

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

Feb 9, 2023

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/psychoanalysis-today-between-the-claustrum-of-the-session-and-the-agera-effect-of-the-maison-verte/>

Bice Benvenuto

Psychoanalysis Today Between the Clastrum of the Session and the Agora Effect of the Maison Verte

Summary:

The creation of the Maison Verte, far from being simply a prophylactic application of psychoanalysis, as it is usually thought to be, marked rather a historical passage for the latter: a passage from the nineteenth century bourgeois private rituals enclosed in posh consulting rooms to the people in the street and their children, the wider world en suffrance. This displacement of psychoanalysis into the public space brings about a great change in the very position of the psychoanalyst. Once past the threshold of the Maison Verte, having left behind the dialogue of the intimacy of private sessions, which still retain their original hypnotic root, the psychoanalyst enters a space that is both familiar and foreign; a reflection of the unconscious that palpitates in a place that welcomes the free unfolding of primary relationships, both within and away from the mother-child claustrum as well as from the analyst-analysand cloister. [1]

If some colleagues have referred to psychoanalysis today as sitting somewhat dormant on Lacan's laurels, this cannot be said of Françoise Dolto's surprising worldwide upsurge, thirty years after her death. Even in the English-speaking world, where Dolto has hardly been translated[2], two major UK institutions such as the Anna Freud Centre and the Tavistock Clinic are currently vying to include Dolto in their curriculum. A book on child analysis (Owen & Farrelly Quinn, 2017), which brings to the fore Dolto's work has even been nominated for the international Gradiva prize in New York!

Why are analytical orientations so different from each other currently interested in Dolto's theory and clinic? If Lacan and Dolto were both marked by last century's development of linguistics, they nevertheless elaborated different positions in relation to this movement. Lacan's "school" of thought and his teaching through a personal language that was both provocative and seductive, however, produced the effect of closing in on itself, on its own tongue. The "Lacanian word", by becoming doctrine and jargon, has made itself popular in academic and psychoanalytical milieus, but has made it more difficult to access the "public square", exactly the space in which, according to Dolto, one is supposed to engage in a dialogue, or better a "polylogue" with different tongues. What we could call Dolto's genius was to take psychoanalysis out of a certain monologue in order to engage with the ever-growing polyphony of today's world. In this sense Dolto presents herself as the psychoanalyst of contemporary malaise.

In the Agora of her Maison Verte (MV) all that is required is the "bodily" presence of its guests, who just drop in with their children. And if they may seem to be there by chance or by curiosity, it is only because

entering the Maison Verte does not require making a request, the offer seems to create it. Anyone who is accompanied by a child, whether with no previous commitment, act of faith or preliminary transference to psychoanalysis, can enter. The MV *welcomers*, by way of their floating listening, let their guests speak while playing or responding to the different stimuli and voices of the public square.

Its creation, far from being simply a prophylactic application of psychoanalysis, as it is usually thought to be, marked rather a historical passage for the latter: a passage from the nineteenth century bourgeois private rituals enclosed in posh consulting rooms to the people in the street and their children, the wider world *en suffrance*. This displacement of psychoanalysis into the public space brings about a great change in the very position of the psychoanalyst. Once past the threshold of the Maison Verte, having left behind the dialogue of the intimacy of private sessions, which still retain their original hypnotic root, the psychoanalyst enters a space that is both familiar and foreign; a reflection of the unconscious that palpitates in a place that welcomes the free unfolding of primary relationships, both within and away from the mother-child *claustrum* as well as from the analyst-analysand cloister. In fact the polyphony of the small agora where the pleasure of play meets the pleasure of speaking or bubbling, leaves desire and unconscious messages free to float between the old and young, between different cultures and social classes, between the hosts and the guests in a multiplicity of transferences. There are no interpretations, but people's responses to the words and actions of others. The unconscious is heard through immediate and living responses. One could say that Dolto had already understood the mutation of the paternal function today from the symbolic void of the old patriarch to the polyphony of the *polis* and its discontents.

