

Oedipus's Depths

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the connections between the myths of Oedipus and Narcissus. First, we propose that Narcissus is pre-existent to Oedipus in the child's development, and it represents its first defense against an unknown and terrifying world. Next, we argue that Oedipus's complex comes after, but that in its "depths," we can still find the vestigial remains of the original narcissism with its polar extremes of love and loath for oneself, or rather, as we explain, for one's image. In our exploration of Oedipus's foundations, we consider Melanie Klein's objectual relation to the mother and the concept of Fundamental Violence developed by Bergeret. Finally, in an attempt to move back even past this stage, we consider the theory of Bleger on the symbiotic relationship between the newborn and the world around him. We conclude by proposing Oedipus and Narcissus as the two polarities of the same archetype of development, one being the unbridled vital instinct and the other the acceptance of reality with its norms, laws, and obligations.

Keywords

Oedipus, Narcissus, Narcissisms, Child's Development, Fundamental Violence

1. Introduction

The dream took place in a prison, convent, or building. Upon reflection, it appeared to be a convent "à la Justine" by De Sade or a correctional house, in any case, a secured place.

Note that we will tell the story in the first singular person, that of the dreamer.

In this place, life went on peaceably, but there was no getting out of it. Then, suddenly, a messy situation starts to unfold. The guards arrive, and I see a door left open. To avoid being identified as a fugitive, I sneak through, trying to look as normal as possible. At the exit checkpoint, which makes me think of an air-

port checkpoint, I approach a woman who accompanies an old lady outside, maybe her mother or, in any case, a member of her family.

Indeed, it seems that this building, from where I cannot escape, is also a “perfectly normal” retirement home. I manage to convince this lady, very scared indeed, not to say anything, but she looks pale and increasingly tense, and I realize she will denounce me. So, I pick up the pace when I leave the checkpoint and reach the exit, which only has automatic gates, such as those for pedestrians-only, but no more controls.

At this point, I see that one or two people have spotted my abnormal presence, and a man is heading towards me. I decide to kill him by throwing him down the wall that runs along the road and gives onto a precipice. I grab him firmly, and I throw him into the void. Satisfied, I quickly pick up the pace and run away without being stopped again. Suddenly, a scene inside the prison appears to me, one of violence, filth, prevarication, and humiliation. This vision reveals what is going on in this place and makes me understand what I have escaped. The dream ends here. Sure, I killed a man to avoid all this horror, or in any case, my unconscious allowed me to.

2. Justine’s Flight

We now revert to the first plural person.

A calm reading of De Sade, the Divine Marquis who was indeed an Earl, shows us that the background of the so-called sexual perversions is not sex, but murderous violence, with its panoply of inflicted suffering, loss of freedom, the annihilation of the other, and fragmentation of body and mind. In Sade, an area strewn with corpses surrounds the building where Justine’s perversion takes place.

“I fled away and continued my circuit until I was on the side opposite the basement window; not yet having found a breach, I resolved to make one, all unobserved, I had furnished myself with a long knife, I set to work, despite my gloves, my hands were soon scratched and torn, but nothing daunted me, the hedge was two feet thick, I opened a passage, went through, and entered the second ring, there, I was surprised to find nothing but soft earth underfoot; with each step I sank in ankle-deep. the further I advanced into these corpses, the more profound the darkness became. Curious to know whence came the change of terrain, I felt about with my hands... O Just Heaven! my fingers seized the head of a cadaver! Great God! I thought, whelmed with horror, this must then be the cemetery, as indeed I was told, into which those murderers fling their victims, they have scarcely gone to the bother of covering them with earth!... this skull perhaps belongs to my dear Omphale, perhaps it is that of the unhappy Octavie, so lovely, so sweet, so good, and who while she lived was like unto the rose of which her charms were the image. And I, alas! might that this have been my resting place! Wouldst that I had submitted to my fate! What had I to gain by going on in pursuit of new pitfalls? Had I not committed evil enough? Had I not

been the occasion of a number of crimes sufficiently vast? Ah! Fulfill my destiny! O Earth, gape wide and swallow me up I Ah, 'tis madness, when one is so forsaken, so poor, so utterly abandoned, madness to go to such pains in order to vegetate yet a few more instants amongst monsters!... But no! I must avenge Virtue in irons... She expects it of my courage... Let her not be struck down... let us advance. it is essential that the universe be ridded of villains as dangerous as these.

