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NAVIGATING THE PSYCHOANALYTIC SYMBOL

The Transphenomenology of Nicolas Abraham.

“Any symbolism, whether it operates in a mediated or immediate way, remains in a rigorous complementarity with the contemporary lifeworld. If there is an ultimate aim or purpose, it is not defined by, or as, transcendence. It is inscribed in the very essence of symbolism, because there is no symbol that does not resolve a conflict.

And there is nothing that is not a symbol.”

Nicolas Abraham, “The Symbol”

For an oeuvre that takes contested beginnings as a key motif (e.g. transgenerational haunting, the temporal displacements of the crypt and anasemia), there is something poetic (perhaps) and certainly uncanny in the absence of an English translation of Nicolas Abraham’s arche-text “The Symbol: Or Beyond the Phenomenon”. The text was omitted from Nicholas Rand’s excellent collection of translated essays that formed the first volume of *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994) and was earmarked for a second volume that has long been shelved. The editor included instead the seminal and titular essay “The Shell and the Kernel” (1968) that more substantively articulated important themes introduced in “The Symbol”. This created more clarity in the outlining of central ideas, but also absented a more radical (as “root” and “revolution”) opening whose effects are only presumed and read in derivative works that better contain the onslaught of a new mode of psychoanalytic thinking. “The Symbol” is dense and technically difficult but also fragmented, unpolished and opens far more questions than it can hope to answer, traversing different registers of

meaning as it tries to capture a reconfigured notion of the symbol. It is an arche-text according to terms that Abraham opens and that I delineate here; the initiation of a project that is already underway and where a definite trajectory is unknown and indeed unwelcome. A spirit of renewal overflows Abraham's words in "The Symbol" and fills his speculations on psychoanalysis, phenomenology, biology, sociology with an unending programme that cannot be fulfilled under a single name or according to authoritarian or fetishized principles. The text is itself unashamedly symbolic, contaminated and fractured by manifold origins with which it must contend; a nodal point and not a causative moment that invites new theoretical syntheses but also generates conflicts in a dynamic process of transformation. Feeding into "The Symbol" are insights from Abraham's three masters, Freud, Ferenczi and Husserl. Its titular premise is the movement beyond phenomenology and its impasses, achieving this through an innovative psychoanalytical lens and the formulation of what Abraham describes as *transphenomenology*. My way into this polysemous text is thus through Abraham's engagement with Husserl in the late 1950s which also draws his work into a mutually enriching relationship with Jacques Derrida, informing my exposition here and amplifying its questioning of genesis as a tangible point available in its immediacy. As a text ostensibly about the origins of subjectivity as this is initiated and maintained through a symbolic operation that differentiates (from the Other) and integrates (the Ego) according to increasingly sophisticated modes that counter inevitable conflict, the text of "The Symbol" can and must be framed in the same way. As an arche-text it is not simply a historical document whose position can be located as precedent in a body of work. This precedence is conflicted from the outset – in meaning, and what remains out of its grasp, in a respect for the past it draws on and the risks of legacy. The text I write is primarily exegetical, but I hope my decisions in contextualising "The Symbol" and

focussing on certain content over others are not taken as definitive. Indeed, it is intended as much to draw on its uncertainties and ambiguities, bringing these further into relief and inviting additional renewals that were always its motive.

“The Symbol”: Dialogic Beginnings

The text of “The Symbol” developed out of an earlier presentation “*Réflexions phénoménologiques sur les implications structurelles et génétiques de la psychanalyse*” delivered at the famous Cerisy-le-Salle colloquium in 1959.ⁱ Abraham presented one of two papers on the 31st of July, on the limitations of Husserl’s conceptions of genesis and structure in his phenomenological method. The other paper “‘Genesis and Structure’ and Phenomenology” was delivered by Derrida and developed a critique of Husserl that shared many concerns and points of overlap with Abraham’s thesis. This text contained the seeds of what, in a few years, would announce Derrida’s name to the broader philosophical world as the architect of deconstruction. Abraham and Derrida’s friendship formed this year at Cerisy and cemented further over the next decade and a half. What was pointedly obvious from this first meeting was not only a shared theoretical interest and direction of critique, but also, according to Roudinesco, their “marginal position in relation to the dominant philosophical discourse of the day” (599). The parallel arguments are illuminating, especially as they seem to pre-empt Abraham’s direction in “The Symbol”, beginning with the limitations of phenomenology to the development of transphenomenological methodology via psychoanalysis.

Both Cerisy papers focussed on problems with Husserl’s reliance on a transcendental ego; a pure consciousness that underpins, yet abstrusely stands outside the structures of meaning,

intention, thought and judgement that constitute the phenomenal world that it apprehends and acts within. This had required methodological “bracketing” (*Einklammerung* in Husserl and rendered as *l’époché* in the French of Abraham and Derrida) to enact a “phenomenological reduction” that maintains the theoretical purity of the ego along with the intentional acts, objects of intention and other structural components that developed and defined phenomenology. In constituting this categorical and totalizing structure, both Derrida and Abraham note how Husserl excluded questions of genesis, especially in his early work (before his text *Ideas* in 1913). As Derrida acknowledges, this was to avoid “historicist or psychological geneticism [...] [that is] genesis as associative, causal, factual and worldly” (*Writing and Difference*, 161), and was essential to establish phenomenological reduction as a distinctive method that dealt in the here-now mediated by a synchronous structure. This was also a movement away from the objectivity of a “natural attitude” and empirical investigation to return to “things themselves” considered as phenomena of the world that appear to us in and through lived experience (*Logical Investigations*, 168).

Phenomenological reduction removes from the world of phenomena any preconceptions of the object of our consciousness or, as Eugen Fink describes it, “captivation-in-an-acceptedness” (41). For Husserl, it is knowledge as astonishment, and reveals that all acts of consciousness, whether these are perceptions, thoughts, judgments or so on, are *intentional*. Consciousness is always about something. Stripped of all cognitive presupposition, the encounter with objects relies on an immediate apprehension of the phenomenon that Husserl calls *intuition*.

It is in his text *Ideas*, that Husserl questions the structure and origin (genesis) of intuition, beginning his sustained analysis of consciousness itself. Investigating the essence of consciousness through bracketing, phenomenology “permits the discovery of a concrete,

but nonempirical, intentionality, a 'transcendental experience' which would be 'constitutive'" (*Writing and Difference*, 158). The prior forms of descriptive phenomenology that Husserl had used, whereby the essence of objects are intuited through careful consideration of multiple perceived planes are replaced by a more direct intuition of this essence in a transcendental experience. The *transempirical* quality of the object discerned from the overlap of its contingent and variable aspects is denoted by Husserl as *eidos* (the Greek for "shape", borrowed from Plato) and becomes a way-point for him to consider a second-level *époché* that apprehends the *eidetic-transcendental* structure of things. Formulated from a necessary bracketing, it is this transcendental gesture that is most problematic for both Abraham and Derrida, especially its reification of pure consciousness to which things in the phenomenal world can reveal their essences in a structure of "self-evidences and factual determinations" (*Writing and Difference*, 167).

