THE UNFULFILLED PROTOMENTAL AS THE FOUNDATION OF THOUGHT, SYMBOLIZATION AND LEARNING DISORDERS

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INTRODUCTION

This study arose from the clinical experience with HIV positive, orphaned patients, sheltered in an institution, who were attended by us, using the Ester Bick Method of Infant Observation and the Diagnostic Evaluation and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. We noticed in them immense difficulties in the area of symbolization, of language acquisition, of learning as well as thought disorders. Despite the very fragmented conditions of their psychic reality and other considerably jeopardized areas in the life of these children, we were surprised by the receptivity and capacity for structural changes that they showed and which we endeavour to reflect on, and to understand, in our psychoanalytical investigations.

After a year’s work, our hypothesis is that these orphans had possibly undergone the emotional experiences of the lack of a thinking, aesthetic and transforming breast; of privation of the maternal function; of the infinite search of a content seeking a continent. We think that the pre-conception is unable to find an object, there is no penetration, no transforming α-function. Thus the pre-conception loses vitality, there is no noise; rather, there is the silence of the grave, in a passivity of those for whom life holds no meaning.

Let us further explain our hypothesis: the disorders in thought, in symbolization, and in learning are due to the undeveloped protomental, which does not structure the mental space as a continent, because of an abysmal privation. Thus, holes in the mental tissue appear, delimited by agglutinated sensorial residues, which instead of being articulated, remain as worthless residues. In

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this way, we differentiate these disorders from neuroses, psychoses, defensive autism and from (-K) phenomena.

Furthermore, we put forward that the protomental – the unborn aspects of the mind – demand the presence of an object, which we could offer through the observations and the sessions of psychoanalytical psychotherapy, by means of the transforming α-function of the analytical link.

The experience of an emotional contact, which these patients could enjoy in their experiences with a psychoanalyst, showed an immediate reaction, with clear improvements in the cognitive area, in somatic vulnerability and in language acquisition. We observed that when contained by a continent – in this case, the analyst – the process of symbolization was encouraged so as to carry out possible transformations, in the direction of (O). The lack of α-function was remedied, depending on the capacity for pictorializing and representability of the analytical dyad.

The alert presence of this other was fundamental on the way to creating an able-to-mind, indicating the importance of the qualified other for the conception of the human psyche. This qualified other was the psychoanalyst, with his/her capacity for rêverie, for modulating anguish and for transforming what was unborn, devitalized, in a state of pre-conception, mnemonic images devoid of pictorial form and without the capacity for representation.

**PROTOMENTAL**

“Open your eyes and you will see it is darkness of the womb” (Bion, 1979, p. 2)

For Bion (1961), the protomental system is the one in which the physical and psychical are undifferentiated. It is the matrix whence the phenomena arise that originally appear to be discontinuous feelings, only barely associated with each other. He maintains that the concept of a protomental system, together with the theories of basic assumptions, could be used to offer a new focus on physical illness, and especially the so-called psychosomatic illnesses. To explain the destination of the basic assumptions that are inactive, he postulates the existence of a protomental system.

Bion expanded Klein’s genius vis-à-vis the origins of psychic life to include the protomental dimension as an open model for fertile research, based on clinical reality and which transcends, through imaginative conjectures, to the dark regions of the mystery of the human mind. In the history of psychoanalysis, Freud tried to get even closer to the hard rock of the psyche, pointing out phylogenetic phantasies and never discarding the importance of an individual’s pre-history,
coagulated in the structural unconscious. Symington (1993) suggests that the protomental system prefigures the notion of \( \beta \)-elements, that Bion would later describe.

Meltzer (1978) sets up a parallel between the protomental system and primary narcissism. The protomental system holds the most primitive parts of the *self*. These are parts of the personality that think with the body, whose functioning is close to the laws of neuropsychology (Meltzer, 1986). Bick, Tustin and Meltzer ventured to conceptualize the clinical findings of the phenomena that precede the classic schizoid-paranoid position, that is, those prior to object-relations, that presuppose the differentiation subject/object and Freudian secondary identification. In these states of indifferentiation, we are only authorized to conceptualize primary identification as that prior to the object cathexis, therefore, prior to the subject/object differentiation.

