this transference ambivalence, that the veritable meaning of his rivalry with men appears. It is the debasement of his love life that aims at constituting a feminine Other by attempting to force her consent and to lodge there, at that moment, the assets by which to constitute this feminine Other, as his waste. He came at that point to deposit the turd of his fantasy on the white page that a woman summoned to that place was for him.

It is at this point that the transference work [*travail de transfert*] – since this is how Lacan once translated

1 TN: literally “to make me shit,” metaphorically “to bore” or “to irritate.”

the Freudian *Durcharbeitung*² – distinguishes the status of the Other from that of the other, distinguishing on the one hand the circus games that he could organize, reserving a lodge for the bored master, and on the other hand the underground construction of this fantasy. Because *there is* a construction of a fantasy in this analysis. How can we envisage a construction of this fantasy, I thought, when he delivered very early in the analysis a wholly constituted fantasy that did not have to be extracted stone by stone?

This construction is accomplished by bringing the transference into play, from the very beginning, in relation to this imaginary aggressiveness. It is not for the analyst a question of “introducing himself into the patient’s fantasies” as the preface to the Italian translation of Melanie Klein’s works says,³ but rather of playing on what Lacan calls “the margin of exteriorization of the object *a*.”⁴ This margin of exteriorization constitutes the partner analyst beyond the imaginary. He jingles the tingling coins in his pocket, realizing the equivalence between money and excrement, but there it is only imaginary. The underlying structure is to constitute in this way the analyst as a partner, by this very venture. Far from being there at the outset in the narration of the fantasy, this structure only comes after the separation on the one side of what belongs to castration, and on the other, of what belongs to the object. The fantasy evoked at the beginning, of an Other that emerges at the moment he masturbates behind the protective screen of plastic, comes to keep together and to confuse in the same moment, the value of castration – which has value in the eyes of the Other – and the object – the maculation he has just produced on the screen. He affirms, in this practice, the phallic value he had for his mother. Which explains why he could rapturously don the same raincoat that had appeared as an object of disgust and rebellion before, thus testifying that he was his mother’s phallus.

In order to approach this point of his imaginary phallic identification, the impermeable veil of the plastic screen had to fall from where he was holding on to it. The analysis continued beyond this point. It has now been a long time since we last met. He calls me from time to time, to ask for the addresses of analysts for children around him that he believes to be in danger.

Unanchored anxiety

There are cases however, in which the anxiety cannot be anchored either by the symptom, or the construction of the fantasy. A woman of about forty, Mrs. D. came to see me one evening in a state of great nervousness. She was invaded by what she calls “obsessions”: she is afraid she will spit blood, while she only has one lung due to the sequels of an old pleurisy. But above all, she is afraid someone will poison her. So it is very difficult for her to have lunch outside of her home, above all in the company of men. But she cannot eat at home either, because her apartment is unfit for anything. Since she cannot throw anything out, it is now totally encumbered. The only space left is where she sleeps, but that’s saying too much too, because she no longer sleeps – at least not at night, since she must constantly get up to check that the door is well closed, that no thief can penetrate within the apartment, finally that no man has come in or introduced his key into the precious lock. This paranoid sensitivity to poisoning and her preoccupation, her fascination, with the lock are striking by their association.

2 J. Lacan, “The Direction of the Cure and the Principles of Its Power,” *Écrits, a Selection*, tr. Bruce Fink, Norton, New York, 2002, p. 254.

3 F. Fornari, “Presentazione,” in M. Klein, *Analisi di un bambino*, Boringhieri, Turin, 1971.

4 J. Lacan, “Discours de clôture aux journées sur l’enfance aliénée,” *Autres écrits*, Seuil, Paris, 2001.

But what is more surprising, given her mode of irruption, is that this young woman says that this is her third analysis. For more than twenty years in fact, she has been seeing psychoanalysts, she says. She went to see her first analyst when she had just been married. The marriage had produced a curious effect on her: she kept exhausting her husband with her nagging and the only thing she could put up with from him was that he make love to her. The husband, having other things to do than to give in to his wife's push-to-impotence, contacted a psychiatrist who recommended analysis. Mrs. D. went to see him.

