

Abstraction in the Rorschach as a mechanism of anti-symbolization: reflecting around the protocol of a suicidal adolescent

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INTRODUCTION

The dynamics of adolescence, as a maturing process natural to the human being, are a complex mix of conflicts and defenses that remain a challenge for clinicians because of the richness of its metapsychology and the severity of psychiatric conditions which can mark this period. That for instance is the case of suicide or attempted suicide of the adolescent. According to a report by the INSERM (Davidson & Choquet, 1981), suicide is the second most frequent cause of death after accidents, in youngsters between the age of 15 and 24, with a number of attempted suicides of 45,000 per year for this same age range. Therefore suicide in adolescence stands as a serious health risk and is difficult, if not outright impossible to evaluate by classical psychiatric methods (psychiatric scales, MMPI or DSMIII-R have failed to assess suicidal risk with any precision), nor by epidemiological methods (the number one risk factor is to have already attempted suicide), nor interviews (after-the-fact stated motivations are desperately trivial [Davidson & Choquet, 1981]).

We believe that a psychological approach based on the Rorschach test can contribute to a metapsychological description of the process and help understanding the problem of suicide in adolescence, possibly even evaluating the risk for an individual.

This article is a first attempt to do so by studying the Rorschach protocol of a 15 year old girl who made a serious suicide attempt a few months after the assessment. In addition to causing an upheaval in our personal professional self-assurance and theoretical conceptions, this case seems to be exemplar in several aspects. On one hand this adolescent was not clinically depressed at the time of the assessment and did not manifest any psychiatric disturbance; on the other hand her Rorschach protocol displays some peculiarities which can be seen as a caricature of some mechanisms specific to adolescence.

We will here not proceed with a comprehensive analysis of the case but instead we will focus on a specific phenomenon, the abstraction response, which we will refer to the adolescent typical movement between idealization and de-idealization.

ABSTRACTION AND SYMBOLIZATION

In the psychological literature – and particularly in the projective literature, it is rather common to see the terms “abstraction” and “symbolization” used as synonyms. We believe, and that is what we intend to demonstrate here, that these terms designate psychological mechanisms that are very different, even antagonist, and that it is clinically relevant to recognize them in adolescents.

In the dictionary we find the following definitions:

Abstract: to take out or remove something.

Abstraction: the act of abstracting something

the state of thinking about something so much that one does not notice what is happening around one.

Used in plural: excessively theoretical ideas, not in relation to reality.

(etymology: take out something)

Symbol: a thing that represents or stands for another

(etymology: a link, something which ties 2 things together)

In psychology, symbolization is essentially a operation of linkage between a concrete object and a concept, a work of figuration and embodiment. This process is well known to be essential to early development, being worked through within the transitional space (Winnicott) and enabling the integration of external and internal worlds. Conversely, abstraction is a work of separation, de-linking, between the concrete object and the concept. It is essentially a mechanism of de-embodiment, is based on a denial of the body and ultimately leads to a denial of reality. Together with idealization and intellectualization, abstraction belongs to the defense mechanisms favored in adolescence and they can open the path to ascetic behaviors (Anna Freud), with their variants such as anorexia and certain forms of suicides. We certainly do not imply that any tendency to abstraction in adolescence – and evidently any abstracted response on the Rorschach – would be a sign of pathological asceticism. We consider that resorting to abstraction should worry the clinician only when it stands as the privileged defense mechanism, in opposition to symbolization, and when it is associated with a painful de-idealization of the self-image, and/or with an impossible de-idealization of the parental figures of attachment.

We will now attempt to illustrate this phenomenon through the study of Celia’s protocol.

CELIA

Celia is a 15 year old girl referred to the psychologist during her hospital stay in the endocrinology department for stabilizing her type I diabetes. Her diabetic condition follows a uneventful course, and Celia has been managing her treatment in a responsible and

autonomous manner. The referring physician is worried because he feels that she is obsessed by her nutritional regimen, especially since the parents have sent a letter describing eating behaviors recently become capricious.