Among us in São Paulo, Célia F. Korbivicher (2004) contributed with the concept of autistic transformations, highlighting the realm of the senses in the beginnings of mental life. The notion of the protomental apparatus is fertile ground for conceptual fruit, with Bion himself referring to it, much later (1976), as a soma-psychotic level of mental life.

Meltzer (1986) goes on to interpret the protomental system as a representative of the nominative non-symbolic, the factual exterior, the quantitative; in the other extreme, the mental system where the following are to be found: the internally driven, the emotional, the qualitative and the aesthetic. Between both of these, \( \alpha \)-function, the process of transforming into symbols. According to this author, in the protomental system, where a primitive level of mental life exists, there is a degree of splitting and severe idealization of the self. If this severity is not modulated by good-enough experiences, the tendency is for this system to remain split off from the personality structures that develop together with language. Despite the splitting, the protomental system exerts great influence on the personality in view of the excessive anxiety emanating from it: catastrophic anguish, anguish of precipitation, of liquefaction the realm of the nameless terror.

According to Grotstein (2004), the protomental system is a proto-organization: the mother-baby system comprises an indistinguishable unity, but at the same time, they are separate. This is a paradox. The aspect of being separate is what registers the experiences. The trauma takes place when something happens before the fetus or the baby are in a condition to metabolize the experience, through representation, symbolization, dream, personification, capacity for play.

He goes further when he states that the first object of the baby is neither the mother nor the breast: it is the placenta. Not as an object that is going to be part of the baby’s reality, but as a continuous delivery service, without interruption. The relationship with the mother differs from that with the placenta and with the breast. The mother is the object that sustains, but as a background object, mysterious, neither seen or known, but whose presence is taken for granted; in contrast the
placenta or breast object is visible. This experience of sustaining becomes part of the baby’s mind and being.

We agree with Zimerman (2004) when he emphasizes that Bion did not work enough on the links between his discovery of the protomental system and Freud’s classic structural mental model. However, it seems to us that the protomental can be rooted in the Id concept from the second Freudian topic, as in the classic model of neurosis. Fetal impressions can leave a series of inscriptions on the fetus’ mental life, which, in the best of cases, can become a configuration of thing and appear through dreams, artistic creation, etc.

It is in this system that, like foreign bodies producing the most varied perturbations, the experiences of some traumatic situations are deposited, which, due to the degree of violence and intrusion they possess, do not achieve representation.

The crucial point is that the impact that the privation of the maternal function has on the child is to perpetuate the structuring psychic abandonment, potentializing it until it becomes the trauma to be compulsively repeated. The most painful abandonment of the human being is the abandonment of the non-representation (Botella, 1997). We agree with Botella (2001) that the trauma should be understood in its negativity: a violent and brusque absence of topics, like a rupture in the mental apparatus, provoking the collapse of the mental functions. Based on Levy (2003), in our clinical practice, we proved Botella’s affirmation vis-à-vis this brutal disorganization that comes from the absence of sense and we repeat the mystic, transcendental question of Christ on the cross, ‘Father, why hast thou abandoned me?’ This brings us to the question engraved in our heart by our patients who question why and for what purpose they were born. In other words, the violence of abandonment is configured by the lack of an external object that gives meaning. Therefore, the question of representation and symbolization remains at the core of the problem of trauma, since it is the other who invests life with meaning. This means we are beyond desire and fantasy, we are in the land of abandonment, of the threat of non-integration of the self. However, we emphasize the need to create a self, before it can fulfil a function, such as giving meaning to the experience of trauma.

The protomental is not just the presence of the archaic: it is the field of potential, with a capacity to evolve and develop by means of the analytic experience. Going deep into the atavistic roots of the constitution of the psyche, we would like to emphasize that these dark regions do not necessarily point to developmental disorders; in these regions also lie the potential of artistic creation, the raw material that makes up dreams and human achievement, in a continuous process of coming into being. While the idea of pre-natal is circumscribed to a chronological dimension, the protomental is a structure where the seeds of mental life are housed. These primordial levels of the
psyche are reached through imaginative conjectures. Thus, we can consider proto-emotions not as archaic remains but as potentialities to be transformed into pre-conceptions in an evolutionary process of growth, in search of realization.

