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Between listening and expression: On desire, resonance and containment

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This paper sets out to conceptualize what goes on in the analyst's mind as he listens – and expresses something to the patient. Bion's ideas of approaching the patient's O, without memory and desire, are discussed. An alternate, more permissive, attitude to desire is suggested. This is based on the idea that containment, instead of denoting a dyadic interaction between mother and child, is a process which links the child to a begetting couple, thus a triad. Containing the patient corresponds, in the unconscious, to thinking about a sexual couple in a mutually beneficent interaction. Since the patient's anxiety, in his unconscious, parallels a frightening primal scene, containment is viewed as a continuous translation of a primitive primal scene into a mature act of love. A specific kind of genital desire is thus necessary for containment. This finds expression in the analyst's resonance with the patient. Clinical material from an analysis with a 7-year old boy is provided.

Martin is 5 years old when he starts his psychoanalysis. His parents have come for help since Martin's situation at the day-care center is desperate. At the slightest provocation he scratches and bites, and he needs constant adult attention. In the consultant room, he attacks me and then withdraws into his own world while disdainfully speaking gibberish.

In the following example, he has reached the age of seven years:

The session starts with Martin saying that he wants to operate on me. He has brought a toy snake from school. He proudly tells me that he has made it himself! No, he changes his mind; he made it together with his teacher. The snake seems to represent a number of things. We talk about his ability to make something nice and keep it.

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After a little while, I initiate a change of subjects. I refer back to his wish to operate on me.

The analyst: You want to operate on me, fix me. I think you want to fix other things as well, for example the cupboard that you scratched the other day. You looked at the cupboard just now, the marks are still there.

Martin: Ha, I am going to let the snake coil itself around your neck!

A: You got mad at me because I talked about what you did yesterday. You don't want to be reminded, because it gives you such a bad conscience.

M: So what, bla, bla, you shithead!

It turns out to be a noisy session. My attention is not only focussed on what is going on here and now. Memories of yesterday's noisy session have entered my mind. I was angry with him and dissatisfied with myself because I did not succeed in stopping the fighting.

I say: "You want to operate on me and fix the cupboard that you scratched yesterday". It is an interpretation, an attempt to make something unconscious conscious. But it is not only motivated by my wish to make him aware of his unconscious. It is obvious that my anger with him is an underlying motive. But I had other motives too. I wanted to rectify things, make him talk about the guilt instead of using violence.

I was driven by a wish to help him towards an inner change. Looking back, I think to myself that my wish emanated from my infantile notions of help and activity. It is worthwhile

investigating these notions. They lead us towards rectification, away from an analysis “without memory and desire” (Bion, 1967).

It is a truism to observe that we move between activity and passivity in our analytic work. I also think it is fair to say that this polarity is colored by our notions of masculinity and femininity. The question remains, however: what notions? I believe that infantile, idealized notions of the mother and the father easily enter the game. According to these, the mother is exclusively focussed on passive care-taking. If the analyst is governed by this notion, he can give himself over in an ocean of listening unfettered by the reality principle. In a similar way, the father may be seen as solely focussed on active rectification. This may tempt the analyst in the direction of changing and curing. If we give these notions free rein in the psychoanalytic situation, we may run into problems, as during my session with Martin. I think that I was listening with my cars plugged: one plug being the memory of my anger at him and the other, my desire to help.

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### Memory and Desire

Bion described the danger of the analyst working on the basis of “memory and desire”:

The more successful the memory is in its accumulations, the more nearly it approximates to resembling a saturated element saturated with saturated elements. An analyst with such a mind is one who is incapable of learning because he is satisfied... Such a ‘memory’ is no equipment for an analyst whose aim is O. (ibid., p. 29).

In Bion's writings, “O” refers to the thing in itself, the absolute truth of, and about, an object. We do not know it, and can only sense it. “O” will only appear in the shape of representations, recognizable to K (Knowledge). Bion's formula reads  $O \rightarrow K$ . The analyst's K only functions if he liberates it from memory and desire.

For any who have been used to remembering what patients say and to desiring their welfare, it will be hard to entertain the harm to analytic intuition that is inseparable from any memories and any desires. (ibid., p. 31).