Dolto had identified, while working with babies and their parents, that the flesh and the sensuality of the senses, first in the foetal state and then afterwards in the neo-natal period, constituted the repressed complex source of psychic life, which is already relational, before we try to enclose it in dyadic or Oedipal parameters. Thus, perhaps unwittingly, Dolto opened the way to the exploration of the repressed universe of psychoanalysis itself, of an even more complex primordial psychic activity as the very constitution of the intertwining of flesh and language. For Dolto as well as for Lacan, the newborn is already marked by an original coexistence *in utero* with the mother, whose placenta, beside being the source of satisfaction for vital needs, was foremost the source of all the pleasures that may suffice to make living a worthwhile endeavour. Dolto recognizes the pleasure principle as the founding principle of the psyche from then on. For Lacan it is then birth that breaks the coexistence with the mother's body that the infant had until then perceived as a part of herself/himself. Therefore the very first encounter would not be with the breast, or any object or person, but with the loss of a part of oneself. When babies cry out for the lost part of themselves, a breast arrives in its place. The breast is given from the outside, like a glove turned inside out, in place of the enveloping placenta which is also the first erotic object that precedes birth, the object *a par excellence*.

Although Dolto did not delve into intrauterine life, she certainly pointed at it as a fundamental and as yet uncharted territory of our subjective development vis-à-vis the mother's body and her unconscious. During pregnancy, there is a specific topology of linked bodies that are neither two separated bodies nor one: the two are linked but distinct, foreign/intimate bodies going through a complex process of inclusion/rejection, reciprocal sucking-in and yet distinction. This uneven topology of psychic prehistory may bother orthodox colleagues, but isn't it the characteristic of psychoanalysis to go back into a past that was considered prehistory, to make it become history of the psychic subject? Wasn't the discovery of children's sexuality by Freud a great scandal at the time? And even, later, the schizo-paranoid fantasies of newborns by M. Klein?

If Lacan says that we are born into language, Dolto stresses that we are also conceived and born into the discourse of the flesh and the senses, too often conspicuous rejects of psychoanalysis. The child's body, although still premature, is not an object, a neutral or fragmented matter, ready to be shaped by...the mind, but already marked by a relationship with the interior of the mother's body and psyche, from which our primordial narcissism and sense of existence derive. We can figure the unconscious image of the fetus's body as composed of two crossed bodies, at once a narcissistic and relational image. The newborn would then be already endowed with a cohesion and a way of communicating through sensory codes exchanged with the mother. Messages are exchanged through smell, touch and hearing. Sensing is not only the activity

of the senses, but above all it gives *sense* to the world.

By the same token, Dolto spoke to newborns as already being subjects of language, insofar as both sensual and verbal language codes pre-exist birth, inhabit the subject and produce symbolic connections. This implies that a subjective cohesion has already been achieved through sensual communication and the words of the mother and the others who have surrounded them during pregnancy. The Doltoian image of the body does not belong to a self-reflexive subject but to the unconscious history of our libidinal ties with others and with ourselves, a space where language and the real of the body interconnect/disconnect/circumvent/repress/welcome/reject one another. The symbolic for Dolto is not “The Event” par excellence, which breaks through from high above to reset our mind, but already the effect of a plurality of events, or more or less happy encounters among different instances.

Besides neuro-scientific and psychiatric new research into perinatal life (Trevarthen & Aitken, 2001), there is also an interesting psychoanalytical field of research on life before birth. Today’s two most original lines of thought on pre-birth, Bracha Ettinger’s (2006) *matrixial* borderspace, and Tamara Landau’s (2012) concept of “enclave” from her study on placental life, both underline, following Dolto, that the symbolic structure, as Lacanian psychoanalysis conceives it today, finds itself on the repression of its roots in the sensual language of the body. After all, isn’t the characteristic of the “structure” to leave the existence of living things outside? On the one hand Lacan does not seem to contradict this when he bars the woman from her own existence in the symbolic insofar as she is made to represent this all-male repression. On the other hand he is not as monolithic as he is sometimes made out to be. He was able to go beyond himself and swing the planes of discourse, especially at the end of his teaching and his life, when he foresaw the emergence of a third sex, so far silenced by civilization’s bipolarized vision of sexuality. In this unpublished last seminar *Topology and Time*, he left his most disconcertingly authentic last words (Lacan, 1979)[3].