Ought I fear causing the doom of three or four men in order to save the millions of individuals their policy or their ferocity sacrifice? (De Sade, 1791)

The unbridled lust in the work of the Divine Marquis is not just lust but a deep desire to hurt, kill, and defragment the other. But who is this *other*? Mélanie Klein would say the evil breast, the other side of the mother, but also the evil penis, and all this because we have a terrible fear of what created us and allows our existence: the mother, the father, the creators in short.

One of the authors wondered whether focusing on the Oedipus complex—masculine in its phallic excessiveness—does not hide the depths of the bond with the mother. There, we were not close to a phallus, but in the womb, both creative and destructive.

Let's say it, in the midst of chaos.

3. This Side of Oedipus

The central tenet of this short essay is that in Oedipus's depths lurks another, sexless this time, *Trieb*, as Freud himself recognized when he introduced the death drive (Freud, 1920). But while Freud identified this instinct mostly with a destructive force, following the original suggestion of Sabina Spielerein (Spielrein, 1944), we would like to propose that this instinct of death is one of the two poles of Narcissism. We realize we can provide little "evidence" for this assertion beyond our intuition based on our clinical practice. We will, however, try to argue our case in what follows.

The reason for writing this short essay is that we have observed a surge of narcissistic symptomatology in our practice. This is most likely due to the troubled times we are traversing due to the COVID pandemic that comes on top of the growing discontent with society itself, punctuated by financial and social crisis and climate deterioration. Therefore, we have been naturally encouraged to interpret even the sexual elements—dreams, anguishes, or fears—on a *darker* and more ancestral complex background to use a Jungian concept. In this, we follow the suggestion of Yalom (Yalom, 2009), who see the death anguish as a fundamental *Trieb* of our inner life, pre-existing to and, in some sense, giving form to the libido. But we propose that the death anguish is one of the poles of an early narcissistic complex that we consider intimately linked to the survival instinct of both the individual and the species. We think that this interpretation could shed new light on some cases and indicate more specific therapeutic avenues.

One of the authors recently lost his mother, who was very old, but this does

not change the extent of the mourning. In the aftermath of her passing, filled by the process of organizing a funeral and the demands of the administrative procedures resulting from the parent's departure, he came across a text that prompted him to reflect on his loss.

In his book *La construction du Sens* (Press, 2010), the author recounted the episode of the funeral of Freud's mother, which Freud did not attend, sending his daughter to represent him.

In a letter to Ferenczi, written on September 16, 1930, Freud said: *It has affected me in a peculiar way, this great event. No pain, no grief, which probably can be explained by the special circumstances—her great age, my pity for her helplessness toward the end; at the same time a feeling of liberation, of release, which I think I also understand. I was not free to die as long as she was alive, and now I am. The values of life will somehow have changed noticeably in the deeper layers.*

I did not go to the funeral, Anna represented me there, too. (Freud, 1960)

Our great problem, as human beings, is to be perishable. We come from the happy union of pre-existing two cells that meet and begin a common path. This path continues for a very variable number of years, to finish one day. It's like that for us but not necessarily for all living beings.

In a context other than psychoanalysis, Rachel Lehotkay describes a biological phenomenon somewhat surprising, the eternity of some jellyfish: *“For thousands of years, man sought to understand where he came from, why he is there, what his fate is. At first, he used religion to help him put a framework to all this; today, he uses science, and tomorrow, something else, no doubt. But it seems that the framework is essential to avoid the anxiety of life, which is true for all living things on this planet, except the Jellyfish Turritopsis Nutricula, the only known immortal living being on the planet. Member of the class of hydrozoans, this jellyfish is native to the Caribbean Sea and measures 4 to 5 mm in diameter. It has the particularity of reverting from the jellyfish stage to the polyp stage, making her theoretically immortal. It thus reverses its aging process. This jellyfish is the only known metazoan case in the entire animal kingdom to transform backward as a “juvenile colony” after reaching maturity sexual, which corresponds to a “solitary” form. Some sea anemones, breeding asexually, can also be considered immortal. Finally, the amoeba, a unicellular organism, divides in two to reproduce and can use germination or a “sexual” exchange in a crisis. The loss of eternity, therefore, seems to be a consequence of the genetic exchange with others...”¹ (Lehotkay, 2020)*

Therefore, the human being, who considers himself the epitome of creation, finds himself in a posture of very uncomfortable vulnerability in the face of death, one that little animals can avoid without issue.

