

# The Creation of Psychic Space, the ‘Nest of Babies’ Phantasy and the Emergence of the Oedipus Complex.

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In her introduction to ‘The Oedipus Complex Today’ Hanna Segal (1989) emphasises Melanie Klein’s view that it is necessary for the baby to have first established a good relationship to the breast if he or she is to be able to manage and work through the pains of the oedipal situation. She adopts the model proposed by Britton (1989, 1992, 1998) whereby a psychic space is delineated at the heart of the oedipal triangle within which the infant is able to maintain a differentiated relationship with each of his parents, a space that Britton conceives as being an extension of the relationship container/contained as described by Bion. In this space the infant also encounters a good relationship between his parents, a relationship that is one of container/contained but one from which he is excluded by contrast with the original relationship between the baby and the maternal breast. This leads him to distinguish the nature of the parental relationship from the connection which he has with each of them separately and involves him in the work of separation and individuation that characterises the depressive position. She adds to Britton’s model that room for the new baby is implicit in the space thus delineated:

I would like to add a point to the idea as described by Dr Britton. An important part of the difference between the infant’s relation to the parents and their relationship is not only that they exchange genital gratifications, but also – and, I think, importantly – the fact that the parental intercourse leads to the creation of a new baby. This is always so in phantasy, even if in reality there is no new sibling. When I think of Dr. Britton’s triangle as defining the space in which different links can be established between the child and the two parents, I think that space implicitly contains the room for a new baby. If a new baby appears inside the mother [...] before such a space can be established – and while the little infant is still heavily dependant on the phantasy of getting back inside mother – psychotic disturbances can easily ensue. (Segal, 1989, 125-138)

Thus room for a new baby within the sibship should result from the creation of an oedipal space within which the relationships between the different protagonists can gradually become differentiated: an intimate relationship between the baby and the maternal container (Meltzer, 1971), identificatory relationships between the baby and each of his parents, a loving and sexual relationship between the parents in the phantasy of the primal scene. The brother or sister who bursts in upon the family constellation before this space has been created will be experienced by the elder child as an intruder, a persecutor, not to say a conqueror threatening to destroy the space in which he had begun to develop his psychic life. Perhaps psychotic or autistic states are always an echo of such a catastrophe.

However, even when the fantasies and affects relating to brothers and sisters, whether real or imagined, have been recognised as a constituent element of the family constellation that shapes the child's psyche, they have until recently (Mitchell, Coles) received far less study by psychoanalysts than those concerning the parents. There are, of course, some notable exceptions to the historical lack of interest in the role played by siblings in psychic reality. In this chapter, I intend to focus on the contribution of Frances Tustin, who, through her description of the 'nest of babies' fantasy, highlighted the importance, for autistic children, of imaginary brothers and sisters.

But before I do this, I would like to make a short detour via the history of psychoanalysis and its founder, for this may help to explain why so little is made of sibling relationships both in the Freudian *corpus* stricto sensu and in psychoanalytic literature in general.

## FREUD AND SIBLING RIVALRY

The topic of sibling rivalry is hardly ever discussed in Freud's writings. This may have something to do with the death of his younger brother Julius, when he was only a few months old, and the impact that this had on the infant Sigismund (as he then was). In his detailed biography of Freud, Jones gives the following account of this period:

A more important occurrence (...) was his young brother's death when Freud was nineteen months old and the little Julius only eight months. Before the newcomer's birth the infant Freud had had sole access to his mother's love and milk, and he had to learn from the experience how strong the jealousy of a young child can be. In a letter of 1897 he admits the evil wishes he had against his rival and adds that their fulfilment in his death had aroused self-reproaches, a tendency which had remained ever since. (Jones, 1953)

The letter to which Jones refers was addressed to Fliess on October 3, 1897. In it, Freud admits he felt jealous of his little brother Julius, who dethroned him from his privileged place in his mother's love. Freud, whose self-analysis was already under way (Anzieu 1988), went on to discover the Oedipus complex, in which little boy's jealousy is aimed at the father as the child's rival in accordance with the fantasy wish to possess the mother sexually. It is however instructive to consider Freud's somewhat confused account of the events that took place in his early childhood: he seems to telescope the death of his little brother and the sexual arousal he felt towards his mother, and the chronological errors he commits cannot be attributed simply to the fact that the events in question had occurred long before. It is as though Sigismund's Oedipal feelings towards his mother served to mask his primitive and guilt-laden jealousy towards Julius. The studies by Anzieu (1988), Gay (1988) and Rodrigué (1996) will guide us in our attempt to unravel the tangled web of fact and fantasy we find in Freud's correspondence.

Let us begin by taking a closer look at the letter written on October 3, 1897. In it, delighted with the progress his self-analysis was making, Freud shares his most recent discoveries with his friend Fliess. These concern two topics, which he develops one after

the other: the erotic attraction he had felt as a young child towards his mother, and his ferocious jealousy towards his younger brother. The paragraph is well known:

Later (between the ages of two and two-and-a-half) libido towards *matrem* was aroused; the occasion must have been the journey with her from Leipzig to Vienna, during which we spent a night together and I must have had the opportunity of seeing her *nudam* (you have long since drawn the conclusions from this for your own son, as a remark of yours revealed); and that I welcomed my one-year-younger brother (who died within a few months) with ill wishes and real infantile jealousy, and that his death left the germ of guilt in me.(Freud, 1954: 219)

This extract is crucial in that it prefigures what was later to be expressed in Freud's theory as the Oedipus conflict. Indeed, he refers to it just twelve days later, in another letter to Fliess (October 15, 1897). Yet it includes several chronological errors that cannot but make us think that some sort of defence mechanism has been at work. The journey from Leipzig to Vienna, during which Freud appears to have slept in his mother's bedroom and perhaps saw her naked, did not take place when he was two or two-and-a-half years of age, but when he was about four years old. The Freud family had left Freiberg (Moravia) when Sigismund was about three years of age. They had settled first in Leipzig for a period, the exact length of which is not known, but it must have lasted at least several months and perhaps even as much as a full year. In other words, the journey Freud mentions in that letter was the one in which they left Leipzig to settle permanently in Vienna. Further, Julius was not born just before Sigismund's first birthday; according to Peter Gay, Freud was 17 months old at the time:

Freud was born on May 6, 1856; and Julius, born in October 1857, died on April 15, 1858 (see the 'Chronology' in Krüll, *Freud and His Father*, p.214. For these details, Krüll refers to Josef Sajner's research (Gay, 1988).