In the midst of different problems, extending from mutism to scandal, a cure took place. The sexual demands of the analysand found a suitable solution. She divorced, remaining on excellent terms with her husband, and found a lover. More precisely, she found two. One, who was rich, supported her but, she points out, did not satisfy her sexually. The other, poor and delinquent, was, she says, her only master in the games of love. The poor lover might at any moment, when he came to see her, steal the gifts of the rich lover – which she expected and feared in a state of anxious apprehension. In short, she found a balance, and happiness. She obtained from the rich lover her own apartment, and above all a bathroom that had to be superb. This was a success.

The first analysis stopped there, it seems, after a period of ten years, on a sort of appeasement. The analyst, who was not taken in, proposed of course that the patient come back to see him if she were to go through a period of great anxiety. This occurred when the poor lover disappeared, just when the bathroom was finished. The eve of her departure on a trip, Mrs. D. received a last call. On her return, no more news from him. She then had the feeling that all she had acquired was for nothing. The withdrawal of the one who was taking care of the jewel box made the bathroom, a wonderful showcase, worthless, and confronted her once again, drastically, with the phallic signification.

Her first analyst declined her request to resume her analysis with him and referred her to a woman colleague: "You need a woman now," he said. Moreover Mrs. K., to whom she was referred, was quite convinced of this, although surprised that after such a long time the analysis was still to be done. She worked actively at it then, by fixing her patient to a familial identification. Mrs. D. had in fact retained from her childhood and adolescence the following tale: her father had a liaison with a young neighbor, and this had poisoned the life of her mother, who could only put an end to it by threatening, very convincingly, her husband and his mistress that she would blind them with vitriol. The key interpretation of this for Mrs. K., in the eyes of Mrs. D., was: "You have identified with your father's girlfriend."

It was after her grandmother's death – someone who was very important for her – that she came to see me; the second analysis being blocked, she could no longer go to see Mrs. K. A crucial subjective experience took place during the burial. At the moment the coffin was about to be closed, she did not recognize her grandmother, who was probably the only woman to have recognized her during her childhood, and the only one she has really pleasant memories of. This is a perfectly constituted elementary phenomenon.

The deposit of letters in abeyance

So, at the moment I see her, she has succeeded in filling up her apartment like a garbage can. She lies in wait for the arrival of a man at her door and cannot part from her keys, which encumber her. Her only complaint is that psychoanalysis has made her age prematurely through the anxiety she cannot get rid of, this has given her wrinkles.

In a paranoid way, she accuses psychoanalysis of everything – which does not prevent her from coming back and calling on me as a witness to the damage psychoanalysis has wrought in her, she who had been a real beauty. She supports this with photographs and letters from men who were desperately in love. I keep insisting that she leave me one, whereas she didn't want to tell me any of the names of her story – for example, her husband's name – and didn't want to leave anything that might be a trace. If I insist that she leave me these testimonies from her admirers, it is because the question here is not so much one of interpreting as of occupying a place: that of the garbage can of her letters in abeyance. Moreover, once I had obtained a first letter, others followed, verifying the equation *litter/letter*. She would write letters to me – narrations of her dreams – on bits of scrap paper that she would deposit in my hands. This series constitutes the essential of the interpretation she was able to furnish of the acute moment she went through.

I will divide this series into two essential registers. First that of the unanchored phallic signification. Here is the first dream: “a car was coming. My father, I think, was stretched out on the back seat. I said, frightened: *What's wrong with him?* Someone answered and it was the voice of my father: *He was never operated on.* No one was driving the car.”

This dream of her father stretched out, whose voice persecutes her, may be opposed point by point to a second, which presents a woman: “I stopped my car in front of a sort of inn. I had two travel bags with me. I left them in the car and went in to ask if there was a room for the evening. The people were sitting at a round table, eating. A woman gets up and asks me if it's for two persons. Of course, but I didn't dare say that it was for me because of the poison. So, how could I leave the bags I had in the car and that I absolutely had to deposit?” Here, the operation consists in leaving the bags, the bursa. In fact, she was to evoke a dream in which effectively her husband is holding in his hands his bleeding testicles. Her mother looms, looms between a bedroom and herself. Her mother can share the meals of men, she cannot. The blood and the anxiety of being poisoned are linked to the anxiety of castration.

The other side is knotted around the object, whether it be scopic, oral or anal. As for the money that is impossible “to wash,” it acts as a stopper to keep at bay the question of the debt between her father and her that is impossible to pay back. The money, since it does not enter into a circuit of the debt, is the strict equivalent of the feces. She has this dream: “I was in my room, I went downstairs. I was in a mad rage in front of my parents. I said to them that if I were to die, I would make a will so they might not inherit my apartment.” She makes this remark: “My teeth were falling into a little pot of shit. . .”

