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RED NARCISSUS

Recourse to the body and refusal of otherness

FANNY DARGENT

The treatment of *Léa* exemplifies what we call the *Body-Ego's narcissistic resistance to object investment*. *Léa* resists making an investment in the object-therapy, which is a troublemaker for narcissism because of the risks of « impingement » that the dual situation for her. Apart from a support for the expression of psychical suffering, the use of the body in the transference (Laufer, 1984) is here at the service of the resistance to object investment within a « beyond the pleasure principle » which puts at a distance the symptom of conversion. It originates in the archaic register of the effect the other has on the boundaries of oneself and on the foundations of narcissism.

I met *Léa* when I came to her bedside in a pediatric ward after she had made a suicidal passage to the act. Returning from her high school, finding herself alone in her parents' house, she had ingested bleach and caustic cleaning products. *Léa* has just turned fifteen ; she is the eldest and the only girl among three siblings in a family apparently without problems. She is a brilliant student, at the same time pursuing extracurricular activities and maintaining a steady romantic relationship with a boy her own age. *Léa* makes no specific demand for therapy, but does not refuse when it is offered to her. Psychotherapy is undertaken.

DEADLY NARCISSISTIC ATTRACTOR AND SELF-CALMING

Léa stays keeps a stiff posture and lets slip only very rare expressions of emotion. She speaks of inner self-censorship, made up of reproaches and heightened demands, and feels that she has « two contradictory personalities, one of which says that feelings are a sign of weakness, the other that acknowledges them ». She talks about her anxiety attacks and the rage¹ that overtakes her when

1. One is reminded of the narcissistic rage described by H. Kohut (1971).

she is confronted with the independence of the object, particularly that of her boyfriend. Léa has an obsessive organization. The defense by sexualization of thought sometimes swings, when faced with the disintrication of drives, into a self-calming psychical and physical over-activeness. Her daily life is directed by meticulous organizing, which busies and exhausts both her mind and body²; the only thing standing in the way of this is the anxiety which assails her at bedtime when she is invaded by « negative thoughts »³. During the first year of psychotherapy, Léa speaks of herself and analyzes her functioning with scientific coldness, while remaining very vigilant during the sessions. Here speech remains self-centered and it would be very difficult for me to picture anything whatever about her object representations, as other people are virtually non-existent in her discourse. She speaks of the « shell » she has constructed for herself; at another moment she speaks of her « muscle mass » as a consequence of her assiduous athletic practice, saying that it makes her feel superior to other girls. She can easily recognize that she is struggling with dependency, trying to maintain control; when she has to endure the company of others, she prefers to take refuge in her « bubble ». Such words are rare, however, and her vigilance mutates into hermeticism, in her way of receiving most of my interventions. What Léa calls her « code of honor » (which forbids her from expressing her emotions or anything that might appear as a sign of weakness) and the size of the demand she makes of herself, may be understood as a *fanatical Ego ideal*, a true « disease of ideality » (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1975) along narcissistic identificatory lines. Under the visibility of this classic dimension of phallic demand in a young girl, I feel the impact of more blurry and anxiety-producing archaic affects for which it is difficult to find representations.

After the first summer separation, something breaks in this precarious equilibrium in which I feel somewhat *absented by her*; kept in the role of a receptacle, a powerless spectator of her *performance, both psychical and physical*, of hyper-control of herself and the other. « The unexpected comes from other people », she says by way of greeting when we meet again. Over the course of the following months, her discourse is shut up in a negativity which is impossible to pin down and is accompanied by a melancholic movement. Léa no longer wants anything, refuses everything and seems to make it a point of honor to use the therapeutic space to reiterate this immovable refusal. I point out that talking here, where she is not alone, is very different from being alone and given over to negative thoughts. She returns to a memory of an experience in elementary school where she had been picked on by a group of girls. « I'm weak.

2. Here I should make clear that Léa presents no symptoms of anorexia.

3. Léa had spoken of anxious and invasive thoughts, an unreasonable fear that some would happen to one of her loved ones when she was alone at home on Thursday afternoons, the time when she made her suicide attempt.

If I left, it wasn't okay, and if I stayed it wasn't okay either. » Léa accepts a second weekly session which allows for a certain animation of her inner scene. When she tries to « remember past scenes, [she] sees herself as a dark shadow, a blurred, inanimate image. » She then has to make an effort to reconstitute faces. The investment of a pictorial thought will enable Léa to share with me a painful and persecutory archaic experience, in this originary defect in the psychical inscription of the object.