For a complete picture, we would have to include the birth of Sigismund's sister Anna, when he was two-and-a-half years old. As we know, he never liked her (Jones, op.cit.) and the feeling seems to have been reciprocated. Rodrigué (1996) says that Anna used to complain about the fact that in Vienna Freud had a room to himself, whereas his sisters had all to share a single room. He mentions also the piano affair: Anna played the piano, and the noise distracted her older brother while he was studying, whereupon he simply persuaded his parents to sell the piano. Thus the age Freud mentions for the Leipzig-Vienna journey lies between his age when his brother Julius died (23 months) and that when sister Anna was born (30 months). It is obvious that a process of condensation of two memories is at work here, with all that implies in terms of the toning down or even the masking of one event by another. My hypothesis would be that the memory of seeing *matrem nudam* (as he says so tactfully in Latin) at age 4 partly masks the impact on the infant Sigismund of his little brother's birth, followed by his death six months later, together with (though to a lesser extent) the trauma of his mother's subsequent pregnancy and the birth of his sister Anna.

He did, however, acknowledge some of the influence these births had on his fantasy life and subsequent relationships. In the letter to Fliess, he agrees that his jealousy towards

Julius and, *a contrario*, his alliance with his nephew John (the son of his half-brother Emmanuel), who was a few months older than Sigismund, were a deciding factor in all his subsequent relationships. He is even more explicit in the following extract from *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

My emotional life has always insisted that I should have an intimate friend and a hated enemy. I have always been able to provide myself afresh with both, and it has not infrequently happened that the ideal situation of childhood has been so completely reproduced that friend and enemy have come together in a single individual - though not, of course, both at once or with constant oscillations, as may have been the case in my early childhood. (Freud 1900: 483).

Such an admission cannot fail to interest us when we think of the passionate friendships and quarrels that ran through all of Freud's life and, consequently, affected the history of psychoanalysis. The splitting of sibling imagos that he describes in the above extract would thus appear to originate in the trauma he experienced at the time of Julius's birth and subsequent death. We may recall the analysis he made in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud, 1901) of a screen memory combining the arrest of his nurse on charges of theft and the birth of his sister Anna; in this memory Freud's half-brother Philipp was suspected both of causing the nurse's disappearance and of responsibility for there being a rival baby in the maternal womb. Nevertheless, in Freud's thinking and in the theoretical models he left us, little importance is given to siblings, rivalry between brothers and sisters is toned down, and feelings of love between siblings and incest fantasies are obfuscated, all in the name of Oedipal love and jealousy. A psychoanalytic reading of Freud's memories and of the mistakes he unwittingly makes in his account of them would lead us to believe that, far from being milder versions of Oedipal fantasies and emotions, those involving brothers and sisters may be even more primitive and violent than those concerning the parental couple. The more certain phenomena have to be disguised and covered up, the greater their unconscious significance.

To summarise this period of young Sigismund Freud's life: his father already had grown-up children, and Sigismund was the first child of his father's third and his mother's first marriage; she was some twenty years younger than her husband. At 17 months of age, he was superseded in his mother's love by the birth of his younger brother whom, Freud later admitted, he hated for precisely that reason; the infant rival lived for only six months, dying when Sigismund was 23 months old. Julius's death prevented the infant Sigismund from processing and integrating what was, after all, normal sibling rivalry. His subsequent guilt-feelings probably facilitated the operation of splitting mechanisms with respect to the fraternal imago: on the one hand, an idealised one he sought after all through his life in his various friendships, and, on the other, a persecutory one that constantly lead to abrupt quarrelling in his passionate relationships. When he was two-and-a-half, his sister Anna was born; he was unequivocally hostile towards her all through his life and that feeling appears to have been mutual. When he was about four years old, during the journey from Leipzig to Vienna, he shared a room with his mother and felt intense arousal at the sight of her naked body. That event was to operate like a screen memory, masking in part the earlier traumatic events, in particular those relating to Julius's birth and subsequent death, and giving rise to some chronological confusion that tended to telescope these events

together. Consequently, the mother's body is absolved from the crime of carrying and giving birth to a rival baby and becomes instead an overwhelmingly attractive object, with the result that all rivalry is displaced onto the father *qua* Oedipal rival. Thanks to this displacement of the little boy's rivalry fantasies onto the paternal figure, and thanks also, as I have pointed out, to the splitting of the sibling imago into two parts, primitive sibling rivalry thereafter lies buried in the depths of the Unconscious.

As Freud's theory developed, brothers no longer appear as rivals, but play the part of accomplices. This theme runs through the whole of *Totem and Taboo* (Freud 1912-13); Freud argues that the brothers, ganging up on the father, the tyrannical head of the primal horde, killed him and ate his body in order to acquire his power, then turned the symbolic representation of the father into a totem in order to prohibit all acts of this kind for future generations.

For a long time afterwards, the social fraternal feelings, which were the basis of the whole transformation, continued to exercise a profound influence on the development of society. They found expression in the sanctification of the blood tie, in the emphasis upon the solidarity of all life within the same clan. In thus guaranteeing one another's lives, the brothers were declaring that no one of them must be treated by another as their father was treated by them all jointly. They were precluding the possibility of a repetition of their father's fate. To the religiously-based prohibition against killing the totem was now added the socially-based prohibition against fratricide (...) The patriarchal horde was replaced in the first instance by the fraternal clan, whose existence was assured by the blood tie. Society was now based on complicity in the common crime; religion was based on the sense of guilt and the remorse attaching to it; while morality was based partly on the exigencies of this society and partly on the penance demanded by the sense of guilt. (op.cit.: 146).