“Psychoanalytic ‘observation’ is concerned neither with what has happened nor with what is going to happen but with what is happening” (Bion, 1967, p. 17). I was far from eschewing memories and desire, history and future, when I reminded Martin of yesterday's devastation. I was saturated with notions like: “Here comes Martin, Scratcher of Furniture”.

To repress memory and desire is painful, says Bion. The contact with O entails an intensified perception, especially of sounds, which gives pain to the analyst (Bion, 1970, p. 47). Both analyst and analysand are afraid. Listening for O is frightening. To recall a memory or a desire may calm both participants in the analytic work. What kind of snake was it that Martin brought along? Being afraid, I did not wait for the answer, but hastened to assure both of us that he wanted to operate on me in order to fix me. The hatred that followed during the session may have been a transformation of the hate-feelings that the snake represented. Or, did he hate me because I did not understand? Did he sense how hard it was for me to stand my own uncertainty? How did I feel about the possibility that I may never understand? And what did I think about his destruction of

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so many things? Did I disguise my hate as a supportive intervention? In that case was his hatred a counterattack?

### Containing and Desire

Bion (1962) introduces the polarity container – contained to describe the analytic work. Containing is a maternal function. Bion stresses this by using the ancient sign for woman to represent the container. The idea of the analyst, containing the psychic reality of the patient, is founded on a genetic model of the interaction between the infant and its mother. When we ask what the analyst contains, we are thus simultaneously asking what the mother contains. We

answer that it is the infant's "nameless dread", the mental content that the child cannot metabolize. What sign does Bion use for the "contained"? Remarkably enough: the male sign of Mars.

In his discussions on containing, Bion mentions the father more rarely than the mother. Here, however, he is mentioned in an example where Bion describes how the baby abstracts hypotheses and deductive systems from its experiences.

Let us suppose the infant repeats an emotional experience in which the following elements are constantly conjoined; the sight of a man, a sense of being loved by the man, a sense of wanting the man, an awareness of the repetition of a phrase, by the mother, of "That's Daddy." "Da, da, da" says the child. "That's right; Daddy" says the mother (Bion, 1962, p. 66).

In the above, the general symbol for the contained, the sign of Mars, corresponds to that with which the infant is specifically preoccupied, that is, the father. In this particular case, the symbol fits both the anxiety content and that which awakens anxiety. But why does Bion use the sign of Mars as a general symbol for the contained? I will look for the answer by way of the mother.

The mother's containing, her reverie and alpha-function refer to the mother's handling of the infant's nameless dread. Bion points out that reverie must be associated with love for the child or its father, otherwise the situation becomes incomprehensible to the infant (1962, p. 36). She needs an inner representation of a harmonious link between the father and herself. Only then can she confront the situation when she is beset by the contained, the child's projective identification. I would like to describe it as follows.

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The infant's projections create holes in her inner world, feelings of helplessness, incomprehension, anguish in the face of the infant's pain. The holes need to be filled with safety, words, support. Help is provided by the phallus of the mature, paternal principle. The phallus of the infantile, idealized notion of the father, on the other hand, is of no help. It is much

too focused on rectifying interventions. The containing is the mother's ongoing translation of an infantile primal scene into a mature love act. The primal scene describes how a frightening content disappears into or destroys a container that is just as frightening. The mature love act speaks of how a content actively fills the container, makes it happy, and in its turn becomes actively enfolded and made happy by the container. In her reverie, the mother thinks of the child. But she also thinks of the father, a benign phallic figure as a counterbalance to the child's projective identifications, experienced as attacking, intervening spears.

Danielle Quinodoz (1992) explores and expands the concept of the container. The container needs to be a “dynamic encounter between begetters” (p. 629). When an early mother-child relationship is relived in the transference, Quinodoz does not perceive it as a dual relationship, even if that is how it appears to the analysand. She thinks of it as an early, triangular relationship, “because the father is present in the reverie of the analyst-mother”.

We are now dealing with two aspects of the container. On the one hand, it is a vessel for the child's projections, on the other, an imagined encounter between a man and a woman. Should we not then also consider two aspects of the contained? It is not only a symbol for that which is frightening, or for the man, but for both. The sign of Mars refers both to that which has not been processed, that which is painful, and to the phallus in search of Venus' bosom.

The term ‘contained’ no longer symbolizes only the object engendered but also one of its begetters (ibid.).

