

The ordalic scene and the work of individuation/separation at adolescence

Brigitte Blanquet

Abstract

This research studies the impact of the ordeal scene (old eng: ordeal judgement) as being a mode of symbolization, specifically primary symbolization. We questioned the function of going through the experience of flirting with danger and with death that older adolescents use. For this analysis, we built an analyzer named the contact ordeal.

It confirms the value of going back over, in differed action, these remaining scenes that are awaiting symbolization.

The contact ordeal illustrates how these individuals attempt to re appropriate the residue-traces of the experience of ambiguity, and in the background, reveal the existence of dangerous primal fantasies with a haunting effect. These fantasies enabled us to observe that going through the ordeal experience is accompanied by the predominance of two major phantasms: The phantasm of mono engenderment, which underlies the murder phantasm. The phantasm of returning to the womb that reactivates the incest phantasm. Using the ordeal scene at adolescence is thus an attempt to introduce accident phenomena along with their work of symbolization. Upon this postulate, we uphold the idea that the contact ordeal mobilizes the danger scene, which offers a necessary and dynamic test to pass. Here the adolescent can replay differently that which started up in hardship.

Keywords: adolescence, ordeal, primal fantasies, contact ordeal, actualization

Introduction

This article is part of a practice based research where we will study the relationship that adolescents hold with the danger figure. I targeted the age group 16-21, having met them daily in an open educative service (1) where I work. I chose to conceptualize how these youth demonstrate the ordalie problematic (2) in the way they put their bodies at risk. I studied how the ordeal scene gets out of their control, causing them to take different types of falls.

These ordeal scenes constitute a rite or a form of passage in which the adolescent shows how the classic problematic of individuation and separation work. Ordeal scenes come over as a figurability mode from which a scene emerges, including a movement of the originary background with an apres coup effect.

In this manner, adolescents are "*finding/creating*" a "*good enough*" scene (Winnicott, 1956) using it to symbolize the remains of ambiguity (Bleger, 1967) or of that which they are unable to integrate.

These ordeal scenes address boundaries for they match up with the need for primary externalization. The notion of obscenity (Duez, 2000), defines this psychological mechanism, in which we observe an internalized scene being put into play in the

social field, drawing upon internal groups, primal fantasies, family complexes and imagoes. Adolescents thus attempt to symbolize, using the outside world to portray the mnemonic tracks that experiences leave in their inner sphere.

Conceptual proposition

I proposed the terminology of **contact ordeal** (Blanquet, 2008), to explain this phenomena. The term ordeal or ordeal originates in the ancient Jewish ritual of ordaly, more commonly known as “God's judgment”. This ritual consists of putting the supposedly guilty person in a potentially deadly situation. If the person survives, he is considered as innocent, “God” having saved him.

From the guilt perspective, the term of ordeal unites different aspects of these problematics. I linked the “contact” principle to it, insisting on first object relations and on the importance of recuperating that which remains outside of subjectivity.

The subject actualizes the question of origins and of the originary (Aulagnier, 1975) in order to integrate into his psyche the part he was unable to symbolize.

Contact ordeal illustrates the phenomena of “topical figuration transference”(Duez, 2000), enlightening our understanding of it.

In other words, the “ordalic adolescent” acts the scene of returning to the womb in order to get out of it's grasp and to get away from it's harmful effects.

I will back up this proposition with the clinical illustration of an adolescent I will call Marc.

Marc and his motorcycle: a dangerous couple

Marc loves motorcycles and does stunts since age 13. He is now 17 is and is starting to receive educative assistance from the A.E.M.O. He has no job, is not in school or in training and lives with his parents and his girlfriend. When we (3) meet with him, he appears lost at first. He expresses his lack of interest for school which he attributes to having frequently moved with his mother. These moves involved living in several countries. He shows difficulty in locating events in time as he goes over his life history. The only wish he expresses seems very idealized. He would like to become a professional stunt artist or an airplane pilot. He spends hours on his computer, creating an Internet site which retraces his numerous motorcycle stunts. Outside of this exclusive testimony, he shows severe inhibition of affect and of thought process.

From his anamnesis, we gather that Marc was born from a relationship between a man living in his own home country and his French mother. Their relationship ended brutally when Marc's mother, who had hidden her pregnancy from his father, left the country. Marc was born in France where his mother brought him up alone. When Marc turned one, the father was informed of his existence. Marc knows very little about him, having met him twice. Their first encounter took place in Paris, along the Seine river, when his father came to legally recognize his paternity. Marc was 8 at the time. Their second meeting took place when Marc was an adolescent. He uses his mother's maiden name. His father sends him money regularly via postal deposits. Marc and his mother are in conflict and says he can not stand her. Nevertheless, he

keeps contact with her family who lives in the village to which he seems to feel some attachment.