If therefore intrauterine psychic life is not just a purely biological development, but is the time and space of intense psychic activity that already involves forms of jouissance and anxiety, separation, grief and mourning on the part of both the foetus and the mother, then we can understand that the most resistant symbolic connections are organized in the archaic. Whereas for Klein, as for Lacan, the baby is born with a body in pieces, without psychic cohesion, a body inhabited by the death drive and its devouring and self-destructive fantasies. But Dolto seems to follow the early Freud when she doesn’t view the death drive as a force that wants to annihilate the object, but rather as the inertia of Nirvana, passivity, renouncing to challenge death’s letting go. It functions as an attempt to block those activities of Eros which *smell* of conflict and disobedience, by mortifying the pleasures derived from even only desiring them. For Dolto, the death drive is on the side of deep sleep but also of incestuous ecstatic enjoyment and the feeling of being an object of annihilation in the hands of the other; death is then placed on the perverse side of the object that so enjoys. Thence my idea that death, rather than being a drive, is the death of the drive (Benvenuto, forthcoming)!

In fact Dolto’s ethical position, while including death’s enticements, verges nevertheless on restoring things to a desire to live. Since conception, life wants to live. It has its language and its logic, its demands and its fragilities. Life is also anguished by death, by its apparent peace, by its solitary closure on itself against which life tries to fight. It can also happen that others do not let themselves be apprehended or do not send their messages of recognition or refusal. Am I supposed to be dead or alive? This is already from the start the enigma of the desire of the other: what is the baby/foetus for the others who are outside? What kind of logic is out there which is not quite the logic of the flesh? Landau (2012) suggests that something happens at the end of the sixth month, the foetus can then hear the external voices, of the father of course, but also the not only internal voice of the mother, and that the baby/foetus is then silent, it does not move, or not much. I find these moments of silence very important, already the experience of a distance from the other, a meditative time, one could say, of preparation for birth, when the foetus’ position in the womb changes. Very delicate moments of suspension during which symbolic integration is made or not made.

But eventually the foetus will have to leave the interior of the maternal body. To be born is to fall into the dimension of time that immediately begins to flow, press, change the life that claims you, and in order not to lose yourself you need an other who makes it possible with their gaze and their voice, otherwise the *spectre* of autism will appear on the horizon! But disorders regarding hearing and looking, as well as eating and touching, can also be due to insensitivity towards the others as the pivot of the sense of our existence. When we are born, we *lose sight* of the coordinates acquired during intrauterine life and it is then that the gaze and the voices of others, found again outside, help the baby to find a place again in the small agora of the family. A problem emerges when, beside the classical mother-child small circuit, today's encumbering nuclear family too remains closed on itself, and to others. If the bond with the mother can easily degenerate into a looping knot, also today's unstructured nuclear family tends to become an enclosure, a golden cage (Benvenuto, 2020) that is as seductive as it is deadly. What to do? Dolto would have said, "Go to the *Maison Verte* with your children and...socialize!"

And here is Alice, a little girl of two and a half who comes with her mother to the *Maison Verte*, set up for the first time in London[4]. They seem to be one and the same. Alice wears only long dresses that prevent her from moving freely; she is hard of hearing due to a recurrent ear infection, which causes her mother great anxiety. Once Alice was playing with her mother on the play-mat, whilst watching with interest as some children climbed a small staircase showing great joy when they reached the top. Alice couldn't resist standing up and making for the stairs, but was stopped by another little girl who hugged her and wouldn't let her go. Her mother shouted "Give her a hug." Alice was paralyzed but would not give the child a hug. A *Maison Verte* *welcomer* asked casually from a distance, "Were you about to do something else, Alice, rather than hug little Jeanne?" These words broke the enchantment: at the same moment, the mother stopped screaming, Jeanne loosened her embrace, and Alice made her way to the top of the stairs, triumphantly.