Phenomenological reduction unwittingly entraps Husserl in the transcendental idealism he had long criticized in Plato (and Kant) although this time transposed to the realm of pure inner consciousness. For Derrida, "in criticizing classical metaphysics, phenomenology accomplishes the most profound project of metaphysics" (166). By suspending worldly assumptions, the phenomenologist presumes to gain access to ideal objects in the intuition of a transcendental ego. In the critiques of Abraham and Derrida, this means that all experience must therefore occur in the form of living presence, whereby phenomenological truth is the revelation of the presence of an object or act to a comprehending consciousness founded on self-presence. "Husserl", to use Stephen Boos' evocative metaphor "is claiming that lived experience is immediately self-present, *in the blink of an eye*" (13). This becomes the first principle of phenomenological method and reformulates Plato's *topos ouranios* – a

divine realm of ideal objects beyond human and worldly understanding – as a space of prior essences that now cannot exist independently of a transcendental ego.

For both Abraham and Derrida, the phenomenologist can only access this realm by bracketing out questions of how its assumed transcendental ego is constituted in the first place; questions that would introduce contamination into its generalized strategies through non-egoic processes and the specificity of its historical development. It is a theory dominated by structural considerations in how the ego and its objects are composed, neglecting the genetic and temporal axes at the heart of its constitution that would problematize this. For Derrida, structure is so dominant in phenomenology that even when Husserl began to address the question of constitutive history in his later work, his digging revealed only “structural *a priori*”, that confirm “superficial structures already unearthed” (156). This was a circular logic that could not move beyond the self-presence of a transcendental ego. Indeed, the exploration of genesis quickly became the question of teleology as what was unearthed in the history of phenomenological structure was relevant only in the way it anticipated the intentionality of a transcendental consciousness. Telos here guided the sense of origin away from the concrete, the messy and multivalent to the indissociable linking of beginnings and ends to the immediacy of transcendental truth.

The contamination of ego by what it excludes in this gesture is precisely where Abraham and Derrida begin their theses in the Cerisy presentations, assuming a subjectivity where the transcendent is always already corrupted by worldly degeneration.ⁱⁱ In this way, each turn from a phenomenology that “is resolutely static and structural in its design” (*Writing and Difference*, 161) to what can be initially labelled as a “genetic phenomenology” (*L'Écorce*, 85, my trans.), that Abraham transforms into his notion of transphenomenology.

Here, the formation of structural phenomenology requires reflection on its *genetic horizon* and to formulate this as a non-bracketed ontological problem. Genesis is “part of the very essence of the transcendental ego ... Indeed, the transcendental ego has an essence that is both temporal and temporalizing: is it not constituted with the help of prior constitutions and with a view to subsequent constitutions?” (*L'Écorce*, 78-9, my trans.).

Considering the genesis of the transcendental ego, Abraham asks whether this “should be conceived as the deployment of a pre-existing intentional ‘aptitude’, or as a genesis of this ‘aptitude’ itself” (*L'Écorce*, 79, my trans.). He therefore distinguishes two possible accounts; one that presumes a pure genetic aptitude that is revealed as the ego ultimately constitutes itself in transcendence (i.e. the genesis is simply the seed of the transcendental locus it will become, with origins simply reaffirming telos), and the other that sees this very aptitude being constituted from various contingencies in the history and pre-history of the ego.

Abraham (along with Derrida) situates Husserl in the former position, even though his later consideration of genetic phenomenology offers some hope of moving beyond this.

Returning to the question of the subject’s affective life had opened Husserl to the possibility of contemplating acts that were not yet acts of transcendence. Affects were mundane, worldly and not necessarily products of an ego, but also resembled intentionality as if they could be related like components to a final product (the comparisons here to the psychoanalytic notion of the instinct [*trieb*] is unavoidable). They referred to a sensuousness before its articulation, the registering of hyletic data (*hylè* in Abraham) before their eventual construction as objects. As Michael Barber acknowledges, Husserl was poised on the threshold of phenomenology’s transformation through a model of empathy (*Einfühlung*) that relates affective experience intimately to the other before its objectivation, making “possible all the higher level kinds of knowing ... and higher level dimensions of

intersubjective experience" (66). For Abraham, however, he balks at this opportunity bringing affect back into the fold of static phenomenology and subsuming the foundational relation to the other to the perception and knowledge of an object through the transcendental function. It is against this miscalculation that "The Symbol" revitalizes the intersubjective nature of affects as a radical insight where experiences such as pleasure and anxiety are fundamental and irreducible to the transcendental relation. In opening the question of origins beyond the limits of a present-to-self consciousness, Abraham begins the formulation of genetic transphenomenology.

Taking as his point of departure the question of how and why we develop interests - the basis of the aptitude towards intentionality - Abraham situates these in the affective experience of anticipatory tension. Here, as for Husserl, it is "through an *actuality*, [that] the elementary subject anticipates and aims for a *potentiality*" (**). The idea of potentiality, however, forms a halo (or *horizon*) around an actuality (existence and experience in the present) putting it in question. Seeing that affective synthesis is contiguous with and "presupposes the identity or the permanence of a correlative ego" (**), reinforces the "living character" of how each are co-constituted. This is a living character that points towards the *past* as an uncertain and incalculable process with strands of significance excluded from the linear direction towards ego-transcendence and a *future* whose unknown contingencies amplify fractures and direction changes in this trajectory. Abraham's view of genetic history engages these notions of potentiality in ways that highlight how they do not simply orbit and germinate the seeds of actuality whose transcendental development is already known. Interests that form the basis of the most rarefied transcendental intentionality are first of all aesthetic (sensuous) affects which are before (and beyond) the registrations that this higher-level phenomenological apprehension implies. To create the

sense of a unifying centre, an aesthetic proto-ego is formed as a basic and “functional” nucleus for the affective life that will constitute intentionality. Husserl describes this in terms of passive synthesis, the passive organization of phenomenological impressions of hyletic data. This actualization which, as will become apparent in due course, is not simply generated as if its movement to greater integration and purpose were apparent in its immediacy. The initial synthesis formed is fluid, although not uncontained. Its interests develop from current constitution (actuality) as this anticipates the horizon of potentialities that fulfil interests and/or demand that the nucleus is itself changed. Affective life and organising ego, actuality and potentiality, function in continual and reciprocal constitution and reconstitution, leading to increasing synthesis of experience and a “permanent modification of the subject” (*L’Écorce*, 81, my trans.). Although we can talk about the achievement of a superior unity, and with this, greater discrimination in the articulation of self and reality, the notion of a transcendental ego that discerns these things in their immediacy is woefully naïve. The formation of ego complexity presumes prior layers of nucleic organization that start with a minimal affective synergy developing interests and the anticipation of these as it encounters an economy of satisfaction in a phenomenal world of actualities and potentialities. By considering a genetic history where the actual is already a re-actualization of prior potentialities it is not only the transcendental ego that is questioned but also the irreducible immanence of the hylé. The ego and its (affective) interests are not formed through “incessant constitution” in the effort to achieve transcendence but are instead the “repeated reconstitution of systems of prior constitutions” (84). As such, they are grounded in a worldliness that offers different freedoms, as will be discovered. New affects result from the modification of previously constituted interests as these encounter actualities and a horizon of potentiality. Through

affective synthesis the ego is also transformed from aesthetic proto-ego to the highest levels of ego-function.

