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The puppet as a border in autism: animating to engage the voice

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Introduction to the concept of autism / PDD.

What defence? What structure?

Autism is defined today by the criteria of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD), and those of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). In each case, it is associated with Pervasive Developmental Disorders (PDD).

In contemporary terms, autism has thus shifted from the category of mental illness to that of handicap and invasive developmental disorders, thus losing the particular characteristics that Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger had attributed to it. The Asperger syndrome is thus now considered as belonging to PDD in DSM 5.

From a structural point of view, and hence in psychoanalytic terms, the debate is quite different. Some authors propose that autism be conceived as a transclinical syndrome or as a particular form of subjectivation; as a clinical variety related to a psychotic structure alongside schizophrenia, paranoia and melancholy; or yet again as a somewhat primitive form of schizophrenia. Finally, yet another hypothesis considers that autism is a structure apart from all the others. This is the position of Jean-Claude Maleval, notably presented in his book *The autist and his voice* (Le Seuil, 2010).

According to Maleval, a decisive step in understanding autism comes through taking into account the specificity of the autist's emotional life and *jouissance*. This leads to formulating the hypothesis that what is involved is a specific form of psychic defence: the immutability and characteristic stereotypes can thus be understood as lines of defence against existential anguish, as attempts to set up one's own rules in a chaotic and disturbing world. Amongst these defence mechanisms, one must also add the use of particular objects. Frances

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Useful links for the CIM, the DSM and the TED :

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_Statistical_Classification_of_Diseases_and_Related_Health_Problems

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diagnostic_and_Statistical_Manual_of_Mental_Disorders

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pervasive_developmental_disorder

Tustin has given them the label ‘autistic objects’, but more recent research has refined their description and extended their definition. Thus, Maleval defines several types of objects according to the degree of elaboration of the defence mechanisms put in place by the autistic subject: the raw object, the regulatory object, the double, the synthetic Other. All these objects belong to a structure called “border” structures, because for the autistic each of them, in its own way, constitutes a sort of line of defence, a reassuring protection on which the autistic can lean to gain support faced with a world which has no limits or is felt as disturbingly bizarre.

We may add immediately here that the existential anguish faced by an autistic subject has a special relation with an object that is heavily laden with psychic drive, the voice. The relation to language in autism bears witness to this: the autistic does not find vocal *jouissance* in speech. This is why any method of communication based on fixed signs, on a precise code, makes it possible to achieve contact; but this functions just to the extent that it is possible to avoid enunciation, i.e. any particular way of conveying the language. And just as the autistic does not find it easy to engage his own voice, he also defends himself against any voice coming from the Other, from another person who thereby gives an indication of desire. Any form of educational forcing which employs some sort of verbal command is thus counter-productive, since it goes against the basic positioning of these subjects; and this is all the more so if one does not pose the question of obtaining the free adhesion of the subjects to the process.

Autism and puppets.

Several remarks and some examples

Before examining the advantages and limits of puppets as “border objects” in autism, it is interesting to note that while the links between autism and puppets are quite numerous, they are of different types. I will mention three of them.

Firstly, we may note that it is not rare to find references to puppets in play-therapies or tests used with autistic children. This is the case, for example, with the “3 I” method (individual, intensive, interactive), where games with puppets are used to develop – or rather, to stimulate – the awakening and the communication of the very young autistic child, or yet again in the course of certain ortho-phonic re-education schemes for learning basic emotions such as crying, laughing, or being angry... Behavioural methods, also, recommend in their programmes playing with puppets; the advice that is given to parents who propose to use this method is to give positive reinforcement to

any response that an autistic child may give to a question that is asked by a puppet held by the adult to the puppet that the child is holding. When the child succeeds, the game of role-playing with the puppets is said to be “mastered”. This supposes that the child has acquired the skill of “pretending” or “make-believe” by integrating a symbolic game; in other words, that the child has acquired a “theory of mind”. This interpretation is seriously open to question, for nothing is more difficult for an autistic child than to play with pretence or anything equivocal, or yet again to perceive the emotions of another person. Nevertheless something of this sort does seem to be happening; we will attempt to identify what it is, and what are the limits.

The second sort of link that we can indicate goes by the name *the puppet paradigm*. This is precisely the term coined by developmental or cognitive psychologists in their demonstration of a deficiency of the “theory of mind” in the case of autism.