Such an emphasis on the sense of guilt and on the need for expiation that binds the brothers and, by extension, the members of the clan together might indeed lead one to think of the sense of guilt that the young Sigismund may have experienced on the death of his rival brother, that he then had to expiate all his life through his passionate friendships, followed by violent break-ups. Where then have fantasies of sibling rivalry and the underlying death wishes gone? They seem to have been subjected to quite massive repression. They do, however, reappear in Freud's writings but with respect to femininity (Freud, 1933). He states that in her libidinal development, the little girl is originally attached to the mother but gives up this attachment and changes her object which, henceforth, will be the father, because of her initial disappointment at having lost the breast and her fantasy of having received too little milk from the mother. Freud goes on:

The next accusation against the child's mother flares up when the next baby appears in the nursery. If possible the connection with oral frustration is preserved: the mother could not or would not give the child any more milk because she needed the nourishment for the new arrival. In cases in which the two children are so close in age that lactation is prejudiced by the second pregnancy, this reproach acquires a real basis, and it is a remarkable fact that a child, even with an age difference of

only 11 months, is not too young to take notice of what is happening. But what the child grudges the unwanted intruder and rival is not only the suckling but all the other signs of maternal care. It feels that it has been dethroned, despoiled, prejudiced in its rights; it casts a jealous hatred upon the new baby and develops a grievance against the faithless mother which often finds expression in a disagreeable change in its behaviour. (op.cit.: 123).

According to some commentators, this is Freud 'at his most Kleinian'. He is very clear about the role played by rival babies in the primal cathexis of the maternal object. Yet it looks as though Freud projected onto women the fantasies that he could not acknowledge and accept in his own psychic reality. Only little girls are said to bear a grudge against the mother because of the series of disappointments she inflicts on them, including that involving the conception of new babies. Freud continues to pretend that boys feel no ambivalence in their love for the mother, and vice-versa. It is possible, then, that he was thereby attempting to get rid of his own fantasies of primitive rivalry, though I would have to qualify what I have just said with a reference to his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Freud 1916-17). There he states that the child's rivalry or even hatred as regards siblings is universal, though to my mind he did not draw all the metapsychological conclusions he might have:

In this connection it will be interesting to compare the child's attitude to his brothers and sisters with that towards his parents. A small child does not necessarily love his brothers and sisters; often he obviously does not. There is no doubt that he hates them as his competitors, and it is a familiar fact that this attitude often persists for long years, till maturity is reached or even later, without interruption. Quite often, it is true, it is succeeded, or let us rather say overlaid, by a more affectionate attitude; but the hostile one seems very generally to be the earlier. This hostile attitude can be observed most easily in children between two and a half and four or five, when a new baby brother or sister appears. It usually meets with a very unfriendly reception. Such remarks as 'I don't like him; the stork can take him away again!' are quite common. After this, every opportunity is taken of disparaging the new arrival and attempts to injure him and even murderous assaults are not unknown. (op.cit.: 204).

I say that Freud did not draw all the metapsychological conclusions that he might have because in the remainder of the Lecture there is no mention of this primitive rivalry; the only reference is to Oedipal rivalry and the child's ambivalent feelings towards the parents, though Freud continued to maintain that there is no ambivalence in the mother-son relationship.

This last [the relation between mother and son] provides the purest examples of an unchangeable affection, unimpaired by any egoistic considerations.(op.cit.: 206)

It would appear that Freud felt he had to put aside any suspicion, however slight, that a son might betray his mother; he did this by exonerating her from what I call the crime of carrying and giving birth to a new baby.

## AFTER FREUD

Until recently, (Mitchell (2000), Coles (2003), for instance) few psychoanalysts after Freud explored the topic of sibling rivalry. Without any pretence at being exhaustive, I will mention the contributions of Jacques Lacan and Melanie Klein before going on to deal in more detail with that of Frances Tustin.

In the article he wrote in 1938 for the *Encyclopédie Française*, entitled 'Family complexes', Lacan described what he called 'the complex of intrusion'.

The complex of intrusion represents the experience of the primitive Subject, when he or she sees that one or usually several similar beings also participate in the domestic relationship: in other words, the realisation that he or she has brothers or sisters (Lacan, 1938: 35-36).

In identifying this complex, Lacan refers to mirror identification and primary masochism. Towards the end of weaning, which in this paper Lacan puts at around six months, the infant reaches the 'mirror stage' of development, with recognition of his or her reflection in the mirror; this unified image serves as a matrix for unifying the child's mental experience and for combating 'fantasies of dismemberment and bodily dislocation...' (op. cit.: 44).

Seen thus, the stage corresponds to the end of weaning, i.e. towards the end of the six months dominated mentally by feelings of unease, and the concomitant backwardness in physical growth, that express that pre-maturation of birth which is, as I have said, the particular basis on which weaning in human beings is founded. When the Subject recognises his or her reflection in the mirror, this phenomenon is doubly significant for the analysis of this phase: it appears after six months, and it then demonstrably reveals the tendencies which at that point constitute reality for the Subject... (op.cit.: 42).

The brother or sister who resembles the Subject is initially cathected as a mirror-reflection identificatory object that is both unifying and alienating; as such, the sibling is experienced as an intruder, the target of primitive aggressive impulses that Lacan likened to primary masochism and the death instinct:

As long as the likeness only fulfils its primary role, limited to expressiveness, it generates in the Subject similar emotions and attitudes, at least insofar as the present structure of the apparatus allows for. But while subjected to such emotional or motor suggestion, the individual cannot distinguish between his or her reflection and the actual self. Indeed, with the characteristic discrepancies of this period, the image only adds the temporary intrusion of a foreign tendency. I shall call it narcissistic intrusion: the unity it introduces in the impulses will nonetheless contribute to ego organisation. But before the ego can assert its identity, it becomes

confused with the image that both shapes it and fundamentally alienates it (op.cit.: 45).