THE SHELL AS SECOND SKIN AND THE OTHER'S BURN

– « How are you ? »
 – « Nothing special. It's *flat*. »
 – « “ Flat ” ? »
 – « That means there are no real highs and no real lows. »
 – « Reminds me of a machine to measure vital signs ! »
 – (Laughing) « Yes ! I did think of that ! »
 – « ‘Flat’ is rather a bad sign ! »
 – (Laughing) « Yes, that means there's nothing left. »
 – « ...I was telling myself that you were speaking of yourself in a very objective way, a bit like a doctor... »
 – « It's as if I were cut in two, lengthwise. The left side is the shell: a sticky being who takes one over, who enters into the body. The right side is « me ». When I have anxiety attacks, it gets into my heart. I don't cut myself anymore on my right forearm, the « me » part... When I cut myself it burns when my sweater rubs against it, but I act cheerful. The worse it is, the more I show the opposite. Everyone thought things were going really well two weeks before my suicide attempt. My parents had noticed that I was cutting myself ; they came to talk to me. I told them what they wanted to hear so that they would leave me alone. My shell forbids me to talk. It's like censorship. Talking is a form of weakness. Cutting myself is soothing, it lets me vent. It allows me not to think of anything anymore. I like to watch the blood flow. When its happening, I feel nothing ; it's afterwards that it rubs against my sweaters. »

The following session :

« I've understood why it's soft : it's like something that can squeeze in anywhere, like a second skin. I isolate myself in a corner of my head, my air bubble, and the shell goes everywhere else. »

The *content* of these two sessions may be read as a shifting and divisible cartography⁴ of an inner experience illustrating the psychical

4. This recalls the formal signifiers defined by D. Anzieu (1987).

organization in which she is enclosed. The « shell » is a metaphor and a form given to the formlessness of the lack of differentiation in the register of the archaic⁵, having caused an essentially mutilating defensive splitting. The Ego, attacked by the drives as well as by the object, has only one solution: it resorts to destructiveness through a de-objectalizing narcissistic turnabout. Léa tries to control her « air bubble », which she will later call a « void », signaling the attack of the Ego and the strength of negative narcissism. In the presence of other people, Léa uses this « shell » as a protective shield and is aware of the trap she is in : « When I am alone, it's turned against me ; I'm cut off from my emotions and my thoughts. This « action-image »⁶ of a « sticky being » does not come without anxiety, a *somatico-psychical* block⁷. It is only secondarily, when passivation is turned around into activation, that it will become a « narcissistic shell » which acts as a psychical protective shield, following the double boundary. A vicious circle is at work, according to the model of demoniac compulsion (Freud, 1920).

In economical and dynamic terms, the self-inflicted physical wound aims to provide release, while re-establishing narcissistic continuity by way of the sensorial. The burning sensation acts as an *excitation that is a protective shield against excitation*. The physical wound gives rise to a narcissistic counter-investment, « whose benefit all the other psychical systems are impoverished, so that the remaining psychical functions are extensively paralyzed or reduced »⁸. The transition from physical pain to mental pain corresponds to a change from narcissistic investment to object-investment⁹. Object investment is to be understood here as an object of sequestered narcissism¹⁰. The physical wound that has been

5. Where is confusion between the object, its drive and the Ego, according to A. Green's definition (1982).

6. Defined by Ph. Gutton, the « *image-action originaire* », whose paradigmatic figure would be the « monster » as a signal of the subject's splitting, traumatic doubt about identity, and psychical effort to bind up the break. « The monster does not reflect a compromise between narcissism and drive, but rather a splitting summed up in a single image. » It is « a polymorphic, undifferentiated image » (Gutton, 2002, p. 860).

7. Green, 1983, p. 159.

8. Freud, 1920, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, SE, V. 18, p. 30.

9. Freud, 1926, *Inhibitions, Symptoms, Anxiety*, SE, V. 20, p. 171.

10. This is in line with Green's theorization. Green, 1979, p. 148.

provoked is a reflection of the narcissistic wound inflicted on the Ego by the sequestered object. There is a vicious circle, insofar as the forces of narcissistic counter-investment are being used by the passage from psychical to physical to struggle against a narcissistically incorporated object. Co-excitation is present in the feeling of having control over the other and causing his failure. The more she is suffering, the more she smiles. It is a formidable sabotage of the objectal attractor for the benefit of a negative narcissism which presents itself as an arrogant, triumphant refusal. The passage from the psychical to the somatic is also an attempt to deal with inner excitation as though it were external excitation, following the model of phobia and projection. The overinvestment of the sensorial is a quest for reassurance about the consciousness of oneself, in this case by way of pain. (« The conscious ego... is first and foremost a body-ego »¹¹).