The container digests the child's frightening, nameless experiences, at the same time as it keeps up an inner dialogue with the father. The contained is not just something that penetrates the container in order to be kept there. It is also inserted for the purpose of producing meaning together with the container. If we keep the dual aspects of container and contained in mind, it becomes easier to imagine alternatives to the infantile notions, mentioned in the beginning of the paper, where, e.g., the mother is seen

as a passive container. This phantasy also implies a view of the container as a receptacle, and of the containing as a passive reception. No, she too works actively to comprehend, and she does so with the father in mind. The father is not only seen as someone who intervenes and rectifies, who awakens anxiety in the same way as the child's "nameless dread". His phallus also fills the mother with thoughts that counterbalance the child's projective identifications. Returning to Martin: in my unconscious, the snake must have appeared as the spear of the primal scene rather than as the beneficent phallus of the genital paternal principle. My reaction was dictated by an infantile world order. I was frightened and angry and tried to protect myself through rectifying Martin away from his hatred.

The container is a vessel for the analysand's projective identifications, and the contained represents the frightening content projected into the container to be metabolized. We may now add other meanings. The container is also a dynamic encounter between begetters, where the contained is an active participant in the containing-creation. We may write it as an analogy in the shape of two circular sentences.

The contained is inserted into the container embraces the contained. It is the union of the two that constitutes the containing.

The man enters the woman enfolds the man. It is the union of the two that constitutes adult sexuality.

When we consider the meanings of the concepts, we arrive at a surprising conclusion. It becomes important to harbor desire during the analytic session. Not the desire to change the patient, but the kind of desire that forms part of all thought. To imagine thought without intention or desire is impossible following Freud. The desire in all thought consists in a union: between preconception and realization, between thought and thinker, contained and container. In the unconscious, this is a sexual union, an encounter between begetters. The analyst's pleasure of understanding, because it is a pleasure, is, in the end, a sexual pleasure. He awaits the insertion of the unknown, the uncomprehended into him. There, he will enfold it, feel it and eventually, maybe, comprehend it. This is the analyst as mother. He penetrates the remote corners and brings them to light, where he names them. This is the analyst as father.

Thus, the analyst-mother and the analyst-father are united and together they create “the analyst's mind”. How is this longing and pleasure transformed/sublimated?

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I suggest: into a longing for resonance. Let us turn to my work with Martin for examples.

At the time of the session that I have already discussed, I arrive one minute late. He stands outside my consultant room waiting. When we get into the consultant room, he starts shouting at me.

M: You were late! The cab driver really has better things to do. You cuntcock! Go fuck your mother! You're just shitting! Fuck your lady, you mustn't be good to her. Tomorrow you will die three times over unless you answer my question: May I go into the adult's room and take as many sheets of paper as I like!?! Answer me!

A: And I answer – that I am thinking about what you've said, how furious you are with me because I was late, how hard I'm being punished, I will be killed tomorrow. It is a hard world. I will be killed because I was late. You've done a lot of mischief. You are wondering, how will you be punished?

Following this exchange, Martin calms down and wants to play. Later during the session, I ask him how he managed to stop the fight.

M: You know, don't you, it was beep-beep! Hey, that is how it was!

In a few sentences, Martin paints the picture of a distorted primal scene. Everything is confused: the sexual differences (the cunt-cock), the differences between the generations (fuck your mother), the differentiation between pregenital and genital (shitting/fucking). Sadism rules, Mars is going to fuck his Venus, be mean to her and soil her.



The intercourse is stereotypical and sadistic, the same holds true for his view of dialogue. His “Answer me!” implies one definition of the word “answer”. I am called upon to answer within the frames of the concrete and inquisitorial dimension within which he moves. Question and answer signify orders from above and execution below. I must not think of anything else and not in terms of symbols.

But I find a different definition of the term answer. It starts from the notion that we are equals taking turns to ask and answer. In this world order, we are driven by our desire for knowledge, not by a stifling of thought. He tells me something, I tell him something. A different primal scene. The woman enfolds the man enters the woman. Symbolic thinking is begotten. Thus, “beep-beep” is his symbolic expression of an inner warning signal.

My words “And I answer...” were not a well contemplated interpretation. They were born out of my resonance with him.