Nothing is simply erased in this process to somehow achieve a pure finality. There is stratification in the constitution of ego, although even this is perhaps not the best image. In his search for new metaphors, Abraham discovers in “The Symbol”, the more effective notion of the *imaginal* taken from lepidoptery. In this type of transformation, the caterpillar dissolves in the pupae to reform as a butterfly through imaginal cells that allow for deconstitution while still retaining a “memory” of the form to be reconstituted. Whatever the status of the unifying-centre of the ego or proto-ego, therefore, its “respective constituents remain alive” (**), although transformed, as the organism moves through successive stages of its development. For Abraham, “there can be no constitution of a higher level that is not based on synergistic constitutions at all the lower levels” (**). As he establishes as a central theme in “The Symbol”, it is *conflict* that motivates development. Nucleic synergies often find incompatibilities with the horizon of anticipations and realizations that demand reformulation of the entire structure. Before describing these in detail later we can first distinguish horizontal incompatibilities of interests within an ego-level, especially as a result of “the ego’s insertion into the intersubjective.” (*L’Écorce*, 83, my trans.). Perhaps more interesting in his theory of genesis, however, is that the supposed evolution of ego and its interests does not clear up vertical incompatibilities between different levels in a supposed functional harmony. There is reciprocity between different levels as the readjustment of lower functioning to the requirements of the higher level is never complete. This is evidenced when there is some break or failure in the higher level which opens up the unruly interests of earlier levels.ⁱⁱⁱ Layers of reconstituted interests and

their quasi-centring egos, cannot, therefore be subsumed to transcendental experience, but form dynamic layers beneath its surface.

The imaginal metaphor is also framed by a notion of *iteration*, introduced in “*Réflexions phénoménologiques*” to describe the movement between levels of functioning. As Alan Bass clarifies in his exploration of the term, iteration “speaks of both repetition and otherness” describing a semi-permanent but open structure where constituted forms are released “from all determined bonds to their origin, meaning or referent” (158). While an original unity of interest and its corollary Ego-formations can be diversely recreated, it also means that first formulations are already re-constitutions (reiterations) for which nothing present can guarantee stability. Using psychoanalytic insight into the nature of the instinct, Abraham further demonstrates “opacity in the history of my interests” (*L’Écorce*, 83, my trans.). He not only questions the immediacy of hylé but also its primacy, suggesting that it is itself reconstituted in “acts of constitution prior to the individual” (85). In its alienness to conscious determination, the instinct most vehemently contests a transcendental ego and shows that there is no “hypothetical purity” in the “flow of the present” (85). Abraham states, “the meaning of intentionality escapes the reflexive power of the phenomenological subject, called ‘primordial’ ... [and furthermore] ... the intentional sense of hylé should appear on the contrary, in an original experience of intersubjectivity, such as it is instituted by psychoanalysis” (85). Intersubjectivity here is a foundational and complex notion in Abraham that frames the instinct, indicating “unforeseeable act[s] of constitution” that are “intelligible only *a posteriori*” (86). The iteration of the instinct (as affect) and the development of intention reconstitute their forms in actualizations that are meaningful *only* as they interweave with the potential horizons of past and future.^{iv}

Constituted through the iteration of biological expediency in a lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*)^v to which it must adapt and develop, the drive removes purity from intentionality by including in its action a contingent and ambiguous genetic history. Abraham further problematizes intentionality by carrying off the origins of the instinct into the realms of palingenetic ambivalence.^{vi} The development of the instinct in the individual is modelled on palingenetic *a priori*s that can only be speculated on as the “reconstitution of immemorial acts, the opaque reiteration of a formerly significant genesis” (86). This quality of being immemorial is articulated more fully in “The Symbol”, when Abraham links causal genesis to trauma, qualified here as the very resistance to direct memorialization. Where this is superficially locatable in horizontal or vertical conflicts, or even in a phylogenetic event, the notion of trauma takes on an increasingly indeterminate character for Abraham and becomes a calling into question of modes of being and their articulation.

It is within the seeming impossibility of investigating and intervening into traumatic origins that Abraham constructs his transphenomenal project in “The Symbol” as the titular “going beyond phenomenology” (***) and the limitations “implied in any act of knowing” (*L’Écorce*, 87, my trans.). The frames and tools that he uses are derived from psychoanalysis because of its continual engagement with the instinctual body and the interpersonal dynamic that transforms this symbolically. The legacy of this is the unconscious (anamnesis that is never static) the quintessential concept that challenges the solipsism inherent in the phenomenological ego.

The Symbolic Structure of Being

Abraham's interpretative impetus necessarily moves beyond phenomenological attempt to locate a causal event in its immediate apprehension. Psychoanalysis understands primal events from which new subjective complexity emerges (whether normative or pathological) as conflictual and traumatic. The "primal scenes" that Freud first names in his treatment of the Wolf Man (1918 [1914]), thus become the *raison d'être* of psychoanalytic investigation.^{vii} By focussing on the immemorial, conflict, iteration and the tensions inherent in subjective differentiation – notions that can be subsumed to the unconscious – his ambition is to "uncover the latent ontology of psychoanalysis" (***) and thus provide the foundations of transphenomenology. As the title of his essay specifies, this approach is defined through a novel understanding of the symbol; a term that is no longer simply "substituting one "thing" for another" (***) as in a referential theory of language nor an endless metonymic displacement of signifiers as Lacan often reduces it. Beginning from the problem of analytic meaning in therapy, Abraham extends the conception of the symbolic operation to the very processes of human life itself, whereby "the advent of being is only possible in a symbolic mode" (***). The symbol introduces form and complexity to being so that the demands of reality can be mediated, and our interior world formulated without being overwhelmed. Abraham defines the symbol as coessential with the Ego^{viii} and enabling the transitions that Husserl had framed in terms of the transcendental ego. "Symbolization", Abraham qualifies "means substituting incompatible functioning for new and higher-level functioning" (***). Conflict at an existing level of functioning can be overcome (albeit with a legacy) by transposing it to a new, more sophisticated symbolic level. By recognizing that "every symbol is a substitute for other incompatible or inhibited functions" Abraham claims "the epistemological originality of the symbol's specific status as the object of psychoanalysis" (***)

Tying the Ego inextricably to the symbol is not to conflate the two and there is no presumption that the latter transparently reveals the former as its derivative. Instead, Abraham's conception of the symbol profoundly complicates the notion of a transcendental ego as it does its concrete genesis. The symbolic operation that he articulates does not reveal the empirical or transcendental thing-in-itself through bracketed excavation but highlights instead an archaeology of primal forms that are more compromised in their originality and considerably less tangible. Abraham clarifies:

“What matters much more to us than the reconstruction of a concrete genesis, which is ultimately interminable, is the now unavoidable obligation to look behind “phenomena” and “being”, for their underlying symbolic operation. In addition to this, the symbolic operation must itself be understood in its emergence from the conflict (the incompatibility) that it symbolizes, which corresponds with the anxiety that interrupts its functioning.” (***)

The search for symbolic genesis is very different from the search for concrete genesis as it implicates a notion of differentiation that is irreducible to the separation from a present referent. The symbolic operation emerges from conflictual origins that are never identifiable once and for all. It carries the traces of a cut for which there is no precedence and that it is fated to endlessly iterate. The liminal boundary separating soma and psyche, self and other is as far as we can go in locating the origins of the symbolic movement, but this space without place is also (re)constituted in the imperative for continual symbolism. This urgency reveals the anxiety of a cut as a key aspect traced into the symbol and a motive (itself ambivalent) for the differentiation of self from its bodily and interpersonal milieu. The emergence of the symbol is interdependent and simultaneous with the birth of the self as

Ego, and through the structure of the cut also generates the Other and the rhythmicity of Time. Abraham states:

“The symbol emerges simultaneously with the advent of Ego, Time and the Other. ... which, of course can be used individually to describe all phenomena. Each of these points of view, however, only reveals a partial aspect. What combines all these aspects instead, is a dialogic conception of the symbol and its operation.” (***)

At the foundation of being and subjectivity, the Ego must discriminate from its Other while also maintaining its integrity. This dynamic of discrimination and integration, in tension with disintegration, defines the journey of Ego formation and sublimation that Abraham outlines in “The Symbol”. His suggestion of a *dialogic* understanding of the symbolic operation opposes sublimation to the ideal of sublation [*Aufheben*] that Husserl imports (implicitly) from Hegelian dialectics, whereby conflict between ideological, affective or subjective positions find a putative and compromised solution through a higher order synthesis. Resembling Mikhail Bakhtin’s related use of dialogism, elements in interaction resist being subsumed to a singular trajectory and are in perpetual negotiation. The emphasis on one node of the interaction is only ever partial and temporary, suggesting different balances in the system that bring other nodes to the fore when demands upon the system’s functioning need rethinking.

