

An Image Mediator in a Dream Mediator within a Group

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Abstract

The image as a mediator in individual therapy and in group sessions provides the occasion to mobilise the primary process of the unconscious, in a movement of regression necessary to any initial visualisation. Starting with this type of visualisation, it is possible to reach an authentic process of symbolisation. By "symbolisation", I mean the process of connecting primary and secondary processes through "tertiary (intermediary) processes", as André Green has defined them. Thinking in images favours this liaison through the use of a mediating image which condenses within itself the image of the subject and of the group. Some images presented in the group exemplify this function.

Key words: group, Photolanguage, image, mediator in group session

The theme of this conference is: Dreams and the Group. During this panel discussion, I have chosen to speak about the place of an image and the way it acts as a mediator in a dream and also about the same image which plays a mediating role within a group. The specific image involved here is that of a group of climbers roped together and scaling a mountain slope. A patient undergoing individual therapy refers to this image in a session which will prove to be a very important step in the progression of her analysis. Then, this winter, the same image happened to be chosen by one of the participants in a "photolanguage" session attended by a group of young people enrolled in an adult education programme.

I wondered about the symbolism of this image not only within the group, but also in the patient's dream, since it brings together both the forces of both life and death. Rather than speaking of a stereotype or an archetype, as suggested by Jung, I will refer to Freudian theory, since, in his famous text, "The ego and the id", Freud speaks of "thinking in images". He writes : "Thinking in images is therefore only a very imperfect mode in the process of becoming conscious. It is also, in a certain way, closer to unconscious processes, from an ontogenetic as well as a phylogenetic standpoint." (p. 233). For Freud, this amounts to saying that thinking in images concerns not only a subject and his/her inner psychic reality, but also the collective dimension of a group and all that is handed down from generation to generation in a given culture. In one instance, as in the other, thinking in images is closer to unconscious than to conscious phenomena.

That fact has been well-known since the publication in 1900 of Freud's essay, "Interpretation of Dreams". The secondary process (through a description in words)

makes it possible to tell about a dream in narrative form. The rule of free association brings intermediary representations into play, making it possible to return to the source, to the unconscious origins, the representation of a "thing" being an affect, anxiety, an unconscious desire, i.e., a representation which is still in the state of what could be termed "thingness". How can "thing" be put into words, other than through the intermediary of thinking in images? Thinking in images is thought which does not only take the form of visual images (even though we know that sight is the most important of the five senses); thinking in images can also be auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile. What characterises this intermediary mode of thought is a contiguous link between these images in what we call an associative chain. If one conjures up a form of sensory image, this image will link up with other images through association. A sound brings back a scene, an odour brings back a memory, as in Marcel Proust's reference to tasting a "madeleine" tea-cake, where a gustatory image brings back an entire series of remembrances from the past, memories of his childhood.

We see that this chain of images linked through association is characterised by the fact that they are always linked to unconscious affects. Here I support the idea that image and affect are an inseparable pair. This is why I speak of images rather than of representations, because we know that representations can be separate from affects, as in the clinical cases of obsessive personalities, who are able to speak of extremely frightening memories in such a way as to succeed in totally dissociating the representation of the traumatic scene from their own affects. In contrast, the image which manifests itself in thought is always linked to affects, for, although it is close to the unconscious, it is also by the same token close to perceptive and corporeal experience, which leaves its traces in the psyche, sensory traces of first perceptions linked to first emotions, part of the very earliest experiences of the subject in the primary bond between mother and child.

After having presented these theoretical reference points, I will now present the case of a group with which I used the "photolanguage" technique and that of an individual session of psychoanalytic therapy. Recently, in the "photolanguage" group, a woman participant showed the group a photograph of a mountain-climber equipped with crampons scaling a snowy mountainside. The climber is shown from the back and is the first of a group of climbers attached to one another with a rope. The rope links him to a second climber below him, but who is not visible in the photo. The summit to be reached can be seen in the background. The young woman who has chosen this picture and presents it to the group says : "I used to be a group leader for tourists whom I took on hikes in the winter or on excursions in the summer. It was my first profession and I really enjoyed it very much; I loved meeting other people and being in contact with nature and really didn't even feel as if I were working." Another member of the group says : "I love the mountains too and do a lot of hiking. For me, this picture shows the effort involved and the huge sense of satisfaction that you feel when you get to the top at sunrise." A third patient says, " As for me, this winter, with all that's happened, (looking at this picture) makes me feel anxious. It's a picture of a