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### Resonance

In two articles, Johan Norman discusses the concept of resonance (1994, 1997). His discussion is partly based on his work with infants, where he encounters the small “analysand” and its mother. The infant cannot talk and thus he only has his countertransference to rely on in his attempts to comprehend. He uses a phenomenon that he distinguishes conceptually from countertransference. He calls it resonance. It is a form of “primary contact on a very primitive level” that acts as a channel between people. It is independent of content, words and the other's intentions. It presupposes “a latent accessibility to another person's psyche” (Norman, 1997).

Johan Norman thinks of resonance as a distinct phenomenon, an inborn preconception similar to our inherited ability to distinguish colours and shapes. His clinical examples include e.g. his own spontaneous gestures and facial expressions that he retrospectively recognized as imitations of the analysand's gestures and movements.

What rôle does he give resonance in the analytic interaction? He views it as a necessary channel for projective identification. If it is closed down, the projective identifications cannot communicate the experiences that the child's psyche was incapable of dealing with.

#### To Tune a Guitar – on Psychic Resonance

My reflections on the resonance phenomenon lead me to a metaphor. A body vibrates if it is exposed to sound waves identical to its eigenfrequency. Thus, the guitar player can tune his instrument. He strikes the untuned string, the finger has tuned up its pitch to match the eigenfrequency of the next string. The silent string, the resonator, now resonates. The sounding string created air waves and transmitted energy to the resonator.

In order to resonate, the eigenfrequency of the silent string has to be pitched. The impact of a weak sound within its own register is more profound than that of a strong sound outside of its register. Force and strength do not help. The string has a fundamental pitch that the musician has to find. Besides, the string has a number of overtones. If it is pitched by the fundamental tone or one of the overtones, it starts to vibrate.

Let us attempt a transposition of this metaphor. In every situation, the mental apparatus has an eigenfrequency, in fact, it has several. If it encounters an expression in another person, and this expression vibrates in accordance

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with its eigenfrequency or one of its overtones, the mental apparatus resonates together with that of the other person. Its sound becomes more powerful. It became charged by the other and now it adds its own energy.

The guitar player has his own method when he lets the string approach the reference string. He uses the peg. The analyst has his method. He enters a state empty of memories and without desire to intervene and rectify, a state of evenly suspended attention. He is hoping to catch the analysand's eigenfrequency, his O as transformed in K.

To Bion, O corresponds to a space “analogous to the pause (or silence) in music” (Bléandonu, 1994, p. 284). In this context, I am talking about O as a potential sound, as the string that has not yet been struck. Then, the string is struck, and the closer its frequency approaches that of the other's eigenfrequency, the closer we are to a K, which could reveal something about O. The analysand who wants to avoid the analyst's understanding, consistently strikes tones outside the eigenfrequency. The analyst experiences – K.

In the snake-example, the analyst placed himself outside the analysand's eigenfrequency. Instead of waiting for the overtones of Martin's story, I wanted to master the situation. His story of the snake and the operation had to fit my interpretation that he felt guilty for his destruction. He did not encounter the resonance that he had hoped for in the analyst. I had tried to master him with my interpretation. Now, he tried to master me with his fighting. It was as though both of us tried to prove an impossible physics formula: “The other can be made to resonate, even if we find ourselves in different eigenfrequencies. It can be done, even if force has to be used!”.

In the case of “Answer me”, something else happens. The analyst approaches the analysand's eigenfrequency, and looks for the conditions for resonance with the analysand in his own inner world. Something, a psychical motion, travels from Martin's inner world to mine. When he shouts at me: “Answer me”, I am facing a tyrant. He is trying to make me vibrate – not in resonance, but out of fear. But what captures me is his struggle with an inquisitorial world order. My response to Martin emanates from my resonance with him. Something is struck inside of me. In my inner world, there is an old fear that I'll be the fool who does not know the inquisitor's single, correct answer; and I understand that he expects me to rave, threaten, punish him. Instead, I answer him calmly, offering a description of that which he fears – and he calms down.

We may ask ourselves whether “the analyst can understand only those

analysands who have shared the same conditions as the analyst. In a way this is so, but only if we keep in mind that the conditions we are then talking about are the conditions of the infants in relation to internal and external forces. The infantile conditions and the variety of basic elements of early object relationships are shared by all humans who have had some experience of a good enough mother” (Norman, 1994, p. 92).