**TECNIQUE**

“Poor body; poor mind. If we remember that one derives from the other, it is almost surprising that they cannot live in harmony and that one considers itself superior to the other.” (Bion, 1967)

The challenge is to make thinkable what could be enclosed in cloisters, or dispersed in these patients.

The α-dream of analysts – a continuous form of processing emotions – is a relational process. This type of dream allows us to transform what we find in analytical settings into ideograms, which are sensorial forms, which house non-sensorial experiences. The analyst who dreams makes the process of reparation and the development of the α-function possible, unfolds in the patient the perspective of developing thinking and the capacity to use it in the contact with him/herself.

In a helicoidal movement of comings and goings, the psychoanalytic experience favours the birth of that which has not yet been born, that nestles in the protomental system where, besides the pre-natal, there are thoughts without thinker and wild intuitions. Sapienza (2004), paraphrasing Pirandello, says that instead of characters in search of an author, they are feelings and parts of the body in search of a character to make them incarnate. Klein (1930) discovered that toys can be used to personify internal objects. Bion, using the resource of fiction, wrote Memories of the Future (1979) to voice the existence of distinct aspects of the personality, incarnate in their characters, as a way of saying what simply would not be possible in traditional scientific language.

Bion (1962) proposes a model in which the patient is a fetus to whom the mother’s emotions are communicated but for whom the stimulus to the emotions and its source are unknown. We can understand the fetus as a model for fetal thoughts, that is, thoughts as yet without psychic birth; this is related to the idea of an embryonic mind, which is evolving. Birth is understood not as the origin but as the point of insertion.

Psychoanalytical play involves expanding the psychoanalytical method used in the clinical practice with children. We can understand dreams, models and personification as equivalent tools to toys, for they are mediators and have a modulating power over mental pain. They can help to find the point of insertion between psychic reality and sensorial forms, through which this reality is expressed.
Both the α-dream and personification allow the selected fact to generate meanings to be found. They are detoxifying resources, that due to the level of mediation and/or play, harmonize with a non-saturated state of mind (Cortiñas, 2004).

In psychoanalytical technique, the art consists of the analyst complementing his/her psychoanalytically trained intuition with the transformation of concepts that inhabit his/her mind in pre-conceptual thought. Interpretation is a conjectural game that condenses science and art.

According to Zimmerman (2004), it is Bion who brings the reality of the instinct and fantasies closer to the external reality, by considering the mother to be real and concrete. According to him, an analyst never substitutes a mother, but works with the patient to fill empty spaces, by means of the maternal function, so that the protomental may gain pictorial form.

To exercise the function of an adequate continent, that is, an object capable of giving form to the protomental, the qualities of the analyst firstly presuppose that he is available to receive the load of the patient’s anxiety. It is also supposed that s/he can hold it inside, sheltering it, so as to give meaning: meaning and a name to these emotional experiences that are wordless. This requires active patience, that involves respect for the patient’s time, besides an acute capacity for listening, that allows the recognition of micro-signals of his/her improvement. Zimmerman emphasizes that being continent is an active function, quite distinct from being a recipient.

Grotstein (2004) affirms that to go on believing, the analyst needs to know where s/he is, the position s/he occupies and needs to speak the same language as the patient. What is important in the psychoanalytical situation is the emotional experience dyad.

In another study which emerged from our clinical experience (Lisondo et al., 2005), in the light of the revitalization of theoretical concepts that inspire the first chapter of this article, the question of technique needs to be reviewed based on the demands of clinical praxis. We emphasize that, unlike classical psychoanalysis, with mental orphanhood it is essential to move:

- “From the Unconscious to the Id, mysterious unrepessed region of the mind, constituted by primary repression, that lies on the border with the soma, in the second Freudian theory of the psyche, very much before the model of neurosis, and, therefore, before secondary repression;

- From interpretation to construction. It is not a question of making the unconscious conscious, nor of filling mnemonic gaps. It is about building the foundations of the mental apparatus, the continent, the plot. To edit rather than re-edit, by means of a special grammar that cannot be repeated. The task is the construction of the mind as a
continent, thus creating the Ego and Superego (Lutemberg, 2001), with the analyst as the semantic catalyser.

