

The circle of childhood and the missile frigate

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The bee encased in resin

It is not from the earth that we originate; at least, in the sense in which this is depicted in biblical poetry. Freud was adamant: it is from the inorganic. This bottomless abyss does not contain icons or relics, nor frescoed crypts. And the child, who floats within nothingness, is the link between this void, and all that is present in the here and now. The child is a subject subsumed within the axis of narcissism, around which the other orbits. But this void is bounded, in that there exists the illusion of a foetal life which surprises us with its potential to mediate between nothing and everything. It is here that we see the body as the boundary of our subjectivity.

I have just seen a five-year-old child who is convinced that women are better. The thing is that they produce children – he, himself, was produced by them – they self-perpetuate and they perpetuate others, which goes beyond the problem of all the psychoanalyst's verbiage about origins. "But what origins are they talking about?" this little boy might say – if he were able – if his problem is that he was born with congenital heart disease, which erupted into a life-threatening illness the minute the maternal relationship of interconnecting blood vessels was severed. So, let us return to the state of being a woman: they are better. They produce children and they reproduce by means of these children. Invincible and eternal, they make no anguished cry in the face of castration. His parents are afraid of the terrors of homosexuality in his still distant adolescence. However, the problem is not one of sexual choice but rather the essential philosophy, the primary philosophy, about how to sustain eternity. I am not particularly surprised by games in which a succession of toy cars go into the

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orifice through which "babies" are born, from which they are born time and again when the orifice (a small piece of wood in the shape of an arch which could be a tunnel) is displaced successively forwards, in such a way that children are born into the world and into the womb time and again. What was more meaningful for me was the child's theory of eternalizing his permanence in time when, after giving his speech about the privileges afforded to women, who are a chain sustained by the ideal of eternity, he traced a sort of oval shape with his pencil. "You will see that it's an egg," he said. He then drew a bee on a piece of shiny paper, cut it out, and stuck it inside the circles of his drawing, covering it with the entire contents of a jar of glue, in such a way that hours later there was, in my presence (as notaries would say when they have to validate a document) a living entity which would last millions of years, like those insects or seeds which have become encased in amber from trees. After millions of years, we can see them in museums or in illustrations appearing in publications about the preservation of the first signs of life in the universe.

The frigate

In the corridors of the building where I have my office, there floats a missile frigate of great dimensions, the most obvious of which concerns the division of its cost, as per its different variables as an instrument of destruction, by the child-survivor. The result of this calculation is terrifying; the breadth of its impact, staggering. It is also unfathomable, because the result of the human equation – namely that the other is deemed non-existent if they cannot be recognized in ourself - makes it impossible to identify with the child, who is mentioned but seen as unquantifiable. This is of the order of the political. This is about raising children aboard the frigate so that they can be launched into a life of adult ideals. The human aspect of power is only embodied within power itself. The child, not deemed worthy of political consideration, is merely the precursor of the adult. Their mark on the world is seen as little more than the movements of an image on a TV screen, causing the same surge of tenderness as puppies do. Those who cannot tolerate being in the tortuous stretch of emptiness which circulates between political power and nothingness may have a certain sensitivity. Well-intentioned, their course inevitably tends towards human inequity. There may be deviations in their course towards similar worthy endeavours: moved by the sight of a stranded whale on some Patagonian or Australian beach, they might feel

compelled to go to its rescue. But it is futile to suppose there will be help for the helpless human being, who cannot be assigned a numerical value with simple calculations. More intrinsic to childhood is the impossibility of the eternal state of the child, frozen in time: the bee in the gum, stuck fast within the infinite, which nobody rescued. The enigma of death anticipates the unspeakable terror about where we come (or don't come) from. History sketches out its story just enough to conceal this, contributing to the fabric – or safety net – of what we call identity. But it is impossible to question why one has a heart with a tetralogy, a teratoma or a cerebral cortex damaged by an accident during birth. No matter how much we learn about the genome, or about hormones or viruses, they cannot respond to history's complaints or questions; the genealogical record is nullified. It only makes the ephemeral this: the ephemeral. For this reason, childhood is a testimony which is irreconcilable with political power, which expects a faultless ideal, endowed with positive potential; it does not accept abysses. Political power can incite a terror of the other to protect its position. The missile frigate is the converse of the child: it knows its goal, its course. It advances with a clear purpose: to gain power, to colonise, to control. The shipyard of its creation is human intelligence and it will continue relentlessly on its course until it is replaced by yet another instrument of destruction. The child, the mysterious interface between politics and nothingness, is an unnecessary entity for politics. What is more, the child's condition ignores politics. Childhood has more power than politics, because it embodies the lack of an answer to questions about the human condition. But politics, by definition, must eliminate any power that challenges it. And what is tragic is the following paradox: the power of childhood is sustained by the most fragile of humans: the child.