It was in 1985, in an article by Baron-Cohen, Leslie & Frith, that the thesis was first formulated according to which autistic subjects were incapable of forming a theory of mind (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, Frith, 1985). This thesis has been criticized, but continues to serve as a reference in the cognitivist approach to autism. To sum up, this thesis attempts to account for a form of mental blindness (Baron-Cohen, 1998), and more precisely for the difficulty encountered by autistic children in attributing to another person beliefs and intentions different from their own, and to « read » other persons’ thoughts and mental states. In the same vein, it is supposed that an autistic child cannot have access to “make-believe”, because the innate neuronal mechanisms are deficient. Now the demonstration of such a deficiency was made by taking up and adjusting an experiment by the developmental psychologists Heinz Wimmer and Josef Perner with normal children, for whom a theory of mind was well and truly present (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). In the article of 1985 quoted above, Baron-Cohen, Leslie and Frith explain how they actually used what they called the *puppet play paradigm* of Wimmer and Perner to achieve their goal (Baron-Cohen, Leslie, Frith, p. 37). This experiment is now known as the “Sally-Ann experiment”. A child is presented with a scene involving two “puppets”. One of them, Sally, has a basket; she puts a ball in the basket and goes away. Then Ann, who was present beside Sally, takes the ball and puts it in a different box. Sally comes back and wants to play with her ball. The question is then posed to each of the children who are subjects in the experiment: “Where will Sally go and look for her ball?” What this experiment shows, according to the authors, is that the majority of non-autistic children (a control group composed of normal children but also some trisomic children) give the correct response, because even if they themselves

have seen Ann's action, they are able to deduce that Sally will keep her initial "belief" and look in the basket; whereas the autistic children, with a few exceptions, give a mistaken answer (Sally will look in the box) – i.e., according to Frith, they were "not able to understand Sally's belief" (Frith, 2010, p. 132). According to Frith, there is a logical problem that the autistic children cannot solve – let us recall that this is supposedly due to a brain deficiency. However we may note that even though this experiment makes explicit reference to puppets, the authors – Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and especially the psychologist Uta Frith who in subsequent writings on the "Sally-Ann" experiment shows that she is sensitive to the world of puppets – these authors, then, do not seem to take into account the feature that their experimental setup was based on puppets. At no moment, then, do they seriously take into account the fact that the action of the *puppeteer*, who held Ann in his hand as she put the ball in the box, could have oriented the perception of the children, whether they were autistic or not! We may nevertheless consider that for the control group of normal children, their response was correct (Sally, on her return, will look for her ball in the basket where it was when she left), even though they saw the action of Ann putting the ball in the box, but they considered that element as irrelevant because it was not *seen* by Sally. On the other hand, the autistic children who replied that Sally would look for the ball, not in the basket but in the box, doubtless gave that response by basing themselves *only* on what they themselves had seen. It is thus rather curious that in attempting to verify a hypothesis based on the postulate of an understanding of the thoughts and intentions of other persons through visual perceptions – an understanding which is supposedly deficient because of "mental blindness" in autism – the authors have on one hand made an association with puppets but, on the other hand, failed to draw all the consequences of this feature.

The third example of a link between puppets and autism is given by the testimony of the Australian Donna Williams, a high-level autistic person (1993, 1996). Williams describes the creation of imaginary companions, Willie and Carol, who accompanied her for a long time. J.C. Maleval sees this as a perfect example of a complex object serving to regulate the autist's defence against existential anguish. Maleval emphasizes that Willie and Carol also had the function of making it possible to invest in the outside world and to develop an animation of the libido (Maleval, 2009, p. 182). However, in spite of the positive aspects that they procured for her, Donna Williams indicates that she let go of these two companions, not by an abrupt rejection on her part, but rather by a slow abandonment, leading to their disintegration and even their death (Williams, 1996, p. 119). In fact,

as she wrote, she sought to emancipate herself from them for questions of « survival », because she felt an alienation in her total dependence on them (Williams, 1996, p. 29), even though she recognizes that she had been able to gain some advantages from them. Incidentally it is in this sense that one can speak of them as “doubles”: Willie and Carol substituted for her own personality each time she had to negotiate with the outside world and hold a position. Willie, in particular, played the role of an effective double, being sure of himself, brilliant, sometimes leaving Donna Williams with the impression that she was inferior to him. This is why, when she wrote to Theo Mark, her psychotherapist, that Willie and Carol “are like the memories of puppets who had their own existence whereas now there is only me” (Williams, 1996, p. 119), we can hypothesize that there is a new capacity for taking a distance in her words, because talking of her companions as having been like puppets, distinct from the person who animated them, is to give them a different place than that of doubles of substitution. Now two elements reported by Donna Williams go in the direction of a progressive access to a distancing, to playing with puppets, and also towards a disengagement, also progressive but not yet complete, from the universe of a double of substitution. These two elements are situated before the stated realization that she communicated to Theo Mark and that we have quoted, that of having lost Willie and Carol. The first element is the role held in parallel with Willie and Carol by two soft toys, one a dog and the other a bear, that she called “Travelling dog” and “Beary-bear” respectively. Certainly, just like Willie and Carol, they served for her as a passage between herself and others; but with the difference that she spoke to them or shouted at them, and that what she expected from them was just that they should be present, thus symbolizing “the outside”. The second element resides in the supplementary step made in the direction of a symbolic distancing. Donna Williams did indeed make a hand-puppet, a “cat-puppet”, called Moggin. This Moggin, at the end of her hand, can be touched by other people and allows itself to touch others and herself. But Donna Williams does not *really* consider that it is she herself who animates Moggin, like a puppeteer. Soon, however, she accepts to be touched.