- From the instinct to the instinct with the object, understood in its mysterious functions, in the poietic of the inspiring human encounter, driven by Eros, giving meaning to existence as it gives value to life, together with a love of the truth. It is not an object reduced to satisfying the instinct, in the libidinal trajectory, in its bare necessity. The object is another human, a sexual being, an interpreter of the world.

- From neutrality to ideological neutrality, bestowing special value on the link, with a live, affective presence in the person of the impassioned analyst in a specific and transcendental encounter (Zygouris, 2003; Moguillansky, 1999; Bianchedi, 1999).”

Inspired by Levy (2003), and basing ourselves on the conceptual expansion of Bion, Baranger and Ferro with respect to the concept of analytical field – which brings a dual view of the psychoanalytical situation – we forward that this view leads to a considerable amplification of the geography within which the processes of symbolization, representation and pictorializing take place, as what happens in the analytical field begins to be taken into consideration, not just in the intrapsychic levels, but also in the intersubjectivity of the analytical experience.

That amplification is fundamental for the type of patients we are referring to, since in this way we understand that the analytical experience can help them in the task of representation. Recalling Marucco (1998) we are not simply in the via de levare but we are also in the via de porre. In the former, we work with resistance so that the unconscious images and representations can emerge; in the latter, we put our affective images and pictograms (Barros, 2002) to lend meaning to the representational void. According to Botella (2001), we use the free association of the patient and the suspended attention of the analyst to obtain access to the web of representations; to reach the non-representable, it is necessary to resort to the construction of the analytical field so that the transformations of the primitive mnemonic marks into “almost hallucinatory” images can emerge. Thus, they may be transformed into shared emotions and feelings.

We agree with Levy (2003) when he states that the concept of the transformation of the representation of thing into representation of word, similar to the transformation of β-elements into α, refers to the representation of the non-represented; that which awaits representation.

**CLINICAL MATERIAL**

Vignettes of infant observation, following Esther Bick’s method.

Carlos – 17 months old, at the beginning of the observation
1st observation
Around 50 minutes after the start, without a sound but with Carlos very active. The carer starts to talk to him again, Carlos comes in my direction saying “mã-mã-mã”; I feel an impact, a mixture of surprise and pain, but before I can recover, the carer puts him on her lap saying: “Ih, he calls everyone like that...”

3rd observation
Carlos is left in his cot and when the carer leaves, he follows her with his eyes. He sits down, moves his feet, stretches his legs and lies down; while he moves his body, he utters sounds, self-absorbed. Suddenly his eyes meet mine, he moves his head, he tries to find the crack in the bars (of his cot) and repeats this movement several times. He plays with his legs in the air, looking up he says: “mã-mã-mã, mã-mã-mã, pá-pá-pá”. He looks at me again and hold out his hand in my direction.

9th Observation
The carer who is looking after him leaves the room, saying she is going to the bathroom. The other carer, with a child on her lap, also leaves the room. I am alone with Carlos. He climbs up and down the playpen, with his strong and agile little hands. He comes in my direction, looking firmly at me, first pointing with his finger, then touching my hand with the tip of his index finger, he makes very soft and delicate sounds with his mouth. At that moment, the carer returns, sits on the floor by my side and says: “Why is it that he says pá-pá-pá when he has never had one (a father)?”. Carlos continues saying “pá-pá-pá”, “pá-pá-pá”, mã-mã-mã” “mã-mã-mã”(I feel moved, my skin prickles, my chest and eyes burn; I need to tense my body to keep control). I want to interrupt the observation and talk to the carer.