Other dreams give her direct access to jouissance, with no repression: “I had taken the train. It stopped in a station. I wasn't in a hurry to get off (*descendre*)” – this is the opposite of the dream in which she is in a hurry to go downstairs (*descendre*) to tell her parents off – her husband, furious, tells her to hurry up and take her things: “I couldn't find the wagon. I wasn't sure it was the one I was in. I couldn't find any of my things. The train started up again. Too late! Where were we going? After a few moments, I realized it was not really a train; there were two of us, the man who was driving and myself. I asked him if he could drive me back. As if it were being transformed, we found ourselves on a sort of engine that resembled ice skates. I had on a very short dress.” This dress revealed her sex, and she had a man's sex. “I woke up coming with pleasure,” she concluded.

The persecutory side of the transference

During the time she interprets her dreams, she returns towards men. During three successive liaisons, at very short intervals, she becomes preoccupied with possible losses of blood during her sexual relations; these preoccupations take up more and more space. She tells me one day that I only succeeded in making her illness worse than it was, just like all the psychoanalysts she had seen up till then, and that she must now go consult a woman analyst. Moreover, she reactivated a former liaison with a woman. She does not want to have anything to do with men anymore, who are, like me, nothing but men without principles – she is actually seized by a narcissistic rage homogenous to her subjective structure. From this day on, a troubled period begins with the enacting of various caprices. She makes the round then of a series of doctors for them to bear witness to a skin disease or an eye irritation due to the inordinate use of make-up.

Repeating with greater and greater fervor her accusations, reproaching me for having made her ill, she telephones before each of her appointments with a doctor to let me know the extent of the despair she is reduced to, and how great my fault is. The transference is at that moment entirely on its persecutory slope. She comes back to see me, wearing dark glasses permanently, really identified to her father's mistress, blinded and finally punished.

Wearing these same glasses, she goes to see Mrs. K. to ask her the reason for her central interpretation. On the one hand, she goes to show all the doctors her non symbolized castration, inasmuch as it is obstructed by the object of the gaze. On the other, the interpretation that had anchored her for a time takes on a persecutive turn that she holds the analyst accountable for. She, who aspired to the fascination of the Other by her beauty, takes the world as witness of the irreparable abuse that has been established in the imaginary. At the same time, in the midst of this period, she formulates the only thing that could repair it all: she must meet another lover, still richer, and perhaps more impotent, who could come to offer her an even larger apartment, permitting her to get rid of the one she possesses.

A new homeostasis

After a rupture, this period ends in her return and she comes, appeased, to declare to me her transference love. For that she had to go see some women mediums to try to regain the affection of her husband. She finds her place once more as the “wife of her husband.” She will then detach herself from her cure, appeased.

What can we reconstruct of the effect of these two analyses with Mr. K. and Mrs. K.? Mr. K. obtained an appeasement by abounding in the sense of the hysterical cleavage of her love life, between the husband or the lover, the first as holder of the title – the important thing being to incarnate the slave who supports Mrs. D. – and the lover “only master of the love games” – the possessor of the organ. As for Mrs. K., she brings into play her patient's identification to the object of her father's desire. But if the analysis then comes up against an obstacle, it is at the point of the real when Mrs. D. does not recognize her grandmother, the grandmother who had recognized her as a child. That is when the imaginary character of the phenomena, the “body language” side, the rotting of the organs and the invasion of the apartment by garbage, takes on more importance.

The anxiety could not, in this case, be anchored by the symptom. The symptom itself, essentially multiple, of a marked hypochondria, was the argument for her acting out. By constituting a network of recourses, by avoiding the crystallization of her persecution, a new homeostasis was found and the anxiety appeased.

In each of these cases, the therapeutic dimension is in the foreground. Psychoanalysis, applied to each of them, proceeds in a different way to relieve anxiety. In the first case, it is the consistency of the symptom that permits the displacement of the anxiety. In the second, it is through the construction of the fantasy in the transference. In the last case, the acute anxiety is appeased because it is the analyst who is found at the place of a partner-symptom, and this permits the subject to collect herself around a renewed narcissistic identification.

Key words: anxiety – symptom – fantasy – transference.

Translated by Thelma Sowley