The circle is not geometric

But the child is not the target of the missile. The child's position is sacralized due to their inability to talk. Characterised by an essential uncertainty, they are positioned in the space between nothingness and the subject. It is not possible to kill without knowing what is being killed; any professional hunter will tell you this. The frigate will absorb childhood and will destroy its enigma. But not with missiles; with financial restraints, economic and expansionist policies, with negligence and indifference.

This child, the focus of this rarefied environment which is propitious for psychoanalysis, is connected to other children. My work as a psychoanalyst concerns this "highly sophisticated twentieth century phenomenon", as Winnicott ¹ puts it, but in my consulting room, I see both frigate and child. These other children are my point of reference, just as much as my five-year-old patient. To be able to include them in their incommensurability, I have no alternative but to reduce their presentation to the inverse of this: a deliberate reductionism which presents the reader with a canon, condensed as far as possible, on behalf of all those children who do not feature in any text. I will include the following:

Young children in the Impenetrable Forest of the Chaco region of Argentina, whose photographs, on occasion, appear in Sunday supplements. They stand in some desolate spot in the middle of a straight path which stretches into the distance behind them. They look shyly at the camera; in the background are their mothers, despondent, overwhelmed by an incomprehensible fear which adheres to the words of the journalist's report: malnutrition, tuberculosis, chagas, leishmaniasis. Marauding dogs gather round pools of dirty water, scratching their backs against the posts which support the sagging cloth which covers some shack.

A tough looking, scrawny little boy from Salta who makes his way along a street in Cafayate, carrying on his shoulders a bundle of firewood which is heavier than his own body weight. Every so often, he gives up and lets it fall to the ground. But at his side, his mother sustains this weight with her gaze, as she does the street, which stretches into the desert. This mother is the son who bears her up, who renews the past, who anoints the life they share.

Another child who passes by, proudly showing off his Nintendo, recently bought for him from one of the shops in the mall in Buenos Aires. Bartering is an ancient tradition but now it takes the form of plastic and the signature of the grandfather on the receipt, in exchange for the smile of the shop assistant and the toy which his grandchild holds tightly. This child – although he does not yet know it – may be the shadow of the destiny of others. Years later, he will trace on his computer the lines of

¹ Winnicott, D. W. (1971) *Playing and Reality*. London: Tavistock

the prow of a ship and he will take part in the discussion about the armour plating of the frigate.

Then there is the child who visits me in my office. He is focussed on his atemporal confinement, a militant activist of the eternal suspension of time, even though he is under the watchful eye of those trying to inscribe him into the ephemeral, the present time and into a generational structure. This gaze not only comes from his parents but also from the psychoanalyst.

The child who is going to die of starvation or of some illness is no longer a child. This child, who has been denied the chance to sustain the burden of culture, still inspires the look of tenderness in the mother's eyes. The social label attached to this child's survival will irremediably rob them of a childhood. And the technological child, who already has the toy frigate in their pocket, has already been assigned a numerical value: if this child is not going to be a politician, they will undoubtedly be involved in some branch of politics.

Lastly, I want to make reference to the well known photograph – the most striking emblem of what I have been describing – of the emaciated child on the verge of starvation on the African horizon, while a vulture circles overhead. The playwright and psychoanalyst Jorge Palant, in his play *Requiem*, transcribes the prolonged agony of the photographer, already dead by his own hand who, in the midst of tragedy, was just able to click the button of his camera to take the final shot. The death of this child and the suicide of the photographer must be stapled together to be of any value.

Digression

This is not about prejudice. If it were, the other would have to be the same, and on this sameness, difference - colour, size, anomalies, religion, gender – would be inscribed. The child is not the other; the child is ourself. To suffer the prejudices of the other, it is not necessary to be burnt on a bonfire. It's enough that you are simply not seen, that the person who looks at you simultaneously withdraws their gaze. In this act of not-seeing, the conditions which underpin the creation of our own subjectivity

are weakened or stripped away. The other, attentive, even cordial, whose empty gaze does not see, will not change simply because of the rules and mandates of UNICEF.