The Oedipus complex, in its essential Freudian description, is not so polished. Indeed, there are echoes of the horde that eats the father and seizes the females.

¹Translation by the authors.

We are in a world of brutality, murder, and cannibalism. We are far from the childhood dream where we want to marry mom, and for this, we kill dad (Saïd, 2011). We could say that Freud is very Kleinian in Totem and Taboo and in other works where he talks about the primitive horde.

“I was therefore tempted to equate the totem-animal with the father, and in fact primitive peoples themselves do this explicitly, by honouring it as the fore-father of the clan. There next came to my help two facts from psycho-analysis, a lucky observation of a child made by Ferenczi, which enabled me to speak of an ‘infantile return of totemism,’ and the analysis of early animal-phobias in children, which so often showed that the animal was a substitute for the father, a substitute on to which the fear of the father derived from the Oedipus complex had been displaced. Not much was lacking to enable me to recognize the killing of the father as the nucleus of totemism and the starting-point in the formation of religion.

*This missing element was supplied when I became acquainted with W. Robertson Smith’s work, *The Religion of the Semites*. Its author (a man of genius who was both a physicist and an expert in biblical researches) introduced the so-called “totem meal” as an essential part of the totemic religion. Once a year the totem animal, which was at other times regarded as sacred, was solemnly killed in the presence of all the members of the clan, was devoured and was then mourned over. The mourning was followed by a great festival. When I further took into account Darwin’s conjecture that men originally lived in hordes, each under the domination of a single powerful, violent and jealous male, there rose before me out of all these components the following hypothesis, or, I would rather say, vision. The father of the primal horde, since he was an unlimited despot, had seized all the women for himself, his sons, being dangerous to him as rivals, had been killed or driven away. One day, however, the sons came together and united to overwhelm, kill, and devour their father, who had been their enemy but also their ideal. After the deed they were unable to take over their heritage since they stood in one another’s way. Under the influence of failure and remorse they learned to come to an agreement among themselves, they banded themselves into a clan of brothers by the help of the ordinances of totemism, which aimed at preventing a repetition of such a deed, and they jointly undertook to forgo the possession of the women on whose account they had killed their father. They were then driven to finding strange women, and this was the origin of the exogamy which is so closely bound up with totemism. The totem meal was the festival commemorating the fearful deed from which sprang man’s sense of guilt (or “original sin”) and which was the beginning at once of social organization, of religion, and of ethical restrictions. (Freud, 1913)*

“[...] the expelled brothers, living in a community, united to overpower their father and, as was the custom in those days, devoured him raw. There is no need to balk at this cannibalism; it continued far into later times. The essential point, however, is that we attribute the same emotional attitudes to these primitive men

that we are able to establish by analytic investigation in the primitives of the present day—in our children. We suppose, that is, that they not only hated and feared their father but also honoured him as a model, and that each of them wished to take his place in reality. We can, if so, understand the cannibalistic act as an attempt to ensure identification with him by incorporating a piece of him.”

(Freud, 1937)

And even in his essentially sexual theory, Freud must recognize a pre-sexual origin in the first of the libidinal phases:

“The first of these is the oral or, as it might be called, cannibalistic pregenital sexual organization. [...] the sexual aim consists in the incorporation of the object—the prototype of a process which, in the form of identification, is later to play such an important psychological part. A relic of this constructed phase of organization, which is forced upon our notice by pathology, may be seen in thumb-sucking, in which the sexual activity, detached from the nutritive activity, has substituted for the extraneous object one situated in the subject’s own body.”

(Freud, 1905)

4. Oedipus and Narcissus

At this point in our writing, it seems appropriate to take a pedagogical detour towards Oedipus revisited by Narcissus, which was the subject of a conference in October 2020 as part of the SIPsyM training (Freléchoz, 2020).

For this, we will narrate in the first person of the speaker.

Oedipus and Narcissus, funny mix! When I was studying a long, long time ago—it’s almost *once upon a time*—Oedipus was the foundation of our learning, the absolute frame of reference of the psyche. There was the “pre-Oedipus” phase and “the Oedipus,” and we had better solve our Oedipus complex or be doomed to public scorn.

Let’s start from there: today, it is clear that the pathologies that we treat in our practice have relatively little to do with “the Oedipus complex” and its avatars. Instead, we have more to do, or rather to fight, with issues rooted in narcissism, in its excesses, or, indeed, its failings. Therefore, it seemed helpful for me to discuss these two terms of the psychoanalytic theory to compare them before attempting a synthesis.