Celia appears as a nice and open young woman, who is obviously glad to have the opportunity to confide in someone. The interview starts by focusing on the eating problems, i.e. the declared motive of the consultation, and Celia's discourse is globally reasonable, she demonstrates a sound insight which leads her to de-dramatize her present problems. However, as we walked together from her room to my office, Celia seemed to have presented her self-image in such a negative way, and so unrealistically, that I had experienced a curious feeling of strangeness and unreality, as if she was talking about someone else, or as if someone else was delivering a monologue. This passing impression had soon evaporated and nothing during the interview or during the assessment recalled it. What exactly had she said? Or rather, what was there in the manner she expressed herself which had plunged me into an intense, albeit fugitive, cognitive imbalance to the point that the only thing I actually could remember was that I had thought "she is delusional"? What importance was I to give to a hallway impression, fleeting and distracted just as my own attention, an impression obtained in a professional non-space?

From the subsequent interview, and from the analysis of the Rorschach, I had concluded that Celia was in a deeper state of depression than was clinically apparent and that it was urgent to positively respond to her demand of psychotherapy, which she had expressed with the ambivalence proper to adolescents. She entered psychotherapy immediately after her release from the hospital, and, according to her therapist, attended the sessions with regularity. Six months after the assessment, Celia seriously attempted to end her life by absorbing barbiturates, a gesture considerably aggravated by her diabetic condition. Had it been possible to detect the suicidal risk on the Rorschach? Had she, in the corridor, given me the clue to her self-destructive behavior?

INTEPRETATION OF CELIA'S PROTOCOL

The Rorschach was administered and scored according to the Comprehensive System procedure (Exner, 1974, 1986, 1993) (Table 1, Table 2). We will interpret the protocol on the basis of the Structural Summary (Table 3) and analyze defense mechanisms following the French psychoanalytical approach.

Celia's protocol has only 18 responses but it is very expressive, very rich, likewise in its formal data and in its projective aspects.

Validity: $R = 18$, $\Lambda = .20$ ($F\% = 16.6$)

[I am not translating here the explanations of CS principles developed in the original paper for the French psychologists]

Key variables: **DEPI = 6*** indicates that the person is most probably in a serious state of depression. We note that Celia displays no apparent symptom of depression and we are led to consider the possible depressive value of her eating disorders, as well as the possible importance of the fleetingly sensed damage to self-image. At this point we hypothesize the presence of a masked depression, the potential seriousness of which is well known in children and adolescents. Whatever the case, a $DEPI > 5$ points to a major problem in the affective area, rather than the cognitive, and leads us to study its nature and dynamics. We will thus enter the interpretation through the emotional door, then study the controls, self-perception, interpersonal relations and end with the cognitive triad.

[I will not translate the step-by-step interpretations of the clusters. Instead I will jump to the conclusions and discussion]

Conclusion for the interpretation of the protocol

This protocol presents some remarkable features, not so much in its problematic integration of drives and in identification difficulties but rather in the defensive organization of this adolescent girl, which is based on three mechanisms: splitting of the ego, recourse to abstraction and reversal of aggression on the self. Ego splitting enables Celia to avoid ambivalence of feelings, therefore protecting her love objects, in a movement going from destruction of the object to its resuscitation. The object is alternatively destroyed (accident, fire) and preserved in its integrity (love, joy). Abstraction, a typically adolescent mechanism, is here used excessively. It consists in transposing the representations of objects into the world of ideas, i.e. in a disembodied world made of pure concepts, and therefore easy to control in the mind. Here, the thinking process functions in an autonomous and omnipotent manner, self-reproducing itself in abstractions, which are also thoughts. Recourse to abstraction, as a privileged defense mechanism, enables Celia to maintain an omnipotent world not submitted to the reality principle, a world where the body and its drives and feelings are absent. Through splitting and abstraction, she can play with the drive representations, alternatively destroying and restoring the object and never recognizing that she, Celia, i.e. her self (which she fantasize as real) could ever experience desires and aggressive feelings. Finally, the turning aggression towards herself is particularly well illustrated by her response VI, 12: “A wolf” (squashed). The same movement is present in the response “fire” [A person who is burning] (IX, 15). Any active stance is reversed in a passive position: the agent of aggression is transformed into an object of aggression, the aggressor is the victim of his own aggressiveness. The simultaneous emergence of both these position is brought to an extreme in response II, 4: “The accident, with blood” (two cars catching each other).