man and of a whole mountain-climbing expedition about to be swept away by an avalanche." Thus reminded of recent events and of the pictures shown on television, the group falls silent, overcome by death anxiety. The woman who has chosen the photo appears to be surprised by this reaction, since she had seen only good memories, given that she had a vision of the picture which was positive, pleasant and serene. Here we see that the group is playing its "regulating role". The positive way of looking at the picture is immediately countered by another more disquieting, more frightening view, representing a risk of death. The death compulsion opposes the life compulsion. The group calls into play inextricably intertwining compulsions. When the person who shows the picture to the others is guided by the pleasure principle, the group reminds him/her of the reality principle. Inversely, when a member of the group has a very negative view of a picture, the others will suggest other livelier and more reassuring viewpoints. In addition to this well-known function of regulation by the group, the importance of the articulation between the imaginings of the individual and that of the group must be taken into account. The process of each individual's growing awareness is enhanced by the exchange among the members of the group about the mediatory object, in this case the image represented by the picture. In fact, in "photolanguage" sessions, the photograph, which is a cultural object, becomes an image. This image contains within it a starting point for the imaginings of one individual, which then prompts the development of imaginings on the group level. The group's imaginings are also added to by the chain of associations of the images within the mind of each group member. These exchanges among the individuals of the group allow each person to become aware of his/her share in the process, starting from the exchanges concerning each person's imaginings.

The same holds true for a one-on-one exchange between the analyst and a patient. The following is the narration of a dream by a 30-year-old woman patient who had been in analysis for 3 years : "There was a high mountain and there were two lines of roped climbers going up one side of it. In one group, there were older people and in the other group me and my boyfriend." Then, she adds, "You were also in the group (with me) and I felt linked to you. In this group, we were more sure-footed and ran no risk of falling and making the whole group fall. In the other group of climbers, there were my uncle and my aunt (who's my godmother); that group of older people worried me : I felt they were in danger, on the verge of all falling off the mountainside." She now comments, "It's because right now in my family 'madness is lurking in the background and the family is in danger of falling apart'." In fact, the uncle in her dream has just been placed in a psychiatric hospital and, as for her godmother, she has breast cancer (and eventually dies of the disease a few months later). In her real life, the patient feels that they are vulnerable. She makes associations starting from the two groups of roped climbers in the photograph; thinking in images plays an important role.

Confronted with this new image in the progression of the patient's analysis, I am able to interpret the transfer, since she has this dream just before the sessions are to be interrupted for the holidays. I am also "letting go" of her and she runs the danger of

slipping and falling apart. She feels very involved with both the groups of mountain-climbers in her dream. She imagines that the group of older people could also be her parents. Then she imagines several possible "trios" of climbers : - her godfather, her godmother and herself or - her father, her mother and herself or - her boyfriend, herself and me

At the time of her dream, the family situation has made her own parents just as vulnerable as the people in the dream. In fact, her father is very anxious about his brother having been committed to a psychiatric hospital; while her mother is worried about her sister's having to undergo such debilitating treatment as chemotherapy after her operation for breast cancer.

The patient's dream is in fact a nightmare, since she wakes up with the idea that the group of older climbers is just about to fall.

She adds, "In a family, we aren't just "roped" together, we're chained to each other." Later on in the process of her analysis, on several occasions, we come back to this image of the group of roped climbers, a metaphor which condenses several different elements. If we take a close look at each element of the metaphor, we see that : n The rope signifies for the group of mountain-climbers what a blood relationship means for the family. The rope represents the family connection as well as the link to the analyst through transfer. The rope then seems to play the role of whatever provides security and reassures. It links people together and protects them from danger.

However, the rope also symbolises another aspect of a link in that it "chains" people to each other, as in the state of depression which threatens the whole family, concerning the risk of one of its members "falling into" insanity. In a very regressive mode, the rope could also represent the umbilical cord.

Here, a question comes up : why does this metaphor have such an impact, such emotional intensity and such dramatic value (in the Greek sense of the word "drama", meaning "action") for my patient, giving it the central role in the progression of her analysis?