Therefore, I will present them briefly. As a preamble, we will have to distinguish between the myth of Oedipus and the Oedipus complex.

We all know the story of Oedipus, the Greek hero, the child adopted by psychoanalysis, who murdered his father and committed incest with his mother! All of us, flawed humans, are supposed to share with him this same desire—admittedly unconscious, but still—to the point of elevating this story to the status of a complex, the famous Oedipus Complex.

The story of Oedipus is a little different. Oedipus did not know who his birth father was, nor did he know that he was sleeping with his mother. When the truth was revealed to him, he gouged out his eyes. As a result, his two male

children from this union (Eteocles and Polynices) killed each other. His daughter (Antigone) was buried alive because she paid funeral tributes to her brothers.

Let's go back to the beginning of the story. The diviner had warned Laius, Oedipus's father, that his child, had he borne one, would slay him. He married Jocasta, refusing to make love to her, but Jocasta got him drunk and "seduced" him. When their son was born, Laius suspended him by the ankles to a tree to let him die. A shepherd found and saved him, and a royal couple adopted him, raising him as their son. As Oedipus hears the soothsayer's prediction—that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother—he fled them immediately.

We know the rest. In his flight, arriving at the end of a canyon with his chariot, Oedipus meets a man who does not want to give way to him (backing up with a chariot in a canyon is impossible). So, they fight, and the younger man kills the older.

Oedipus continues on his way, and he meets the Sphinx, who asks him THE question: "Who walks on all fours in the morning, on two legs at noon and on three legs in the evening?" Oedipus gives the correct answer—the man—and in doing so, he delivers Thebes from "the plague." Here the word plague has its ancient meaning of "indifferentiation," a situation of confusion where everything is the same, as the illness does not distinguish a person from another. The plague affects everybody so that everyone becomes identical to the other, reverting cosmos chaos. We know that some populations used to kill twins because they could not tell one from the other.

Oedipus is rewarded by becoming king (he restored order), and he marries the queen because her husband is deceased. We know the rest. Jocasta hangs herself when she realizes that she has been sleeping with her son, while Oedipus gouges his eyes, and their children die.

5. The Meaning of the Myth

Let's take the Greek myths as lessons in wisdom, philosophy, or as indications of the risks and temptations that threaten each human in his development. The classical Freudian interpretation is peculiar. Indeed, to accuse Oedipus, this innocent child, under the pretext that he has unconscious desires, is quite rich! More innocent than he would be difficult to imagine. He does everything he can to thwart the prophecy and avoid his parents. To avoid sin, he flees, and he leaves to live his adult life elsewhere.

As we know, in Freud's time, parents were innocent by definition. The discovery of infantile sexuality had already caused a scandal, and therefore questioning the wisdom of adults was not an option. Social consensus relegated children's sexual abuse or mistreatment accounts to the level of unconscious fantasies expressed by "sick" children.

Today, the reading of the Oedipus complex induces me to think that this story, this myth, was primarily intended for parents. Thus, the lesson that we could draw would sound something like:

- Gentlemen: “let your children grow up; one day, they will overtake you.”
- and for you Ladies: “do not try to keep them in your bed; their fate is to impregnate other women!”

Let us now examine the other pole of our reflection, namely the myth of Narcissus and narcissism. So here comes Narcissus: we all know the fate of the “hero” in this myth. His excessive desire to see his image mirrored in the river’s water led him to fall and drown into the very picture of himself. Before his demise, he had seduced several people whom he abandons in great distress.

In everyday language, narcissism means: “love for oneself” or “love for self.” The myth of Narcissus should therefore provide us with a warning in the form of a lesson of life: “Too much love for oneself leads to one’s doom!”. The subtle point to notice here is that Narcissus loves himself less than he loves his own image, and this is the fulcrum of the definition of personality narcissistic disorder.

In psychoanalytic language, the term “narcissism” does not always mean someone who loves himself too much but instead signals an imbalance in constructing an individual’s personality. In some way, they too love their image more than themselves. This imbalance or fault can appear in two different—and entirely opposed—forms:

- either as a feeling of lack or need. An absence, a lack of love, self-esteem, a sense of unworthiness, the feeling of being worthless. During a session with a patient, I called this “shit narcissism.”
- or, on the contrary, as a hypertrophied feeling of one’s worth. The person suffering from it feels that others do not pay enough attention to him and deserves more recognition, care, and consideration. In short, he is a Very Importance Person. I called this “God’s narcissism.”