It is greatly to Lacan's credit that, in this article, he highlighted primitive rivalry and distinguished it clearly from Oedipal rivalry, which is much less violent and persecutory:

If, on the other hand, the intruder arrives after the Oedipus complex, it is more often than not adopted in terms of parental identification, denser in affect and richer in structure... (op.cit.: 47).

Lacan's reference to *Gestalttheorie*, which in the Fifties became a structuralist model, is an obvious problem insofar as it tends to evacuate the dynamic and affective aspects of object relations. His model is based on the image of the rival at the mother's breast, much more than on the feeling of having been more or less evicted from mother's attentiveness and tenderness by the arrival of a new baby; this aspect becomes comprehensible only once we situate the sibling drama within the framework of the dynamic relationship between child and mother (or, in analysis, within the dynamic of the child's primitive transference to the analyst who is suspected of taking an interest in objects other than himself).

Melanie Klein considered primitive sibling rivalry and jealousy to be extremely important; for her, they were part of the early stages of the Oedipus complex that begins during the first year of life. The child, boy or girl, is frustrated by the breast and is pushed into attacking the contents of the mother's body, experienced as creating obstacles to the unlimited use of it he or she desires. The contents targeted are the father's penis and the internal babies it is supposed to give the mother. The child's attacks are extremely sadistic and transform these contents into fearsome and dreaded persecutory rivals. Klein (1945) described this situation in her famous analysis of Richard:

[...] he felt he had attacked and injured the imaginary babies inside his mother's body and they had become his enemies. A good deal of this anxiety was transferred onto children in the external world (p. 375).

Disappointed by the mother's breast, the child then turns towards the father's penis with the hope of being given babies; the simultaneous projection onto the paternal penis of the child's own oral, anal and urethral sadism transforms it into a bad and sadistic penis that creates in the mother's body bad, sadistic and threatening babies:

[Richard's] hatred of children, as well as his fear of them, was partly derived from the attitude towards his father's penis. The destructive penis and the destructive and greedy child who would exhaust the mother and ultimately destroy her were closely linked up with each other in his mind. For he unconsciously strongly maintained the equation 'penis = child'. He felt, too, that the *bad* penis could only produce *bad* children' (p. 393).

According to Klein, in the early stages of the Oedipus complex, the initial Oedipal triangulation involves the child and the child's maternal and paternal part-objects (respectively, breast and penis); this succeeds weaning, taken in the widest sense of the



term, i.e. including all the frustrations the baby experiences in the relationship with the mother. This early oedipal situation is established at the same time as the child realises that the satisfying breast, which had been idealised, and the frustrating breast, experienced as persecutory, are one and the same. Thus the part object oedipal constellation that Klein describes actually succeeds an even more primitive kind of triangulation, characteristic of the *paranoid-schizoid position*, in which the two objects the baby has to deal with are the idealised good breast and the persecutory bad one. The lessening of the splitting of these two images of the breast leads *ipso facto* to the emergence of the early Oedipus complex, with the displacement of some of the infant's libido and aggression from the breast to the father's penis. Rival or even persecutory babies are the product of a fertile relationship between paternal penis and maternal body; the same relationship also creates good internal babies that repair and restore the mother's body, experienced as damaged by the infant's sadistic attacks. In so far as the infant can acknowledge the reparative role of the father's penis in giving the mother babies, feelings of concern and guilt related to the phantasied sadistic attacks on the mother's body may come to the fore, as is characteristic of the *depressive position*. Klein (1955) emphasises that this acknowledgement is harder to achieve for the only child or for the youngest child in a family, for whom it is as if they had managed to prevent the birth of any more babies. Speaking of 'the child's anxiety about the mother who is frustrated and neglected by the father, instead of being loved and made pregnant by him', she goes on:

This anxiety is particularly strong in youngest and only children because the reality that no other child has been born seems to confirm the guilty feeling that they have prevented the parents' sexual intercourse, the mother's pregnancy and the arrival of other babies by hatred and jealousy and by attacks on the mother's body. (p. 158).

These extracts make it obvious that Klein was particularly eager to call attention to primitive sibling rivalry, whatever the child's sex. She did, however, treat it as deriving from the early stages of the Oedipus complex, not as a distinct form of rivalry *per se*. It is because the child has the fantasy that it is the bad paternal penis (the penis onto which the child's own sadism has been projected) that has created bad babies in the mother's body that leads to feelings of hatred and persecution towards these rival brothers and sisters, be they real or fantasied (the unborn children).

## THE 'NEST OF BABIES' FANTASY

In her exploration of autism in children, Frances Tustin broke new ground in the psychoanalytic understanding of sibling rivalry. In her first book, *Autism and Childhood Psychosis* (Tustin, 1972), she described the two main stages in the treatment of autistic children: in the first the child has no sense of having an internal psychic life and it is the analyst's task to revive this; in the second, they become aware of the fact that they do have a mind of their own, a mind that is quite distinct from any other person's. It is at the start of this stage that fantasies of rivalry begin to appear, and in particular what Tustin called the 'nest of babies' fantasy:

In this phase, when the child is beginning to be able to bear the awareness of a clear distinction between himself and other people, there invariably develops a fantasy which I have come to call the 'nest of babies' fantasy. This is associated with the notion that there are 'special babies' who are given 'special food'. (...) My 'brain children', the children in my mind whom I am felt to feed when I am preoccupied and averted from him, are sometimes felt to be the recipients of this special food. There is the fantasy that he (the patient - the child who is receiving my therapeutic milk) is in competition with predatory rivals on the other side of the 'breast' who want to snatch the nipple away from him – to take away his chance of life and sustenance' (pp. 177-8).

