

48th IPA Congress – Prague, Czech Republic
Prague Congress Summary

By Maxine K Anderson, MD FIPA

October 2013

What I wanted to focus on in this summary of the 48th IPA Congress in Prague were the different views of the “presentational” aspects of experience. We are used to thinking of presentational, sensory-based nuggets of the “now” experience as being subjected to alpha function (Bion), thus capable of becoming re-presented; that is, symbolizable, or thinkable. But it was intriguing to consider other ways of viewing these pre-symbolic experiences that are often lived but inexpressible. Several authors mentioned Suzanne Langer’s notion of presentational symbolism, first mentioned in her work *Philosophy in a New Key* (1941). My understanding of this concept is that the fantasy experience is made up of sensory/visual images stored as memory, not to be abstracted into less saturated words or thoughts that could accrue new meanings. Here the “hardness” in the presentation of “hardness of the rock” would be the live and enduring message.

Lea Pistiner de Cortina in the plenary on symbolism presented a case of a massively traumatized woman who lost a brother amidst the era of the ‘disappeared ones’ in Argentina and indeed whose father had been a member of the military junta. Coming from a Kleinian/Bionian background, the author suggested that the patient had to dismantle her experience, as Meltzer would say the autistic does, to avoid unbearable emotional pain. Pistiner de Cortina’s experience of deadness, a deep sleepiness or emptiness in the analytic space was then understood in terms of the result of an autistic withdrawal or dismantling; a kind of autistic retreat from the unbearable pain and trauma of the patient’s early experience. Symbolic functioning was not possible in this circumstance, and the analyst had to endure and keep her mind as alive as possible until more symbolic functioning, in the form of containment and dreaming, became available. Slowly, with her analytic persistence and containment, the patient’s affects could be labeled and she could express her grief about her brother, eventually being able to recall her dream about his shirt, as a symbol of him but also a separation from him. Symbolic function thus became available; the “detention of projective identification”, to use the author’s phrase, could be altered and the flow of her life could resume.

The discussion of this beautiful paper added interesting complexity for me: Riccardo Steiner, from London, influenced by the work of Herbert Rosenfeld, emphasized an alternative view: that it was not a detention of PI, but a massively fragmenting PI which destroys the mind of the analyst and thus her capacity to employ alpha function; and that such fragmentation could be thought of as a repetition of the envisioned brutal murder of

the brother. So his discussion was that the analyst had to recover from a subtle but overwhelming projection in order to help her patient.

Another discussant, John Muller an academic semiologist from Princeton, suggested that the deadness the analyst felt and that so pervaded the atmosphere and functioning of the patient was a living sign, something that could be viewed as a positive expression of her experience. In fact, he suggested that this was the earliest sign of life in the analysis. These different views of the psychic deadness, as the protective withdrawal, as massive overwhelm, and as living sign suggest different perspectives on what was unthinkable experience. I believe these differences flow into different technical stances: one of endurance, and the other as inviting curiosity and openness to meaning.

Another panel on “Beyond Neurosis: Clinical studies of representation, figurability and the creation of mind” also picked up on this point. The panel included Howard Levine, Virginia Ungar, and Caesar Botella. As the chair, Levine’s introductory remarks focused on the unsymbolized as that which includes impulse, action, and dissociation of affect. He mentioned Bion’s ‘O’ as experience which is active, unrepresented, and not yet subjectivized within the unstructured unconscious, by which I think he means the unrepressed unconscious, ‘that vast reservoir which is the growth plate’ of the psyche.

Among the papers of this panel that really appealed to me was one on figurability by Cesar Botella. Figurability is the French terms Botella proposes for attempting to give form to, at best, a barely discernible presentational element. A synopsis of this view might be that the ‘true object’ of concern that the analyst tries to detect is not what is represented in a memory but what generates and lies behind that memory. And that in situations in which the presentations of experience have been such as to leave nearly undetectable traces or representations in memory, the analyst needs to employ what he calls “regrediance,” that is, to allow himself to regress in the presence of his patient to a kind of endo-hallucinatory state in order to weave a patch so as to cover over a void where something could not be represented. An example of such is when Botella depicts a sequence in which the patient refers to ‘a shower’ at one point, and only after a circuitous route including Botella allowing himself to slip into a regressive hallucinatory state, can he suggest that the unbearable object of concern which made memory impossible were the ‘showers of the concentration camps.’ Further discussion suggests that this patch is a kind of construction of the analyst and in that way a falseness, but that its knitting the psyche together is better than if the void were left unattended. So we have an added approach to the un-represented, the traumatically un-representable, and the analyst’s ‘patch’ to cover the void.

And the third panel I will mention: Application of Field Theory to the formulation of interpretations in working with patients who have impairment in symbolization: Antonino Ferro, Guiseppe Civitaresse, Elie De Rocha Barros. One portion of this panel that was particularly striking was Civitaresse's paper in which he illustrated the somatic reverie or "dreaming in the body" and the analytic interchange with the patient where attention to the bodily states is given as respectful a status as that of words. He suggested this stance as being a kind of 'multiple worlds' notion of experience in the analytic field; a kind of intermediate zone, between interpretation and enactment; a zone co-created by analyst and analysand. This zone, he says, may pick up unconscious expressions of truth that our conscious selves cannot have.

Elie Barros also spoke of the impairment of construction of the meaning of the symbol, citing Susanne Langer's "presentational symbolism" once again where the expressive side, the emotion or affect of the symbol may be intact where as the ideational aspect of the symbol is not. This expressive side of the symbol may not have its meaning evolve but rather remain as the expression of affect.

So to have many simultaneous thoughts about the presentational, the unrepresented, what the French call "l'actual", which focuses upon absences rather than presences, but also absences as vital expressions (the deadness as a vital communication about one's lived experience)—the encounter with these emphases was and is intriguing, and may perhaps evolve as one of the growth plates for psychoanalytic investigation.

Maxine K Anderson, MD FIPA is a co-founder of the Northwestern Psychoanalytic Society and Institute and is currently Director of Training. She maintains a private practice in Seattle.