AUTISTIC TRANSFORMATIONS
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Bion’s Theory and Autistic Phenomena

Célia Fix Korbivcher

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Autistic transformations: a proposal
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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.
“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
a modicum of trust and vitality. The challenge to us as analysts is, therefore, to make good use of the—sometimes physically—intolerable emotions of emptiness and desperation that we shall inevitably experience sooner or later in these difficult situations. Whenever we succeed in this, we get closer to the patient and exorcise the fear of contact underlying that of separation, which is experienced as a physical laceration.

This conceptualisation is all the more important when these phenomena are vaguer and more difficult to identify, as in persons who, despite the flatness of their affective lives, retain sufficient “operational” capacity to cope with the demands of everyday life. It is precisely in these situations that one’s vision must become keener and one’s reasoning more perspicacious. Obsessional defences, hallucinatory sensations, and psychic integuments mediated by symptomatic or seemingly well-adapted behaviour may be used in different ways by different patients to withdraw into a kind of autistic shell. To reach these patients, analysts must possess conceptual equipment allowing them to cross the desert of non-thought and of protomental or inaccessible states of the mind. An essential requirement is receptivity to the slightest changes in climate, whether in time or in space and however imperceptible, and to the reveries that visit us if we succeed in achieving the correct state of passivity, without memory or desire, as recommended by Bion.

The crucial theoretical step taken by Célia Fix with the concept of autistic transformation, in my opinion, concerns the reincorporation of all these phenomena and concepts, which feed on each other, within a never-ending circularity, in the sense that in order to see we need theories, and that the phenomena we observe then modify those theories. She fits everything into a radically intersubjective framework of the birth of the mind, in accordance with Bion’s view, as implied by the notion of transformation. This step is both crucial and fruitful because it changes our understanding of clinical work and, precisely, induces us to apply new instruments. In other words, the author grafts these on to the fertile plant of Bion’s thought and of the developments in psychoanalysis since Bion. This leads naturally to the use of different models and techniques in our daily work. Another of the book’s unparalleled merits, which Célia Fix shares with very few other authors, is that she enables us to see how Bion can inspire our clinical work.
As stated earlier, however, the main focus of the volume is never on theoretical concepts, which rightly remain in the background. This, for me, is the best possible demonstration an author can give of how he or she works. She does not run away from us: we know nothing about a non-writer, but if someone writes, we get to know everything, whether good or bad. A writer’s style always tells us something about the person and the analyst alike. As in analysis, lying is impossible. It is the unconscious at work. Just as Marieta, Pedro, and Ana come to life as characters in the round, so we can be sure that Célia Fix succeeds in instilling new life into them when she welcomes them into her home. We can, likewise, be sure that she sees them against the background of psychoanalytic theories and not the other way round. That is why she is not afraid of not understanding, of getting exasperated, of hating, and of feeling bored. Rather than hastening to consult the sacred texts, she lets them work with discretion. In this way, she feeds her patients; she gives them food for the mind, as Bion puts it.

Again, Célia Fix gives us a valuable indication of her conception of analytic work through a fine quotation from Viderman. Analysis, like dreams and art, does not reproduce the past or the visible, but itself “renders visible”, causes things to come into being before our eyes, creates a world that was not there before, and confers meaning on life. Everything, therefore, centres on the experience of analysis with the patient in the here and now of the encounter, as witness the serious jocularity and humour of which the author shows herself to be capable, less emphasis being placed on reconstruction of the past (the great advantage of working with children would merit a chapter in its own right).

Moreover, conceptual and affective genealogies are here recombined. A token of the climate of humanity, intimate participation, and gentle wisdom that pervades the entire book comes in the first chapter, when the author describes her felicitous meeting with Frances Tustin. The celebrated analyst respects and encourages the pupil as she takes her first steps; there could surely be no better illustration—precisely because it is offered indirectly by way of a personal memory—of the forging of the bond that creates the mind (the spark of every new idea) and lies at the root of creativity in psychoanalysis.
Many theoretical publications in psychoanalysis contain personal elaborations of original ideas belonging to the foundation of psychoanalytic knowledge. A few of them contain the spark of a new idea, an idea that will necessitate reviewing the field of study, furthering and expanding it. The concept of autistic transformation is one of these ideas. The present book outlines the history of the development of this idea. Initially, we recognise the new idea; we then identify its origins. It is a marriage of W. R. Bion’s theory of transformations with the theorisation on autism developed by Frances Tustin. Finally, the author’s careful elaboration leads us to review the theory of transformations through which we gain a better perception of the presence of autistic manifestations in personalities that attain adequate levels of symbolic development.

The first three chapters come from papers written between 1992 and 2005. They provide a view of the clinical problems that stimulated Korbivcher’s investigation. The next three detail the autistic transformation hypothesis, its clinical and theoretical elaboration. The book ends with an examination of the consequences of the author’s approach, but at a higher level of abstraction. This sequence elucidates the author’s view.
Based on her clinical experience with children and adults who presented primitive forms of mental functioning, the author examines these phenomena from the viewpoint of the theory of transformations, creating an original approach to the autistic phenomenon. The inclusion of autistic transformations, conversely, widens the psychoanalytic theory. Korbivcher’s observations, and the hypothesis she uses to organise them, broadens our notions of the mind beyond the realm of the senses, beyond objective thoughts, beyond hallucinations, beyond authenticity, and beyond future thoughts. It also broadens Tustin’s perspective of the existence of an autistic part of the personality, besides the neurotic and psychotic parts.

Quite a few problems and difficulties arise from the concept of autistic transformations. The author puts us in contact with several of them and proposes ways to approach them, both theoretically and clinically. As with any new idea, these are steps in the dark, and the data raised lead to doubts. However, what Korbivcher proposes will have an impact on our future discussions of ideas we tend to treat as already settled.

The importance of Célia Fix Korbivcher’s contribution can be evaluated by the awards her work has received from the psychoanalytic community, both in Brazil and abroad: The Fabio Leite Lobo Prize, from the Brazilian Association of Psychoanalysis in 2002, the 2004 Parthenope Bion Talamo Prize from the Italian Society of Psychoanalysis, and the 2005 Frances Tustin Memorial Prize.

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Introduction

This book is a collection of six papers in which I present ideas concerning the clinical aspects of primordial states of the mind, more specifically, autistic and non-integrated states present in neurotic patients. In such states, bodily sensations prevail in place of fantasies and emotions.

I believe that it would be useful at this moment to describe the path I followed until I decided to publish this collection of papers about this topic.

My entire training was strongly influenced by the ideas of Bion. Moreover, my contact with the contributions of Frances Tustin was extremely significant.

In 1990, I had the privilege of meeting Tustin in person. This opportunity arose purely by chance. A colleague, in supervision with Tustin, mentioned a paper I was working on, in which I presented the report of an analysis of a six-year-old girl who, during a session, asked me whether I knew “a strange animal called platypus”. She defined it as “a very strange animal which spills milk through its pores”. She then added, “Pores are holes.”

At that time, Tustin had published her book, The Protective Shell in Children and Adults. On the cover of the book, there is a photograph of