Symbol, Ego, Time and the Other are definable as separate components, but they are also intimately interwoven. As they become points for considering existence, none can subsume the others, especially when conflict emerges. Indeed, it is tensions in the dialogue that show the inherent connection between the terms while allowing for their discrimination. The development of being in dialogic terms is in the reformulation of conflicts through novel and

more complex systems of interaction-discrimination designed to better manage them.

Despite this, however, development also retains something from the earlier systems that reverberates as a remnant of what has (not) been left behind, threatening collapse yet providing the impetus for an operation of sublimation that is never complete. Impasse in thinking through one register is often due to blindness in considering its complements.

Dialogism moves beyond the stasis of monological thinking allowing for better management and understanding of conflict at various levels from the subjective to the theoretical, albeit in a less certain and linear model. It is in these transphenomenological terms beginning with the symbol, that Abraham delineates the constitution of the Ego in “The Symbol” in ways that redress and dislodge problematic developmental accounts including aspects of Freud’s own psychosexual model.

Returning to his earlier questioning of affect in its relation to intention (and desire) Abraham begins his transphenomenological investigation of human subjectivity from the experience of anxiety, the exemplary emotion or proto-emotion in many psychoanalytic accounts. This has implications for all axes of being as the very operation of the symbol is generated by and defends against a “primal” or “original” anxiety (a quasi-primacy, as will become apparent). This is defined as the threat of non-being, an existential dissolution that is formalized in the differentiation of the Ego from its Other, where the Other provokes through both its proximity and separation. Once constituted, it is a threat to the integrity of the Ego that motivates differentiation, but also offers the background for extension beyond its current limits and thus development. Ego-genesis can no longer be considered in isolated terms because it exists from the outset in a *Dyad* with the Other where perpetual discrimination renders “being [as] the indefinitely iterated affirmation of otherness” (***). We can also see here how Time is dislodged from a linear phenomenological account (with attendant

developmental schemas) by a temporal rhythmicity that reframes transcendental origins and telos as endlessly and irresolvably deferred.

What is key in Abraham's discussion of first structures (which he denotes as *Arche*) is how "the emergence of the Ego is, from the outset, intersubjective and as such is a figure complemented through a Dyad" (***). By articulating the same original anxiety through the symbol, Ego and Other emerge from and reform a Dyad. The integration-discrimination of the Ego, therefore, requires another Ego (as Other) or plurality of Egos in proximity that are also Dyadic. Being, in Abraham's central thesis, is thus the overcoming of (primal) anxiety through successive differentiation-integration that advances from the most basic forms of living (Dyads affecting themselves) to the complexities of discrete individuals (Dyads) in conflict with other Dyads and then with culture. This is generated and maintained through the iterative processes of symbolization that transform humans through sublimation; a creative act that pushes towards the transcendent but is grounded in a lifeworld that ever-defers this.

The Symbol and the Arche

For Abraham, the symbol is central in generating subjectivity and the psychoanalytic model becomes a transphenomenal archaeology of symbolic operations. Like "an archaeologist ... dealing with documents in an unknown language" the psychoanalyst is given "a 'thing' that carries meaning" (***). The symbol, however, is multiform, binding analyst to patient in an enigmatic interaction that communicates the inner world of each participant as this functions in relation to cultural and interpersonal meanings. Symbols do not exist in isolation and cannot be deciphered according to a symbolic key or universal lexicon. They

similarly do not submit to imposition from the analyst's, or indeed patient's subjective frame. If, as Abraham states, "all we need to do is add meaning to the "thing" (its support), the semantic signification to the hieroglyph ... [we] would have done nothing but convert one system of signs into another" creating "a symbol *dead as a symbol*" (***). The symbol is so much more than a medium for communicating and must be understood in its function "as the *operating symbol*, animated by meaning and presuming concrete subjects functioning together as a whole" (***). It is "an integral part of the entirety of reality" (***), forming a functional circuit that crosses physical, psychical, interpersonal and cultural realms as both a meaningful and sensuously opaque relay that mediates the relation of Ego to Others and Time.

It is this functional characteristic that links the symbol directly to the overcoming of operational conflict at a level of organization in the Ego or other complex structure. Conflict creates gaps in actual and potential self-elaboration that generates both anxiety in the Ego and the impetus for further symbolic mediation. Symbolization is thus "the replacement of incompatible functioning with new, higher-level functioning" (***), that opens more ways to conflict-free operation. It transforms the concrete operations of the new-born child whose physiology and sensuous relation to its carer forms a minimal sense of reality, through the different modes of symbolic representation necessary for delineating Ego,^{ix} to the complexities of social symbolism and the (albeit compromised) coherence it offers the existent. Abraham's logic begins from the symbol and not *a priori* formulations, and as such, "the symbolized is always the symbol of a lower [inférieur] symbolized" (***). At the heart of being is a primary symbolism, the transphenomenological *Arche* that somehow maps the emergence of Ego, Time and the Other from a *cut* that also renders the threat of non-being as a primal anxiety.

The Arche is the very dissolution and displacement of a foundational event that would underpin structural stability, creating a kernel of being that is insubstantial and incalculable. The imaginal metaphor demonstrates its suitability here, as a horizon of perceptions, meanings and understanding, implicit in the symbolic operation are exposed to a referential challenge at their heart. Like the caterpillar, the features and function of a symbolic organization must be dissolved into *indetermination* (Abraham's neologism for an active form of indeterminacy) to be redetermined at a higher level. Where the transformation into a butterfly is genetically coded in the imaginal cells, the naturalism of this metaphor cannot be continued to the symbolic operation. The symbol is instead poised and defined against its failure and the threat of primal anxiety this threatens. The separation of the symbol and Ego from the Other is never fully achieved (or necessarily desired) and this exposed structure incessantly haunts the security of any reformulation, requiring ceaseless vigilance and differentiation. The butterfly would be but one synergy for whom unanticipated challenges from the lifeworld or its inner representation would demand further transformations.