For Tustin, it is the awareness of otherness, corresponding to the individual's basic identity and discovery of his or her mind, which gives rise to initial feelings of rivalry - long before the establishment of even the early stages of the Oedipus complex and the construction of sexual identity. When the child begins to have his or her own mental life, there is an unbounded desire to possess everything; and when the infant realises that he cannot do so he thinks:

'But there are some who have it', to be followed by, 'But it isn't me'. This leads to disappointment, rage, jealousy, envy and competition, all in terms of imaginary especially favoured entities (p. 178).

The 'nest of babies' fantasy develops when the child experiences rivalry too early in life. Tustin linked this to what was for her the pivotal experience of the autistic child: the premature awareness of bodily separateness from the object of instinctual gratification – in other words, 'the world was not body stuff to be moulded in his own terms' (p. 178).

In the 'nest of babies' fantasy, the child is faced with a vast number of greedy, threatening mouths, the principal source of paranoid anxiety. This anxiety lurks somewhere inside the autistic 'black hole' that her first little autistic patient, John, described to her one day. One of the main issues in the analytic treatment of autistic children - as well as in dealing with autistic enclaves in many other pathological conditions - is how to identify this primitive anxiety, tolerate its expression (however violent this may prove to be), and try to understand its meaning with the patient, rather than attempting at all costs to reassure the child, which would merely fuel his omnipotent fantasies.

Klein (1945), referring to her patient Richard, wrote:

Because of his unconscious fear and guilt about his own oral-sadistic impulses, however, infants predominantly represented to him oral-sadistic beings (p. 393).

Hitchcock's 1963 film *The Birds* seems to me to be a remarkable illustration of this fantasy: innumerable threatening beaks attack human beings in their most private of retreats.

Tustin (personal communication) went so far as to argue that, in the development of autistic children treated by psychoanalysis, the initial forms of oedipal triangulation (i.e.

taking into account the difference between the sexes) are in fact derived from the 'nest of babies' fantasy: the father being experienced as the biggest of the babies, and therefore as a particularly dangerous rival.

In her final writings, Tustin made significant changes to her model of the psychopathology of autism. Firstly, she clearly renounced the hypothesis of a stage of normal primary autism (Tustin, 1994a), a hypothesis that she had sustained in her earliest writings, that she had borrowed at the time from Margaret Mahler (1968) but which she latterly considered an error. Furthermore, she accepted that normally the infant experiences oscillations between states of fusion and separation from its mother, whereas the infant at risk of developing autism finds himself stuck in an illusion of continuity with his maternal object, who he experiences as an inanimate object:

As in all psychotic conditions, a normal reaction becomes exaggerated. In autism it has also become frozen. In *normal* infancy there are oscillations from 'flowing-over-at-oneness' to becoming aware of separatedness from the mother and the outside world. In this 'dual track' as Grotstein (1980) terms it, there are alternating flickers of awareness of space and of 'no space' between infant and mother. In the infancy of autistic children, these normal oscillations have not taken place. Something that is normally fluid has become frozen. Such an infant has become traumatized and frozen in a state of panic-stricken clinging in an adhering way to a mother who is experienced as an inanimate object that can be clutched. (Tustin, 1994a, 14-15)

In her last paper, 'Autistic children who are assessed as not brain-damaged', Tustin (1994b) describes a pathological illusion of at-oneness between infant and mother the outcome of which can only be a traumatic rupture when the infant becomes aware of his separateness from the maternal object:

Autism is a two-stage illness. First, there is the over-close association of mother and child, and then there is the sense of being traumatically wrenched apart. Autism develops to deal with the sense of brokenness. It is like a plaster cast to support the brokenness.

Thus it would seem that she postulates the existence of a third area from the very beginning of extra-uterine existence, as a precursor to the psychic space described by Britton and the 'room for the new baby' referred to by Segal. It is this space that has never developed .....in the autistic child. The rival sibling can then only figure as a terrifying persecutor who comes along to destroy the illusion of at-oneness in which mother and child were living.

These last hypotheses of Tustin lead us to a completely new model of the development of object relations. This model no longer follows the path that leads from a state of fusion or symbiosis between mother and child towards a stage of separation/individuation (Mahler, 1968) followed by making room firstly for the presence of the paternal third, then the siblings. Rather, it envisages the unfolding of that which was already present in the mother-child relationship: the space contained within the relationship between the parents

(the primal scene) which itself implicitly contains room for the new baby. I have elsewhere developed the hypothesis of the importance of the bisexuality of the primary psychic container (Houzel, 2005), a bisexuality that is necessary for the psychic development of the infant but which is split in the case of autistic children, the masculine aspect of the container being experienced as menacing and destructive and projected on to the external world. I take the maternal container described by Bion as being bisexual to the extent that the mother, in exercising her containing function, needs the support of her internal objects, both maternal and paternal. The mother's internal objects, and their relationship to each other, would thus define an initial space, which the oedipal space belonging to the infant's own development would then further support. In those cases of psychogenic autism to which Tustin refers, it would seem that the mother has been unable to provide the infant with this initial space in which he could have established a non-adhesive relationship with her and begin the development of a capacity for symbolic thought. Instead, a purely sensual adhesive relationship develops that allows for no symbolisation. The illusion of at-oneness contained within this adhesive relationship leads to an experience of catastrophic ripping apart whenever a third object intrudes on the child's relationship to his mother. The "babies in the nest" described by Tustin, who enjoy the special food contained within the mother's breast, are then the persecutors who come to disrupt the charm and shatter the illusion on which this relationship was based.