In contrast to the object of prejudice, the child is seen – too much so. Tenderness or hatred are often at the heart of the questions surrounding their existence. The child is the focus of our narcissism in its dimension of otherness. Furthermore, because of the child's closeness to our origin, all offspring (not only human offspring) provoke an affectionate curiosity, but this is not exempt from horror. What is unbearable is that the child is both ourself and a stranger: unknowable. For this reason, "child" psychoanalysts resort to "constructing" or "observing" the child, although this is inadequate. Other psychoanalysts (those who work with "adults") see the ones who "work with children" as strangely familiar, in the same way that they view children. It comes as no surprise that they do not understand what we "do". They insist on assigning us magic powers, a gift, a special touch which enables us to respond to this unknowableness which we have to deal with. These special abilities are also extended to different fields of clinical practice in which questions and issues remain unresolved, such as in the field of psychosis.

The psychoanalyst of children has access to a knowledge which is both unlimited and formidable: "they work with children". What is more, if you know about children, the only explanation for your talent is that the analyst is a child. Only a child knows what it is to be a child; that is the crux of the matter. When we founded the Department of "Children and Adolescents" in the Psychoanalytical Association of Buenos Aires (ApdeBA), an intellectual battle had to be won for it to be given its true denomination: the Department of "Childhood and Adolescence." Despite this inscription, it continues to be called "The Department of Children." But we who treat children are not children. So what is this knowledge we possess?

For others, and for ourselves, we embody the spirit of enquiry about childhood. However, it is understandable that even those who believe in our knowledge are subtly mistrustful, and feel that we are also the source of equivocations and prohibitions. It is not possible to overcome the resistances which the psychoanalysis of children generates among its own psychoanalysts. These resistances originate from fear, when there is no other option but to delve into the unknown.

In the Department of Psychopathology of Lanús, the consulting rooms for children are at the end of the corridor. If you continue along the passageway, you will come to a wall which separates this section from the mythical other half. On the one side are the external consulting rooms; on the other side, the mirror image, is the hospital morgue. Mauricio Goldenberg, the head of this section, used to visit here from time to time and he did not know what to do with me. I was his subordinate, but I occupied a place in his territory from which he was excluded. I "knew about children", and this meant he was left out.

But what intervention can be offered to those children, while they bounce their toys against the wall which separates them from the morgue. They are so close to the abyss that predates their existence, and still leaves its mark on them, an abyss which, at the same time, emits signals, in prison code, to those who inhabit the other abyss on the far side of the wall.

The child's knowledge

The knowledge of a child is a child's knowledge: that's as far as it goes. Only the child knows what a child is: themselves. So when a psychoanalyst calls themselves a child psychoanalyst, there is no other option than to presume they are a child, unless you are able appreciate their ability to tolerate the unknowable aspect of children. Let's agree on the following: the psychoanalyst is not a child, nor possessed, nor a visionary, nor a beneficiary of psychoanalytic epiphanies. The psychoanalyst who analyses children is immersed in their mystery. They must tolerate the shortcomings of Freudian metapsychology, and are kept afloat with a life-jacket in the form of a few theoretical concepts from some psychoanalysts considered as pioneers. It would appear that women know something about children. But what is it that they know? Practical knowledge, some things connected to maternity and the upbringing of children. But babies don't talk about what is happening to them. The baby's knowledge is rooted in the present, is ahistorical and governed by biology, which will switch on the first perceptual networks.

In this way, there is a knowledge *of* the child – the child's knowledge - which cannot be expressed in words: the other knowledge is *about* the child, a credible, valid

knowledge that can be expressed in words, but which is different. Melanie Klein writes about the child she observes, and she does so very well. It is enough to read Chapter 6 of *Psychoanalysis of Children*.² In this book, her ability to observe is evident, still unhindered by the imperative to theorize. We must also recognise something which may seem surprising: she is not a great writer. Her work is the irrepressible testimony of the person who cannot fail to see. It is a way of looking which is naked, associative, audacious. It was her need to respect theoretical divergences which later obliged her to create a metapsychological superstructure which she provides in her polemic with Anna Freud. This, however, does not create a culture of talking "from the perspective of the child" as does the magnificent story by Clarice Lispector.³ However, it is inevitable that some followers have constructed imaginary maps with the coordinates gleaned from Klein's theory. There have been female psychoanalysts who teeter on the border between the inexpressible and the theoretical, at one and the same time, immersed in psychoanalytical theory and in this concentration of narcissism, which is their baby. What is not known about the child is lost forever. The lost child flees, on their own adventure, until they come within the confines of the law – like Pinocchio – or there is the child so wise, so elevated as to be unreachable, like the representation of the "intelligent baby"⁴ or the "wise baby" (according to another translation)⁵ in Ferenczi's clinical practice.

