



Project
MUSE[®]

Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Notable Encounters

Pontalis, J. B., 1924-
Miqueu-Baz, Christine.

American Imago, Volume 63, Number 2, Summer 2006, pp. 145-157 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/aim.2006.0023](https://doi.org/10.1353/aim.2006.0023)

AMERICAN
IMAGO

PSYCHOANALYSIS AND
THE HUMAN SCIENCES
VOLUME 63 • NUMBER 2 • Summer 2006

 For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aim/summary/v063/63.2pontalis.html>

Notable Encounters

First of all, I wish to express my great pleasure at being your guest here tonight. My pleasure and also my pride, since the British Society has always been for me, as for many of my French colleagues, let us say a key point of reference. I don't say an ideal psychoanalytic Society. Indeed, what would such an ideal Society be? One that would know no disagreement, no internal controversy? One that would be unaware of the rivalries between its members, of the theoretical and technical disputes that divided them? One that would not recognize the persistence of transference or, worse yet, that would run the risk of producing standard-issue analysts, each one cast in the same mold—in short, a Society that would be stagnant, boring, lifeless?

By this definition, the British Society is certainly not an ideal Society; but, let me repeat, it is a reference for us, even if, for example, our ideas of how analysts should be trained differ considerably. Your Society is admired as much for its creativity through the years as for its ability to resolve the conflicts that have jeopardized its existence. In France, on the other hand, we seem to have a special knack for poisoning such conflicts. As you know, this has led to repeated schisms and created such a multiplicity of different schools and subgroups that, given this fragmentation, we can sadly no longer speak of a French psychoanalytic community.

My connection with your Society goes back a long way. I believe it began at the end of the sixties. Do not expect me to provide specific dates. Indeed, it gives me a special kind of pleasure not to remember such things, as if my memory, just like the unconscious, did not care for chronology, was in fact timeless (*zeitlos*). Anyway, the Franco-British colloquium was cre-

Presented at a Scientific Meeting of the British Psychoanalytical Society on November 16, 2005.

ated in the sixties and still exists today, though its participants have naturally been replaced and renewed over the years. For if there is a time that does not go by, there is another time, with which we are all too familiar, and that flies by.

The colloquium in question met once a year for two or three days, most often in some welcoming inn or other, before being held in Brighton, bringing together five or six British and five or six French analysts. The aim of these meetings was, and still is, to exchange views from both sides of the Channel—this waterway that both separates and links us. We would focus on some limited clinical material, a sequence of sessions or even a single session. This forced each participant to express his or her ideas openly, without being able to hide behind some sophisticated theoretical conception—a typically French sin, apparently . . .

I can still remember our British colleagues' amazement after a talk given by one of the French analysts. He reported a treatment in which he had remained silent for several months before finally daring to make his first interpretation—an interpretation he felt, naturally, to be "mutative." Who among us has not felt one day this conviction, or indeed that illusion: "After this interpretation, everything changed"?

Once their astonishment had passed, along with our own embarrassment—in fact, not all the French analysts present were followers of the cult of silence (not, by the way, to be confused with mutism)—we entertained ourselves during the break with the following anecdote, obviously fictitious:

The patient of a strict Kleinian analyst runs into a friend on his way to his session. They start to chat but the patient quickly breaks off the conversation: "I'm worried I'll be a few minutes late for my session," he tells his friend. "Oh come on, two or three minutes, it's not a big deal." The patient answers nervously: "You don't understand, that's not the point. The thing is, I will have missed at least two interpretations."

All this to illustrate how often we approach "the other"—the other here including our patients, which is even more reprehensible—on the basis of prejudices. In this case, it was colleagues

who weren't part of the same circle and whom we saw through still-vivid caricatures: the French analyst who never opens his mouth, the British one who never stops talking.

Let me take a different example from another Franco-British colloquium, one at which Hanna Segal related some of her sessions. Well, I'll admit today, not without shame, that I feared—always that caricature—she would bombard us with interpretations, all of them more or less coming back to the dialectic which is not actually a dialectic, but rather a splitting of the good object and the bad object, the good breast and the bad breast, and who knows what else. I thought to myself: after a while this must get pretty monotonous for the two protagonists!

Instead Hanna Segal's intervention greatly impressed me; I admired her clinical finesse and the constant attention she paid to "what was going on" between her patient and herself. It was a valuable lesson and one I made use of later in my own supervisions. In one's own analytic sessions with patients, of course, this becomes more difficult, especially when one is involved personally, as a person I mean. "What is going on?" These simple words have always struck me as much more pertinent, evocative, and delicate than the weighty concept of "transference/counter-transference relationships," which is a good example of what we in France call *la langue de bois*, that is to say, wooden language or empty clichés.

Other memories come back to me. There was the Conference of English-Speaking Analysts (my English and my accent were in much better shape back then). The proposed theme was "On Psychic Pain." I believe you were given in the internal *Bulletin of the British Society* a copy of the text I presented almost thirty years ago. Speaking about psychic and physical pain (is this distinction meaningful?) was a rare thing in those days. Now, it is rather fashionable. Were we perhaps pioneers with that conference?