Commentaries
Carlos was referred for the Observation by the institution, and presented as a “naughty child, who doesn’t stay still but doesn’t yet talk”. The beginning of the Observation caused an impact: on the one hand, a lack of sounds, on the other, Carlos’ expressiveness, through his intense corporal activity and movement. The Observer felt admiration and pleasure when coming into contact with what she interpreted mentally as captivating vitality, vivacity and tenacity, in the search for the understandable object; silent voices would suggest a desperate struggle for meaning.
What is more, the active and exploratory manifestations found no resonance and remained in a sensorial dispersion, unable to find the integrating function of the self, due to the lack of consensuality, as a process of incipient symbolization.

Looking at these vignettes, we asked ourselves what Carlos was doing when he uttered “mã-mã-...pá-pá-pá!” Who was he calling when, as pointed out by the carers “He never had a mother or a father, he came days old to the Shelter and nobody ever sought him out...”

Silvia Neborak (2003), at the start of the Observation and of our Project, identified a pre-conception of the maternal and paternal function, when Carlos looked insistently for a mother and a father.

In a conversation with Grotstein (2004), he commented that Carlos knew that he needed a mother, showing in these vignettes the strategies he used to link up. As he said, the paradox present in the mother-fetus relationship – to be indistinguishable and at the same time separate – results in the mother being registered in the protomind as a mysterious presence, which sustains. The experience of oneness, the fundamental matrix for the formation of the mind, is necessary; it is in this experience that the link is created. Therefore, when Carlos touches, points to, smiles and babbles, he is seeking to realize this pre-conception.

Furthermore, Grotstein says that the α-function of the baby that sends signals and not symbols, messages in pre-lexical language for his mother to interpret, if she is in synchronicity with him. In the Institution, albeit surrounded by people, Carlos did not have available a continent capable of taking him in and understanding the meaning of his search, thus not creating the conditions for this experience to take place; in other words, the real external object, capable of carrying out the function of “a psychic shelter for mental life” (Lisondo et al., 2005), was missing.

We thought that, by constituting an emotional-relational field in the Observation, a mental setting was being set up to receive the protomental, that expressed itself in a lot of movement, considerable searching and babbling of Carlos as he sought pictorial form. His intent look arose as the link, when he felt himself to be seen and sought (2nd vignette).

The vignettes reveal the presence of the function of rêverie in the Observer’s mind, who promoted the realization of the experience of at-one-ment. Carlos, on being watched, valorised, admired, listened to, in other words, psychically invested, was beginning to appropriate the meaning of the linking experience and the significative language so that the human relationship could be born.
Excerpt from the 1st Session of the psychoanalytical psychotherapy of Thiago – 5 years old.
“Despair”

(He begins the session with sounds that remind me of the desperate howling of a wolf, very sad sounds that develop into music.)

Thiago arrives 5 minutes late, accompanied by his carer.
I am waiting and, before entering the room, Thiago puts his head out of the window and then hides when I greet him.
This time he comes along with me easily and asks me, looking at me:
-Tia (“Auntie” - a common Brazilian form for children to address women who are not their mothers), why do I come here every day?
-I think you would like to come here every day. I want to make an agreement with you that we will have this meeting every Wednesday at this time.
Thiago goes to the box and picks up the Sellotape that he had used in the previous session. He shows difficulty in handling it and gives up, opting for the masking tape.
I tell him that the box and the material will be there for us to work together and that this material is his alone and I hand him the key with the padlock.
Thiago cuts up pieces of the …tape and puts them around the table.
While doing this, he begins to emit sounds:
....col, col, col, cul cul
...cucucul, culcucul, culcucul, culcul
These are sounds of despair.
These sounds are increasing and I think that it seems to be a dog barking or a wolf-cub howling.
He goes on with these sounds and says:
-The sticking plaster has finished (in Portuguese, sticking plaster is often referred to as a “curative”)
Not Sellotape.
-But for you it seems to be a “curative”.
He looks at me thoughtfully and after a while says:
-Yes, it does.
He sneezes and says:
-Health...amen.
I tell him:
-I think the curative you expect from me is to take care of your hurts and to have health.
It calls my attention that on this particular day, his eyes do not show that alteration. I observe that the left eyelid is more closed than the right.

7 During the period of assessment, I noticed a lack of coordination in the movement of one eye, wavering and a droopy eyelid which led me to suspect a serious neurological disorder.
He looks fixedly at me and says very proudly:

-You are looking at everything I’m doing.
-And you like to be looked at and have me here with you.