Scarification, cutting oneself, is *the wounding of the other*. Narcissus is red with his own blood, which he himself has spilled, the outpouring of a vital movement against being internally held captive by the unmoving shadow of the object. Captivity in the reflection of the real, the perception of a shifting and colored substance, in a clinging that is as futile as it is fleeting. It is both a wound « of one's own », aimed at reappropriation, and the other's wound. It is above all inner alterity (Green, 1997), inner otherness, that is lacking here. Narcissistic resistance¹² by the body, in which the scarifications take part, is played out in an archaic register before conflicts of sexual difference have been inscribed.

THE TRAUMA-OBJECT: EMERGENCE OF AND RESISTANCE TO ALTERITY

I got into the habit, unwittingly at first, of starting my notes at the end of the session with a brief description of sensory-motor elements based on what I perceive of Léa's presence. I had become particularly vigilant about these perceptible elements as indicators of the her state of anxiety, which had the effect of regulating the emotional tone of my interventions. The more I *saw* her as white and still, the more I adopted a

11. Freud, 1923. *The Ego and the Id*. SE, V, 19, p. 27.

12. Between two of the registers studied by F. Marty in terms of narcissistic resistance to investment of the object in its genital dimension, within the problematic of sexual difference and, opposite to this, psychotic narcissistic regression of impossible alterity (Marty, 2000).

psychodramatic style, which, used at certain moments, helped to « cushion » the trauma-effect of the object¹³. This vigilance, accompanied by an emotional response that signified I *recognized* and *perceived*¹⁴ her own and the object's dead body, fostered the emergence of drive movements that restarted the play on the interior stage. Léa started to talk about « other people » ; this went along with an investment of an environment, one which could be hated because of the wound it had inflicted and which had led to a temperamental organization of her personality. A veritable *silent* tyrant in the family circle, she controlled everybody's movements, garnering the maximum number of privileges while shunning family life. It was necessary to limit this runaway omnipotence and deal carefully with her narcissism, which was still hypersensitive. Léa can hear me and smile when I point out her tyrannical behavior. She expresses gloating contempt for her peer group and her parents whom she « tests » to see if they react in the way she expects. Finally she exclaims that she just « doesn't give a damn about other people ». Aside from narcissistic rage, Léa seems to struggle against a return of a trauma, striving for control in anticipation of any change of object.

THE CHESS GAME : PLAYING, INSTEAD OF « PLAYING DEAD »

The psychical space gets larger and projects itself outwards, the symbiotic shell¹⁵ which has been *told* is externalized into a temperamental

13. The trauma object is defined by A. Green as « the threat the object represents for the Ego, insofar as, by its very existence, it forces the Ego to modify its regime. For, on the one hand, the object being inside the drive set-up, it is charged with all that is energetic and all that is fantasmatic in the drives ; it therefore seeks to penetrate the Ego from inside. On the other hand, since it is outside the drive set-up, the object is not at the disposition of the Ego, and the Ego can, at the same time as it handles the other instances, do violence to itself in order to escape from its quiescence and go towards the object. Besides this, the object itself is neither set nor permanent: it is contingent » (Green, 1979, p. 143).

14. The psychodramatic style evoked here may be articulated with what F. Richard locates in the « double paradigm of primary identification with the father and the appeal to the mother » and « the technique which consists of replaying when the analyst voices the father or the mother, in his way of speaking, within a sort of analytic psychodrama where there only two participants. The intonation is meant to avoid both excitation and, at the same time, excessive neutrality. (*Indifferenz*, in Freud's text) » (Richard, 2007, p. 1642).

