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Before and Afters of the Womb: Reply to Commentaries by Jeanne Wolff Bernstein and Dodi Goldman

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This reply engages with Wolff Bernstein's and Goldman's rich discussions of Farhi's work. Wolff Bernstein's exploration of the relationship between Winnicott and Susan as a perversion of the phylogenetic shield operative in primal repression furthers our understanding of Milner's treatment of her patient. Following Wolff Bernstein's thoughts of the problems caused by Winnicott's mishandlings of Susan, I suggest that we might consider the referral process itself as an analogue to pre-natal life, the conscious and unconscious significations of which can have an important impact on the qualities of relational bonds to be built with the treating analyst.

Goldman's commentary deepens our insight into Milner as a person and as an analyst. At the same time, it also raises an important question about how early in biological life it is logical to assume the possibility of psychic material's registration, which Goldman sees as equivalent to considerations of psychic organization. Seeing the two as temporally distinct, I draw from critical analyses of Laplanche's theory to discuss how experience can be registered as yet-misaligned bits that await a later developmental time before it can become invested with meaning and become psychically organized.

Discussing Farhi's work with two such sophisticated thinkers, each with their own, distinctive voice has been a great pleasure indeed. With this pleasure has also come a deepening of my understanding of Milner and Farhi as theorists and clinicians but, mostly, as humans. At the same time, as all good conversation does, this dialogue has sparked further questions in me that revolve around how we think about the impact of malignant maternity in pre- as well as post-uterine life as well as about how we are constituted as subjects. The latter has been especially interesting to me, as this exchange has stimulated reflections not only pertaining to individual subjectivity but also on how the subjectivity of the clinical dyad, in the inflections of its intersubjective exchange and its evolution over analytic time, comes into being. I want to briefly address some of these thoughts as raised by my co-discussants' papers.

WOLFF BERNSTEIN: MELTING INTO AND DIFFERENTIATING FROM

Wolff Bernstein (this issue) takes great interest in Milner's relationship with Winnicott and in the impact it has on Susan's treatment. Noting the complexly enacted *mélange* of omnipotent

caretaking laced with sadistic gesture in his referring of this patient to Milner, Wolff Bernstein addresses the conditions under which Susan's analysis begins and how it shifts when, 7 years into the work, Winnicott abandons her. Wolff Bernstein notes Milner's clinical skill in handling Winnicott's sudden withdrawal from Susan's life—and, I would add from the life of the analytic dyad as well. This event must have resonated with Milner in deeply personal ways, having herself been thrown out by Winnicott when he had unilaterally terminated his treatment of her.

Susan's eviction, followed in quick succession as we learn from Goldman (this issue), by the dissolution of Winnicott's own marriage, births not only suffering but also painfully midwives a new era of *psychic* productivity for the patient and of *analytic* productivity for Milner as she encourages Susan's creative refashioning of the analysis into a space where her drawings could be used analytically. This shift makes possible Susan's desperately needed fusion with her analyst. The complicated dynamics surrounding this period of their work bear, I believe, further exploration and may have interesting implications for our overall work as analysts.

I am thinking here of Wolff Bernstein's description of the phylogenetic shield operative in primal repression as discussed by Freud and Lacan. In the perversion of its original aim, which is to guard the infant from over-excitation that the early ego is unable to process, Wolff Bernstein describes how it can become "transformed into an iron shield, blocking out any light and air, forcing the infant into an adhesive bondage with a mother who allows for no separate existence" (p. 518). Winnicott's original role as Susan's protector became compromised by the multiple transgressions of his relationship with Milner.¹ His relationship to Susan may have no longer shielded but, rather, come to have constrained and suffocated the analytic dyad. Winnicott's sending Susan away and the feelings it must have triggered in Milner may have pierced the thick, constraining shield, allowing breathing room in a previously constricted analytic relationship; the treatment moves in a dramatically novel direction once Susan is no longer under the auspices of Winnicott's care—just, as soon thereafter, Winnicott is to also not be relationally contained in his marriage which is about to dissolve. Free of her abandoning analyst's scrutiny of her work with Susan, Milner was able to engage her patient in new, ultimately very fruitful ways. Milner had already been struggling to establish her own voice by that time in her career, especially as Klein's supervision of her work with Susan had been unhelpful. I believe, thus, that Susan's abandonment by Winnicott may have further catalyzed Milner's own professional struggle with developing her own voice, inadvertently helping her in coming to rely on her own analytic ideas.