And then, and then, it was in London, at a conference of the newly created European Federation that I had the occasion to speak on the negative therapeutic reaction as a concept. At the time, my ideas did not meet with any great success. However, the article I later based on that talk, entitled "No, Once Again No!" is the one of mine that is most often cited. Which goes to show, I suppose, that sometimes you just have to be patient! Wait and see!

Again in London, there was a congress of the International Psychoanalytic Association where I had the privilege to chair a panel on the subject of dreams. There I was on stage flanked by Harold Blum, a man of lively intelligence and a fine, measured delivery, and by Masud Khan, who I feared might cause some upset, and not only in his manner of speaking. To guard against this we had placed our great friend Victor Smirnoff next to Masud in the hope that he would calm him down if need be. Victor, although Russian in origin, out-Britished all the British. But it all came off beautifully. Delegates flooded in from other rooms, doubtless attracted by the prospect of a fight. There was no fight; instead an animated but polite debate took place. Masud, though wilfully provocative and arrogant—in fact he was a great phobic—was not yet in his megalomaniac phase, not yet demanding to be called Prince Masud Khan. The excesses we all know came later . . .

Right, I will put a stop to my London reminiscences here. I would just like to add quickly that over the years I've had the chance to form professional and personal ties with eminent members of your Society, among them Paula Heimann, Pearl King, Joe and Anne-Marie Sandler (thank you, my dear Anne-Marie, for having agreed to be my *discutante*), and the delightful Marion Milner, who for me remains, don't ask why, eternally a young girl.

Christine Miqueu-Baz, who was kind enough to translate this paper—and this was not an easy task—suggested that I start the evening with a sort of self-presentation or autobiographical study (*Selbstdarstellung*), adding, somewhat to my annoyance, that I was known in England primarily as the coauthor of *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (*Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*), commonly referred to as “Laplanche and Pontalis,” as inseparable as let's say Marks and Spencer, or more posh: Fortnum and Mason. Just briefly on that subject, a guaranteed genuine anecdote to illustrate just how closely my name and that of Jean Laplanche were tied together until we each found our own separate paths. Many years ago, a young man came to see me wishing to undergo analysis. He briefly described the reasons motivating his decision. I asked him what had led him to consult me in particular. Reply: *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. I told him, “You seem to forget that this work has two authors.” His reply: “I do not forget that for

one second. I hesitated for a long time between you and M. Pontalis. In the end, I chose you!”

I did not try to find out what fantasy of a “combined parent figure” lurked behind his confusion, and referred this patient sick with indecision to a third party . . .

Back to tonight, I did not come prepared to praise the originality of my own work regardless of any narcissism on my part, or what Michel de M'Uzan has humorously named my *narcisson*, a term resonating in French with *nourrisson* or “nursling,” the *narcisson* being a particularly durable and resistant psychic organ.

Setting aside my *narcisson*, I wish to relate a few of the notable encounters (*rencontres marquantes*) in my life, encounters that led me to become an analyst and to remain one. Certain encounters transform you. It is thanks to them and to the many identifications they provoke that we manage to acquire an identity of our own, a fragile identity, or—to use Fernando Pessoa's word—a kind of “intranquillity.” May we never become tranquil analysts!

The first encounter was with a man far removed from the sphere of psychoanalysis. In 1941—a precise date for once, because this was a real event, I mean something that happens without any warning—I was lucky enough to have Jean-Paul Sartre as my philosophy teacher for a few months. Let me remind you that the study of philosophy in the last years of secondary school is a peculiarity of French education. This is one French exception that really is precious, unlike many of the others that are claimed as such.

Throughout the previous years of schooling, we had always been taught the same subjects—history, geography, math, and so on—only with increasing degrees of complexity. But of what could philosophy possibly consist? This was the great unknown. When we asked the older students, their answers were always extremely evasive, much like the answers our patients give to those who want to know what psychoanalysis is all about. “What's that? Nine years on the couch and you still find something to say?” “What's that? Nine hours of philosophy every week? What's this Sartre guy going on about for all that time?”

As I was saying, philosophy was the great unknown. I could say as much for psychoanalysis, until we become involved with

it, or indeed even after we embark on the long “voyage out,” to quote Virginia Woolf, that is analysis for both patient and analyst. A voyage with no fixed destination, and yet one that transforms you.

Let’s come back to Sartre. He was removed from psychoanalysis, even hostile to it, since the idea of the unconscious was unacceptable to him, as a remote descendant of the Cartesian *cogito*—“I think, therefore I am”—and Sartre could certainly think anything. Winnicott would say: “First, I am.” Judge for yourselves. Sartre was able to write pages and pages about waterskiing without ever having tried that very difficult exercise of balance himself—and lucky for him too, as he probably would have drowned in thirty seconds! He did not teach us about Freud, but rather about Wilhelm Stekel, from whom he borrowed the concept of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*), a concept that, according to him, rendered useless the ideas of the unconscious and of repression. He had just read Stekel’s book *The Frigid Woman*, which illustrates the concept of bad faith. Incidentally, the teenagers we were found this a very convenient explanation, especially when we were not particularly proud of our performances.