#### A CLINICAL ILLUSTRATION

To illustrate the 'nest of babies' fantasy, and the difficulties faced in the creation of a psychic space, I shall describe an extract taken from the analysis of Cyril, an autistic child whose treatment I have discussed in greater detail elsewhere (Houzel, 1999). With the help of this material, I will try in particular to illustrate one aspect of the fantasy that, following Tustin, I would express thus: when the child acknowledges otherness and starts to become aware of his or her mental functioning, everything contained in the therapy room may be experienced as representing the rival babies that stay permanently inside the therapeutic setting. As such, they are supposed to take advantage of the young patient's absence and eat up all the 'special food' of the analysis, as Tustin put it, that the patient is deprived of in the break between sessions.

For my part, I feel that this is one of the obstacles on the developmental road that should normally lead to pretend-play and the resulting expression of fantasy life that, as it becomes richer and richer, enables the child to tolerate frustration, waiting, separation and difference. The child is in a vicious circle, since the means that could be used for expressing the intolerable anxiety associated with the discovery of otherness remain out of reach because they are part of the very fantasies that fuel that anxiety.

Several analysts quite rightly make a distinction between autistic reactions and the autistic state or structure. I would suggest that, in what I am about to describe, we can see one of the criteria for differentiating between these two aspects: in the case of autistic reactions, as manifested at times of separation, emotional deprivation, infantile depression or simply in the 'still-face' experiment, (Tronick *et al.*, 1978) the child usually manages fairly quickly both to restore the relationship with other human beings and to use real objects as

transitional ones - in other words, as objects that can be used as a vehicle for his projections and on which he can base the imaginary scenarios that help the mind to tolerate frustration and waiting without falling apart. In the autistic structure *stricto sensu*, however, this is not possible, since every object is experienced as a rival baby - a baby in the nest - who has a right to everything of which the autistic child is deprived. The only way to soothe autistic distress would seem to be either to ignore these rivals completely by denying the existence of otherness and diving back down into the deepest of autistic states, or to eliminate the rival babies by throwing them away or otherwise destroying them - hence the fact that play is impossible for the autistic child.

Cyril's analysis began when he was 3 years old and I saw him three times per week. He had been diagnosed as having autism. He is the eldest of two boys: his brother is two years younger. Both parents are from a very cultured background. The father is in an intellectual profession, the mother had been in higher education but does not currently work. She has a deformity of the uterus which made her pregnancies difficult. She found herself pregnant with Cyril after three spontaneous miscarriages. She had to be on bed rest throughout her pregnancy with Cyril, which was a time of great anxiety. The baby moved very little *in utero*. The mother's impression was that, by remaining very still, he was protecting himself from the uterine contractions that she experienced as being threatening to him, given the very little space that he had. So from the very first the mother found it extremely difficult to have a sense of herself as a good container for her baby; she even had the sense of being a threat to him from which he had to protect himself.

Cyril was a quiet baby. His sleep soon settled into a regular pattern. He was breast fed for six weeks, but this was very brusquely interrupted due to an infection of mother's breast. Nothing was noticed at the time of this sudden weaning. Cyril's motor development was delayed: he only sat up at a year and did not walk until 22 months.

Mother's second pregnancy began when Cyril was 15 months. During the final trimester there were complications that meant that there was a danger that she would give birth prematurely, and this led to her having to remain in bed and then to being hospitalised for the last month.

Cyril's parents began to be concerned about him because of the delay in his motor development, but particularly because of his failure to develop language. In addition they noted behaviours that they described as "strange". Cyril would bang his head against the floor or against the wall and he would rock backwards and forwards. At around 20 months his parents had the impression that he was withdrawing from the world, that he was "in his own bubble"; he showed very limited interests, for example in opening and closing doors, listening to music; he did not develop any symbolic play and very little pretend play; and then he would take an adult's hand to obtain what he wanted and did not point.

Here are some extracts from his analytic sessions:

After our first summer holiday break, Cyril inaugurated a new activity in the sessions: he emptied his box of toys, threw away the pens and paper I had prepared for him on a little table, climbed triumphantly onto this table and from there onto my lap, and exclaimed:

‘Big, big, big!’ I interpreted this as his wish to grow into a big boy coming to see me and drawing support from me. I was initially more in tune with his wish to grow up than with the theme of rivalry with the objects he threw away representing, I think, the rival babies who (in his view) had stayed with me all through the long summer break that had lasted a little over two months. In a subsequent session, this aspect became clearer, as the following extract shows:

Cyril threw the pens to the floor then played with the water, attempting to flood the whole room, in spite of my forbidding him to do so. Then he threw all the sheets of paper from the little table to the floor, and climbed onto the table saying in a triumphant tone of voice ‘Grown-up!’ From there, he climbed onto my lap (with my help), then back to the table. He picked up the pens, gave them to me to hold for him, then threw them back onto the floor. With one of the pens, he drew several long lines on some sheets of paper, saying they were ‘little cats’. He then threw these sheets of paper to the floor and went through the whole sequence again: climbing onto the table, then onto my lap, then back to the table. He also made as if to bite me.

I felt that the little cats he had drawn and then thrown to the floor in order to take their place on the table or on my lap represented rival babies whom Cyril wanted to chase away so as to be alone with me; I made an interpretation to that effect. He had tried to bite me, and that seemed to correspond to a fantasy of an oral attack against what I could contain inside myself. At the same time, he appeared to feel threatened by the little cats; he expressed this by trying to leave immediately after drawing them. I interpreted this to him as an expression of his fear that the little cats that he wanted to attack and whose place he wanted for himself might attack *him* and chase *him* away.

In the following sessions, Cyril played out a repetitive scenario. He began by completely emptying his box and throwing all the pens and paper to the floor. Then, with a tumbler, he filled his box with water; he was often quite fascinated by the water flowing into the box. I interpreted this play as an expression of his wish to chase away the toys, the pens and the sheets of paper as representing rival children whom he thought of as hard and threatening; he wanted to replace them with mummy-water because he wanted me all to himself like a mummy full of good food that he could turn on like a tap, as and when he wanted (at times he would stand inside the water-filled box). He gradually began to be able to put some toys or pens into the water and manipulate them there; he seemed to feel that they were less of a threat insofar as they were to a considerable extent imbued with this maternal element.