Abraham articulates a kernel-horizon distinction in "The Symbol" that refers to the stratification of symbolic levels in the constitution of Ego as they contend with the double process of articulable sense and its foundations that are beyond this. Developing this pairing more fully in "The Shell and the Kernel", the kernel is defined against the shell (horizon) of meanings as an a-semantic realm – or more specifically operation – that describes the continual articulation of the symbol from what it is not; not only its differentiation from other symbols that provide its meaning, but also a more profound insistence from the very possibility of its failure to formulate and mediate being. This is what he refers to with his "neologism *anasemia*" (*The Shell*, 85), the defining quality of psychoanalytic discourse and designating what has so far been discussed in terms of the search for symbolic genesis.^x

For Abraham, “in the last analysis, all authentic psychoanalytic concepts can be reduced to [...] two structures (which happen to be complementary): symbol and anasemia” (87). Their existence bridges the unstable and impossible domain between a shell of symbolic meanings and the designifying action at their heart that anasemia traces. Symbols are drawn into indetermination as conflict exposes this designification which is then overcome through imaginal redetermination that mediates (temporarily and incompletely) the conflict at a higher level. This continual allusion to its own failure that motivates as much as it compromises means that the symbol is ultimately unable to locate and thereby resolve the originary act of differentiation that is its genesis. This general framework of traumatic cutting rendered unique each time through the specific content, form or function of threats to the symbol remakes the kernel anew and creates the ground without grounding of psychoanalytic subjectivity and the transphenomenological discourse that frames this.

Transformations in the kernel question the Arche as the authoritative beginning of the symbolic operation. Primary symbolism emerges from a first traumatic cut to create Ego, the Other and Time, and with these, anxiety and an affective life. For Abraham, the Arche has the maximum simplicity that is added to with each new symbolic articulation. It is his attempt to think *before* notions of concrete genesis in phenomenology, empiricism or transcendental philosophy, without resorting to the mythological schemas so common in Freud, or to infinite regression against which the symbol tends. Even the notion of original anxiety, once so promising, cannot be instituted as a substrate without mythologising its guarantee. It is the affective rendering of the tension between poles of being and non-being that is more fundamental. Being, after all, is required for the dissolution towards non-being to be constructed as anxiety, so its foundations are *always*

displaced. The Arche *is* this tension between symbol and the trauma of its failure, the unspeakable and unthinkable “*impossibility of being*” or, more precisely “active non-being in tension with being” (***). It is a “pure fiction” furthermore that “can only be considered as a limit-idea (like zero in mathematics) which does not exist in itself but is essential for operations” (***). The Arche generates (original) anxiety and creativity through the symbolic operation, connecting yet differentiating each in the iteration of a “primal Being” (***). With an originating act “as inaccessible as anxiety itself”, Abraham qualifies that “the advent of being and identity is only possible in a symbolic mode” (***).

As the foundational discrimination of the Ego from Other, the Arche is structured as an intersubjective Dyad. We can best formalize this through the mother-child relationship in the way that the infant’s management of the mother as first Other, especially her presence and absence, is always already creating the structural divisions that psychoanalysis distinguishes as consciousness and the unconscious.^{xi} Symbolic being is never closed in on itself as at least two elements are needed for the process of discrimination. Abraham’s formalization of this is that “A is A only if in some way A *implies* B in the form of a negation, which is to say, if A symbolizes *with* B” (***). The negation of B is both a separation from the (m)Other as an object in the external world and her corollary repression as the founding of inner division and hence subjectivity. This initiates being in a symbolic mode as the negated B is the term against which A differentiates itself. B in turn becomes a cosymbol, the elusive and impossible trace that structures desire by promising subject A’s completion whilst also threatening collapse through the fusion with the Other this implies. The symbol thus creates and maintains a cleavage out of which being can emerge but into which it can continually fall. The cosymbol B leaves a mark of difference in the symbol A that opens its world but also hints at the anxiety of its origins which keep being and non-being proximal. This anxiety

threatens the “disappearance of the human as human”, but also marks “the advent of a ‘mutation’” (***), the possibility of transformation and moving into more complex (and ultimately fulfilling) modes of symbolic organization.

Considered in dyadic terms, the most archaic form of Ego deals with phenomena as an encounter with otherness that leaves it “searching for standard themes” (***). The Dyad never exists or functions alone but needs other Dyads for the emergence of Ego and its meaningful articulation. Other Dyads are encountered at its own level, maintaining a level of connection and differentiation until conflict interrupts this. In the asymmetrical mother-infant relation, for example, the infant interacts with its mother at a sensuous, physiological level until the mother’s own symbolic complexity intrudes – her Oedipal prohibitions against sensuous enjoyment, the requirement to work, take a phone call and so on. Similarly, the mother cannot perfectly encounter her infant as its frequent and often enigmatic communications – unexpected cries, discomforts, gestures - interrupt the sense of a continuous relationship at her level. This disruption between two interacting Dyads is what motivates a modification to functioning and the emergence of higher-level operations, without quite resolving the inferior level.

This disruption is entirely necessary therefore as it reiterates the Arche as an act of differentiation that produces the Ego and Other from a manifold intersubjective milieu. Each term of this external meeting of two Dyads – The Other becomes another Ego - effects and responds to an inner duality in the effort to symbolize original anxiety. As Abraham states,

“the Arche-Ego is both the symbol of Anxiety and symbolizes with the Other for which it is also the negative. The Ego’s foundational act is to discriminate itself

from the Other. Its being is thus the indefinitely iterated affirmation of this otherness and in this way, it remains non-thematic.” (***)

This movement of articulating itself against what it is not maintains both a connection and a cleavage that is the Ego’s continual dynamic with the Other, dragging being out of original anxiety. It is the emergence of the symbol from (and with) the kernel of being that allows this non-thematic action to generate the themes and content of a horizon of meaning. For Abraham,

“We understand that the implication of the Other in the Ego creates the symbol of the fusion and thus Anxiety. [...] symbolic substitution is used to avoid anxiety [...] and to operate without ever fulfilling itself. It must neither dissolve into the original fusion nor effect a complete separation.” (***)

The anxiety of loss that structures the first desire in the psychoanalytic model is shown as a paradox, as the yearned for completion of the self through a suitable object, the cosymbolizing Other, is a further opening onto original anxiety. Calculated bonding with the Other must also negotiate the potential and incalculable unbinding of a fusion that will not loosen its grip. The symbol institutes the Arche as its origin through a necessary cut and distancing that comprises/compromises being as divided between an anxious desire to return to the fused state and an opposed desire to move away from this. The action of the symbol is thus paramount in articulating against (and with) its own possible failure. In the basic formulation of the Dyad, hewn from and yet divided by its differentiation from Others, symbolization is inseparable from the antagonistic function that is its source. This threat is also the motor force of the imaginal operation, creating the first formulation of a subject integrated under the nomination of the Ego. Abraham describes this as *integrative symbolism*. The iteration of new forms is underpinned by a foundational indetermination that allows for redetermination at a higher level in the face

of novel and contingent demands. The process of iteration builds on thematic components that structure the Ego and its desire (in their actuality) which conflict opens to indetermination as both threats from the past and a future of possibility.

At the basic level of Ego-integration, the themes that form the horizon are still attached to perceptual traces, hallucination and sensuous memories of the Other. Indetermination becomes easier the further away symbolism moves from these concrete and bodily experiences. Deconstituted components are redetermined in new synergies and not lost, creating increasingly complex and powerful systems with a greater availability for renewal. For Abraham, “indetermination and redetermination appear to be essential moments of symbolization, the former implying the development of an operation and the latter the possibility of choosing a particular mode from all those that indetermination made possible.” (***) The psychical apparatus is the exemplary synergy, with many inner agencies interacting and modifying each other, while also connecting to the intersubjective field where they symbolize with the Other and Time. Personal, interpersonal and social realms are each “partial aspects of a synergy”, interwoven in the imaginal operation that transphenomenology attempts to reconstruct beyond the limitations of consciousness and the apprehension of phenomena.