We must consider “narcissism” as a defensive attitude. Defense is a way for our psyche to face the world surrounding us and is a modality of our “being in the world.” The notion of “defense” is not necessarily negative since it indicates an adaptation to the world, which can be provisional, definitive, rigid, or flexible.

Let’s now turn to how narcissism plays out in building a personality, starting from the beginning, namely the child. At birth, by nature, the child is helpless, without skill or defense, at the mercy of the outside world. Without the other, without an object—or rather a person—to accompany him², he is lost. Or to quote Winnicott: “There’s no such thing as a baby,” to which he then adds: “He just dies!” (Winnicott, 1960)

So, to defend himself, which means coping with distress and helplessness—neoteny, or *Hilfflosigkeit*, according to Freud—the child develops a fantasy (an unconscious or rather a non-conscious idea) of all-powerfulness, a concept of grandiosity which fills the reality, and which helps him to live. In this sense, this

²We use the masculine pronoun he to indicate either a girl or a boy.

defense mechanism is healthy insofar as it helps to survive and to grow. Facing reality would crush a child who did not have this defense, and he could not help but be desperate.

The child convinces himself that he self-generated himself and created the world (the proof is that, when he closes his eyes, the world ceases to exist), that only when he cries, we take care of him. Then, when he's had enough, he makes everything disappear and falls asleep! The quality of the adequacy of the mother-object, her ability to adapt to the child's needs, gives the child the time necessary for its maturation so that it can gradually renounce all-mightiness and face reality.

And this is where an essential part of the child's development happens. This play—that here we intend in the sense of the space that must exist between two gears for them to run smoothly—is a functional play between his narcissism or his idea of omnipotence and the confrontation with reality that makes no favors!

The mother-object adequacy strengthens the feeling of omnipotence in her child as she strives to meet the child's needs as quickly as possible, and she dedicates entirely to him—at first. This time, alas, will not last. Gradually, evaluating the child's reactions as best as she can, the mother-object will introduce a latency period, delaying her response to the child's need. In short, she will introduce frustration.

Therefore, the child experiences a series of disillusionments that make him realize that he is not alone in the world, that the others exist, that mom loves other objects—the father and his siblings if he has any—and that the world does not obey to him. What a job, what an effort to accept reality for what it is! This adaptation effort is what we mean by psychic work: things are not natural and do not happen spontaneously! When all this delicate “adjustment” doesn't work, when the gap between expectation and care is not adequate, the construction of narcissism fails.

This “failure” can have diverse consequences. The child's sensitivity, vitality, or unknown components like the strength of his pulsion all play a role. Children from the same family treated identically will react differently. Ironically, we can draw two opposing guidelines:

- the first is when there is too much early disillusionment, too much failure. The result in adulthood is a feeling of worthlessness: “I am worth nothing,” “I am nothing,” “I am incapable of...”, “The Other is Everything”, “I'm not worth paying attention to,” “adults have better things to do, I come next.”
- the second is when there is not enough “shortage.” Too much presence, too much totality, not enough space for penury. As a result, the child who's now an adult will demand “love”—or whatever he calls it—in the form of a perfect match between his request and the answer of reality. He will ask, and whatever we do, it will never be enough!

Of course, there is a whole spectrum of possible outcomes between the two extremes, but these are the two opposite poles of narcissism.

6. Narcissus before Oedipus

And now, to have Narcissus revisit Oedipus, let us resume the development of the construction of the psyche.

The two aspects are exposed one after the other only for didactical reasons. In reality, they are simultaneous, so let's see how these two elements combine or oppose. In the child's development, the question of narcissism, i.e., his adaptation to reality, seems to me to take precedence. The "good" narcissism would be a healthy balance between me and others, accepting my place in the group and among my siblings. Therefore, I am not "Everything," I am not "Nothing," the "Others" exist, and there is reality—with its physical and legal laws—from which I cannot escape.

For the rest of his psychic development, the child will face "Oedipal" questions of the type that the Sphinx posed to Oedipus. Oedipus's response considers the human being, "who walks on all fours, (childhood) on two legs (adult) then on three (old man)."

Therefore, *accessing* the "Oedipus" means accepting to confront the following three questions:

- we have been generated (by whom and why?)
- there are generations (implying the passage of time with its corollary, death!)
- there are two different sexes (why I only have one of the two!!)