I have since had further confirmation of the way in which the ‘nest of babies’ fantasy may emerge with respect to the objects in the therapy room. When he throws the pens and paper I set out for him on the little table on to the floor, I tend to try to preserve the cardboard folder in which I keep the few drawings he has produced (he is still at the scribbling stage) by, for example, picking it up and putting it on a chair. When I did just this in a recent session, Cyril opened the folder, took out his drawings one by one and threw them angrily as far away as possible; I interpreted this as an expression of the

jealousy he felt when he saw me take such good care of these drawing-babies. On another occasion, he emptied his box of toys on his own head, saying they were hurting his head (they were indeed falling on it). I commented that the toys were perhaps the children he felt were always in the room with me, the children he wanted to attack and chase off - and of whose return attacks he was very much afraid.

By now Cyril had developed a language which enabled him to communicate his phantasies to me much more fully. He told me about his little brother Tristan, after whose birth he had retreated behind his autistic defences. [For the most part] He complained about him: Tristan was annoying, did stupid things, messed up everything in the house. Once, having spoken to me about Tristan, he said "break you" several times, which I at first understood in the sense of a similar French expression that would mean "get lost" and interpreted in this way. However he then brandished the scissors and made the gesture of cutting me in two down the middle. I then said to him that he had perhaps had the impression when Tristan was born that his mother had been cut in two, as he might have feared that I had been busy with another child during the Christmas holidays that had just finished and that that had cut me in two.

He now used the toys more and, in particular, the plasticene. He frequently took lumps of plasticene to make people and uses the point of a pencil to make two holes for the eyes, a hole for the nose and a slit for the mouth. Usually one of the characters was the father, another the mother and the third was the baby. The following extract from a session shows his efforts to construct a psychic space and to fill it with internal objects:

24 November 2005

He decided to play with the plasticene. He took it out of the box himself. For quite a time he played at letting it fall by tapping on the box and then putting it back in the box. Later he took the whole block, which was quite soft, and put it against his neck as if it were caressing him. Then he decided to make a father, mother and a baby, which he did very crudely by cutting the block into three and marking out the eyes the nose and the mouth with the point of the pencil. He made the father first, then the mother and finally the baby. He gave the father a big caress and then immediately afterwards he squashed him.

He then proceeded to insult me calling me a filthy beast, a shit, an idiot...

I said that it seems as if he wished to squash me with his insults, like the father that he had caressed and then squashed.

He looked at the figure that was the mother and gave a cry as if he were frightened, then he came and lay across my knees and then turned himself over calling for help and saying he was about to fall.

I interpreted that when the father was squashed the mother became dangerous, as if he were about to fall into her eyes as he seemed in danger of falling off my knees.

He then talked to me more clearly than he had ever done before, telling me that they had left his house with some suitcases to go to granddad and granny. Then he told me about a big boy at his school who insulted him, told him he was an idiot and he no longer wanted to play with him.

This extract illustrates how the containing function requires the necessary combination of paternal and maternal elements and Cyril's difficulty in achieving this. The maternal object becomes devouring and dangerous if stripped of all paternal aspects. But on the other hand Cyril wishes to eliminate the father, even if he does also experience some affectionate feelings towards

him: he crushes him as if he were taking up too much room. The father is then confused, as Tustin describes, with the largest of the “babies in the nest”. It is only gradually that he will become differentiated and that Cyril will discover his reparative function. The oedipal triangle is based on this distinction between the protective and reparative father and the rival babies, a distinction that has only recently emerged for Cyril. The obstacle he has to overcome to achieve this is specifically the confusion that he generates between the imago of a reparative and protective father and that of his fraternal rivals, who occupy all of the maternal space available which he must repossess by mercilessly crushing those rivals.

One aspect of the reparative function of the father has been highlighted by Simonetta Adamo and Jeanne Magagna in a paper given to the second international congress on infant observation (Tavistock Clinic, 1-4 September, 1997). The father enables the infant to take over a new space and, thereby, to free up the space occupied by the primal scene and the room for the new baby. The new space that is thus conquered is a product of the intimate relationship with the mother, but transformed, symbolised and internalised. By way of illustration, I would compare this conquest to the altitude restrictions imposed on aircraft that allow them to fly in the same corridor: if there were two aircraft flying in the same corridor and at the same height, then there would be the danger of a collision. If, however, a sufficient altitude difference is imposed a collision becomes impossible. The father needs to allow the eldest to elevate himself to the level of « big child », in order that the next born may occupy the lower level which is thereby made available. This is precisely what is lacking in the two dimensional world of autism which does not allow for any possibility of a change of level. The interpretation that I made to Cyril, concerning the protective function of the father which is lost when Cyril crushes him, seemed to help him to begin to make a differentiation between his image of his father and that of his rival siblings : he speaks clearly about going with his suitcase (his internal world) to « Papy » and « Mamy », somewhere that he has always evoked as a place of security, that is at some distance from the family home and where he has stayed on his own, away from his younger brother.

25 January 2006

At the beginning of the session Cyril said to me: “you are trying to understand! You are trying to save my life!...” He talked about being very small and about difficult things, which led me to say that he was asking me to save the life of baby Cyril who had experienced some difficult things.

He became absorbed in some repetitive water play, filling a beaker, emptying it into another one or into the sink etc. I asked him to stop this game. He didn't do so, but began to call me names whilst excusing himself for using bad language.

I said that when I asked him to turn off the water he felt that I was like a mother who would not always give him good milk and he was then very angry and called me names.