For Abraham, it is the psychoanalytic situation that “replaces the symbol in its actuality with its imaginal operation” (***), generating both recognized meanings and communicating a more opaque history of its overcoming of failure in the emergence of being. Higher levels of symbolization iterate lower levels by engaging in the continual connection-differentiation from the Other traced in each whilst also reformulating their deconstituted components otherwise. The Ego’s adaptation to contingent demands

resonates with the otherness and opacity of origins exposed through unconscious conflict and the anxious possibilities these anticipate in the future. It is this notion of resonance, introduced in “The Symbol”, that Abraham develops at the heart of his clinical thinking and that forms, with the themes it generates in a horizon of meaning, a double-structure of psychoanalytic listening. From this, the iterative mapping of prior conflicts that have been imaginably transformed is indicated through repetitions that also resonate with a more incalculable genesis that still casts its shadow on the present; the essence, that is of the unconscious.

We can see here how the intersubjective is pivotal in understanding symbolic functioning in an operating psyche. Resonance can be distinguished from Husserl’s empathy precisely because the latter is still bound to subjectivism. It is best defined as what happens when “the contents encountered in consciousness, induce through their peculiarity an unconscious complementarity” (***). A disturbance in the thematic and affective correspondence between analyst and patient resonates through the transference, often inducing new material, but with this also something anxious, long hidden and beyond the scope of simple recognition. The transphenomenological approach works in this double sense, whereby interpretation searches for neither an objective nor subjective truth but is a transformative attending to genesis in and through the intersubjective that requires the “mediation of another” (***). Transformation is now conceived as the obscured reiteration of a once meaningful and still traumatising genesis, where this initial situation is overcome through greater synthesis of experiences. Analysis of fundamental conditions that work centripetally from symbol to genesis must be complemented therefore with an anticipatory trajectory of thinking that examines the emergence of

different levels in the imaginal process constituted by increasingly sophisticated symbolic operations.

It is this question of the movement to higher-level symbolization that occupies the latter sections of “The Symbol”. Abraham draws a provisional schema for the Ego’s transition to more sublimated functioning that resembles a developmental model, but has none of the guarantees. Indeed, his framework for this is the pathological expression of symbolic conflict and the implications of this for more normative expectations of transformation in all the interrelated components of being. These move from basic processes of integrative symbolism that compose and differentiate the Ego from the intersubjective field to the development of social symbolism that remakes the subject and its relations in terms that are cultural.

Integrative symbolism

As intimated in discussing the Arche, Integrative symbolism is the original symbolic system that is exemplified in the formation and functioning of the Dyad. It is the organism’s first encounter with and response to the *not-me* of its world that once again has the infant-mother experience of separation as its model. This both constitutes the Other as a foreigner and forms a basic symbolic response to negotiate this and include the experience of alterity internally. The Other is instituted as support and opportunity whilst also marking its cleavage in the paradoxical threats of fusion and separation. These are managed internally and externally through the symbol in a first mode of integrative symbolism that will encounter all other Dyads at this level. Abraham speaks of how these meetings can be either in- or out-of-phase according to the preparedness for connection

or separation from the Other. Because of the lack of anticipation in this structure, the existing state of the infant determines whether the interaction is beneficial or disruptive. Out-of-phase disruption causes the infant to suffer, as it does its carer, creating a “symbolic anxiety, or simply anxiety” (***) that resonates original anxiety in the symbol.

Integrative symbolism puts the Arche in operation through its intersubjective reformulation as a Dyad. Its integrative nature does not just refer to the reconstruction of the Dyad as meaningful but also intimates the division and incompleteness in the Ego that the symbol must anxiously overcome. It is through its incompleteness that the symbol generates the complementary forms, cosymbolic envoys of the unconscious, that can modify its functioning in relation to the foundational caesura and suggest modes of its suturing and fantasized overcoming. The Other that is structured and traced as support in these cosymbols, is also, of course, a threat that suffuses the Ego’s hopeful longing and advancement with the anxiety of their unthought operation. Integrative symbolism similarly refers to the intersubjective system itself, inseparable from the Dyadic subject as it interacts with other Dyads in a mutually impactful and affective process that necessarily gains in complexity as new challenges emerge. The inner structure of the Dyad is based upon and can be traced back to its transphenomenal source in the encounter with a specific Dyad (the mother, for example) and the multiplicity of Dyads beyond this that form the intersubjective world. Each term of the encounter is haunted by these traumatizing origins now dispersed and deferred through the manifold system.

The pulsion of phases between Dyads, causing both harmony and suffering to the basic integrative structure, also accounts for the temporal ways in which the multiplicity of the

intersubjective is internalized. Abraham describes a basic feedback system, primarily functioning according to physiological impulses, that conditions subjective functioning according to trial and error. This generates a sense of anticipation that is different from the actuality of experience and projects a sense of the future. There is a level of reflection here, but it is still reactive and not quite reflexivity. It resembles the conditioning processes of behaviourist psychology, although reframed as integrative symbolism where the indetermination of physiological processes generates intentional acts with greater degrees of freedom. I can now “choose” to continue or desists with an action depending on its consequences.

Where the Arche is the (quasi-)first symbolization of the non-thematic division at the heart of subjectivity, integrative symbolism is a second level functioning that brings the subject together thematically to better manage its concrete context. This is a movement from physiological processes to a basic level of consciousness that creates a minimal sense of boundedness and begins to integrate experiential traces of trial-and-error testing into inner content that can create synergies of greater complexity. Themes are still relatively uncoordinated at this level but as temporality is increasingly integrated, more organised and meaningful relations in the intra- and inter-subjective realms open as a potential. Abraham qualifies further:

“We have seen that the members of a Dyad acquire their individuality thanks to a symbolism (a symbolic functioning) that anticipates (through symbolic achievement) fusion with the Other, and thus repeats the action of the original cleavage. The symbolic pulsation (deriving from symbolic functioning) of anticipations and realizations, therefore, constitutes the intrinsic temporality of each term of the Dyad.” (***)

Reflexive symbolism

The expansion of the Ego, its more intentional and adaptable functioning, is achieved through greater organizational synergies of more complex components. Anticipation begins the transition to reflexive symbolism where the thematic organization of experiences creates recognizable forms of Ego and consciousness. The singular achievements that underpin the anticipations of integrative symbolism are coordinated in reflexive symbolism as chains of successive accomplishments which allow it to “‘know’ how to anticipate complex configurations from the sudden appearance of a few elements” (***). New levels of complexity are also achieved interpersonally as the encounter between Dyads necessitates the formation of a Tetrad; four terms (two symbol-cosymbol pairs) interacting in both intersubjective and intrapsychical realms. Although it is still governed by the principles of genesis for all symbolic operations, reflexive symbolism allows almost unlimited variation in the paths available for redetermination as anticipation is facilitated through reflections on equivalent objects and experiences, and the expansion of themes. The kernel of being is now re-envisioned as the creation of thematic symbolism to contain the non-thematic cleavage in being in chains of meaning, whilst also negotiating an uncertain future in less reactive and more intentional ways. Conflict within the reflexive system will always threaten regression, but it will also promote creative responses as thematic symbolism holds and displaces anxiety, promising its (impossible) transcendence in sublimation.