In this protocol we thus find a particular configuration:

- In economic terms, an intense drive pull which exceeds the ego capacities of regulation;

- In dynamic terms, a deficiency of capacities to symbolize, compensated by the recourse to abstraction, and based on the core mechanism of splitting which is the only means for Celia to avoid ambivalence of feelings; she is unable to admit ambivalent feelings due to the precariousness of her narcissistic self.

In face of the threat represented by drives and emotions, taking into account the massive recourse to “disembodiment”, the precariousness of the narcissistic bases of the self, and in the presence of a major depression non-recognized by Celia herself, we maybe might have anticipated the suicidal gesture occurred six months later. We missed it. But in our communication to the therapist, whom she had agreed to see regularly, we did insist on the seriousness of Celia’s present psychological disturbance. That is often a message which is difficult to pass on when, as in the case of Celia, there are no evident clinical signs of disturbance.

DISCUSSION

The abstraction response on the Rorschach has traditionally being identified as a typically psychotic phenomenon. Bohm (1951, p. 344) describes responses of “concreteness” and “abstraction” as the two extreme poles of the symbolization process. He believed that these phenomena were typical of schizophrenics. Chabert (1987, p. 195) also discusses abstractions in the chapter on psychoses and defines abstractions as “a radical intellectualization which leads to disembody images” which “against the emergence of fragmented body images (...) produces a pseudo-synthesis in the mind which deflates the pressure of drives and their destructive violence”.

Indeed, the abstraction response is based on two mechanisms: on one hand, denial of the body and of emotional subjectivity, on the other hand an intense ideational activity and a handling of “pure” ideas (in the double sense of *per se* ideas and of non-sexualized ideas). These characteristics of the AB response strongly evoke what psychoanalysis has described under the term of asceticism. This notion, whereas it appears in S. Freud’s writings (1914) and in particular in “The economic problem of masochism” (1924), where an ascetic mode of life is understood as relating to the masochistic tendencies and the unconscious feelings of guilt, truly acquires the status of a defense mechanism only with Anna Freud (1936). A. Freud considers the ascetic trends as typical of adolescence and interprets them in original terms that are of particular interest for us. She claims that asceticism in the adolescent IS NOT based on repression, that it is rather “the manifestation of the natural hostility of the Ego towards drives, a hostility which is undifferentiated, primary and archaic “ (p. 158-159). This important intuition was somewhat lost in the following decades. Authors such as Fenichel (1945) or Blos (1962) do describe asceticism as a set of mechanisms typical of adolescence but they link it directly to the oedipal conflict and to regression. It is only with Medlicott’s study (1969) on the artistic representations of the Temptations of Saint Antony that the importance of the pre-genital aspects of asceticism reappears, thus underlying its threat for the psyche. Nevertheless, and

probably due to the somewhat specific theme of the study, it seems that asceticism was thereafter studied only in religious contexts (see in particular Gilberg, 1974).

The protocol we presented here illustrates clearly the specific defensive configuration of asceticism, which culminates in the abstraction responses. We wish to underline again the importance of the regression, in a movement which cannot be assimilated to a regression “in the service of the EGO” inasmuch recourse to abstraction, and asceticism, is based on a mechanism of de-linking, an antinomy to symbolization.

CONCLUSION

Recourse to abstraction in the Rorschach reflects a specific and unique defense mechanism which consists in substituting a real, concrete object belonging to the hic et nunc (and by real object we include both an **experienced** emotion and a real person or situation), for an idea of object, out of space and time, an-objectal. That mechanism is different from intellectualization: we might say that abstraction is to intellectualization what denial of reality is to common denial (denegation). In abstraction, there is a quantum leap which is essential to recognize. We believe that this defense aims at negating the body as a vector of drives, as present in the here and now and thus imperfect and limited, as subject and object of the libido; in other words it consists in denying the embodiment of the self. Systematic recourse to abstraction enables the persons to stay in a position of omnipotence as regarding their internal objects. That is precisely what makes it an anti-symbolization process. Referred to the triad splitting-denial-projection, the particular nature of the abstraction response on the Rorschach is that the projection is operated not in the form of a partial and archaic concrete object but rather in the form of a total and idealized conceptual object [whether it be a positive (“joy”) or negative (“fear”) idealization], which looks like superior intellectualization. On the contrary, the abstraction is not an intellectualized representation of something, as indeed it does not represent anything and takes the place of “something that cannot be represented” as Celia tells us on card X.