In an everyday sense, the analyst is far from being a rowdy and scolded boy. However, the distance is strangely unimportant. In an inner sense, the situation is quite different. The analyst has a register of eigenfrequencies and overtones. He awaits the moments when they coincide with those of the analysand. Then, resonance arises. The contained has reached the container has reached the contained ... Metaphorically speaking: the sexual union has come about and something is begotten: the unconscious content of an interaction becomes intelligible. The ability to think through the interaction increases.

The analyst's desire concerns comprehension, the desire to unite container and contained, man and woman. However, if he reaches for it without recognizing that the frequencies differ from each other, dissonance follows. Instead, like a patient lover, he has to await the right moment. Meanwhile, he can practice his own “erotic sensitivity”, his ability to catch and beget overtones.

### Speaking on the Phone

A second metaphor from the world of sounds is inevitably brought to mind. In one of his articles on technique, Freud offers the following image of the analyst's understanding of the patient's unconscious:

He must turn his own unconscious like a receptive organ towards the transmitting unconscious of the patient. He must adjust himself to the patient as a telephone receiver is adjusted to the transmitting microphone. Just as the receiver converts back into soundwaves the electric oscillations in the telephone line which were set up by sound waves, so the doctor's unconscious is able, from the derivatives of the unconscious which are communicated to him, to reconstruct that unconscious, which has determined the patient's free associations (ibid., p. 115).

Freud discusses a problem that he formulates in “The Unconscious” (1915). How is it possible that “the unconscious of one human being can react upon that of another, without passing through the conscious”?

(p. 194). In his simile, the two persons' unconscious minds are linked through the cable's electric oscillations, that is, the derivatives. The analyst's task is to convert, reconstruct.

The resonance metaphor speaks of an immediate understanding rather than of reconstruction. It offers a vivid image of the analyst's primitive identification process, by which he understands his analysand. On the other hand, nothing is said about the analyst's reflection on his own resonance. The telephone links people across distances, but it also implies a distance. It describes the analyst's work of decoding at a distance, rather than his spontaneous recognition.

When it comes to resonance, I lay stress on that which the analyst immediately and personally recognizes in the analysand – and in himself. The capacity for resonance, though at bottom a primitive identification process, develops gradually. It keeps pace as the mental apparatus turns into a self – and as the analyst attempts to place himself as close as possible to the analysand's eigenfrequency.

Psychoanalytic concepts seem to vacillate between inclusion and exclusion, between inclusive and narrow meanings. The inclusive definition invites us to play with the meanings of the concept, to stretch the limits of definition. In this case, we run the risk that the concept becomes meaningless and emptied of a specific significance. The narrow, exclusive stance invites theoretical stringency and deeper studies. We run the risk that nothing will seem good enough to fit the concept. There must be a dialectical relationship between these two positions in order for a creative development of conceptual meanings to take place.

We may call the inclusive stance a maternal attitude, if we keep in mind that we are moving within the same infantile world of notions as when we imagined the container to be no more than a passive vessel. In a similar vein, we may call the exclusive attitude a paternal attitude. We could formulate a new, circular analogy.

With an exclusive definition, I enter into an inclusive definition enfolded an exclusive definition. It is in the union of the two positions that knowledge, Bion's K, results.

Thus, I arrive at my definition: Resonance results in the moments when the analyst identifies projective identifications as recognizable elements from his own inner world. Resonance is an affective, a sensual, and an aesthetic phenomenon. An emotion is born in the analyst. It may appear as completely new to him, but simultaneously as coming from his own, affective repertoire. Often, something sensuous-bodily is touched within

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him. The experience of resonance is, finally, aesthetic, awakening the analyst's longing. He reflects on and tries to transform this longing, this desire. He does not, however, ascetically deny its existence, but allows himself to take pleasure at the moments when resonance appears.

#### Outside of O

If I place Bion's ideas on O, memory and desire next to my own, what do I find? We are, after all, dealing with the same problem: to stand in front of the unknown and that which is not understood, describing the condition and a way to relate to it. Bion offers definite, disciplinary rules. The analyst must eschew memory and desire, he must dedicate himself to a disciplined denial of both. In contrast, the verbs he uses to describe O are passive and hard to define. O becomes, evolves. Its presence may be recognized and felt, but not actively explored.