He takes the paint and leaves it.

He takes a sheet of paper, coloured pencil and coloured chalk and goes on making his sounds.

-Cu, cucucul, cucucucu...

The music has a very sad sound.

I ask about this music.

He says it is a little song and goes on...

-Uu, Uu, Uu.

-I know how to “namorar” (this has a variety of meanings: to date, to court, to perform the acts associated with a sexual relationship)

-I know how to kiss a lot.

-Now it’s serious

-Very, very, very.

He continues singing, gradually getting louder and clearer as he draws.

-I know how to “namorar”.

-I know how to kiss well.

I say to him:

-You began to sing a song which gets clearer to me and you want me to know a serious thing: that you want to love and be loved.

He uses gouache paint and a green pencil for his drawing, and then scribbles over it in red.

-A woman, a house, a dog and the dog’s food.

-You arrived and your song sounded like a dog barking, I think you drew this: you as a puppy here by my side, wanting to be given some food.

He spreads the paint intensely.

He tears up the drawing and says “throw it away, it’s ugly”, after having covered it with several layers of ink, soaking the sheet with water and paint.

-I was interested by your painting and your songs but you think the painting is ugly, that it is worthless and because of this, you want to throw it away.

Thiago takes another sheet of paper and says:

-Now I’m going to make a drawing.

He concentrates on this drawing, which is done with coloured pencils, sitting by my side.

There are many pieces of the “curatives” surrounding the table as Thiago draws.

-Today you told me you want to be taken care of and the curatives and I are here for you.
-I'm supposed to write a letter
-And what are you writing in this letter?
-It's for Cássia, from the shelter.
-Besides the letter, there is a drawing that you are doing very carefully. What did you draw?
-It's a cave.
-Ah, there must be something inside the cave, what can it be?
-An animal...a dinosaur. Does a dinosaur have a tail?
He stops in order to listen to a noise.
-What's that? He asks apprehensively.
-I thought it was a wolf...he calms down.
He takes the drawing, folds it and puts it inside another sheet of paper, rather like an envelope. On top of this envelope he puts the box of gouache paints.
-mm mm mm
-nnnn neném(baby) neném
-neném, mamãe (mummy) neném
-mmnmnm
-mamãe mamãe I tried
-I tried, I tried
-Mamãe, neném
-You call
-Mamãe, mãe( mother)
-I love you
-To love
-Mamãe
-Mamãe I want you to love/for love
-You made a new song and tell me how you miss your mother to love and be loved.
He takes the crayon box and puts in inside the box. Each one of the crayons falls through the hole, so that the crayon box remains empty.
-How can I put this (in), everything keeps falling out?
-Your question is how can you hold inside of you the love you need so much.
-Mamãe, I want you to love.
He repeats this line very loudly, repeatedly, increasingly loudly.
It is a sad and desperate chant.
He takes the letter and the drawing and says that it has dried and he is taking it home.
-We can keep the letter and the drawing of the dinosaur in the box. Everything we do here we shall store in the box, you cannot take this material away, because it is the material we use to talk about here.

-But I’m going to take it away!

He walks towards the door, puts the letter inside his trousers as if I couldn’t see this happening. I hold out a hand to him asking him to help me put the letter away.

He shouts:

-But I want to take it away!

-Perhaps you are afraid of leaving your dinosaur here.

-I want to take it!

He hands me the drawing and I put them in the box.

He throws himself down on the sofa and says he’s not leaving.

He begins to cry and shout that he doesn’t want to leave there.

He sits tight on the sofa and seems as if he has spread glue on his back.

He shouts and cries that he is not leaving, he kicks out.

I take a paper tissue and clean his nose and he goes on shouting.

I tell him he is welcome, that we shall have a time together and that I shall be waiting for him the following week.

I carry him to the waiting room. He is kicking out, shouting and kicking me.

I hand him to Júlia, who looks at me frightened.

Discussion

We can approach a psychoanalytical understanding of this moving and deep session using various vertexes, such as (-K), or attacks on the link; but we can also highlight the concept of terror, and the importance of the analytical function to develop the protomental and/or transform the pathological. In Bion’s work, this function acquired its own space.