He said that his mother had given him his tea before coming to see me. He talked of his mother being kind and how he loved her very much and wanted to be all on his own with her. Whilst carrying on with the water play he also continued talking to me: he told me that the girls were not kind to him, that Pierre (a school friend) was not kind to him and had given him a kick up the bum and that he, Cyril, had told his parents. If he did this again he would fight him and would kill him.



I asked him if he expected me to protect him from those who were unkind to him, as when he told his parents about Pierre giving him a kick up the bum.

He began to describe situations with at least three protagonists in which some would ally against others and threaten them with death: sometimes it was he and Tristan who wanted to kill father and mother, or father, mother and me, sometimes it was father and mother or father, mother and me who wanted to kill him, then again sometimes he wanted to kill father, Tristan and me so that he could be on his own with his mother. At other times he said that there was a wolf that was going to eat us both or that he was going to kill the wolf by throwing it on to the ring road (the road he uses to come to his sessions). The wolf would be crushed by a car. He finished by asking me to cry for the people who had died in these adventures, whilst announcing that he was happy. I pointed out to him that he wished to put all his sadness about the people he wished to kill when he was angry into me, in order to feel happy and rid of this sadness.

These three person scenarios, in which alliances are made and unmade alternately, without any one object ever becoming fixed in the role of persecutor, are characteristic of the oedipal configuration. The infant needs to explore each of these alliances and their effects on the whole constellation of his internal objects in order to find the necessary equilibrium that will allow his sexual identity to be built, based upon an identification with the parent of the same sex. We can see in Cyril the shift towards depressive feelings and the struggle against guilt which accompanies his conquest of a space at the centre of the oedipal configuration: Cyril has an experience of sadness which he evacuates by projecting it into his analyst.

He still has a long way to go to complete his oedipal adventure. He needs to acknowledge his ambivalence towards each of his parental figures, to recognise fully the reparative role of the father, to accept the difference between the generations and, last but not least, to allow the other siblings, real or imaginary, their due place as the product of a procreative relationship between the parents, of a good primal scene. This presupposes an adequate integration of his own anality which would enable him better to tolerate his negative feelings, to no longer project them externally and to make use of his aggression in the service of individuation, that is to say to assume a certain distance from his maternal object, to claim his own space whilst respecting that of others.

Recently, Cyril has very movingly expressed this conflict: “Let me finish my sentence, then I will let you speak...”, he said, his whole body very tense. He talked to me about the night and about death. We were on the brink of a week’s holiday and I therefore linked this material to the interruptions of the sessions. I talked to him about the night between the sessions and about his anxiety about what would happen during that time. He replied “You will be with someone else!” He took the plasticene to knead it a little, then held it out to me saying “Here’s a present!” I thanked him and said that in this way we would not be entirely separated during the holidays. However this positive and reparative aspect of his anality was quickly overwhelmed and he was gripped by an uncontrollable urge to defecate. I had to allow him to go off to the toilet.

A particular aspect of the difficulty that autistic children experience in approaching the oedipal triangle was highlighted for me by a scenario that Cyril enacted in various ways: he would grip on to the sink with both hands and then call me to help, asking me to give him a hand to help him detach himself – he would smear his hands with glue and then smear mine similarly and then immediately want to rinse them vigorously to remove all

trace of the glue inviting me to do the same. I interpreted this material as representing his fear of finding himself stuck or glued to me like a mother who would not allow him to move away and needing the Houzel-father-hand to help him detach himself (I also linked this to the frequent necessity I have to use my hand to set limits for him). My interpretation was confirmed in a discussion I had with his mother: she described to me an occasion when Cyril had cried, something quite exceptional for him. I commented that Cyril seemed to find sadness very difficult to manage. Surprised by my remark, she told me that when she is sad (it is quite likely that she had suffered from post-natal depression and she is of a depressive nature) Cyril will do all he can to make her laugh as if to get her out of her sadness; she added that he glued himself to her at such times, which she found very difficult to tolerate as when she is not well all that she wants is to be left alone. She described a vicious circle to me: the more he glues himself to her the more she becomes irritated and the more he then tries to glue himself to her. It seemed to me that what both were lacking in these circumstances was a paternal third party who would enable each of them to keep their distance and to preserve their own space, which links with Tustin's hypothesis of a deadly illusion of continuity.

## CONCLUSION

The origins of sibling rivalry are related to the advent of 'otherness', and hence predate any question of belonging to one sex or the other. As soon as the idea of the maternal other takes root, that of a third party claiming all or part of the mother's attention emerges. Psychoanalytic research on autism in children and on autistic enclaves, developed by Tustin and her followers, tends to confirm the hypothesis that the original image of the other is relatively undifferentiated and much closer to a kindred individual, a child-rival, than to the paternal object as third party. This may explain why there has hitherto been much less research into sibling rivalry than into the Oedipal situation; Oedipal rivalry seems to have more or less obfuscated this more primitive kind of rivalry involving siblings, which is often much more callous and severe than the Oedipal version. Far from incarnating the paradigmatic version of primitive rivalry, the Oedipal situation manifests a more tempered one. Sibling rivalry is often presented as a mere displacement of Oedipal rivalry, which is regarded as the main issue for growth of the mind and as constituting its pivotal conflict. However, seen in the light of the psychoanalytic studies I have mentioned, sibling rivalry is a more primitive and much more relentless version than its Oedipal counterpart. By placing heterosexual and homosexual object-relations into a libidinal context, Oedipal rivalry and the ambivalence of affect it implies enable the individual to find a way out of this kind of conflict that, in the pre-Oedipal situation of primitive sibling rivalry, would have been impossible.

I have put forward the hypothesis that in order for otherness to become possible and for the infant to be able to establish his psychic space, it is essential that from the very beginning of the relationship between him and his mother an early form of the oedipal constellation needs to be present involving the bisexuality of the containing function, based upon the internal parental objects of the mother and their protective and procreative relationship. I believe this to be a prerequisite both for the development of psychic space and, within that, room for the new baby. .

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