Bion uses a religious terminology. We approach O, which he describes, among other things, as the "godhead", through an "act of faith". We should take up this "scientific" position, expressed in religious terms, in order to achieve "at-one-ment" with O. "The religious mystics have probably approximated most closely to expression of experience of it" (Bion 1970, p. 30.). The instructions to eschew memory and desire are reminiscent of religious advice given to those who want to achieve a mystic union with the divine.

Like Bion I stand baffled, ignorant, unable to understand before the unknown. If I call this unknown: the “patient's inner reality”, it is not because of a lack of respect for the awe-inspiring impossibility of getting to know another human being. Bion uses a language borrowed from religious mysticism. As all conceptual frameworks intended to describe the inner world necessarily have to be of a tentative character, it is not meaningful to reject the mystical version only by arguing that it does not correspond with my weltanschauung.

Instead, I would like to describe the differences between us as follows: Bion claims that if we stand before the unknown O without memory, desire, sensations or a will to understanding, it may be revealed in a form comprehensible to K. I say, that we, while wisely attempting to abstain from memory and desire, cannot in any way abstain from thinking about O. Our thoughts are reminiscent of fantasies about the proceedings in the “nuptial chamber”, using Meltzer's poetic expression (1988). Inside, there is a constant begetting of new meanings. Like children outside the fertile

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bedroom, we are left with longing, a sense of being left out, awe, envy and fury at how little we really understand. Still, the begetting leaves traces, frequencies, that we, with our analyst's spirit, may divine through resonance.

Finally: to me it seems that Bion stresses what the analyst should not do when he approaches O, while I focus on what he actually does do – and how it is possible that the analyst can cope with, yes, even be fascinated by and take pleasure in being outside of O.

Intervention – Expression

What does resonance produce in the clinical situation? I call it the analyst's “expression”. The analyst communicates thorough interpretations as well as unpremeditated remarks and everything in between. His tone of voice, his gestures and body language vary. I subsume all of it under the term: the analyst's expression. The analysand perceives it and submits it to a similar process of listening, resonance and expression. Thus, the analytic dialogue continues.

The analyst's expression emerges from the resonance between the analysand and his own inner world. It may grow into a well-wrought interpretation, it may manifest itself in a spontaneous line on the spur of a moment – or in silence. It all depends on his professional knowledge and the frames of the analytic method, but also on profoundly personal circumstances. It has to do with a fundamental ability, his ability to listen with a sensitive ear. Finally then, it has to do with the extent to which something personal is struck within him, how he reflects on and communicates this experience to the analysand.

The analysand observes the analyst's dialectic movement between nonresonance and resonance and is thus offered a productive chance to identify. His intellectual capacity develops. Martin's reaction to my words “And I answer...”, proves that this is so. Something similar happened later during the same session. I had said to him that he was fighting with me, calling me a cunt-cock and a motherfucker because that was what his friends teasingly called him.

M: Now we'll play doctors! Your heart is sick. I don't know if I can save you, I'm really a pediatrician. But I'll try. Yes, I believe I can do it.

I comment:

A: It is different now than at the beginning of this session. Then you wanted

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to kill me. Now you want to save my life... I'm wondering about something else. Maybe you want to save your own heart too. You very much want to be good at heart, will you be a kind and goodhearted boy?

M: Yes, I think so.



The session is over. Martin often finds it hard to leave me without putting up a fight, but this time it works.

M: I cured your heart – and my rowdiness! Bye, bye!

Martin observes my attempts at resonating with him. I recognize myself in his anxiety for his own destructiveness. My resonance becomes an expression, articulated as an interpretation that he is anxious about his own goodheartedness. He identifies with me, the pediatrician who is able to name frightening things.

In my first clinical example, the analyst as “snake charmer” did not listen for the overtones that were begotten in Martin's inner world. The container-contained-couple was not tuned to the frequencies that could have sounded in unison with its own. The outcome was dissonance, an inability to understand, attempts to rectify – and, eventually, violence. In the case of the “Answer me!” and the heart operation incidents, something has changed: the analyst seems ready to listen, resonate and express.

But psychoanalysis knows no happy end. The analyst strives to expand his sensitivity to resonance and his ability to express it. The analysand strives to take care of his “sick heart”, to contain the contained. The progression is circular: between resonance and dissonance, between coping with dissonance and not coping, between reflection and acting, between begetting and destruction. We all move in these circles.

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