15. The second skin of the shell, as she called it, is more like a communal skin, along the lines of destructive symbiosis in which « it is around the persecutory pole that the Ego will agglutinate » (Ciccione, L'Hopital, 2001, p. 124).

shell that can be *experimented with* in the transference. What she experiences in her sessions starts to be able to be talked about. The use of a subjectivating utterance causes her to feel anxiety about « being overwhelmed » fear that « it won't stop ». Expressing this fear of losing all limits in the face of excitation elicited by the object softens this fear in part, by freeing hateful drives that act as so many subjectivating « psychical grips » on her inner life. Under cover of her misanthropic discourse, Léa pursues her investment of the object down the roads of negativity. « Other people » and their « weaknesses », are characterized as a « repugnant jumble » she has to « stay away from ». She evokes the human species' environmental self-destruction, which is what made her decide to become a veterinarian. To this misanthropic transport in which I feel quite included, I say that she would seem to occupy a kind of overhanging space from which she can observe the world with a critical eye and that it is a great weight on her shoulders.

– « I'm not the only one who thinks this. I want to change things. »

– « I can understand why your investment in your education causes you so much anxiety – the future of the earth is riding on it ! »

– « But I'm not the only one ! If people are on pins and needles – *I'm not alone !* »

– « Ah, now that's the first time I've heard you say that you're not alone ! »

Léa is able to find a way of re-presenting the current scene for herself. « A chess game » she suggests right away as an expression of what she experiences in her session, a « strategy » for keeping the upper hand. She says she's afraid of « letting go here and having it continue into the rest of [her] life. » For the first time she speaks of her *dreams*, which are few and far between, as images with « blurry, faceless characters who don't speak but whose thoughts [she] can hear ». Each bit of progress is followed by a redoubling of defenses, and I must sometimes use a psychodramatic style when faced with this space that is constantly in danger of freezing over. « *Indifference is a bit like playing dead* », she says. « That's rather the impression you give sometimes : that you're playing dead. »

Léa agrees, but adds that she's not doing it on purpose. The duality of the situation seems to have re-actualized an early experience of indifference on the object's part ; this takes the form of a paradoxical transference in which Léa makes me experience what she has not symbolized enough. She plays dead, acts indifferent, as perhaps her mother had once done, in a painful narcissistic identification awaiting symbolization. The last session before the vacation is marked by a change in her attitude. She asks me for advice on how she can convince her parents to let her go abroad for a weekend. A representation of the

mother emerges from a chaos of indifferentiation. « My mother is kind of an anxious type », Léa says almost apologetically, as though to justify her demand for advice. Is this a projection of her own anxiety about leaving home for the first time ? If so, all the better.

Splitting is at work in this adolescent girl, and inner otherness, which had been held in suspension, was been reactivated at puberty when the drive current was broken into, causing massive narcissistic counter-investments. Close to melancholy, narcissistic incorporation of the object acts like an open wound, seizing upon a great share of the drive current. The force of the disintrication within a deadly narcissism-masochism had led Léa to attempt suicide. The attack on her body through scarification was another mode of this. Particular attention to counter-transference, and especially what was emanating from Léa's sensory-motor presence, enables us to examine the archaic level, supporting a process of differentiation and emergence of inner otherness. Little by little, transitional space was re-established. In part, Léa played dead¹⁶ in order to control all drive activity and the risks of overflow this made her run¹⁷. Her body also exhibited the narcissistic anxiety provoked by the trauma-object. It would be possible to develop another theory based on the automatism of repetition. « Playing dead » was equivalent to « indifference, » a sort of absence of drive activity that she made me experience and which could be understood as a re-actualization of an early experience of indifference on the part of the primary object, on the order of non-recognition of her need for libidinal gratification ; this had prevented the establishment of auto-eroticisms of life and of good-enough narcissistic continuity. Through narcissistic identification, in order to anticipate anxiety-distress engendered by unforeseen changes of object, she had taken refuge in narcissistic and masochistic withdrawal by constituting a formidable early Superego. At puberty the defensive organization became more extreme, cutting her off from the drive roots

16. There are similarities with anorexia.

17. This is the approach proposed by M. Laufer: « [...] a “ dead ” body, and thus perfectly controlled » (M. Laufer, 1984, p. 131).

that had been attracted towards the Superego and which now turned against her. A fantasy took shape, of having disappointed the object and thus lost its love (she had expressed a fear that I would find she was not trying hard enough), which led to intense guilt feelings of a melancholic form. In this early configuration, the father seemed to play a nurturing and supportive role. In Léa's treatment, the therapist was the object made passive by her indifference, but at the same a narcissistic attractor calling for a deadly fusion. First and foremost, it was necessary to enable the re-establishment of transitional space, without which any attempt at treatment at a fantasmatic level would have been in vain, or would have veered off into the hyper-intellectualization that Léa favored in life, to the detriment of any form of affective lability.

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