Facing these questions means realizing and accepting the idea that we did not create ourselves, that there are little ones and grown-ups and that, for the moment, we are among the former, and that there are two sexes and we have only one of the two!

Access does not mean finding answers but accepting confrontation with our human reality.

And when I say "accept," we must understand that this acceptance is not final and that we will ask questions—these questions—for the rest of our life. In this sense, one can wonder if it is even possible to solve the Oedipus complex.

Indeed, suppose we have overcome as far as possible all the pitfalls of childhood development: accept to grow up, recognize that we need the other to experience our sexuality, and rejoice in discovering new aspects of life while we age. Yet, even in that case, life takes care of confronting us with questions that are sure to undermine our so dearly acquired self-esteem.

Simplifying them, we can present them as follows:

- How can I accept to be the offspring of "those" parents? "Haven't I been abducted from a royal family and entrusted to these peasants who pretend to educate me?"
- As a teenager with the discovery of sexuality: "Isn't it annoying to have to go through the sex of another person to experience my sexuality?"
- As an adult: "Realizing that as an adult I can't do everything!"
- As a parent: "But my children are only that? What a disappointment, I who believed that..."

- Later, with old age starting to take its toll: “Already? So early? With all these young people who overtake me, run faster, know more things...”

So, narcissism, this primary defense of ours against reality—an often harsh reality—continues to manifest itself and stir our psyche throughout our lives. No one is safe from this confrontation at one point or another in life. So, a sign of mental equilibrium—provisional and unstable like any equilibrium, lest we fall into frozen and immobile stability—is the ability to reconquer day after day this balance, as a compromise between our narcissism (the feeling of existence) and Oedipus (the acceptance of reality).

To conclude, even if I am convinced that

“Is a fool he who refuses reality,”

I must admit that

“Whoever accepts it is really insane!” (Heller, 2004)

Leaving the “exposé” of one of the authors, let’s pick up the thread again and come back to “we.”

The Freudian horde is not, or does not reach the level of, a chaotic deconstruction. Even in the description of the cannibalistic meal of the brothers who have just killed the father, it remains far from the physical fear found in panic attacks. Let’s not forget that Freud has not been analyzed by “the other,” and he keeps “at a distance” his link with the other, the primary other, the feminine other, that of the belly and the entrails.

Going back to the dream described at the beginning, we see that sexual slavery feels like deadly slavery, at least potentially. Indeed, who has absolute power has a right beyond that to use the other’s body just for sexual pleasure, and this is the right to torture and, ultimately, to kill.

The narcissistic pervert knows very well that the ultimate power over another being is not to derive pleasure from him but to take, or better, ruin, his life.

This right is the right to annihilate the other. But who holds this power over us? The mother and, a little later in our path, the father. The creators of life are also its destroyers. Maybe it’s this fear of annihilation the root of Oedipus. This fear of not being able to exist is what lurks in the depths of the Oedipus complex, which Freud has named, Mélanie Klein has explored in their duplicity (the good and the evil breast), and Jung has defined as archetypes, double, and opposite.

Isn’t the individuation process nothing more than a fragile attempt to find the unity of the individual who will always be a double and torn creature? The analyst of two of the authors (Abraham, 1994) said that we must descend into the unconscious as we descend into a well, and the analyst holds the line, or the rope, to give us the courage to enter the darkness and dampness of the spring, as this well is indeed a source. It is also a buried phallus, or else the phallus is an inverted vagina, and not the opposite as Freud would like us to believe. Indeed, these two beautiful organs must meet each other to generate, and before this act, there is only the Great Nothing, the source to which we will, when old, come back.

In our clinical practice, we have observed, without statistics or supporting studies, that “panicators”—i.e., those suffering from panic attacks—have often experienced threats of miscarriage in the maternal womb, sometimes in the very early stages of their intrauterine development, or their mother had significant stressful experiences during pregnancy. Thus, sometimes you must ask patients to question their mothers, who suddenly remember situations never mentioned before, denied, or simply forgotten in everyday life.

This descent into the well, well of memories this time, must be approached with calm and patience, waiting for the right time—otherwise, the patients don’t understand what we are talking about—and it is of great help in treating severe anxieties.

And then this mother who brought us into the world, on whom we are so dependent, must move away from us by force of circumstances, or more precisely, she will move away anyway because she has other things to do and must resume the path of her life. The third party, the father, arrives to take back his wife. Still, the idea of the desire of a marital/sexual union with the mother, at that stage of the child development, seems so remote and, above all, so naively oriented to explain only the evolution of the little boy that we are obligated to review the Oedipus complex in more Kleinian terms.