She'd made it indeed! She had taken hold of her own body, instead of remaining paralyzed by her awkward long dress, by Jeanne's tight embrace and by her mother's deafening cries. She was able to acquire her own hearing through the quiet enunciation of another's words, which addressed her potential ability to move and choose, thus opening a new sound field for her sense of hearing. In fact, verbal and sensory codes are often destined not to align, except in certain privileged moments that Lacan called anchoring points. I think that in this case, Alice experienced one of those crucial points where another's words aligned with her auditory sense.

Some time later I learned from her mother that Alice had also not developed her sense of taste and touch. As a result, she had difficulty eating and had no body contact with others. She had not been able to develop a primary relationship to the world through her senses, her mother enveloping her in her own closed territory, with no way out.

In the *Maison Verte*, Dolto liked the idea of having a mirror placed at the top of a small ladder so that the children could admire their triumph after climbing to the top. However, the experience of the mirror is not always a happy one because children are confronted with a scopic image that does not reflect their own unconscious image.

According to the Lacanian theory, there are two kinds of body: a visible one, the image of the body that a mirror returns to us and to which we identify narcissistically; and the invisible one, made up of the sensory and libidinal ties that are excluded by the narcissistic image of the mirror. For Dolto, what is repressed at this moment in the mirror is the archaic narcissism of the unconscious body image. In Alice's case, there was no mirror at the top of the stairs. Her jubilation did not arise from a self-reflective visual experience but from a more subtle sense of a cohesion of her body, finally separated from her mother's, while being reflected in the eyes of others. The tight enclosure within her mother's body, which had deprived her of her own hearing, touching and tasting, could only burst thanks to the socializing effect that the *Maison Verte* had allowed. The following week, I could barely recognize Alice who had her hair cut short and was wearing skinny jeans and sneakers! She spent the entire session playing with the mirror, ecstatically admiring this new image of herself. Before being able to acquire a body image, Alice had needed words that

she could hear, that could bring new elements to reorganize her body apart from her mother's, who in the meantime was also transformed in her hair style and in her clothes, also freed from the same enclosure as the little one!

The turning of the head away from the mother just to lend an ear to other stimuli is what we are witnessing with Alice. The welcomer's simple words *appealed* to her desire to exist beyond the mother's deafening space, which held her tightly in a static rock-like image of her body that could barely move, a body unable to hear the closest sounds. The Maison Verte functioned for her as an acoustic field through which her own image acquired its missing ears so that she could narcissistically triumph at the top of the podium.

For Dolto an exclusive not-yet-two-bodies relationship is the fixation on an image related to primary survival such as breathing and sucking. But very early on babies, while absorbed in sucking the mother's breast, will also turn their heads to respond to other people's presence. This shows that the baby derives pleasure from others beyond the need for food, beyond existing in a pure erotic state of being one with the mother. This static and very archaic image could seem not far removed from what Agamben (2002) reminds us regarding Heidegger's description of the *poor* world of animals, such as that of ticks, all absorbed by sucking blood. Whereas the human dynamics of desire are reflected in a *richer*, changing world, which opens up to a shared pleasure with others who will add meaning to these exchanges. Yet, as Agamben reminds us, desire, like love according to Socrates in *The Symposium* (Plato, 1951), is *poor* in that animal absorption, which all the wealth of our too human intellectual resources can hardly make up for. Dolto recognised that this state of consuming absorption was also constitutive of the human animal, the reason why she is not content with the idea that we just have to cut the cord (the nipple? the session? the phallus?) that connects to it in order to obtain the human desired effect. In the Maison Verte Alice and her mother had to take their time before they could turn their heads from their reciprocal absorption and hear the call of the others' presence, towards whom to irresistibly move. What else would the drive be if not this *towardness*?

Lacan was aware of Dolto's knowledge about this eroticism which, far from foreshadowing pathology, gathers that libidinal force that alone made life once worthwhile, while keeping it going... somehow.

