



AUTISTIC TRANSFORMATIONS

Bion's Theory and
Autistic Phenomena

CELIA FIX KORBIVCHER

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Célia Fix Korbivcher

First published in Portuguese in 2010 by Imago Editora

First English edition published in 2014 by
Karnac Books Ltd

Published 2018 by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A C.I.P. for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 9781780491752 (pbk)

Edited, designed and produced by The Studio Publishing Services Ltd
www.publishingservicesuk.co.uk
e-mail: studio@publishingservicesuk.co.uk

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank Karnac Books for publishing the English edition of this book. Milena Basaria translated the book into English. I owe her recognition for her excellent work and for complying with Karnac's instructions, thus making this edition possible.

I thank John Wiley & Sons Ltd for kindly granting permission to reproduce the paper "Bion and Tustin: The autistic phenomena and Bion's referential", written by me and published in August 2013 in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 94(4): 645–665. I am also grateful to Routledge for permission to reproduce the above-named paper, also published as a chapter in the book *Primitive Mental States. A Psychoanalytic Exploration of the Origins of Meaning* (edited by Jane Van Buren and Shelley Alhanati, 2010).

I thank my colleagues and friends: Antonio Carlos Eva, Cecil José Rezze, Darcy Portolese, Evelise de Souza Marra, Fernando Giuffrida, Ione Vitorelo Castelo, Julio Frochtengarten, and Roberto Vilardo, with whom I have established a rich dialogue in recent years. This dialogue contributed to the development of many of the thoughts gathered in this book.

I also thank João Carlos Braga, always a generous and available presence, on whom I was able to count as a major interlocutor—indeed, a questioning interlocutor. With him, I learnt to become more demanding and to sharpen my arguments. Without his collaboration, this would be a different book.

I owe my gratitude to Cecil Jose Rezze for having greatly contributed to my personal development. I am mainly grateful for the encouragement he gave me to question, to investigate, and to think for myself.

I am particularly grateful to James Grotstein for his generous contribution and detailed comments on some chapters of this book. His interest in the proposals I have developed, along with his respect and encouragement, were a great incentive to deepen my ideas and to publish the book.

Finally, I thank Mônica, Michel, Camila, Luciano, Theo, Bruno, and Ruy for their patience. I particularly thank Ruy, my lifetime companion, always present, supporting and encouraging me. Without him, none of this would have been possible.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Célia Fix Korbivcher is a training and supervising analyst, child analyst, and a member of the Brazilian Psychoanalytic Society of São Paulo. For several years, Dr Korbivcher has been working in private practice, analysing children, adolescents, and adults. She has focused on the study of autistic phenomena in neurotic patients and has written several articles on this subject. Her papers have been published in both Brazilian and international journals, including the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*. She authored the original Portuguese edition of this book, published in 2010 by Imago Editora. Dr Korbivcher was awarded the Fabio Leite Lobo Prize in the years 2001 and 2008. She received The First International Parthenope Thalamo Bion Prize in 2004, and the Ninth Frances Tustin Memorial Prize in 2005.



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FOREWORD

Giuseppe Civitarese

"But how come you know these songs?" Marieta asks her analyst. That immediately reminded me of the similar surprised response of a patient of mine: "You mean you also watch these trashy pulp films!?" This is, first and foremost, a book about the importance of speaking the same language as one's patients. Each is different from any other; each has his or her own history, guards his or her secrets and carries the burden of his or her troubles. We see these patients passing in succession as we read. We meet Ana, silent, motionless, and constantly chewing gum. Next comes Marieta, just mentioned, whom we encounter first at the age of six, and then at nine. Marieta initially presents with "wild Joá" (violent emotions), then calms down and is able to ask for what she needs: "Abracadabra, be sweet, sweet, sweet, very sweet!" The magic works. She, too, is asking to be fed: for a sweet can mean either a candy or behaving sweetly. Five-year-old Mário, on the other hand, is more demanding and yells at the analyst, "I WANT FOOD NOW! GIMME, GIMME, GIMME NOW!" Then there is Pedro, six years old, who is afraid of dreams and has night terrors, so he can neither get to sleep nor be awake.

It is odd, but that is the way it is. Night dreams and daydreams are the mind's way of going about the task of transforming emotions

into thought. Just as there are daydreams, so, too, there is daytime sleep, which we call the waking state, and, just as they do at night, the two go together. When dreaming is possible, in the sense of successfully conferring a personal meaning on experience, waking “sleep” is the seeming facility with which we move between persons, our naïve realism, and the smooth surface over which everything appears to glide.

Next in line is six-year-old Luís, who comes alive only when his father licks his face. He is followed by Caio, aged four, who communicates only with the names of television characters—“sounds in search of a mind”. However, other fantasy characters, too, bring to life the vivid and moving stories that allow us to participate intimately in the joys and pains that Célia Fix and her guests share, sometimes for years on end: the whale, the platypus, France or Brazil as places in the mind or in the analytic field, or songs such as “Chega de Saudade”.