The images of the good and evil mother, one nurturer the other genital, mirror those of the good and evil breast, nurturing and destructive, but also of the good and evil penis, generator and destroyer. These representations lead to archetypal Jungian bipolar visions, between which the newborn oscillates, devouring or devoured. Thus, Oedipus could represent our fear of Nothingness felt like the fear of the Woman/Mother/Earth. Couldn’t Oedipus be the image of need, coming just after the previous phase—a little more towards the exit of the well, to refer to our metaphor—to separate from this powerful creature who has come between us and the void?

Mélanie Klein places Oedipus much earlier than Freud: she writes, “*In my opinion, the Oedipus complex arises in the first year of life and begins to develop in both sexes alike.*” (Klein, 2018)

Mélanie Klein tries to *navigate*—no disrespect intended since her position in the psychoanalytic world of the time was complex and courageous—between Freud’s Oedipus (genital, she will say and not phallic) and “her” Oedipus. She tries, and we understand why, not to burn the bridge between her vision of Oedipus and that of the Freudians, Anne Freud included.

She says that “*In my opinion, the sexual and emotional development of boys and girls includes *from the most tender childhood* (in italics in the text), genital sensations and tendencies which constitute the first stages of the positive and reversed Oedipus complex. They are felt under the supremacy of oral libido and mingle with desires and fantasies urethral and anal. The libidinal stages partly overlap from the first months of life... I think that little children of both sexes feel desires for their mother and their father and that they have unconscious knowledge of the vagina as well as the penis... In both sexes, the superego*

appears during the oral phase... the very first internalized object, the mother's breast, forms the basis of the superego... The very first feelings of guilt, in one sex as in the other, come from the sadistic oral desire to devour the mother, first place the breasts" (Klein, 2018)

This passage tells us that superego and guilt happen very precociously and have as object the creature on which our survival has depended and depends. Even if the famous phrase of Ernst Haeckel (1866) "ontogeny recapitulates the phylogeny" has been widely—and rightly—criticized, it remains illuminating. Since the "birth of sex," the continuation of the species' life depends on mating and reproductive strategies. But "before" getting there, there is the struggle for pure survival. And this is true both phylogenetically and ontogenetically. Before sex, the only "concern" was survival, as this increases the number of cellular divisions or viral replications, and therefore evolutionary success. But also, ontogenetically, before being able to reproduce, before even facing the question of the search for a partner, you must come to sexual maturity, survive until there.

We believe that this generates an "absolute necessity for survival" and a "terror mortis" which persists beyond the fear of our individual death and which is passed onto us by what Jung called "the collective unconscious of our species." To be sure, "pulvis es et in pulverem reverteris³," but in this little in-between of time under the sun, we must—in the most imperative and selfish way—do "our duty" and not precipitate the collective end. This is because the survival of the species is the only "eternity" that we know, and losing it is intolerable, not rationally, but "biologically." In religion, this translates into the fear of the "mors secunda," as Dante said, death of the soul, damnation, and hell.

Below sex, with all its complexity, in the depths of the soul, there may be this fear of returning to the "corruption" of the inanimate world without having fulfilled our duty towards life. The Egyptian gods are indeed made of stone; they live in a world from which, for better or for worse, we want to move away to undertake individuation, which is ephemeral, but to which we hold onto ever so firmly.

So, even when sex is not here or is not there yet, every new being comes from another living being. The father will arrive very late in evolution, but "the body of which we come from," the mother, has always been present.

The mother's right over the person she has borne may also be similar to the state's power over the individual. The state is a form of protection of the individual, benevolent in theory, even if not always in practice. Thus, we are probably moving away from the individual's personal sphere to move into the social context and, at a deeper level, beyond the individual unconscious and to touch the collective unconscious sources that generate society itself.

7. And Even before Narcissus

Our goal with this "look at Oedipus's depths," somewhat embryonic and incom-

³You are dust and to dust you shall return.

plete, is to open a parenthesis for the readers. We do not pretend to have provided clear explanations but rather to have partially opened a door on lawns still to be cleared, on abandoned fields that we could turn into gardens. Or perhaps not. Sometimes reading a useless article helps us look at the weeds, those plants that grow in the “wrong” place, without touching or changing anything. Leaving disorder somewhere helps to keep order elsewhere.