This type of image plays a mediating role between internal reality, within the psyche, and external reality (the patient's current family situation) and the links between individuals which characterise it. What is more, this image of the group of roped mountain-climbers will later become a central image to which she will often refer in the course of her analysis. This image will become a means of mediation between her and me, as is the photo of the mountain-climber chosen and presented by an individual within the "photolanguage" group. We can therefore say that :

-The image acts as a mediator between the conscious and the unconscious. The image is a pre-conscious production within the psyche, which has a predilection for imagining. The imagination's productions are pre-conscious.

- The image provides the occasion of relating infantile neurosis and present neurosis by means of transfer during analysis.

- The image allows the group to visualise the connection, the link among its members. At the same time, the rope represents both a link which poses the threat of alienation and a bond which guarantees security and continuity. The rope represents

the link, that is, the ambivalent relationship of the subject with the object called into play by this image, which is both dangerous and reassuring.

Nature can be a good, nurturing mother, but can also be a mother who kills, who is violent, devouring, and destructive, as the mountains reminded us this past winter in several European countries.

In any case, the ambivalent aspects in a subject's relationship to an object are represented both in the patient's dream and within the group by means of an image which serves as a psychic mediator.

We need to think in images, for metaphors are one of the paths which lead to symbolisation. The image of the group of mountain-climbers attached together with a rope is a means of visualisation which the subject as well as the group needs to understand that, in order to live, a link to others is necessary and that links to others are also dangerous in that they pose the questions of death, death anxiety concerning physical or psychic death.

This mode of thought calls on the process of regression, of which Freud says that he only retains the images of perception. (Chapter VII, "Interpretation of Dreams"). Thinking in images leaves within us traces other than words (which are the result of a secondary process); this type of thinking mobilises a primary process which strikes and touches us in a completely different way. The image is the occasion for an exchange of imaginings, but also for an identifying exchange between the patient and the analyst during therapy or between one participant and the others in the "photolanguage" group session. It is evident that in the two clinical approaches under study here, in one case, an external image (the photograph) brings forth internal images whereas the images from the dream, produced by the patient's unconscious, conjure up, through condensation and displacement, several people from the patient's life and from her own reality. Images mediate between external reality and psychic reality by enabling connections to be made within the psychic reality of the subject because of inter-subject exchanges concerning the images. In individual therapy, the image of the mountain-climbers roped together becomes a cultural "reference point" common to both the patient and the analyst : each of them knows what is being referred to when it comes up later on in the analysis. In the same way, the image also carries out a specific function for the group, in the sense that it suggests a threat of disintegration, given that it is the last day and the last session for this particular group. We also have an image of the end of the group's existence which brings with it death-anxiety; since the link will be broken, in the sense that the members of the group will no longer see each other. An image speaks of the "here and now" which it attempts to portray. Images also possess the characteristic of being "malleable", as has been shown by Marion Milner : they change and evolve according to the contribution of each member of the group.

- The inner world of the patient's imagination and of that of the analyst make it possible to arrive at a representation of the Oedipean triangle, the parents seen as a couple linked together, suggesting an original fantasy, that of a primitive scene of

sexual intercourse or of death. n The imaginings of group members moderate those of the participant who has chosen the photograph. The group brings nuances to her imaginings, with the force of self-preservation opposing that of destruction. Gradually, the picture of a pleasant memory evolves and changes as each member of the group talks about the photo. The image is transformed and deformed, it is reassuring, then suddenly frightening. All the facets of psychic reality can be brought up and represented. Thinking in images allows exchanges of identification based on, arising from exchanges of imaginings.

The image as a mediator in individual therapy and in group sessions provides the occasion to mobilise the primary process of the unconscious, in a movement of regression necessary to any initial visualisation. Starting with this type of visualisation, it is possible to reach an authentic process of symbolisation. By "symbolisation", I mean the process of connecting primary and secondary processes through "tertiary (intermediary) processes", as André Green has defined them. In my opinion, what is important is seeing how thinking in images favours this liaison through the use of a mediating image which condenses within itself the image of the subject (a mountain-climber), of the group (the mountain-climbers roped together), of the link between them (the rope of life), life experienced as climbing a mountain, a way of growing, but also recognised as a permanent threat of "falling" (going insane) or of death. In summary, the image of a group of mountain-climbers attached to each other with a rope in itself epitomises the paradox that living necessarily involves acceptance of the risk of dying.

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