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Symbolic Conceptions: The Idea of the Third

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The idea of the third which appears in Jung's concepts of the transcendent function and the *coniunctio* also occurs in several psychoanalytic theories concerning the emergence of reflective and symbolic thought in childhood development (defined here as the development of 'imaginal capacity'). Noting the way this process is often conceived in terms of the metaphor of sexual intercourse leading to 'conception', this paper suggests that such images need to be understood as symbolic conceptions of the meaning-making functions of the human mind. This leads to a different view of psychoanalytic theories that attempt to account for the development of imaginal capacity in terms of the Oedipus complex. It is suggested that a) these functions must be operative in the mind before the Oedipal situation can become meaningful and b) that psychoanalytic theories are themselves symbolic conceptions which, like mythological narratives, seek to communicate and comprehend psychic reality through imaginal forms.

Imaginal capacity and the idea of the third

The idea of the third has often been used in psychoanalytic thinking to describe the emergence of a new level of mental functioning that is essential for psychological development. Winnicott called this the third area, an intermediate area or potential space that exists between internal and external reality and is the location for play, creativity and cultural activity (Winnicott 1971). Ogden (1994) has applied this idea to the analytic situation in his proposition of an 'analytic third' arising out of the intersubjective field between analyst and patient but not reducible to either of them. He sees this area as the locus of potentially creative transformation, especially if the analyst can become aware of it through his or her reverie. From a different perspective, Britton has developed the idea of a third position that arises out of the coming together of the parental couple in the mind of the infant and enables the child to observe

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and reflect upon relationships in which he or she is at the same time a participant (Britton 1989). Britton's ‘third position’ has much in common with Fonagy's concept

of reflective function, the capacity to reflect on one's own mind and the minds of others and to recognize intentions and motivations that can be differentiated from action and behaviour (Fonagy & Target 1996).

The idea of the third is also a key element in Jung's concept of the transcendent function which he described as facilitating ‘the transition from one psychic condition to another by means of the mutual confrontation of opposites’ (Jung 1939/1954, para. 780). Jung discovered that this active confrontation between conscious and unconscious often resulted in the emergence of new symbolic forms which transcended internal conflicts leading to a greater psychic wholeness. However, the idea of the transcendent function has a much wider application as an abstract formulation of the many different forms of internal opposition that issue in the emergence of a third.

In this most generalized and abstract form, the third (area or position) may be described as a representational space for the occurrence of emergent meaning. In this sense, the transcendent function is an attempt to describe the psychic function that is involved in the creation of *meaning* —it is an account of the meaning-making function of the psyche that suggests meaning to be the outcome of a process of opposition between two or more opposing elements that are somehow transcended in the creation of a third with a new level of complexity. The third is thus an *emergent* phenomenon, having properties of a different order from its constituent parts. This brings the idea of the transcendent function and, more generally, psychoanalytic thinking on the idea of the third, into congruence with the theory of emergence in other disciplines, such as biology and consciousness studies. Emergence theory offers an alternative to reductionism by explaining how the conjunction of elemental phenomena can produce properties which are not reducible to their constituent elements (Cambray 2006, p. 4).

The emergence of the third could also be described as the development of a capacity for symbolic imagination or simply *imaginal capacity.* By this I mean the capacity to formulate and creatively explore images of one's own psychic life and the world in a way that feels fully real yet distinct from the actuality of the external world. It refers to something more than the capacity to symbolize since it also involves the capacity to relate to symbols as significantly meaningful, having multiple referents that remain distinct from the form in

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which they are represented. I have previously described this as the recognition of the absence of the symbolized in the presence of the symbol, arguing that a capacity to bear absence is a *sine qua non* of a capacity to make creative use of symbols (Colman 2006). It is equally the case that absence can only be tolerated by means of early representations that eventually lead on to symbol formation. I am thinking here of Bion's formulation that thought develops as a means of tolerating the absence of a realization (Bion 1962b, pp. 111-12). For example, the conception of a breast may enable the infant to tolerate the absence of a breast (which would be a realization). For this reason, an intolerance of absence and an incapacity to symbolize tend to go hand in hand.

Symbolic conceptions

In the first part of this paper I aim to show how a range of developmental processes, from the earliest beginnings of thought to the full emergence of imaginal capacity can be conceived in terms of the emergence of a third. In both analytical psychology and psychoanalysis, these processes are often symbolized in terms of some kind of sexual intercourse in the mind. In psychoanalysis this ‘symbolic conception’ appears as the ‘link between the parents’ in the primal scene; in analytical psychology it appears as the image of the king and queen in the alchemical *coniunctio.* This idea is, of course, implicit in the metaphor of *conception* itself. It is this metaphor that makes it possible for me to use the idea of ‘symbolic conception’ to refer to a) how symbols are ‘conceived’ in the mind as well as b) the way that such processes are metaphorically symbolized, as ‘conceptions’. By symbolic conceptions then, I mean not only the process in the mind through which symbolic ideas develop but also the symbolic narratives that describe that process in terms of the metaphor of conceiving babies.

