

Psychic Foreclosures

Ms. Nilofer Kaul

In retrospect I think the work on autism with its elaboration of the concept of dimensionality played an important role; the fine aesthetic sensibility of many of these children was so unmistakable that one could not avoid wondering if their developmental failure had not been founded on processes for warding off the impact of the beauty of the world.

Meltzer (1986, p.204)

The place we live in psychically is often flooded by pre-packaged images of a good life – one we have accreted through borrowed images. These may often be infected by an explosion of peddled consumer fantasies. Fashion often promises us a passport to this exciting world, and brands are its fast track routes. These become the inchoate signposts to happiness, excitement, and other kinds of "never-lands". How can addiction to such consumer-led worlds be thought of psychoanalytically? It will be agreed by most psychoanalysts that addiction is marked by a compulsive and insatiable reliance on an object/activity that defends against feelings of helplessness, and the pain of loss and creates an omnipotent world where suffering is evaded.

Can these products and lifestyles be seen as a proxy for aesthetic objects? Meltzer (1986) writes about the tumult of emotional encounters as processes through which we search and possibly arrive at aesthetic experiences. Following the Keatsian (1819) dictum of "Beauty is truth, truth beauty", Bion and Meltzer would concur that it is in the experience of an emotional truth alone, that an aesthetic experience is born. However, pseudo-aesthetic objects or "proto-aesthetic" (precursors to symbolised and emotionally digested aesthetic experiences) are consumed rather than encountered. In using this term, I refer to Meltzer's idea of the infant's entry into the world and the accompanying encounter with the beautiful but terrifying mother – which is perhaps the foundation of the search for an aesthetic object. If what is experienced is a thin object that is one-dimensional (without depth), perhaps this baby can only grow into a paper-thin object world. Instead of introjecting a whole object, this baby will cling to the surface of things. The flimsiness of such attachments can leave an experience of void, that we may see manifest in addictive relations. An obsession with images of bliss could well be linked to an addictive object world and may be a perversion of the aesthetic drive. I use here Madame Bovary (1992 [1856]) to explore such an object world and its manifestation in the form of an insatiable appetite for accumulating proto-aesthetic objects.

Ignes Sodre (2015) writes "about the use of compulsive daydreaming as a drug to cure empty, depressed states of mind." "Flaubert's great novel is", she continues, "at its most essential, not about the evils of adultery, or even of indiscriminate greed: Madame Bovary is about the misuse of Imagination" (p. 57). Sodre draws attention to compulsive daydreaming as a psychic dwelling place. This is a conscious fantasy world that is kept secret from everyone. This may often be the case with our patients who keep this world of fantasies they are addicted to a secret from us. This world is a compilation of pre-fabricated images of supreme happiness with some underlying promise of omnipotence.

From the beginning, of the novel, we can feel the deadness of Emma's world with ominous clarity. This is accompanied by the drumbeat of futile fantasies which gets louder. Her father leaves her at a convent where she is taken up by the atmosphere:

... She was softly lulled by the mystic languor exhaled in the perfumes of the altar, the freshness of

the holy water, and the lights... She puzzled her head to find some vow to fulfil... (p. 33).

The word "lulled" here indicates that some feelings are being soothed through sensuous pleasure. This is a re-markable description of what Meltzer (1975) calls "shallowness" – constituted by an internal object world that is thin and one-dimensional, which can only echo back what it receives; not find a meaning in it. When she went to confession, we are told she "invented little sins" to stay longer in the sensuously pleasing ambience. Still later we are told:

She confused in her desire the sensualities of luxury with the delights of the heart, elegance of manners with delicacy of sentiment. (p.55)

And again:

This nature, positive in the midst of its enthusiasms, that had loved the church for the sake of the flowers, and music for the words of the songs, and literature for its passional stimulus, rebelled against the mysteries of faith as it grew irritated by discipline... (p. 37)

The narrator is unsparing about Emma's inability to suffer mental pain:

When her mother died she cried much the first three days. She had a funeral picture made with the hair of the deceased, and, in a letter sent to the Bertaux full of sad reflections on life, she asked to be buried later on in the same grave... Emma was secretly pleased that she had reached at a first attempt the rare ideal of pale lives, never attained by mediocre hearts (p. 36).