Before articulating the move from symbolization generated in local interactions to social symbolism, Abraham briefly considers the impacts of transphenomenology for resituating research into biological sciences in a rethinking of the bioanalysis begun by Ferenczi. Here,

he develops a notion of *duplicative symbolism* that responds to exceptional situations where “a kernel is somehow cut off from all or part of its horizon of potentialities” (***), and is unable to engage in or develop through a functional cycle. The pathological forms of this are easy to imagine as both internal and external horizons are diminished, and isolation necessitates splitting in the kernel and forms of impoverished duplication. Abraham, however, discusses this in terms that are potentially enriching, citing a symbolism of self-reliance which he also employs in the biological sphere to discuss periods of latency, the evolution of sexual duality, mitosis and the parallels between sleep and orgasm. This is not the specific concern of my exegesis here, however, especially as Abraham only offers undeveloped speculation which is largely abandoned with the symbolic turn that “The Symbol” announces.

Social Symbolism

The constitution of individuals through integrative-reflexive symbolism implicates the groups from which they emerge and that they constitute and function within. Collective living requires aggregative levels of symbolization to construct the group, and beyond this, the negotiation of its abstract cultural forms in what Abraham names *social symbolism*. This creates new tensions and potential conflicts between individual and its social milieu, but also potential opportunities for the individual to function at higher levels of symbolization. This background is, of course, not guaranteed in its cohesion or beneficence and, like Freud’s writings on the discontents of social living, Abraham also sees compromise in this higher-level symbolism where the aggregate can hinder individual transformation, creating models of redetermination that are exceptionally difficult to escape. For him, opportunities for change are more likely to be passed down generations than be enacted in the present.

In addition to the genetic centres underpinning ontogenesis, the aggregate also constitutes a *synoptic* centre derived from its individual constituents, affording both a panoramic viewpoint and the possibility of previously unimagined transformations. In this spatial extension of symbolization, conflict can now be localized in the aggregate and “subsequently displaced in relation to the places where it occurs” (***). Functions can become specialized through a central symbolism constructing “real peripheral ‘organs’ grappling with specific problems” (***). Coordinated by the synoptic centre, this means that a conflict in one locality can find resolutions elsewhere.

Aggregative symbolism can only function if it is symbolized in at least one of its members, the individual (or collection of individuals) in question being the genetic centre of group functioning.^{xii} This individual then reconstitutes the other individuals in the aggregate, and potentially the aggregate itself. Aggregative living increasingly provides the meanings and themes for development *as if* the transformation of instinctual assemblages in the face of the external horizon had the status of teleology (i.e. we have a knowledge of appropriate development and associated functioning within the aggregate). The functioning and development of the individual within the aggregate, however, retains the quality of synergistic transformation where tensions still exist within assemblages and between levels. With two centres to the aggregate, the synoptic centre is functional and encounters conflicts in a horizontal dimension, where it focuses synchronous inter-individual relations, creating the inner horizon of symbolic realizations and potentialities for the obscured genetic centre. The genetic centre concerns conflicts of maturation and introduces temporality into aggregative symbolism. This conflict drives and is symbolized through the

stages of ontogenesis that attempt to resolve it, although its opacity is now magnified beyond the individual by both the synoptic centre that displaces it, and through an incalculable palingenesis that haunts any new individual or aggregative iteration. These horizontal and vertical interactions abound in a developmental spiral, producing phases of positive transformation when opportunities for indetermination and redetermination are extended, and challenges to this when social and psychological cohesion in the aggregate is out of phase. When genetic and synoptic centres do not accord, there are localized tensions. The organismic nature of the aggregate can usually dissipate these, but they can also spread through the same structure becoming a location of excessive anxiety that can cause regression or unprecedented transformation in both the individual and the aggregate.

The existence of higher-level organisms is therefore stratified, with symbolic horizons extending out from a genetic centre and through a synoptic centre to engage with the external horizon of the aggregate (or lifeworld); each being transformed in the process. For Abraham, the implications of aggregative living mean that there is “not a ‘property’, an ‘organ’ or a ‘function’ ... that does not amount to the symbolization of a two-dimensional conflict in the genetic center” (***). The greatest pretense of this coherent stratification of symbolic mediations, however, is “that all conflict can be resolved through symbolization” (***).

Symbolization of conflict is thus a perpetual process of learning that takes more organised social forms as the individual draws on the knowledge of the aggregate. This is increasingly underpinned by what Abraham terms *signition*, the meaningful ordering of the lifeworld (instead of creating new symbols) as a set of premonitory signs that link past and present to

anticipate future conflicts and opportunities. Because this enriches the lifeworld and the capacity for affective regulation, Abraham questions whether this is the ultimate form of adaptability, permanently protecting the genetic centre from anxiety and making further development unnecessary. Signification, however, is not sufficient for understanding the complexity of human societies. Abraham notes how aggregates regularly form in lower-level organisms, and also recognizes how sophisticated communication or empathy (Husserl's examples) are not sufficient in themselves to distinguish human social being. Drawing on Freud's ideas of civilized living, Abraham characterizes human society in ways that extend beyond simple group dynamics to consider the importance of a Thirdness [*Tiers*] that triangularizes the Dyadic structures of its individual units. Human society, he states, is inconceivable "without reference to a *third term of the relationship*; a third term that can be real or imagined, but that is always effectively absent" (***). Freud defined this as the superego, the function of self-regulation that social symbolism institutes in the individual. Abraham's conception of Thirdness is a development of this as both a coercive prohibitor that provokes fear *and* that which facilitates desire and provides comfort.

Thirdness is at the heart of social symbolism, remaking the manifold lifeworld of lower organisms into the cultural world of social and specifically human intersubjectivity. For Abraham, it is a universal regulating force that lessens the need for physical confrontation in the settling of conflict. Its impact on the social individual has the quality of an instinct, using language as its instrument to modify concrete experiences through cultural meanings. Thirdness allows for *objectivation* through nomination – the externalization of an individual in and through language – producing a "magical effect" (**) on the social Ego and its Others. Liberating the phoneme from concrete circumstances in the infant or lower

organism, Thirdness situates the name and what it nominates in a larger social context, creating additional meanings that “allows for a reciprocity of appropriate actions between subjects” (***).

Where Thirdness makes direct action unnecessary by exerting force at a distance, physical conflict remains the (reconstructed) origin, the primal scene of social symbolism at both ontogenetic and phylogenetic levels. For Abraham, this primal scene is the conflict in the child’s desire (and the adult before them) as aggressive and sexual instincts are encouraged and repelled by adults in its world under the dominion of Thirdness that constructs this suffering as a mode of being. Nomination redetermines acceptable action providing some protection from anxiety and a route for the child and adult to act on each other. This is, of course, Oedipal in its structure, although Abraham opens its parameters as Thirdness is not invariably the authoritative function of the father and neither is the interaction to be avoided always incest. No doubt drawing on the physical interaction witnessed by the Wolf Man in Freud’s famous case, the primal scene is a scene of coupling between adults.^{xiii} Whether this is sexual or confrontational, it leads to patterns of chaotic and confused identification and thus a more traumatised and anxious search for identity.