With this in mind, in the latter part of the paper I look particularly at recent developments in the theory of the Oedipus complex, including Britton's ideas about triangular space and ‘the other room’. I will argue that the primal scene is best understood as a metaphor or as I would say *a symbolic conception* of abstract processes in the mind rather than an account of any kind of concrete pre-existing unconscious phantasy. This inevitably leads to a somewhat different approach to theories that describe the development of mental functioning in terms of the Oedipus complex. I regard these theories as essentially mythological narratives which symbolize the development of a ‘third position’ but cannot account for it.

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The *coniunctio* in Jung and Bion

In Jung's later work, the idea of the transcendent function is gathered up into the broader idea of the conflict between the opposites. Jung saw the psyche as a complex of opposites and regarded psychic development in terms of their reconciliation in what he came to call the *coniunctio oppositorum,* the conjunction of opposites. He never saw this as an end-result but as something that was continually in the process of becoming. The *coniunctio* is thus very similar to the idea that the depressive position is never finally achieved but has to be reworked throughout life. Bion proposed an oscillating model of ps ↔ d which has been refined by Britton as an ascending spiral, ps (n) → d(n) → ps (n + 1) (Britton 1998, pp. 69-81). This model has considerable structural similarity with the way Jung thought of the *coniunctio* (Bravesmith 2007).

This similarity is perhaps all the more striking given that Jung was interested in the most sophisticated levels of psychological functioning concerned with spiritual experiences requiring a very high degree of imaginal capacity, while Bion was interested in the most basic constituents of thought. Yet they both

utilize the same metaphor—the idea of a kind of sexual intercourse in the mind: where Jung speaks of the *coniunctio,* Bion speaks of preconceptions 'mating' with sense impressions to produce conceptions. Furthermore, Bion's (1959) use of the concept of 'linking' in relation to thinking processes (and the way these can be attacked) has become increasingly accommodated in recent Kleinian discourse with the specific example of the link between the internal parental couple which is then taken as a template for the origin of thought (Britton 1989; Rusbridger 1999; Ruszczynski 2005). In this way of thinking, the symbolic nature of the imagery easily becomes concretized. Jung, however, was explicit about the symbolic nature of the images he was using which he took mainly from alchemy. He approached alchemy as a symbolic imaginal world whose aim was to promote psychological and spiritual development through the contemplation, exploration and development of its very rich and elaborate imagery. Jung regarded the image of the *coniunctio* as a couple in sexual intercourse as only one of many possible symbols of a potential psychic wholeness that is unknowable in itself:

> *Obviously, very different if not contradictory symbolisms were needed to give an adequate description of the paradoxical nature of the conjunction. In such a situation one can conclude with certainty that none of the symbols employed suffices to express the whole.*

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(Jung 1955, para. 470)

Although Bion is less explicit, I think he too regarded the idea of 'mating' as metaphorical or at least as a 'model' rather than a theory. For Bion a model is ephemeral and not factual (Bion 1962a, p. 80). It is a way of trying to describe something in terms which may be metaphorical, analogous or an illustrative example. When he uses the idea of 'mating' as, for example, in his description of a pre-conception mating with sense impressions to produce a conception he notes that he is using 'a phrase in which the implied model is obvious' (ibid., p. 91). So although he makes considerable use of the model of mating and intercourse and is interested in investigating the correspondence between links in the mind and the link between nipple and mouth or between the parents in intercourse, it is my impression that he always regards these as contingent, essentially metaphorical links—models that assist understanding but do not correspond to actual realities and may be easily discarded or replaced by alternative models. Bion is always aware of the danger that a model may become concretized and thus mistaken for a realization of that model. Simply put, this means taking the metaphor literally so that instead of it being an analogy, it is seen as identical to what is being described.

Cross-modal domain mapping in cognitive development

Recent advances in our understanding of the way infants build up a representational world show an essentially similar structure to the processes described

by the *coniunctio* and the transcendent function. Very briefly, developments in cognitive psychology indicate a process whereby infant learning proceeds through a process of comparison and contrast between different aspects of perceptual experience/stimuli. For example, Knox has compared the transcendent function with Mandler's work on the processes of perceptual analysis and appraisal that leads to the formation of the earliest conceptual models that she calls image schemas (Mandler 1988; Knox 2004). Ramachandran's work on the link between synaesthesia and metaphor has pointed to an area of the brain, the angular gyrus, where different sensory modalities coalesce and patterns common to each may be abstracted (Ramachandran 2003; Ramachandran & Hubbard 2003; Graham 2005). This would also seem to be connected with cross-modal perception in infants—an early ability to recognize the same objects presented in different sensory

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modalities—e.g. the shared features between what something looks like and what it feels like (Stern 1985).