This raises interesting questions about the place of the referring analyst in the life of the analytic dyad, an issue that has been undertheorized in our professional literature. Could the placenta offer a useful metaphor to a deepening of our understanding of the referral process, a way to construe it as riddled with conscious intent but also distended with conflictual unconscious communications and meanings that shape the early (and formative) moments of analytic work? When the referral is successful, the placenta withers and dies, substituted by the new, developing relationship between patient and analyst. But its early kernels, the pre-natal life of the dyad if you will, live on. Oftentimes they emerge as memories or formulated thoughts much later in the treatment;

¹Her work with Susan was not the only instance of incestuous melting of treatment boundaries in Milner's life as an analyst. The analysis of a child patient on whom her groundbreaking paper on symbol formation was based (1952) also suffered from professional boundary violations as it was supervised by the child's grandmother herself, Melanie Klein! Although Milner had expressed her reservations about the appropriateness of this arrangement, she failed to protect her patient from these transgressions (Grosskurth, 1984).

sometimes in their latent form they surface in dreams, fantasies and enactments. Early experience, Laplanche (1999) tells us, especially of the excessive kind that defies conscious registration is subject to endless translations and reinscriptions. In the early stages of an analysis, the relationship between referring and treating analyst in its conscious and unconscious significations may help the analytic treatment garner momentum or fall flat, it may foreclose analytic creativity or stimulate intense relational engagement.

But, of course, emotional ties and relational engagements are never clearly circumscribed. Affective placentas don't wither and die. Winnicott was not fully absent from Milner's life with Susan, even after Milner became psychically freer of him. Several years later, he was asked to author the introduction to *The Hands of the Living God*. Therein he described having been both pleased and excited to be allowed to read the manuscript as the work with Susan evolved (1969). That he also notes that the work Milner has done with Susan has been achieved by "some miracle of detachment" (p. ix) suggests that he was not naive to how his relationship with Milner complicated Susan's analysis or of the psychic use his ex-patient was able to make of his multiply enacted abandonments of herself and her patient.

GOLDMAN: IS "EARLY NOT NECESSARILY DEEP"?

Goldman's concise tracking of the trajectory of Milner's work offers a précis of the foundation on which Farhi's own work is based. Stating his intention to "honor Farhi's engagement with the *rhythm of oscillation between fusion and differentiation*" (p. 504), Goldman traces Milner's path to her finding her analytic voice. This journey, mediated through images, was for Milner so intense that it threatened at times to flood her (her fear of "letting the sea in") and eventually culminated in her 1952 paper, which revised psychoanalytic approaches to our understanding of symbol formation.

With this as the historical antecedent to Farhi's work, Goldman points out Farhi's extension of Milner's belief that intra-uterine life may lay the groundwork for later identificatory processes. In her lengthy analysis with Susan, Milner, though stating it explicitly (1969, pp. 77, 79, 102), hesitated to theorize how Susan's mother's murderous impulses towards her fetus had psychically damaged her patient long before the infliction of post-natal trauma. Farhi's goal is to explicate and further her mentor's position as to the importance of uterine life by reference to the importance of establishment of annealed bonds to counteract the weight of a struggle for survival on the placental level.

The question this raises for us, and which Goldman takes on directly, is whether this kind of psychic process is possible at such an early time. Goldman remains unconvinced that this kind of memory could be registered in any meaningful way as it implies psychic consciousness on the cellular level. For him it is, instead, more parsimonious to assume that it is the post-natal experience with mother that registers and scars Susan. This recalls a similar line of objection raised in response to Laplanche's (1999) theory of subject constitution. The enigmatic signifier, exceeding maternal awareness and infantile consciousness, is implanted and unconsciously interpreted by the latter in a mechanism that need not be initiated by either but which occurs just by virtue of the mother-infant relationship. As the maternal unconscious leaks into the infant, shaping and making her into a person with an unconscious of her own, the Laplanchean infant, previously a bundle of drives and disorganized bodily experiences, becomes a subject unto herself. Who is the "I,"

however, who is doing the psychic work of registering the maternal enigmatic signifier if selfhood is birthed only as a consequence of this process? In Farhi's case, how can there be a self registering the trauma of maternal murderousness if selfhood is post-natal?

What is at stake here is the question of psychic organization. Can we assume that psychic processes are at work long before they become organized? My read of Farhi is not that she posits a coherent, narrative, cellular-level mneme but that she is, rather, proposing that traces of experience register to be only retroactively formulated and organized to become meaningful. The communications around Susan's drawings may, thus, not speak to a differentiated pre-natal *sense* of self that struggles for survival but, rather, to the experience of the struggle to survive that can only acquire meaning post-natally. Limited as our emotional lexicons are in linguistically representing experiences of merger, states of oneness and fusion, the I/you distinctions that emerge in language do not necessarily tightly correspond to the marking of self/other ego boundaries.

As this stimulating exchange of ideas is coming to a close, I feel grateful to have had the chance to study Farhi's work amidst such great intellectual company. At the same time, I feel a sense of sadness that Farhi herself is not able to enjoy and engage with the range of responses her work has generated. I am looking forward to seeing how her insights will be utilized by psychoanalysts in the future.

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