And coming back after rereading and taking a distance from our text.

We no longer know who said that “thought is a circle, which when it comes back on itself, tries to rise to become a spiral.” So, we suggest readers come full circle together.

As important as it may be to know when Oedipus began, we are not sure that the “partition” of the construction of the psyche in these terms still has a meaning.

We would like to try the exercise of picturing the stages that a newborn must go through before finding his place in the human community. Let’s start again from Oedipus and descend into its depths. We will have to distinguish between the group, the others, the individual, the instinct, and the pulsion. We begin with the most advanced. Oedipus, at its roots, is a group, tribal, communitarian, societal movement. This group stages murder and the totemic meal, and this implies a community organized around specific rules. The individual is constituted as part of a group, a clan, a family, a tribe, or a nation. Léo Ferré (Ferré & Liégeois, 2013) says that “the disorder is the order without the authority.”

So maybe Oedipus, the Ten Commandments, the place of man and woman in society, Genesis, and other myths, are a form of power aiming to bring some order to the original chaos, or at least attempts to.

As we have attempted to show above, the previous phase for the individual would be the step of narcissism. The individual, aware of himself, asks himself the question of his value, his merit in connection with others, to whom he claims something, or to whom he feels indebted of something. The question of his value, his importance, its place arises here. The other people are considered mere mirrors.

He measures himself, evaluates himself, evaluates others, and seeks the place that can be his own in interactions. He is not necessarily aware of the group around him. Before that, the subject must have crossed another stage of his evolution. Once the subject has a vague awareness of himself, he must meet the Other. An author said, as a joke, that “a paranoid is an individual who believes that there are two entities in the world—him and the others—and his problem is that the others are much more numerous than him.”

We come back to the double polarity of Narcissus and Oedipus, between the feeling of existence and the acceptance of reality: could we suppose that Narcissus and Oedipus are the two poles of the archetype of development? Probably yes.

Here the Jean Bergeret’s (Bergeret, 1984) concept of *Fundamental Violence*

seems entirely appropriate. The author postulates that at the beginning, the relationship of the newborn to his parents is exempt from hate or love and is governed by the law of “Me or the Other.” This law is also reactivated in the parents and reminds me of some westerns where two individuals decide that the city is too small for both of them and that one has to die to make way for the other! The rear tracking shot of the camera, which shows the extent of the land, makes this logic absurd, so vast is the Earth! The example of Romus and Romulus, who are said to have been abandoned and then adopted by a she-wolf, speaks to us here. But we are not sure that adoption by the she-wolf would have been enough to keep them alive. It’s because they “agreed” to suckle from her breasts that they have given themselves the right to live. We could call this stage of development a state of raw instinct. The child would be without desire and without hatred, just driven by a will to live.

Before this period of the child’s development—and surely we will not be able to go further back—there could be a phase characterized by the concepts developed by José Bleger (Bleger, 1985) in his work *Symbiose et Ambiguïté*. He postulates that the newborn is not isolated from an outside world he would later meet, but rather that he is immersed in a sort of indifferentiation between him and the world, hence the notion of symbiosis. The question he raises is: “*we do not have any longer to seek how the child, throughout his development, relates to the outside world, but how a type of (undifferentiated) relationship changes to achieve, in the best case, the development of identity and a sense of reality [...]*.” According to this view, the child, at first, would be undifferentiated from his environment. However, at the end of this phase, he starts situating himself as an emerging subject, and this activates the next stage of his development, namely the period of Fundamental Violence we have described before.

8. Conclusion

We started from our clinical experience and intuition to suppose the phase before the Oedipean one as a period of pure violence and survival instinct that still lurks in the “Oedipus’s depths” and becomes apparent in the sexual manifestations. We have accompanied our observations with both literary and psychoanalytical references. Furthermore, we have explored possible descriptions of the periods before the supposed narcissistic one drawing from ideas by Bergeret and Bleger. Finally, we have explained how these intuitions can shed light on problems that we encounter in our practice and that, according to us, can be ascribed to death anguish and survival instinct. We conclude by proposing Oedipus and Narcissus as the two polarities of the same archetype of development, one of the poles being the unbridled vital instinct and the other the acceptance of reality with its norms, laws, and obligations.

This is something worth considering! And if really “thought is a circle, which when it comes back on itself, tries to rise to become a spiral,” we also must accept, now, to end.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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