All these processes—perceptual analysis, appraisal, the development of image schemas, cross-modal perception and metaphor—chime in both with Jung's model of the transcendent function and Bion's concept of linking. They all involve the mapping of one form of experience on another (which might also be described as a link or a conjunction), leading to the emergence of new meaning through recognition of the pattern that is common to both. Clearly, the ability for pattern recognition is at the heart of metaphor and symbol since they involve just this kind of recognition of similarity and difference, resulting in the emergence of new meanings.[1]

Ramachandran has shown how the cognitive aspects of metaphor can be impaired by damage to the brain (see Graham 2005). Our work as psychoanalytic therapists also shows how symbolic capacity can be compromised by emotional damage to the psyche resulting in the kind of concrete thinking whereby the distinction between symbol and symbolized cannot be recognized. Difference is felt to be intolerable and so similarity is collapsed into sameness. As I put it earlier, the absence of the object symbolized in the symbol used to represent it is felt to be intolerable; so the symbol has to be treated as if it *were* that object—the dimension of absence has to be obliterated.

Transitional phenomena

This can be further appreciated through Winnicott's distinction between transitional objects and fetish objects. Winnicott sees transitional phenomena

[1] *Although this early form of sensory cross-referencing may be superseded by internalized abstract representational models that can interact with each other to generate new symbolic forms, we also continue to find new meanings via cross-modal perception in the form of art works that express one perceptual mode in terms of another—for example, music that describes landscape in sound, such as Beethoven's Pastoral Symphony or, more prosaically, music that expresses sexual excitement and climax.*

as being a way of coping with the absence of the mother (the object of the infant's attachment) but also, crucially, a precursor to the development of

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symbols and the creative living that depends on the capacity to use them. He argues that the importance of the transitional object lies not only in its symbolic value as a representation of the mother but equally in its *not* being the mother. In this way, transitional phenomena 'facilitate the process of becoming able to accept difference and similarity' (Winnicott 1971, pp. 6-7). Something that is similar to mother but not mother enables the child both to bear the absence of mother and to find a symbolic form that represents that absence. I think its not being mother means that the transitional object includes in it the beginnings of a capacity to contain absence in representational form. When the anxiety of separation and absence is too great, the transitional object is used instead as a fetish object, treated as if it *is* the desired object whose absence can be denied by the maintenance of an object which is under the subject's control.

Winnicott's work lends itself very easily to the Jungian idea of the mediation of the opposites. Transitional phenomena represent a *coniunctio* between the opposites of presence and absence on the one hand and subjective and objective on the other. They belong to a third area which is neither subjectively created nor objectively found but both and neither. Winnicott's elliptical style, though, has given rise to some confusion about what is meant by the intermediate area. I do not think that Winnicott means literally a space between people so much as an area of the *mind* that is intermediate between subjective fantasy and the perception of external reality. This third area, he argues, is essential for creative living. Surely what Winnicott is describing here is the space in the mind that we think of as 'the imagination'; his work on transitional phenomena is a psychoanalytic theory of the origin of imaginal capacity. What Winnicott *is* saying about the intermediate area, though, is that imaginal capacity can only come into being through interaction *between* people—it cannot develop in isolation purely in terms of subjective developments within the infant's own mind. It is an inter-subjective theory for the origin of symbolic imagination.

Intersubjective meaning-making

Meaning-making is thus not a purely internal function. It depends not only on the sense the infant makes of the environment through 'the self-organizing emergent properties of the human mind' but also on the infant's introduction to the world of social meanings through interpersonal relationship (Knox 2004, p. 6). In Winnicott's language, this occurs through a process of gesture and recognition: through her recognition, the mother confers meaning on her baby's gestures which can then be used by the infant to make sense of his or

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her own experience. Winnicott's rather poetic image of ‘mirroring’ has turned out to be a seminal intuition of some of the detailed observational studies that have been

made of mother-infant interaction in recent years. It seems that what is essential for the infant to be able to develop a representation of their experience is a response that is *similar*, but not identical. So, for example, when the mother, with humour and love, mirrors back a pretend exaggerated facial expression of her infant's distress, the infant is able to internalize an image that is sufficiently different from the experience for it to form a representation (Gergely & Watson 1996). This can then be used as the beginnings of a capacity to observe and reflect on experience that will eventually develop into reflective function, ‘the point of view of the third’ (Fonagy & Target 1996, p. 230).

It seems to me that here we can again see the emergence of new meaning through recognition of a pattern that is common to two overlapping domains. The infant is able to recognize the similarity and difference between its emotional experience and the image reflected back by the mother. Out of the comparison between them, a pattern can be recognized which forms the basis for representing that experience in the mind. So here, too, the transcendent function is in operation, negotiating between similarity and difference in the creation of a third.

It seems highly likely that the mirroring behaviour observed by Fonagy and his colleagues is an outward and visible sign of the inward and spiritual reverie taking place in the mother's mind as described by Bion. The mother's containment of the infant proceeds through the internal representations she is able to form of the infant's experience and the way these issue in her emotional response, mediated through physical gestures. Bion proposes that a ‘third object’ comes into being out of the relationship between container and contained and that the quality of this object reflects the quality of the relationship between them—either promoting the development of meaning or destroying it (Bion 1970, quoted in Segal 1991, p. 58).