We have an excellent opportunity here to clinically focus on the transforming work of the α-function of the analyst, which evolves gently and progressively. In the latter part, we heard sounds similar to howling, letters pronounced with sonorous expressivity, primitive and moving contacts in the search for the loving object. On finding this object in the field of transference, Thiago was able to reveal his intense pain and find a “curative” for his deep wounds.

Bion tells us about the emotional experiences linked to the nameless terror, expressing in articulate language what invades the mind like a boomerang; that is, the dispersion of terror, which returns potentialized in its quality of generating further dispersion. For Martinez & Sor (2004) it is
an attempt to represent a panic attack, the moment after the event, when the personality tries to recover the being-at-one with itself.

Thiago expresses this terror with his howls. In finding the other who gives meaning, he remains waiting for another sound, forming the word. In a growing psychoanalytical dialogue, they find a phrase and a piece of music: a meaningful history of this relationship is being built, where that which is not born acquires meaning and representability in a process of neogenesis; what is pathological can be given shelter and given a new meaning. A new meeting takes place here, a realization, where previous experiences of privation or realizations, that were inadequate through lack of an object, find shelter, where they can be expressed. Furthermore, we observe that certain pre-conceptions could be developed in the transference, thanks to the continence of the object.

On the graphic plane, Thiago gives pictorial form to terror, when he draws the cave with the dinosaur and the wolf, personifying the characters of this atavistic world.

The session reaches its peak of elaboration, with a hint of introjection, when it refers to loving and being loved, which is a moment of intolerable mental pain. He feels the incapacity of containing this love and the hardship of the privation begins to emerge.

We accompany the despair of the protomind, threatening him and inducing him to act out, when he is requested to leave the concrete shelter of the letter, a first stop in the direction of mental work. The firm attitude of the analyst raises hope for the continuity of the relation and for the incipient possibility of an internal emotional dialogue, with his sheltered friend, himself. This no authorization reveals a theoretical and technical posture of the analyst and not a normative choice.

Marta Martinez (2004) points out the brave attitude of the analyst who opens the door for thought, or, as Bion puts it, the development of pre-conception with a negative realization.

By tolerating this frustration, he is able to think about it and it will give rise to learning through experience. The analyst, who was inside the emotional experience, intuited Thiago’s need to believe that he could await the following session, he could experience an act of faith.

At the end of the session, Thiago dramatically clung to his place as analysand, where there was something vital and precious that he could not lose. In desperation, he protests.

**CONCLUSION**

Bion’s studies on the fetal psyche broadened the horizons of psychoanalytic thought, towards the understanding of psychosomatic phenomena and primitive states of mind. Among those
writing in this part of the world, Wilheim (1989, 1996 & 1997) has made important contributions, which are fruitful for our theoretical elaboration, when interpreted as conjectures, as models.

We had the privilege of psychoanalytically attending orphan children in a Shelter. In coping with this experience, we increased our capacity to listen and to perceive the manifestation of embryonic psychic phenomena, which are so far before the possibilities of representation, the ungovernable marks and records. With passion and faith in the power of the psychoanalytical method, we offered to be analysts in the creation of an unprecedented link, with our analysed mind, as well as with investment and hope.

In the clinical practice, it was possible to recover archaic levels, in the structuring of subjectivity in search of mental space, the matrix of mental functions and of continence, sometimes of psychic birth, in the realization of human pre-conception.

In this study, we specially highlight the privation of the real external good object as a traumatic factor in “mental orphanhood”8 (LISONDO et al., 2004). This trauma does not allow the development of incipient mental functions, present in the protomental level, as pre-conceptions seeking realization. The privation of a good rêverie does not nurture psychic life and give it sense. These pre-conceptions, when they cannot find an available object, lose psychic vitality, wither, give up. A new history started to be built, as in the session with Thiago.