The covering of amber

My five-year-old patient is continuing with his analysis. His position is that "women are better", not because of their sexualisation but rather because of their ability to defy temporality. With this as his standpoint, he enjoys giving his drawings to his relatives and to me in the spirit of altruism. It is a liturgy which comes from his generosity; an ecumenical gesture whereby he opens himself to those who love him. For the time being, this conviction is everything. However, a crack begins to appear in

² Klein, M. (1932) *The psycho-analysis of children*. London: Hogarth press 1932

³ Lispector, C. (2005) Niño dibujado a pluma. In: Cuentos reunidos. Alfaguara. Madrid. Also in: Revelacion de un mundo. Adriana Hidalgo. Pages 185 – 188

⁴ Ferenczi, S (1926). *Further Contributions to the Theory and Technique of Psycho-Analysis*., London: Hogarth.

⁵ Porge, E (1992) La transferencia à la cantonade. In Litoral 10. Editorial de la torre abolida. Cordoba.

his protective covering. Sometimes he is embarrassed or reluctant to speak. When he plays with his little Playmobil toys – it is enormously difficult to tell whether they are male or female – he begins to not tell me the script of the stories which are unfolding. Or he quickly retracts what he has said after having chosen pink paper to dress up the Prince. The analyst is faced with a difficult situation because this child could be loved for his magical theory about infinitude. It is a painful process; the words of the psychoanalyst who speaks to him – he is not interested in the word “interpretation” – are enough to create cracks in his laminated, transparent covering. There is no other option. But the analyst, who weakens this protective casing of resin with words, tells him the only thing possible: these words will kill you so that you can live. This must be very hard because I am saying to him: now we will *also* hate each other. But he has made me recognise something of myself in him. These words have penetrated me. Through him, my commensurability has been reaffirmed. Possibly, my hate is because I cannot sustain my own understanding of death.

A comment about the ship

I have seen them in news reports, probably on CNN. They are like a floating, armoured vessel. They have no apertures; it is not possible to tell where the missile is fired from. If there is a deck, it is for the helicopter, which enhances the efficiency of their destructive power. There are no sailors, only the glittering of the sun reflected on the hermetic structure. There is no doubt that their most recognizable feature as an artifact made in this world is that they move up and down with the movement of the sea, just like any other ship. We assume that inside there are subjects who are isolated from all sensorial contact with each other, even when this other is referred to as “the enemy”, “an objective” or by other names. Yes, we want to assume that there are subjects behind this armour plating of subjectivity. Some film will show this, or will show the members of the crew reunited with their children when they finally reach dry land after their mission. We want to believe this. In fact, we know it is so.

These instruments of war defy description, so much so that they cannot be made into a toy. Imagine a Playmobil missile frigate: where would we put the sailors and the captain? On the outside there is no deck. It is impossible to see within. Its

potential for destruction overwhelms the imagination. It does not have representability.

Although the missile frigate seems to be the antithesis of the subtle unfolding of emotions which takes place between me and my patient, there is a vulnerable side to it. It has been created by men who know it inside out, down to the tiniest, hidden chip. In contrast, in the consulting room, the child of five continues to generate more and more questions which have no answer. As mentioned before, we want to believe that, among this vessel's crew, there is someone who still resists – be this at some later stage- someone who feels uneasy with their subjective condition.

Sessions

He's playing one of his usual games. He usually dresses up his Playmobil toys in suits made of different coloured shiny paper. They are princes and princesses with their children. As soon as I begin to make a comment about his game, he shouts, "Don't talk to me while I'm playing!" At the same time, he hits my arm, adding in a conciliatory tone: "See how strong I am?" It's true: he's strong enough to defend his position.

The following session, he arrives in the arms of his mother, crying. By way of explanation, she tells me that, "He was sleeping in the car when we arrived."

She takes him to my office and he doesn't mind staying even though he throws himself dramatically on the floor and continues to cry.

I have learnt that if a child cries, you wait; you wait with him. It's not bad to cry. Child psychoanalysts tend to dread crying. It seems to elicit, without any euphemistic veneer, the anxiety-provoking question which usually confronts us: have we hurt the child?"

I wait some minutes and I begin to make out, amidst his tears, some sort of modulation of his voice, which seems like grumbling.

I try a question: "Are you very angry?" He nods his head in agreement. I believe that I asked the question again, and now I obtain a similar answer, but this time it is clearer.

It allows me to complete the question, but in a tone which is closer to a statement: "Are you very angry because I took you away from your mummy?"

I repeat these words; he cries a little more. Suddenly, he stops crying and he asks me, "How do you spell the word *hate*?"

He walks towards the table, and takes a piece of paper and a marker. He wants me to spell out the word he has mentioned.