Summary so far

Before I turn to the somewhat different way that the idea of the third is represented in recent developments of the theory of the Oedipus complex,

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particularly in the work of Ron Britton, let me summarize the points I have made so far.

The idea of the third is connected with meaning-making and the development of a reflective space wherein symbolic representations may be contemplated and explored. I have called this imaginal capacity and have suggested that Jung's concept of the transcendent function offers an overarching model to describe a salient common feature in various accounts of these processes: the coming together of two different or opposing elements and their 'transcendence' through the recognition of the pattern that is common to both of them. This process is often symbolized in terms of sexual intercourse—a symbolic conception of how symbols are conceived. I have referred to some recent work in developmental psychology which suggests that these processes may originate in cross-modal

perception in the angular gyrus which may also be the brain area responsible for the development of metaphorical thinking. Through reference to Winnicott's work on transitional phenomena and the development of his ideas about mirroring and recognition I have suggested that imaginal capacity may depend on the emotional capacity to bear and symbolically represent absence and difference and this capacity can only develop through the kind of intersubjective interaction that Winnicott poetically described as 'mirroring'.

Unconscious phantasy and 'the third position'

Britton's idea of the third seems to describe broadly something similar to what I have described so far since it involves the capacity to imagine different kinds of relationships and to reflect on one's own psychic life—'reflecting on ourselves while being ourselves', as he puts it (Britton 1989, p. 87). However, its derivation is different in several important respects. The most important of these is that Britton's theory assumes the existence of innate unconscious phantasies which play an important part in its aetiology—an issue I need to address in some detail.

I have previously argued that unconscious phantasies are metaphorical constructions that involve various forms of meaning-making and therefore cannot correspond to any fundamental actualities in the mind (Colman 2005). Since it is not possible to have direct knowledge of unconscious phantasy, especially in infants, the way it is formulated is *necessarily* a metaphorical

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interpretation. Although it may be objected that Klein is attempting to describe primitive emotional experiences, this would only prove the point that the descriptive means at her disposal are necessarily metaphorical rather than factual. Furthermore, research from the field of developmental psychology has strongly questioned the possibility that infants could have the kind of elaborated phantasy images attributed to them by Klein (Stern 1985; Zinkin 1991). The infant's innate repertoire of responses to the environment (preconceptions) is now thought to be far more elemental than previously believed, consisting merely of triggers to respond to certain stimuli (Elman et al. 1999, p. 108, quoted in Knox 2004, p. 6). These triggers might be thought of as preconceptions but they would certainly be much more elemental than, say, 'the idea of a breast', let alone a complex formulation like the primal scene of which the infant has no direct experience. This makes it much more likely that unconscious phantasy, rather than being some kind of 'bedrock' of psychic life, is an *emergent* phenomenon that depends on the early development of meaning-making capacities through the operation of the pattern-finding transcendent function.

In this view there is no underlying stratum of the mind to which the complex phenomena of psychic life can be reduced. Britton comes close to this view when he refers to unconscious phantasies as 'the psychic counterparts to Kant's noumena, the unknowable *things in themselves* ', yet he still maintains the idea

that these 'forever unseen' unconscious phantasies are the 'bedrock of psychic reality' (Britton 1998, p. 119). Furthermore, although unknowable, Britton nevertheless assumes the existence of some kind of innate idea of the primal scene which kick-starts the creation of imaginative capacity. He explains this through his concept of the 'other room':

The other room is the place where [in its perceptual absence] the object spends its invisible existence. I think that it is conceived inevitably as in relationship with another object, which is a condition of existence. The 'other room' is in other words, the location of the invisible *primal scene.*

(Britton 2003, p. 20)

Significantly, Britton suggests that the other room is the equivalent of the mental space that we call our imagination. As I understand him, he suggests that the other room of the imagination is called into being in order to 'place' the primal scene. In this way he is able to derive the origin of imagination from the phantasy of the primal scene.[2] Of course, this view rests on the assumption

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that the idea of the parents in intercourse is an innate *a priori* fantasy that is, as Britton says, 'conceived inevitably', and is a condition of existence.

This is also the difficulty I have with the way that Britton derives the origin of triangular space and the third position. Britton suggests that it is the recognition of the link between the parents which initiates a triangular space in which it is possible to think of oneself as both a participant and an observer of relationships. This certainly makes sense if the idea of the primal scene is believed to be something which is 'conceived inevitably'. However, in an emergent view of the development of imaginal capacity, it would be necessary to develop the capacity for such complex internal representations *before* the link with the parents could be conceived. In particular, it would be necessary to develop the capacity to represent objects which are *absent* through the development of symbolic representations (such as transitional objects) which 'contain' the absence through representing it. It would be this which initiates the emergence of the third area rather than the Oedipal situation. Where these capacities have not developed or are attacked, there would indeed be a missing link but only in a symbolic sense would it correspond with the link between the parents.