From a developmental point of view, we can consider that abstraction is to adolescence what isolation is to the latency period, i.e. a means of neutralizing, or diminishing, the impact of drives. But contrary to isolation, abstraction does not permit to displace the representations. The abstraction response being all-including and totalitarian, there is no room for imperfection and ambivalence. When recourse to abstraction as a defense mechanism is systematic, we are in presence of asceticism, that complex aggregation of defenses so typical of adolescence.

In cases of somatic illness, the danger is that denial of the body may be directed towards the real body instead of the body image. The psychic aggression of the body is easily transformed into physical aggression and can lead to suicides or manipulation of treatment.

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Table 1 Rorschach protocol of Celia, 15

I	1	A bat > should I turn it? [as you wish]	In extension, it is ready to fly, it is no more folded up
	2	V A spider, no, not really	It is nearing its prey, it is going to eat it [How do you see it?] It is fat, it is black, it is going to approach very slowly. You can see the legs, the teeth (D1)
	3	Or else an inkblot, when a teacher asks a drawing, an abstract inkblot	Something that you do ... an image, bec. of the little spots around, and the shape, bec. it is black, it is grey, it is ...
II	4	With the red? Is the red normal? An accident, with blood @	2 cars catching each other, here, at the place of impact one can see blood gushing forth (very imprecise)
	5	2 persons who argue a little, that's all	Anger, despise, hate. Bec. it is black first and then red
III	6	A man and a woman who love each other, that's all	You can see a little their bodies, and their hearts in the middle. It is abstract, the body is ill-proportional. Joy, happiness, it represents music a little, the violin, soft music
IV	7	A monster ... does not represent much that one	Big, huge, nasty [What makes it look nasty?] His expression, his heaviness
	8	A monkey	A bit like the monster
V	9	A bats (sic)	A little like the other one
	10	A bird flying off	The body, the wings
	11	A butterfly @	It looks more like a butterfly, flight, freedom
VI	12	[Holds card at arms length] A wolf, but seen from the sky, bec. here (D3), it represents a wolf, it does not have the legs of a wolf	Only the head and mustache, here, squashed
VII	13	A vase, a modern vase, with lots of shapes	Geometrical, with these shapes (S) it is something ... well it is inside the vase
VIII	14	2 bears climbing on a mountain, the different parts, the prairie, the upland, the hill, may I say what I would do? I would ski	It has more or less the shape of an animal, here the mountain, the colours ...
IX	15	The fire	The flames, it is big, it is ...
	16	The fear	Looks like a person who is burning
X	17	A child drawing, in school, that's all ...	There are no shapes, it is something that you cannot represent
	18	The radiance, the smile, to be joyous, the laughter	Bec. the colours are soft, they are bright

Table 2 Sequence of scores, Celia, 15

Card	N°	Loc	#	Determinants	2	Contents	Pop	Z	Special Scores
I	1	Wo	99	FMPo		A	P	1.0	AG, INC
	2	Ddo		FMA.FC' -		A			
	3	Wv		C'F u		Id, Art			
II	4	D+	4	ma.C -	2	Sc, Bl		5.5	AB, MOR
	5	W+		Ma.C'.C o		H, Hx		4.5	AB, AG
III	6	W+		Ma -	2	H, An, Hx	P	5.5	AB, FAB2, COP
IV	7	Wo		Ma o		(H)	P	2.0	AG
	8	Wo		F o		A		2.0	
V	9	Wo		F o		A	P	1.0	DV
	10	Wo		FMAo		A		1.0	
	11	Wo		FMa o		A		P	
VI	12	Do	3	FD.mp u		Ad			MOR
VII	13	WSo		F u		Art		4.0	FAB
VIII	14	W+		FMa.CFo	2	A, Ls	P	4.5	DR
IX	15	Wv		C		Fi			AB
	16	Wv		Mp		Hx			AB, MOR
X	17	Wv		CFo		Art			DR
	18	Wv		Ma.C		Hx			AB