The trained intuition and sensibility of the analyst allow an interpretation to be reached, when it can be passed through the sieve of critical thought. It is critical in that it has as its base the analysis itself, theoretical thought and the discussion of clinical material. The “anything goes” would be an unacceptable license, far removed from scientific thought and ethical commitment. In other words, we maintain that the analytical object is ineffable in its essence, which is a quality that does not spare us from the demand for precision. We present this communication to bear witness to our aspiration to a reflective and critical dialogue with the scientific community.

By way of an epigraph, and with the aim of leaving questions open, without replies that annihilate them, we offer the reader, as an invitation to think with us, the following questions which were inspired by the experience.

1. In this work we maintain that primitive mental states, that are frozen, paralysed, undeveloped, can be transformed by the experience that allows the realization of pre-conception.

8 “We use the term mental orphanhood when the privation of the maternal and paternal functions is a stigma in the child’s fate since the maternal mental womb, when his/her life is marked by the uncanny, that is, when the infant is deprived of the good psychic contact with the mother and/or father during pregnancy and after birth.

we hold the hypothesis that mental orphanhood of institutionalized children leads to a psychic configuration in which the following stand out: flaw in the structuring of the primary identity ⇒ the being; flaw in the narcissistic regulation ⇒ self-esteem; essential depression; over adaptation; and other factors to be investigated in this configuration. Mental orphanhood is the epistemological paradigm for our work.”(p. 324-5)
The pathological ((-K), attacks on the link, etc.), unlike the undeveloped, which seeks a good experience with the object, repeats, and is not permeable to, the simple experience, which is destroyed. Clinical psychoanalysis can be very fruitful and auspicious when the protomental is not yet developed.

2. How should pictorial form be given to the protomental? Intuition, hypotheses, imaginative conjectures, α-dreams, reconstructions? What qualities of the object can the protomental demand?

3. Can we consider the protomental as being synonymous with β-element?

4. Klein began her theory with the newborn infant. Is what is constitutional here a biological myth? Is Bion, when he presents the protomental as being incarnate in the constitutional, in the link and in the biological relation with the amniotic fluid in the mother, not going a step ahead of Klein? Is this the fundamental difference between them?

5. Is the structural unexpressed unconscious of the second topic, the Id, the place of the protomental? Is the ontogenesis, the stockpile of the Id that recapitulates the phylogenesis, at the base of the protomental?

6. In what way are psycho-embryonic speculations, foundation of the protomental, of clinical interest, not merely to increase the understanding of the psychopathological, but, above all, to allow the primitive, undeveloped states of mind to metapsychologically take root with their technical consequences in clinical practice?

7. Freud talks of the primal phantasies seeking the origin of the psyche. The complementary series also go back to the experiences before birth, even taking into consideration his opposition to Rank. The concept of primary identification with the totemic father precedes the experience with the object, as well as the concept of primary narcissism. What is the place of the pre-natal psyche in Freud and in Klein?

8. The patients of this Shelter have suffered cumulative traumas, which take us through Dante’s Inferno. What about the mystic vertex, which transcends scientific knowledge, and that can inspire the analyst with acts of faith to achieve possible development? In other words, what are the implications of the mystical vertex in the analytical posture in this clinical approach/experience?

**ABSTRACT**

This study is a reflection on the psychoanalytical care given to orphan children, which allows us to observe the manifestation of embryonic psychic phenomena, far before the possibilities of representation, and on the possibility of recovering with them the archaic levels of the structuring of subjectivity in the search for the creation of mental space and for the psychic birth within the realization of human pre-conception.
Starting with Freud, passing through Klein and focusing Bion and other contemporary authors, we highlight the privation of the (good enough) real external object since life in the womb, which does not allow the development of the incipient mental functions present in the protomental level. We observe that these pre-conceptions, when they are unable to find an available object, lose psychic vitality.

In the children and adolescents attended, we were surprised by the life force, the hope in the psychoanalytical process and the positive transference. We question ourselves if the appeal and happiness viv-à-vis the meeting with the transforming object did not lead to an unconditional investment, as a means of clasping the object so as not to lose it, thus shaping a mental condition that obscures the presence of Thanatos.

At the end, we invite the reader to think together with us on questions inspired by this clinical experience.

**KEY WORDS:** Human pre-conception; privation; real external object; protomental.

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