This leads me to wonder whether the idea of the link between the parents in Britton's model could be thought of as a symbolic conception as it is in Jung's model of the *coniunctio* and Bion's models of 'mating' and 'linking'. In this view, the emergence of symbolic representation through the capacity to form links in the mind is primary, and the recognition of the link between the parents is secondary, resting on the basis of that achievement rather than being the origin and initiator of it.

[2] *This point has also been made by Hewison*

Here I think it necessary to tease apart two aspects of the way that the idea of the primal scene has come to be used in psychoanalytic theory. As a result of the merging of the theory of the Oedipus complex with Bion's use of a model of 'mating' to describe the emergence of 'conceptions', the primal scene as an image of the phantasized intercourse between the parents has come to be equated with the emergence of meaning in the mind, the very basis of thought itself. Rusbridger, for example, states that

> *the response to the realities of the Oedipal situation appears to constitute the main building block of the mind ... Perhaps the main*

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> *form that this conjunction takes in the analytic situation is in the emergence of meaning. For meaning to emerge in the mind ... mating (Bion 1963) between different ideas has to occur.*
>
> *(Rusbridger 1999, p. 492)*

In this formulation the image of the primal scene is not regarded as a symbolic representation of the origin of thought but as being an *a priori* phantasy in the mind that itself makes possible the development of symbolic thought. As I discussed earlier, however, Bion regarded his formulations as models, not theories: Rusbridger's account is therefore an example of equating the model with its realization—taking the metaphor literally. It also elides the difference between the model of mating, applied to the relation between preconceptions and sense impressions and the idea that thought involves links in the mind. Bion's use of the abstractions and to represent the contained and the container respectively in his model of the growth of a mind capable of thinking (Bion 1962b, pp. 90ff.) also lends itself to the kind of concretization whereby such abstractions are taken to be a reference to some kind of 'primal scene' of sexual intercourse in the mind.

This way of thinking does have advantages. It provides a single model which links together the patient's object relations and the structure of their thinking in one unified formulation. The value of this approach is amply demonstrated in a recent collection of papers on 'Oedipus and the couple', edited by Francis Grier (2005). I would particularly mention Morgan's concept of the 'creative couple' and Ruszczynski's concept of 'the marital triangle' both of which utilize this double focus of the *image* of a couple relationship to describe a form of psychic functioning in which it is possible to *reflect* on the couple relationship (Morgan 2005; Ruszczynski 2005).

However, it is something rather different to *derive* this kind of capacity from the concrete phantasy of a couple that is an innate *a priori* image in the unconscious mind. This results from a confusion between metaphorical interpretations of clinical material and the discovery of proven facts about the unconscious mind. This point was made by several of the contributors to the Controversial Discussions of the 1940s, most notably by Glover who argued that Klein's methodology tends to take her interpretations as evidence for the theories on which those interpretations are based (Hayman 1989). Thus, for example, Segal describes how in one of her early papers Klein 'noticed' that, to many

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children, the school building represents the mother's body (Klein 1923, quoted in Segal 1991, p. 33). But this is not a 'discovery' of a factual piece of evidence—it is a symbolic interpretation that enables Klein to link one domain of experience with another in a meaningful way. What Klein is doing here is recognizing the common pattern, the metaphorical congruence in two rather different kinds of 'containers'. This is a form of *meaning-making* that shows the transcendent function in action in an inspired and visionary way. The interpretation is itself the creation of a third element that transcends and transforms the meaning of the two domains it brings together.

This suggests that interpretations of unconscious phantasy depend on the use of the transcendent function in the analyst (Davidson 1966; Bovensiepen 2002). Using their own symbolic attitude, the analyst offers a form of meaning to the patient that enables them to take a 'third position' to their own proto-symbolic productions. In other words, the analyst's interpretative activity promotes the patient's imaginal capacity, enabling them to bring to bear a conscious attitude on the spontaneous fantasy productions emerging from the unconscious and find new meaning in them. In this way, the analytic process involves the development of co-constructed meanings, rather than the discovery of pre-existing psychic facts.

The difficulty of course is with those patients who either cannot or will not engage in such meaning-making activity. These are the patients whom Britton describes as lacking the third position. Describing the third position as 'the capacity for seeing ourselves in interaction with others and for entertaining another point of view whilst retaining our own', he says:

> *Anyone, however, who has treated a psychotic patient or has been involved in a psychotic transference will know what I mean when I refer to times when this seems impossible and it is at those times that one realizes what it means to lack that third position.*
>
> *(Britton 1989, p. 87)*

Britton famously describes such a patient who told him to 'stop that fucking thinking'. He understands this in metaphorical terms as the patient's hatred of the intercourse in his mind between himself and his psychoanalytic thoughts. However, in the view I have been describing, where unconscious phantasy is a symbolic construction, not an *a priori* bedrock, this would not be possible since, lacking the third position, the patient would be unable to construe their analyst's thinking in metaphorical terms of this kind. The *analyst* may understand it this way but this depends on *his* symbolic capacity to conceive of

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thinking in terms of the metaphor of symbolic conception—i.e., that 'thinking is fucking'. So my view would be that it was not merely because the patient could not accept such interpretations that Britton found it was better to keep them to himself but that they would not yet have any meaning for her: the symbolic capacities on which they depend had either not yet developed or had been temporarily destroyed. In such cases, I would not regard the Oedipus complex as invisible so much

as *inconceivable.* The patient does not have the imaginal capacity to form a conception of it.