The names of all the patients, whether big or small, remain impressed on our memory. It is they who are in the foreground. Célia Fix knows how to summon them up in the way that only the best writers can, by the masterly use of just a few details. Through the manner of her presentation, she enables us to see them as living persons. No distance between them and the reader is noticed. That is no doubt why, every time I picked up the book, I was pleased to discover myself so thrilled by the stories that I could hardly put it down.

Another reason might be that, as in the most felicitous examples of psychoanalytic writing, Célia Fix does not care to weigh down her text with jargon. She takes with her only the basic essentials, like someone venturing into the desert or the high mountains. That is when certain tools become important. Célia Fix has obtained some of these from the preferred authors whom she mentions, such as Tustin, Bion, and Green; other tools, as we shall see, she has constructed for herself, as Bion recommends all analysts to do.

Yet, even if the conceptual apparatus remains in the background, due respect is accorded to it. Célia Fix’s ambition is to put forward a new development of the paradigm that has gained increasing acceptance in psychoanalysis since autism first came to be studied. From Bleuler to Kanner, to Meltzer and Tustin, we can now trace the precise line of its evolution. The past few years have witnessed a flowering of literature that has taken up and expanded Frances Tustin’s insights on autistic barriers in neurotic patients. Since the publication of her fasci-

nating books, we have become accustomed to the idea that the concepts bound up with the paradigm of autism describe forms of psychic functioning that are present in us all, and fortunately so, we might say, because they are, after all, defences that can preserve us from the traumas of life and become pathological only if they persist for too long or ultimately come to dominate all the other resources that might be available to us. This is in line with a consistent trend applicable to the principal concepts of psychoanalysis, which come into being to illustrate an aspect of pathology and then prove equally useful for throwing light on normal modes of mental functioning. These lie on a continuum that extends from the normal to the pathological and differ not qualitatively, but only quantitatively.

The paradigm of autism enables the analyst to confront previously intolerable situations of chaos. In addition, it belongs within the wide-ranging theoretical sphere of sensory phenomena that precedes and paves the way for thought—that is, the “protomental”. Winnicott would say that a subject (an ego) must first come into being and can only then experience the conflicts that stem from the drives. Kristeva calls this dimension the semiotic *chora*. Something very useful for clinical work that we have learnt is that words, too, are action and that the sensory floor of the ego that precedes symbolic functioning accompanies us throughout our lives. It is no coincidence that another of the most fruitful developments of Tustin’s research, in my opinion, is Thomas Ogden’s concept of the autistic-contiguous position, which is, incidentally, so close to Bleger’s notion of the *glischro-caric* position. This entire area of study is of extraordinary interest and comes together in the conceptualisation of the inaccessible or “non-repressed” unconscious, one of the frontiers of research in psychoanalysis. The issue is how to transform states of mind that do not correspond to representations—traumas presumably recorded only in implicit memory—into something representable.

What is the main advantage of the paradigm of autism? We have developed an attitude of the kind Meltzer calls “peripheral vision”, like that possessed by autistic children and which we all have in a literal sense in the retina around the fovea. It is a hypersensitivity that allows us to apprehend phenomena that previously went unnoticed or were deemed insignificant, but which now prove essential in some forms of psychic suffering, when separation is experienced like a wound to the body. In order to perceive the stars at night, we must

avoid the light pollution of big cities; in other words, we must give up certain notions that do not help us to see and adopt new ones instead.

Célia Fix now contributes authoritatively to the expansion of this theoretical field. As stated, she does so not only by gathering together the heritage of the masters, but also by forging instruments of her own which she puts at our disposal in this book. Chief among these is “autistic transformation”.

The concept of autistic transformation is a valuable addition to Bion's series of psychic transformations. Unlike rigid-motion transformations (as produced by the classical transference), projective transformations (responsible for the phenomena of splitting and projective identification) and transformations in hallucinosis, autistic transformations organise a set of phenomena, some of which are very obvious, while others that are highly subtle have been observed in pathological autism, but might also be encountered in neurotic patients with autistic or encapsulated nuclei. In an analytic session, these patients defend against awareness of their separateness from the analyst by resorting mainly to the distorted use of sensations. They envelop themselves in autosensual activities so as to divert their perception away from something that might plunge them into terror. Just as Dante's Beatrice refuses to smile at the beginning of Canto XXI of *Il Paradiso* in order not to incinerate him with fascination for her (the fate that befell Semele), so, for these persons, the object has a Medusa-like quality against which they must defend at all costs. Analysts might experience these moments, which sometimes appear interminable (it is characteristic of these situations that the arrow of time seemingly comes to a halt), by succumbing themselves to autistic transformations. They get bored and distracted, decathect the patient and use theory as a source of what itself ultimately amounts to autosensual stimulation and not in order genuinely to think—that is, they are not in living contact with the emotional situation of the moment, but are isolated in an unreal and closed-off world.

The concept of autistic transformation combines a number of hitherto scattered theoretical components into a conceptual framework that helps us to recover a sense of vitality when faced with these despairing situations, and, as we can see, to recognise the signs of autistic transformations in ourselves, too, and not just in the patient. If the analyst succeeds above all in escaping from this spell, the result is an anti-autistic transformation that might help the patient to regain