He has done this with other words, especially the names of the people in his family, to whom he dedicated his drawings.

Instead of dictating the word letter by letter, I make it a bit more difficult for him, repeating the word "hate", very slowly, so that he can deduce the sequence of letters which make up the word by the sound. He complains a bit: "You're not helping me." But he understands perfectly.

Once the word is written down, he writes it again according to the same procedure.

Then he asks me how to spell *Raul*, and in the same way, it is written on the paper below the word *hate*, which is duplicated above.

Maybe because of his lack of any notion of grammar, of the particles or linkers between words, he writes "hate to Raul", "hate for Raul" (or other variations). He substitutes an arrow for the prepositions he does not know how to incorporate. This separates the words *hate*, and leads to the word *Raul*.

He then frames this fresco of our transference with swirls of the same colour in the angles and extremes of the letters of the words which show the picture of the situation which has become established between the two of us.

It's worth noting that he concludes with an R on its own, something left hanging, which is outside the trajectory of the arrow which points towards hate. This R is for Raul but it is also the first letter of his name. This may mark the beginning of the words which, from this point on, will circulate in our psychoanalytic sessions.



The relegation of the child

The child is not the target of the missile: children embody questions which cannot be erased. From my patient's crying-grumbling to the magnificent transcription of his written word, there are the ineffable remains of what we call infancy, which will always be unreachable despite the astuteness or "intelligence" of those who will inevitably draw on various strategies to understand, apprehend and control it. The estrangement which takes place when we are confronted by our childhood, lost forever and buried deep within ourselves, is the inverse position of the enemy of the frigate. It haunts our very being but at the same time, it is our foundation: childhood will never be a trophy of the victor.

The child is an iconic, subjective representation of our own infancy in the present, yet this infancy is lost forever and, for this reason, the child cannot be destroyed except by the person who, by doing so, turns themselves into a killer. It is monstrous to kill a child, even in the context of the brutality of war. This is not about ethical norms. It is the fact that killing a child is a disgrace to the soldier, who should know who to kill. It is not politically acceptable to kill children even though this does happen. Such acts of violence are not permissible in the political arena and, if they do come to light, they are considered deplorable by all parties. The child undermines power, disarms it. From a political perspective, it is not possible to say "I don't know who this is" with respect to the child because that same child is ourselves.

The child not only calls politics into question, the child also ignores it. This power over established power is a challenge which is so disconcerting that the situation is not sustainable. The child, who is neither friend nor foe yet whose position diminishes the validation of power, will be taught a lesson in a subtle, underhand attack to weaken their position.

So, if the missile is not aimed at this target, there will have to be an alternative method to undermine the child, who will be gradually erased. Politics will withhold education, sanitation, food. It will prevent the child from existing in their wise yet fragile splendour. Politics looks the other way. The double standards of this human operation will come to light and those responsible will be deeply moved by the effects

of their own hypocrisy. As mentioned previously: the scenes which display the devastating effects of these policies arouse great emotion, even in those who have been instrumental in their implementation.

Inconclusive epilogue

The missile frigate is powerful, but not as powerful as childhood and the subject who emerges from it.

With my five-year-old patient, we have succeeded in establishing our reciprocal hatred. But this was constitutive, and not just for him. I have offered him an intervention about his infancy but I have let him know the following: "I admit this. This occurred between the two of us, and it is also in words." We understand one another. Despite our small battles – which should perhaps be called love – he has renounced his position of having boundless knowledge to accept a word which lets us know where we stand with respect to one another. Now we are going to hate one another but maybe culture does not only make room for renunciation and feelings of unease, but also for love and survival.

Meanwhile the frigate sails onwards in all its glory. During its active life, it cannot kill anybody, but its capacity to intimidate is just as lethal. The asymmetry which derives from its fire power is its hallmark of superiority.

Yet this is less than the enormous step which my patient took when he went from the pure emotionality of his childhood to speaking and writing a word.

The frigate (in contrast to the structure of the subject) can be dismantled, taken to bits and reassembled. Naval engineers know how to do this by heart. Every nut and bolt, every electrical circuit and every movement of its crew can be tracked on the computer screens installed along the sides of its sanitised rooms, which are without doubt better equipped than any room we have seen in a hospital. The engineer who knows everything about his frigate sees on the screen a bolt which has come loose, causing a vibration which nobody has felt.

As for my little patient, we have begun to share an awareness of our ignorance. In respectful accord, we suppose that the best we can agree on is the following: life gives us a lot, but it does not return everything that it takes from us. For example: childhood.

Trad: Lesley Speakman