Clinical example

I now want to give a clinical example of a patient who certainly taught me a lot about what it means to lack the third position but whose difficulties I have come to understand rather differently in terms of the inability to symbolize absence, difference, otherness and gaps of all kinds which together comprise the experience of negation or simply 'not-ness'—i.e., not present, not the same, not one etc (Colman 2006). When there is no third position, negation is felt to be intolerable because it is literally Unthinkable.

Some years ago I used to see a patient for twice weekly individual therapy at the Tavistock Centre, a large institutional building where I had a room on the third floor. Like many patients, this man objected to the strict time boundaries I kept and the fact that I always ended the session after exactly 50 minutes. He pointed out that since it took him two or three minutes to get from the reception to my room and I did not ask the receptionist to tell him to come up until exactly on the hour, he was in fact being deprived of two minutes every session. He was insistent on the literal aspect of this situation and strongly objected to my attempts to explore its meaning with him.

This situation rumbled on for several weeks until, one day, I had to cancel a session and was only able to give him one week's notice. He was yet more incensed by this, wanting to know how come he had to pay when he missed a session but I did not have to pay him when I missed a session. He also insisted that I should tell him the reason for my absence, according to the same logic—that he had to discuss the reasons for his absences with me, so why should I not discuss the reasons for my absences with him. It now became even more difficult to explore the meaning of the situation since, in a very confusing and

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bewildering way, I found that everything that he felt that I was doing to him was precisely what I felt that he was doing to me. For example, he would demand that I comply with his expectation that I should tell him the reason for my absence, yet complain that he was being forced to comply with my expectations and that I was forcing him into a position where he was helpless and trapped.

Initially, I tried to understand the difficulty in terms of his feeling dropped and excluded by my absence. I suggested that this reminded him of the times when his parents had gone off on holiday leaving him with an aunt he didn't like and that he was finding the combined impact of abandonment and exclusion intolerable. None of this was to any avail. In fact, the situation deteriorated so that *any* comment I made that was in any way different from what he had said was rejected and denied. My impression was that he could not tolerate any kind of difference at all—hence the belief that my behaviour was and/or should be a mirror-image to his own. The idea tha the might have fantasies about my absence struck him as somewhere between perplexing and preposterous—he could see

no possible reason why he should imagine anything about it at all—that was irrelevant and not the point. After a few weeks of this impasse, he announced that he was terminating the therapy forthwith: ‘Why should I stay here and be kicked in the teeth by you’, he said. And so he left, abandoning me as he had felt so abandoned.

Discussion

It might seem that this man's difficulties had to do with Oedipal exclusion—he could not bear me to be with anyone else in his time and felt bitterly excluded in such a way that he had to try and force himself into my mind, as if to break up the parental intercourse. However, it seemed to me that his incomprehension about why he might *imagine* anything about my absence indicated that there was no parental intercourse in his mind that might be broken up. For imagining requires a space to imagine in and what little space there was in his mind had completely closed down in the heat of his confrontation with me. So there was no ‘other room’ wherein I could be imagined to be doing anything at all—that was why he had to *know.* It was not what was going on in the other room which troubled him, it was that his exclusion created a gap between him and me that he could not bridge through

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imagination but had to close through action. The space between us, whether due to my absence or the ‘gap’ between his arrival in the building and reaching my room, constituted an unthinkable negation of himself that had to be closed by insisting on our mirror-image sameness. He wanted to get into my mind ('to know what I was doing’) as a way of obliterating the difference between us.

This was to be achieved by the use of omnipotent projective identification where there was no difference between what I was doing to him and what he was doing to me since both of us were one. This situation has been neatly described, in relation to couple interaction, as a ‘projective gridlock’ (Morgan 1995) where there is no room for two, never mind three. The problem seems to be a primary intolerance of separateness which then feeds in to the realities of the Oedipal situation and prevents the development of a third position.

The absence of a third was particularly apparent in the way the patient made me feel that either I had to comply with him or he would have to comply with me. This is strongly reminiscent of Winnicott's account of the mother who forces her gestures on the infant, thus preventing him from being able to develop representational models of his own experience through the negotiation of similarity and difference. Finding no room for his own ‘primary creativity’, he is left with feelings of invalidation and alienation that can ultimately lead to doubts about his own existence. My patient's reactions certainly indicated that he felt his survival was under threat, as if it was me or him—hence his final abrupt termination of the therapeutic relationship.