At adolescence, Marc is interested in nothing but his motorcycle. He does numerous stunts that he defines as follows: *“I have an accident on purpose, in fact these are acrobatics and they are not really accidents”*. He trains several hours a day. He especially loves the contact with the machine and the body to body contact it procures. He describes the stunts that he does and how he learns to master the boundaries he oversteps. Marc does front cartwheels and tries to beat his own record, expressing the spectacular aspect of his technical performance. His first accomplishment consisted of staying balanced on the front wheel over a distance of 169 meters. The second feat, just as dangerous, illustrates the “crampon figure”. He hangs on to the back of a motorcycle going 100 km an hour, driven by someone else and marvels at the furrow of tracks dug by his iron clad shoes: *“It's as if I was skiing on the road”* he says. A video attached to the motorcycle films the tracks he leaves. He takes many pictures of his stunts which procure an increase of “adrenalin”, hoping that he will be noticed by a sponsor. The energy that he puts into trying to control the machine is the nodal point of his problematic. The images he shows us is that of an ego hanging on in an effort to avoid the fall. Marc invests his motorcycle with externalization of complex psychic scenes. Clinging to a rapidly moving, uncomfortable, dangerous object requiring special attention. This leads me to consider that what is put into play again and again is his necessity to pick up the non-elaborated part of his life story. This is what he transposes onto his machine. The motorcycle would thus represent an equivalent of the manner in which he, himself felt uprooted, off-balance, insecure by a machine-mother to which he had to cling desperately to avoid the fall. What is at play is to relive a dangerous situation, to control it and to reconnect with the former sensation.. That is what he attempts to feel again here.

The problematic of the ordalic person

“Once you take a fall, after that you know what the boundary is”, says Marc. The ordalic person takes risks. He submits his body to dangerous tests that constitute a play precisely of that which the person questions. The proposition of contact ordal helps to analyze the scenes which are always hooked-up with a danger figure. This imperative is linked to the remains or agglutinates, according to J. Blèger (1967), which were unable to create conflictualization within the psyche. In order to differentiate from the primary object, the subject uses a dangerous scene to replay these non-integrated elements of the ego/non-ego relationship. Conflictualization can emerge from this. This is where the work of psychic delocalization originates.

The danger figure is necessary. The person needs to “bump” into a boundary so that the play-work he is acting may be symbolized. The danger figure provides a support, a localization agent to guarantee a passage from the inside to the outside.

Marc's case helps us to highlight four statements to show how the ordalic scene is

functional thanks to the danger figure.

The danger figure constitutes a search for a spatio-temporal mediator. The ordalic person goes back in time. It is like a machine which is representative of rough movements encountered in being handled by the primary environment. This mother-motorcycle machine is the figuration of a clinging type of bond to avoid breakdown. It also symbolizes questions about the type of space where the experience takes place, of its localization, but also of the passage between the inside and the outside. It is figuration of time which belongs to the past. The danger figure constitutes a sensational attempt to reconnect and find sensations that Marc was unable to symbolize. The game consists of experiencing strong sensations again, in order to link sensory impressions together. This would be the equivalent of auto-calming behavior when the objective would be produce a zone of permanent perception. This zone of permanence thus created gives the subject a feeling of controlling the machine as well as a radical means of overcoming separation anxiety. The danger figure is based on a transgressive movement in a search for the Other. The ordalic rite shows that what is being sought is "God's judgment". The subject replays a former non elaborated transgression, something illegitimate which could belong, or not, to former generations which weight him down. The ordalic scene includes the search for a law, a paternal imago, an external object (Marc seeks a sponsor). He seeks an attribution principle which would decide for him or give legitimacy to be alive. This principle would also establish a boundary again between self and the Other, between life and death.

The ordalic subject puts into play the question about origins and agglutinated remains or those non-differentiated from an early relationship. Marc gives an example of this assertion.

I will further develop the individuation/separation process with the help of a drawing that Marc did early in the psychotherapy that lasted two years.

Marc's drawing: something out of heaven

(see attached file)

"It's a story about a monster eating a cavalier. The cavalier is food for the monster so it can grow", says Marc. He (Marc) would be up in heaven. He would fly like the bird he drew. Except for the bird Marc drew, everything else is decoration.

First impression left by Marc's drawing: in the foreground on the left side, the monster is ready to devour the cavalier, helpless between its' paws. No way out for the cavalier who seems condemned to being devoured. Not far from him, the cavalier's spear is on the ground, near the fire, useless. Water forms a stagnant pond that does not flow. The central field contains three elements: an unsurmountable wall from which flows a waterfall. At the foot of the wall is a cave. On the upper level is the sky, the "up there" that Marc spoke of, the bird's kingdom. I will extract four themes that this drawing shows.

The first theme shows a sacrificial position:

in the foreground, we see a devoration/feeding scene that illustrates what happens in Marc's psychological organization in regards to the primary object. The only human being present is meant to be food for the beast and to be devoured by it. This devoration scene has to do with anxiety of being swallowed up. The subject sacrifices himself to keep the beast alive. In other words, the beast can live because the cavalier helps keep it alive, but pays for it with his own subjectivity. The object survives because the person sacrifices himself.