This remarkable development is also linked with a new report to the self-image in the mirror (this image had become familiar) and, particularly, with a more integrated relationship with his hands (which are the organ of touch and also the basis of any relation to an object as a puppet). However, Donna Williams does not fully attain access to the stage of the mirror, and only partially accomplishes a separation from her double (Maleval, 2010, p. 292), which corroborates the

fact that the route towards the puppet also remains incomplete.

Thus, beyond the role of mediation and formation of the lived body that can be provided by the construction of doubles as complex as those of Donna Williams, we learn from her account that the support they represent also has its limits, to the extent that the need for psychological autonomy and authenticity remains. The attempt to free oneself from one's doubles thus seems to be a necessary step in the evolution and complexification of autism.

Is the puppet a double?

We now have to ask ourselves a question: is the puppet a double? This is an important question, since it conditions the way we can measure its effects, in particular in a psychotherapeutic context. We may recall here that a certain tradition of puppetry in psychotherapy has conferred a pivotal role to this notion of a double. One can find the starting-point of this tradition in certain texts dating from the end of the sixties and the early seventies. I will quote the best known, one of the first works on puppets in psychotherapy, published in 1974, *Puppets and marottes. A method of projective group ergotherapy*. The authors back up their practice and interpret their observations and results on the basis of a theoretical postulate that they formulate in these terms: "It is evident, they write, that a *marotte* represents the person who invented it. But it represents him in a very special way, it is effectively his double" (p. 168). This notion of a double, here, is a reference to the study of Otto Rank (1973) and to that of Sigmund Freud when he addresses the question of *disturbing strangeness (Unheimlich)* (1985), where the authors emphasize that it contains two dimensions: a projective dimension and a dimension of existential anguish. Concerning the latter point, we may recall that Freud mentions a particular sort of anguish provoked by a double, which had been noted by another author from whom Freud borrowed the expression of "disturbing strangeness", the psychiatrist Ernst Jentch: this is the anguish provoked by the sight of mannequins in a shop-window and the disquiet created by the impression that they are animated (Le Maléfan, 1998). Lacan, re-reading Freud's contribution to the concept of the *Unheimlich*, thus indicates: "What is more *Unheimlich* than seeing (a statue) become animated, that is to say (...) able to show itself as having desire!" (*Anguish*, lesson of June 5th 1963). The point is that for Lacan, the double is first of all the ideal form in which the subject is alienated at the time of stage of the mirror and the formation of the self. This imago of the double, as he calls it in his early writings, is a "narcissistic world", which does not contain others, already indexed to death, resulting in

imaginary rivalry and imprinting in the self the indelible mark of superiority in appearance, despotism or seduction, what Lacan calls “the ambiguous structure of the spectacle” at the origin of the self (2004, p. 43). But the image of the double is also, for Lacan, the source of a “radical strangeness” (*Anguish*, lesson of December 5th 1962), in that it has the power, when any subject is confronted with it, to suddenly make it appear as an object exiled from its own subjectivity, fixed and automated under the regard of an Other with an enigmatic desire, giving rise to an anguished question “What does he want of me?” Happily, Lacan remarks, this sort of anguish “does not happen every day, and maybe it only happens in fairy tales: usually it stays at the stage of a fantasy”. In reality, he further remarks, it is only “fugitive”. This is an important point: why does it remain fugitive? Why can one have the *fugitive* feeling that a mannequin is animated or that a puppet is really a *being*? Let us simply say that a barrier is reinstalled, the barrier that had provisionally given way, and that the effects of castration fall back into place... The magic of the symbolic...

These indications show that the reference to the puppet as a double is not without problems, because the relation of a subject to his puppet seems to be conceived in a framework which belongs essentially to the realm of Imagination. This is why I put forward the following proposition: the puppet is not a double, but it nevertheless has certain effects of a double. To explain this proposition, I emphasize that the puppet can be apprehended according to the three registers identified by Lacan, the ternary RSI (Real – Symbolic – Imaginary). Thus, the effects of the double are situated on the side of the Imaginary: specular effects, mimicry and identification, sticking close to the creation: *I am this other and this other is me*. And on the side of the Real: effects of presence, disturbing strangeness or terror: there is desire in this *other* that is *directed towards me*.