In these circumstances, the intersubjective dynamic is experienced not as a *coniunctio* but as a battle between competing subjectivities: there cannot be two

subjectivities operating together because that implies a relationship (*coniunctio*) and the capacity to represent a relationship as separate from what the patient feels *in* the relationship is missing—it is indeed the missing link. So both parties are likely to feel that the other is attempting to force their subjectivity on them and there is no possibility of a mediating third through which this impasse might be transcended. There is no reflective space, only an exact mirror-image. This meant that interpretations about my absence in terms of my patient feeling excluded by a couple could have no meaning since there was no metaphorical capacity to imagine one. This patient was not psychotic, but his capacity to use the transcendent function, to make links and discover meaning was very limited. When he felt threatened by experiences of absence and negation that he could not represent in his mind, what imaginal capacity he

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had shut down altogether, thus compounding the difficulty between us and eventually leading him to break off the therapy relationship altogether.

The idea here is that Oedipal difficulties are more the result than the cause of a failure to develop the idea of a third in the mind. In such patients, all forms of absence and difference remain an anathema because there is no means of representing them. Ultimately, they refer to an unthinkable catastrophe that must be defended against at all costs. The negation of the subject by frustration, exclusion, absence etc. Has itself to be negated because any kind of gap between the subject and the world is felt to be intolerable. The subject literally cannot conceive of such a thing—they have no means of representing it. This would suggest that attacks on linking are attacks on the experience of unthinkable negation *per se.* The absence of the primary object or the parents in intercourse would then be particular examples of this more fundamental anxiety.

Conclusion

Despite their differences, it is notable that for Jung, Winnicott and Britton, the idea of the third is closely related to the development of symbolic imagination. Furthermore, although Jung did not address the problem of patients who were unable to symbolize, subsequent generations of Jungian analysts have done so and have suggested that it is through the analyst's own symbolic attitude that the patient can eventually be helped to develop symbolic conceptions of their own inner experience, especially through the way this is reflected and enacted in the transference (Davidson 1966; Plaut 1966; Bovensiepen 2002; Colman 2006). This also suggests that the clinical phenomenon of patients who cannot form an idea of the third is similar despite the different theoretical models through which it is understood.

I have suggested that Jung's concepts of the transcendent function and the *coniunctio* form a sort of symbolic container for these different theoretical models. In so doing, it is not my intention to engage in a fruitless competition between different theories but to show how some Jungian concepts might be helpful in thinking about these differences and highlighting some common

features—especially those concerned with meaning-making and symbolic or imaginal capacity. In a sense, my methodology has itself utilized the transcendent function—the mapping and superimposition of two or more

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domains of knowledge in order to generate a third position that transcends them both.

I would also like to propose that some of the differences between psychoanalytic theories can be understood by regarding them as symbolic or mythological narratives that occupy the imaginal space they may also seek to describe. With this in mind, I would like to ask a playfully provocative question about the location of triangular space. It is obviously not a space in the external world; it would be a crass interpretation that would expect there to be an actual mother and father in a child's world for them to be able to develop a conception of triangular space. Yet it is not entirely internal either since when the child perceives the link between the parents and begins to operate in triangular space, this certainly concerns the way that they relate to and are able to represent actual external relationships in their mind—that surely is the point of the third position. So it would seem that triangular space might exist in a sort of intermediate space *between* the internal and external worlds. Could this possibly be that intermediate area that Winnicott called the potential space? Could it be the same space that he calls 'the place where we live', the place where we are when we are engaged in cultural and creative activity such as listening to a Beethoven symphony or playing with toys on the floor? (Winnicott 1971, p. 124). Of course, in some sense it must be the same space since this is the space of the imagination, even though there are so many different psychoanalytic versions of how the imagination comes into being.

This kind of overlapping multiplicity of differing versions is also a common feature of mythological narratives. There are, for example, so many medieval accounts of the legend of the Grail that it would take a scholar more than a lifetime merely to read them all. Mythological narratives use symbolic imagery to describe some kind of imaginal reality that is not communicable in any other way; yet because none of the symbols employed suffices to express the whole (Jung 1955, para. 470), these narratives inevitably proliferate.

It seems to me that this is also what happens in psychoanalysis in its efforts to find a language for the communication and comprehension of the internal world of psychic reality. Since the reality we seek to describe necessarily transcends the symbolism with which we seek to describe it, it is not surprising that psychoanalytic narratives proliferate, in the same way as mythology or alchemy. This would only render psychoanalytic narratives invalid if we were to restrict the criteria of truth to those of scientific materialism. Of course, what we ask of our psychoanalytic narratives is that they should adhere to the criteria of *psychic truth*: they are a means of apprehending psychological realities in symbolic, imaginal form. This is surely the only way in which the

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internal world *can* be apprehended for, as Hannah Segal says, ‘communication with the unconscious phantasies … can only be done with the help of symbols’ (Segal 1957, p. 58; quoted in Segal 1991, p. 42).