Invoking Thirdness, language symbolizes desires that are also negated and rendered impossible at the same time, constructing the social group as both beneficial and detrimental. Community offers symbolic and social opportunities at the cost of “symbolic castration (initiation)” (***), that prohibits sexual and aggressive instincts. Social symbolism is the most open to indetermination giving it all sorts of flexibilities unavailable in lower-level functioning. Its governing image is an abstracted projection of the aggregate and

changes, therefore, as the group responds to external and internal conflicts. Imagoic iteration is amplified massively in its novelty and creativity. Approaching the genetic centre in the other direction, Abraham speculates on the origins of social symbolism in phylogenesis. Absent from personal biography the primal scene is instead constructed in inaccessible species conflicts incalculably traced in instinctual assemblages that necessitate Thirdness to contain and nourish them. Satisfactory symbolization of the primal scene conflict can therefore organise chaotic identifications into social identities. The original anxiety intimate with primal scene conflicts can of course be exacerbated by social structures. Abraham observes that all neuroses are ultimately disorders of genetic (primal scene) anxiety or social integration. The imperative is then to construct societies that are neither too static nor in turmoil and that encourage creative iteration institutionally. The clinical parallel to this is a practice where social symbolism can open conflicts to creative solutions; the process, in other words, of sublimation, a movement well beyond simple adaptation.

Conclusion

In building a model of elementary being, Abraham goes beyond the parameters that are typically set. The Arche is no longer a spatial and temporal locus available immanently to empirical investigation or transcendental insight. It is the contamination of these frames through a notion of the symbol that makes such objective-subjective distinctions possible but also problematic. For Abraham, the symbol ties non-thematic beginnings (a presence or absence, for example) ineluctably into the themes that (re)constitute it through iteration. Origins are polysemous fragments, divisions and conflicts that are already under way and which we have the responsibility to appropriate through a continual dialogue. The Arche is

not something to be re-found in its purity as a model of idealised emergence (and thus telos) but opens the future incalculably towards who knows what. Genetic ideals still embed much clinical and developmental thinking with no recognition of their cultural contingency or instability. As I have shown, however, by considering social strata in the operation of the symbol and how these stretch all the way back and contextualize the Arche, Abraham begins to address how different communal and cultural arrangements render this sclerotic or transformative. This question is pertinent for the psychoanalytic institute that he challenged but is of course far broader as clinical work picks up (too often to repeat) the failings of its social milieu. For Abraham our intersubjective foundations and their antagonisms must be recognised in a model of sublimation that cannot simply sublimate them but must constantly engage their action. Emancipation can only happen through creative iteration of the Arche that weds Ego inexorably to its Other and functions through different levels of being that must be kept in meaningful circulation. The social iterates the possibilities of the Arche to transform or calcify, just as our bodies, psyches and relationships do, but it is also where the greatest availability of indetermination and redetermination is offered. The psychoanalytic clinic will therefore be stymied if its focus is simply within the consulting room, suffocated by the dogmatism of terms that are divorced from their radical symbolic operation. The legacy of "The Symbol" is to remind us that psychoanalytic investigation and clinical interpretation cannot be monocular. The subjective Dyad is inexorably framed by the quality of social living which in turn is reciprocally constituted in relation to biological processes. It is the symbol that allows us to navigate these planes without losing sight of their complex interaction and that can transform the understanding of individual levels away from the absurd reductions that often constitute disciplinary practice. Untangling such complex motivations can, of course, be vertiginous

and Abraham can only offer an incomplete map. Like early navigators, however, this can still indicate where the journey might best be started, and where its most felicitous opportunities and perilous threats lie.

ⁱ The titular theme of that year was “Entretiens sur les notions de genèse et structure” [Discussions on the concepts of genesis and structure]. For a list of presentations, see <http://www.ccic-cerisy.asso.fr/genesestructureTM65.html>.

ⁱⁱ While it is not my specific focus here Derrida’s many engagements with Husserl’s work have deconstruction of the transcendental ego at their heart. Both “‘Genesis and structure’ and phenomenology” discussed here and his later text *Speech and Phenomena*, published in 1967, put the presence to self of the transcendental ego in doubt through questions of historical, worldly constitution in the former text and Husserl’s use of temporality to overcome the structural stasis in phenomenological method in the latter. It is worth noting that similar criticisms of Husserl came from within phenomenological circles. Social phenomenologist Alfred Schütz also highlights the limitations of Husserl’s monadic focus on the transcendental ego in explaining intersubjective phenomena in his 1958 paper “The problem of transcendental intersubjectivity in Husserl”.

ⁱⁱⁱ Abraham’s example is that socio-cultural conflicts can lead to headaches.

^{iv} There are clear parallels here with Derrida’s logic of deconstruction that performs similar distortions of Husserl’s theory of time and space in the ideal unfolding of the living present that endures despite changes in its appearance.

^v Abraham borrows Husserl’s notion of *Lebenswelt* to describe the subject’s experience of the everyday world.

^{vi} Palingenesis features as an idea in both “Réflexions phénoménologiques” and “The Symbol”, as a reference to the notion of biologist Ernst Haeckel, already discredited before Abraham’s use of it, that in evolution, the development of the individual (ontogenesis) recapitulates the development of the species (phylogenesis). Although mindful of its limitations at the biological level, Abraham develops palingenesis through his transphenomenal method as a repetition (or more strictly, an iteration) in the individual of an ancestral legacy, although the reference points for this ancestry move fluidly (and therefore indeterminately) between biological, social, familial, psychological and historical registers. The most transformed and influential articulation of this is no doubt his notion of the phantom introduced in the final years before his death.

^{vii} Reflecting on the limitations of Husserl’s genetic phenomenology in “The Symbol”, Abraham notes similar problematic trends repeated in the psychoanalytic canon, especially when the *reality* of the primal event is sought. Despite Freud’s equivocations as to the truth value of the Wolf Man’s primal scene, he still fell into this trap.

^{viii} It is important to note here Abraham’s capitalization of the term Ego and with it other key psychoanalytic concepts that he draws on in “The Symbol”. This follows the French psychoanalytic tradition of denoting its changes to everyday terms by capitalizing them and is the springboard of Abraham’s consideration of the complexities that psychoanalysis introduces to language and to thinking in “The Shell and the Kernel”. There seems to be some inconsistency in what Abraham considers properly psychoanalytic terms in “The Symbol”, especially those he introduces such as the kernel. For both clarity and to continue Abraham’s arguments I have tried to maintain his formatting as faithfully as possible.

^{ix} We can include in these first stages notions like Freud’s thing presentations and Klein’s formulation of phantasy.

^x Anasemia is so important to Abraham’s oeuvre that it denotes his collected works by *Aubier Flammarion* in French. The term combines *ana* from the Greek for ‘up, back, again, anew’ with a derivative of the Greek *sēma* pertaining to the production of meaning, prompting meditation on the foundations and broader implications of this process.

^{xi} Abraham does not make this explicit connection to the mother-child duality in “The Symbol”, perhaps because it is too exemplary and would render an otherwise complex theoretical argument in terms that are too literal. He does, however, explore this in later texts, especially “Seminar on the Dual Unity”. My text “The Subject in Transmission” provides a useful commentary on this.

^{xii} The connection here to Freud's notion of leadership in "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego" (1921) is clear, although this is now reframed in terms of a nodal point that draws together the potential for more sophisticated operations than it is down to charismatic personality and the surrendering of ego of their acolytes.

^{xiii} This case centres much of Abraham's later work with his reconsideration of the Wolf Man's primal scene as a complex and indeterminate process of reconstruction in his text, co-authored with his partner Maria Torok, *The Wolf Man's Magic Word* (1986).