The second theme is about surviving and being indestructible

The sacrificial position is represented by the cavalier. The survival figure emanates from this position, giving a feeling of indestructibility. This gives the effect of perpetual or permanent eternity or swinging between either eating or being eaten. The fantasy behind this is *"in order to deserve to stay alive, I must remain food for a parent"*. This endless cycle continues thanks to the cavalier's sacrifice. This survival mode functions like the Phoenix myth does, raising up to life again from his ashes, with a taste of immortality. On the other hand, only splitting can keep the subject safe, thus enabling us to underline the fantasy of indestructibility which is dear to the ordalic person. The following words could be his: *"since I am nothing but food to keep the Other alive, I will continue to play this role forever"*.

The third theme is about origins

The waterfall questions a scene about origins. Marc's drawing shows us the impact that this scene has, rendering subjectiveness inaccessible. The wall of the waterfall illustrates how he is cut off from his history. The importance given to the waterfall is a theme pertaining to birth. Marc's mother evokes his birth when she says: *"I had him due to the sofa act that his father pulled"*. His drawing portrays a wall-type maternal imago. This imago links up with a problematic resulting from early relationships of a vampire type. P. Wilgowicz (1991), says that these underline the fantasmatic constitution of a dangerous primal scene. For the ordalic subject, the origins or the primal scene generates originary guilt for it is mono-engendered. In fact the primary origins scene shows the disappearance of an imago having left its mark in a sense that says: *"a person is begotten from one only, for when one is born, the other disappears"*. This life/death reasoning is what mono-engenderment is about, or the way in which the person was mono-engendered. That is why this mono-engendered originary scene underlies the importance of feminine narcissistic filiation in the construction of narcissism. A person very existence is determined by the death or by the disappearance of the other. This origins scene shows that an originary fantasy of murder or a bad omen weighs upon the subject. Marc uses mono-engenderment in his ordalic behavior showing this life/death potential in imploring *"God's judgment"*. Only this he would be able to make it legitimate for him to live by erasing the feeling of originary guilt.

The fourth theme shows how splitting works: Marc's get-away to heaven

In his drawing we see that Marc attempts to get to heaven, like a bird, where everything is “all calm”. Without hesitation he was able to explain what the bird represents for him. His sky is clear, an unlimited space where he can be born again, in the form of a bird. The cavalier and the bird incarnate how splitting works. The cavalier is caught up in the sacrificial scene but the bird belongs to the vast universe beyond reality's grasp. Only severe isolation can render him untouchable. To do this, he anesthetizes affects and flattens his emotions. Things are treated as decorations, objects of nonsense, inanimate and aesthetic, as if he were setting the table. Seen from heaven, one can glide over reality, which becomes smaller seen from high above. Marc delocalizes himself in choosing this high position.

This flattening operation carries the risk of psychological breakdown. It could even lead to his getting out of the realm of reality in attempting to be, he himself, his own origin, thus condemning the Other to death. In the end, splitting does serve the purpose of acting as a prosthesis.

In synthesis

The ordalic scene has to do with the work of individuation/separation at adolescence. This scene shows how the figuration process functions. It underlines the necessity for these people to treat the remains of traumatic experiences. They do so by building on the outside that which took place inside. The ordalic subject uses the danger figure in his search for the Other. What he really is in search of is to connect up again with the characteristics of the internal object. At the same time the subject is seeking an external object that could save him. He hopes and expects to be able to call on this external object and for it to become his “saviour”. This object would thus hold the function of attribution judgment and thus attest to his current experience.

Due to originary guilt, the subject acts out his search for the Other, one who could “whiten his slate”, free him from his guilt and legitimate his existence. This external object represents a missing parental imago, one that is absent from the primitive scene.

To resume what is at play in the ordalic scene, the adolescent is submitted to:

- localizing himself in regards to the object without be swallowed.
- localizing himself psychologically through the auto-reflexive processes (seeing, hearing, feeling what happens within oneself), (R. Roussillon,1990).
- localizing the current ordalic experience in regards to ones' past experience.
- localize himself topologically.

The ordalic scene offers the possibility of now playing scenes differently, working out the knots and meddled parts. The subject can go back over the scenes and attempt to neutralize the threatening object by:

- returning to a scene concerning his origins in an attempt to change it.
- seeking a “saviour” via an external object.

- making tracks that enable the subject and the Other to verify his existence.
- testing the survival position again.

In conclusion

The ordalistic problematic uses a scene in an attempt to modify the initial experience. The ordalistic scene, via the contact ordeal, enables the subject to find remnants of the object, a trace of the Other, to help him to organize a boundary. This spot is localized there where pain is felt. It is a space where the Other is present. Contact ordeal constitutes an attempt to circumscribe the boundaries of the internal object in the encounter with an external object. Boundaries force ordalistic subjects to put into play various scenes that he was unable to interiorize and put them to use.

The ordalistic adolescent shows difficulty in breaking away from his primary objects. This is one of the ways in which he attempts to deal with separation and individuation issues.

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Notes

- 1) Service for which the abbreviation A.E.M.O. is used.
- 2) We find this flirt with danger in different forms such as suicide attempts, violent sexual behavior, accidents while driving alone, abortion. Pregnancy is also used as a solitary goal, a last chance and without it being the couple's choice.
- 3) His educator and myself, as psychologist.

Brigitte Blanquet docteur en psychologie - Psychologue clinicienne
e-mail: brig.blanquet@laposte.net