However, just as there may be many different versions of a myth, there may be many different versions of the psychic truth offered by psychoanalysis and, of course, we know that psychoanalysis amply fulfils this criterion. The implication, then, is that there is not and cannot be *one* truth in psychoanalysis because what psychoanalysis offers is *symbolic truth* or, rather, truth in symbolic form. In the case of the symbolic conception of the idea of a third, whether *coniunctio* or primal scene, I have suggested that what is being represented symbolically is the symbolic capacity itself. In short, the idea of the third is a symbolic conception of the meaning-making functions of the human mind.

Translations of Abstract

L'idee du tiers exprimee dans les concepts jungiens de fonction transcendante et de *coniunctio* est egalement presente dans plusieurs theories psychanalytiques traitant de l'émergence d'une pensee reflexive et symbolique chez l'enfant (ici definie comme le developpement de sa «capacite imaginalé». A partir du constat que ce processus apparaît souvent sous la forme metaphorique de l'acte sexuel menant à la «conception», cet article propose une comprehension de ces images en termes de conceptions symboliques des fonctions semiotiques de l'esprit humain. Ceci nous amèene à envisager differemment les theories psychanalytiques qui tentent de rendre compte du developpement de la capacite imaginale en termes de complexe d’œdipe. J'avance, d'une part, l'idee que ces fonctions doivent être opérationnelles dans le psychisme pour que la situation oedipienne puisse prendre tout son sens et, d'autre part, que les théories psychanalytiques sont elles-mêmes des conceptions symboliques qui, tout comme les récits mythologiques, visent communiquer et à apprehender la realite psychique a travers des formes imaginales.

Die Idee des Dritten, die in Jungs Konzepten der transzendenten Funktion und der *coniunctio* entwickelt wird, gibt es auch in einigen psychoanalytischen Theorien, die sich mit der Entstehung des reflektiven und symbolischen Denkens in der Entwicklung des Kindes befassen (hier definiert als die Entwicklung der, imaginalen Kapazität’). Es wird beschrieben, wie der Weg dieses Prozesses oft in Form der Metapher vom Geschlechtsverkehr verstanden

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wird, der zur, Konzeption' (Empfängnis) führt. In dieser Arbeit wird die Ansicht vertreten, dass solche Vorstellungen als symbolische Konzeptionen der sinnstiftenden Funktionen des menschlichen Bewusstseins verstanden werden müssen. Dies führt zu einer anderen Sicht auf psychoanalytische Theorien, die versuchen, die Entwicklung der imaginalen Kapazität mithilfe des Ödipuskomplexes zu begründen. Es wird vorgeschlagen, dass a) diese Funktionen im Bewusstsein bereits wirksam sein müssen, bevor die ödipale Situation bedeutsam werden kann, und dass b) psychoanalytische Theorien an sich symbolische Konzeptionen sind, die, wie mythologische Narrative, versuchen, die psychische Realität durch imaginale Formen zu vermitteln und verstehen.

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L'idea del terzo che compare nei concetti junghiani di funzione trascendente e di *coniunctio* compare anche in molte teorie psicoanalitiche che riguardano l'emergere del pensiero simbolico e riflessivo nello sviluppo del bambino (definito qui come lo sviluppo delle 'capacità immaginali'). Considerando il modo in cui tale processo viene spesso concepito in termini di rapporti sessuali che conducono al 'concepimento', questo scritto propone che tali immagini debbano essere considerate come concezioni simboliche delle funzioni creatrici di significato della mente umana. Ciòporta a una diversa visione delle teorie psicoanalitiche che tentano di spiegare lo sviluppo della capacità immaginale in termini di complesso Edipico. Si ipotizza che a) tali funzioni siano operative nella mente prima che la situazione Edipica possa divenire significativa e che b) le teorie psicoanalitiche siano esse stesse concezioni simboliche che, quanto le narrazioni mitologiche, cercano di comunicare e comprendere la realtà tapsichica attraverso forme immaginali.

La idea del tercero que surge del concepto de Jung sobre la Función trascendente y la *coniunctio* tambien aparece en varias teorías psicoanalíticas concernientes con la emergencia de los pensamientos simbólico y reflexivo en el desarrollo infantil (el cual es definido aqü cómo el desarrollo de 'la capacidad imaginal'). Apreciando la manera cómo frecuentemente es concebido términos de la metáfora del acto sexual que conduce a la 'concepción', este trabajo sugiere que tales imagenes deben ser entendidas como concepciones simbólicas de la función de dar-sentido de la mente humana. Ello conduce a una visión diferente de las teorías psicoanalíticas que tratan de explicar el desarrollo de la capacidad imaginal sólo en términos del Complejo de Edipo. Se sugiere que a) estas funciones deben estar operativas en la mente antes de que la situación Edípica pueda ser significativa y b) que las teorías psicoanalíticas son en sí mismas concepciones simbólicas, que, cómo las narrativas

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mitológicas, buscan comunicar y comprender la realidad psíquica a través de formas imaginales.

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