This loss too becomes a source of narcissistic gratification. The emptiness and ennui is linked with the absence of any real emotional link to others. An early meeting with Charles Bovary reveals this onerous ennui (or her incapacity to find meaning). Her voice would vary, "her look full of boredom, her thoughts wandering..." (p. 22).

But she strives to feel. But her efforts fail, as they are based on mimicking rather than experiencing:

... she wanted to make herself in love with him. By moonlight in the garden she recited all the passionate rhymes she knew by heart, and sighing, sang to him many melancholy adigos, but she found herself as calm as before... (p.41)

Soon after the marriage, Charles finds himself intoxicated by love, but Emma is unable to find any happiness:

... Emma tried to find out what one meant exactly in life by the words felicity, passion, rupture, that had seemed to her so beautiful in books (p. 33).

The barrenness of Emma's internal life is so palpable, that it is actually terrifying. Daydreaming is a desperate bid to survive the flattened emotional landscape that threatens to engulf her; but also the reader. This shapes the desperation in search for excitement. After her visit to the ball given by the Marquis d' Andervilliers, she returns full of discontent and restlessness:

She knew the latest fashions, the addresses of the best tailor she studied ... the descriptions of furniture; she read Balzac and George Sand, seeking to gratify in fantasy her secret cravings. (p. 54)

She mimics the lives of the people who inhabit her imagination as

Everything in her immediate surroundings, the boring countryside, the imbecile petit bourgeois, the general mediocrity of life, seemed to be a kind of anomaly, a unique accident that had befallen her alone, while beyond ... there unfurled the immense kingdom of pleasure and passion. (p. 55)

An adhesive identification with this lifestyle increases her frustration, and she has a breakdown. The violence she seeks is in itself a substitute for turbulence of lived emotional experiences. She breaks down as she is unable to find meaning through this incessant substitution. This breakdown indicates not just Emma's inability to go further, but also a foreclosure in the text a textual inability to go further.

There are moments in the text where this foreclosure becomes more apparent. After Emma's

marriage, when the father returns to the empty home, full of memories of his dead wife, her first pregnancy – a dead son is alluded to

... he felt inclined for a moment to take a turn towards the church. As he was afraid, however, that the sight would make him yet more sad, he went right away home. (p. 29)

This moment is both unusual in this text; and symptomatic of it. Unusual in the way there is a tenderness, and symptomatic in the way it turns away from emotionality. There are some moments when the text seems to touch on something moving in Emma:

Why could she not lean over balconies in Swiss chalets, or enshrine her melancholy in a Scotch cottage, with a husband dressed in a black velvet coat with long tails, and thin shoes...? Perhaps she would have liked to confide all these things to someone, but how to tell an undefinable uneasiness, variable as the clouds, unstable as the winds? Words failed her-the opportunity, the courage.” (p. 38)

This is a moving moment as the narrator for a moment gets closer to Emma and lets in something ineffable, gesturing towards a search for something “undefinable” and Emma’s longing for meaning here is embodied in signifiers of opulence. There is a poignant absence here:

If Charles had but wished it, if he had guessed it, if his look had but once met her thought... (p. 38).

I want to read addictions against the backdrop of such unformulated experiences hinted at in the foreclosures or the limits of the text (in the analyst’s mind when it is in the clinic). That the emptying of meaning which Emma confronts in the convent itself, can be read as a void, an absence in her quest for an object of reverence.

Bion (1992) writes:

There is a great difference between idealisation of a parent because the child is in despair, and idealisation because the child is in search of an outlet for feelings of reverence and awe. In the latter instance the problem centres on frustration and the inability to tolerate frustration of a fundamental part of a particular patient's make-up. This is likely to happen if the patient is capable of love and admiration to an outstanding degree; in the former instance the patient may have no particular capacity for affection but a great greed to be its recipient. The answer to the question – which is it? – will not be found in any textbook but only in the process of psycho-analysis itself. (p. 292)

It is the latter that I am concerned with here; that it may be possible to see addiction as a perversion of the quest for reverence and awe. The foreclosed moments in the text are like psychic foreclosures which impede the search for an aesthetic object. The failure to find that outlet for feelings of reverence and awe, may be perverted into an addiction to “proto-aesthetic” experiences. This may be the foundation for a search we are embarked upon – our personal searches for experiences that fill us with awe. In the absence of a thinking other, this emptiness may become an engulfing void which is intolerable.

References

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