In the end all I can say is what Lacan could not do in spite of Dolto. That even though he was aware of the significance of these other sides of pleasure and of language, yet he could not hear them if only as a lalala not needing memory, repetitions, deciphering. I believe psychoanalysis is suffering from cutting it(self) short while upholding the supremacy of the Word, whose capitalized singular universal order cannot not silence those lowercase lalalas it flew from. While Dolto in spite of Lacan seems authentically at ease speaking of losses, castrations and words strictly in the plural, when inhabiting *pluriversals*, so not to risk consolidating monolithic rocks which, we can all, psychoanalysts included, alas!, easily be turned into.

Bibliography:

Agamben, G. (2002). *L'aperto. L'uomo e l'animale* [The Open: Man and Animal.]. Bollati Boringhieri.

Benvenuto, B. (2002) *And yet it moves!* [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Watson, E. & Collins, D. (Eds). Routledge.

Benvenuto, B.(2020). *The golden cage*. *Journal of European Psychotherapy and Counselling* 22, Taylor & Francis online.

Dolto, F. (1971). *Dominique: Analysis of an adolescent*. Outerbridge & Lazard.

Dolto, F. (2013). *Psychoanalysis and paediatrics. Key psychoanalytical concepts with sixteen clinical observations of children*. Karnac.

Owen, C. & Farrelly Quinn, S. (Eds.). (2017). *Lacanian psychoanalysis with babies, children, and adolescents: Further notes on the child*. Karnac.

Ettinger, B. (2006). *The matrixial borderspace*. Minnesota Press.

Lacan, J. (1979). *Le Séminaire de Jacques Lacan, XXVI: La topologie et le temps 1979*. Unpublished. Transcript

http://gaogoa.free.fr/Seminaires_HTML/26-T/L09011979.htm

Landau T., (2012). *Les funambules de l'oubli* [The funambules of oblivion]. Imago

Plato (1951). *The Symposium* (W. Hamilton, Trans.). Penguin.

Trevarthen, C. & Aitken, K. (2001). Infant intersubjectivity: Research, theory and clinical applications. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 42(1):3-4 48.

Notes:

[1] This paper was presented at the Conference “What Would Lacan Be Without Dolto?” *Fondation Européenne pour la Psychanalyse*, Paris, April 6, 2019.

[2] Only two texts by Dolto have been published in English: *Dominique: Analysis of an Adolescent* (1971), and her medical thesis *Psychoanalysis and Paediatrics. Key Psychoanalytical Concepts with Sixteen Clinical Observations of Children* (1939).

[3] I am referring to *La topologie et le temps*, as I read it 30 years ago thanks to pirate prints from Lacan's taped seminars, at a time when only a few of them had been published in the present revised form.

[4] I have already published this case in the chapter “Dolto, Klein and Lacan in a Polylogue or The Agora effect in the Maison Verte-UK” in *Further notes on the child*, Owen & Farrelly Quinn (Eds.)

Bio:

Bice Benvenuto is a psychoanalyst practicing in London, a founding member of the *Centre for Freudian Analysis and Research*, the director of *Associazione Dolto* in Rome and a founder of the Maison Verte-UK in London. For many years she has been a visiting professor at the *New School of Social Research* (NY) and *Florida Atlantic University* and has lectured extensively in the UK and abroad on psychoanalysis, feminine sexuality, child analysis and literature. She is the author of *Concerning the Rites of Psychoanalysis*” (Polity/Routledge 1994), co-author of *The Works of Jacques Lacan: An Introduction* (FAB 1986), and a contributor to several books, including *The Klein-Lacan Dialogues* (Rebus 1997), the introduction to the work of F. Dolto in *Theory and Practice of Child Psychoanalysis* (Karnac 2009) and *Further Notes on the Child* (Karnac 2017), which was nominated for the Gradiva 2018 International Prize, and a forthcoming book on the drive (Routledge).

Publication Date:

December 9, 2022