Table 3 Structural Summary Celia, 15 (1993 version)

STRUCTURAL SUMMARY				
LOCATION FEATURES	BLENDERS	DETERMINANTS SINGLE	CONTENTS	S-CONSTELLATION
Zf = 11	FM.FC'	M = 3	H = 2, 0	NO..FV+VF+V+FD>2
ZSum = 32.0	m.C	FM = 3	(H) = 1, 0	YES..Col-Shd Bl>0
ZEst = 34.5	M.C'.C	m = 0	Hd = 0, 0	YES..Ego<.31,>.44
W = 15	FD.m	FC = 0	(Hd) = 0, 0	NO..MOR > 3
(Wv = 5)	FM.CF	CF = 1	Hx = 2, 2	NO..Zd > +- 1.5
D = 2	M.C	C = 1	A = 7, 0	NO..es > EA
Dd = 1		Cn = 0	(A) = 0, 0	YES..CF+C > FC
S = 1		FC' = 0	Ad = 1, 0	YES..X+ $\frac{1}{2}$ < .70
DQ		C'F = 1	(Ad) = 0, 0	NO..S > 3
.....(FQ-)		C' = 0	An = 0, 1	NO..P < 3 or > 8
+ = 4 (2)		FT = 0	Art = 2, 1	NO..Pure H < 2
o = 9 (1)		TF = 0	Ay = 0, 0	NO..R < 17
v/+ = 0 (0)		T = 0	Bl = 0, 1	4.....TOTAL
v = 5 (0)		FV = 0	Bt = 0, 0	SPECIAL SCORINGS
		VF = 0	Bt = 0, 0	Lv1 Lv2
		V = 0	Cg = 0, 0	DV = 1x1 0x2
		FY = 0	Cl = 0, 0	INC = 1x2 0x4
		YF = 0	Ex = 0, 0	DR = 2x3 0x6
		Y = 0	Fd = 0, 0	FAB = 1x4 1x7
		Fr = 0	Fi = 1, 0	ALOG = 0x5
		rF = 0	Ge = 0, 0	CON = 0x7
		FD = 0	Hh = 0, 0	SUM6 = 6
		F = 3	Is = 0, 1	WSUM6 = 20
			Na = 0, 0	
			Sc = 1, 0	
			Sx = 0, 0	AB = 7 CP = 0
			Xy = 0, 0	AG = 3 MOR = 3
			Id = 1, 0	CFB = 0 PER = 0
		(2) = 4		COP = 1 PSV = 0

RATIOS, PERCENTAGES, AND DERIVATIONS					
R = 18	L = 0.20	FC:CF+C = 0: 6	COP = 1	AG = 3	
EB = 5: 8.0	EA = 13.0	Pure C = 4	Food = 0		
eb = 7: 3	es = 10	Afr = 0.38	Isolate/R = 0.06		
	Adj es = 9	S = 1	H: (H)Hd(Hd) = 2: 1		
	Adj D = +1	Blends:R = 6:18	(HHd): (AAAd) = 1: 0		
		CP = 0	H+A:Hd+Ad = 10: 1		
FM = 5 : C' = 3	T = 0				
m = 2 : V = 0	Y = 0				
a:p = 9: 3	Sum6 = 6	P = 6	Zf = 11	3r+(2)/R=0.22	
Ma:Mp = 4: 1	Lv2 = 1	X+ $\frac{1}{2}$ = 0.50	Zd = -2.5	Fr+rF = 0	
2AB+Art+Ay=17	WSum6 = 20	F+ $\frac{1}{2}$ = 0.67	W:D:Dd = 15: 2: 1	FD = 1	
M- = 1	Mnone = 2	X- $\frac{1}{2}$ = 0.17	W:M = 15: 5	An+Xy = 1	
		S- $\frac{1}{2}$ = 0.00	DQ+ = 4	MOR = 3	
		Xu $\frac{1}{2}$ = 0.17	DQv = 5		
SCZI = 3	DEPI = 6*	CDI = 1	S-CON = 4	HVI = No	OBS = No

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