However, what characterizes the puppet is the fact that the dimension of the “double” is limited and countered by the dimension of the Symbolic, which makes it possible to have access to the register of pretending and to maintain a symbolic distance: the puppet is only an artifact that I can play with without risking a loss of my own identity. Distanciation, or distance, is thus at the foundation of every puppet; this means that it is not a stand-in copy, a sameness, but always contains a discrepancy, a radical difference which separates it from its creator. This has the consequence, sometimes, that it constitutes a veritable alterity which can be troubling and a possible source of revealing interpretations for its creator.

The autist and his double

Once these points have been made clear, we may remark that the concept of “double” seems to have a different definition when it is applied to autism. According to the psychoanalysts Rosine and Robert Lefort, who were the first to identify this function, the “double” is a “fundamental and structural component of autism” (2003, p. 27). Jean-Claude Maleval has taken up this indication by extending the notion of « double » to objects, to machines or other persons. He thus confers on the double a protective and dynamic function, which clearly distinguishes it from the sort of double found in psychosis:

« Contrary to what is observed in psychosis, writes Maleval, the autistic double is not fundamentally an instrument of persecution, quite the contrary: the subject often finds in the double an element which helps to calm his difficulties (...). It is not a strange object (...) (but a) familiar object, which is always kept under control, or considered as a « friend » inherent to a secure world (...). Moreover, (...) it can be mobilized as a means for an artificial enunciation, where the gains in expressivity can be considerable, even if they do encounter certain limits ». (2010, p. 110): « The double presents itself to the autist as a privileged structure for getting out of his solitude, reassuring by its conformity to himself... » (2010, p. 110).

This expressive use of a double works as a border, a transitional border between the reassuring world which is kept under control, organized by its own unchanging rules, on the one hand; and on the other hand the exterior world, chaotic and incomprehensible. But starting from this border, an enunciation can become possible for some subjects, sometimes related to an animation of the autistic subject by way of an object-double that they animate themselves. This is where the puppet comes into its own and finds its place. But is it still a puppet? Or, more precisely, how does a puppet play its role as a double? – a question that Maleval pinpoints when he writes that the double is in “conformity” with the subject.

The puppet as a double in autism

The most striking illustration of this question is contained in the book by the high-level autist Kamran Nazeer, *Send in the idiots*, where he writes about André, one of his classmates in a specialized New York primary school, whom he met again 20 years later (Nazeer, 2006). « André had found an unusual way of overcoming his difficulties to hold a conversation, writes Nazeer. For several years, he had trained as a puppeteer. He made his own puppets with wood and string, he continues, and put on shows in the neighborhood. » But Nazeer indicates that André used them mostly when he

had to meet people, or even over the telephone. In fact he did not necessarily have to make them speak, their mere presence on his knees or beside him was enough. However, in the situations reported by Nazeer, they intervened when André no longer managed to enter alone into the dialectics of an exchange: the puppets then took over and expressed a point of view which prolonged his own one by means of a substitution which conferred on them the status of a double more than that of a puppet. In other words, the puppets of André were not “characters” in the sense that puppeteers usually define them, in other words conventional expressive types which are exaggerated or caricatured and which thus transfigure the human being. André was one with his puppets; the transformation or the transfiguration were reduced to the use he made of them, even if on occasion he presented them as a spectacle, which is by no means negligible. For sure, he gave them a voice slightly different from his own and dressed them in a costume, but, as Kamran Nazeer emphasized, they did not really allow him to soar forth, they just provided an additional defence against the rupture of his internal coherence but not an emancipation. This unity between him and his puppets was so strong, being of the order of a doubling and not a distancing, that it was strictly necessary to avoid interrupting or contradicting them when they spoke, on pain of triggering an aggressive response and a retreat. Kamran Nazeer had a bitter experience of this when he visited his friend. In these moments, André was *in* his puppet, and it was he who refused the exchange.

« That the word is expressed in the domain of the real means that it is expressed in the puppet » says Lacan (*Psychoses*, 1981, p. 63). Related to the way André used his puppets, this indication makes it possible to consider that the relation of a high-level autistic with a puppet is that of a singular and fragile articulation between the Imaginary and the Real. Fragile, because due to what is fundamentally lacking in organizing the relation to the Symbolic, this puppet will always run the risk of turning into a double: in this case it will become the sign of a presence rather than signifying an absence, and its status will be that of being connected up rather than manipulated... Singular, because here there are creations: the creation which gives a “body” to a subject who is lacking one, and the creation of a place to enunciate who he is. A detour, then, by which the autistic subject can gain access to speech, that one cannot impose on him, merely propose, and which most often is of the order of a discovery.

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