The first sentence of Sartre’s lesson on ethics went as follows: “The judgment of fact refers to what is, the judgment of value to what should be,” spoken in his usual voice (from the head). This trenchant formula has remained etched in me. I did not grasp its meaning, its import until much later on, after the event. It is always after the event, in the “après-coup”—Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*—that meaning reveals itself. In the spring of 1941, Sartre was released from the stalag where he had been a prisoner. Back in Paris, he was profoundly dismayed by the atmosphere of collective contrition within which the Vichy government was trying to imprison us. We were guilty, we had deserved our defeat, said Pétain, by “preferring enjoyment (*jouissance*) to the spirit of sacrifice,” and so forth.

What was Sartre getting at with his statement? France has been defeated, that’s how it is, that’s a fact. But what can be, what must be, that is something else called resistance, called freedom. Sartre’s whole philosophy is a philosophy of freedom, a refusal of what La Boétie, the special friend of Montaigne, termed “voluntary servitude,” a refusal of that passion felt by so

many to submit themselves to the tyrant, the leader, the Führer; that same passion which Freud analyzed some four centuries after La Boétie, though well before the advent of Hitler and Stalin, in his *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*.

Some of our patients, with the help of transference, show themselves compliant and docile as they were previously with their teachers at school, in the face of their father's demands, their mother's expectations: "Be a nice boy, work hard!" This puts us on the lookout for manifestations of negative transference, though in the end this will in fact be quite *positive* for the progress of the treatment. Remember, Anne-Marie, the discussion we had in Barcelona on this topic?

Since then I have remembered some words that Ferenczi wrote in a letter to Freud; they refer to Jung: "He will never be an analyst. He will not allow himself to be destroyed by his patients."

Sartre did not want disciples. The problem is that many people want a master more than anything.

Lacan, on the other hand, who was my second notable encounter, enjoyed playing the role of master, when he was not going even further and confusing himself with the *grand Autre* ("big Other"), as he called it. I was one of his numerous patients, whom he termed pupils. This was a dangerous confusion of roles and led to abuse of power.

How did I get interested in analysis? I taught philosophy for many years; Sartre had given me a taste for it. One day, one of my best pupils said to me, somewhat embarrassed by her own frankness: "I enjoy your lessons very much, Sir, but you see, what bothers me is that I get the feeling you don't really believe in what you're saying." It took me some time—again the *après-coup* effect—to take in the import of her words. This young lady was wrong to suspect that I did not believe what I was saying, but she was dead right when she pointed out that I was not fully present in my discourse as a teacher. Of course, it was not this incident that decided me to undertake analysis, but it did help me to become more aware. I thought to myself: there must be a place where I could discover my particular voice, where my speech could be free, liberated from the demands of that "bastard logic" (Samuel Beckett), from the tyranny of organized language; a place where my voice could free itself from its usual

functions: information, communication, expression. “That of which I speak and do not know delivers me”—so did a poet say. That place was psychoanalysis, the “talking cure” that heals the sickness of speech and maybe even the sickness of discourse, of *tout-language* (“nothing but language”). Language is infirm, it cannot recognize the *infans*.

If, in the end, I distanced myself from Lacan, it is no doubt because—among other reasons—I never subscribed to his famous formula that “the unconscious is structured like a language,” an idea that, I believe, always lay at the heart of his teachings. When, somewhat later, he went further down the path of formalism, he resorted to mathematical terms, as with the introduction of “mathemes.” Expressing psychoanalysis mathematically, what a program! That would be to ignore that the unconscious, even if presented as a system by Freud, is nevertheless excluded from the system of language. It would be to misjudge the very nature of human sickness that we all experience. As for the id of the structural model, it is so close to the formless, to chaos even, that one could call it an “antisystem.”

It must be said that in the France of the 1950s, linguistics—as taught by de Saussure and Jakobson—was king. It was considered the guiding science of all the other human sciences. Lacan was part of this movement, and it is from this position that stemmed the general disregard for the *infans*, of which I spoke a few minutes ago. The *infans* does not only mean “his majesty the baby.” By *infans*, I mean one who lacks words, one who even when he finds words is still searching to regain that which escapes language. I do not see in this *infans* someone who is deprived of speech. I prefer to imagine that he feels that access to verbal language will accentuate the gap between that which he hallucinates and the object of his desires. Yes indeed, he will then be done with the primitive hallucinations, with the wait for full gratification. Our intense emotions, like our instinctual urges, can hardly be translated into words. Words are always inadequate, except perhaps in poetry, where the word and the thing may coincide occasionally. One of my articles is called “The Melancholy of Language”; it captures the pain and the need in renunciation. How often are we surprised in analysis by the fact that it is exactly in those moments when words fail us—both patient and analyst—that we come closest

to the intimate, the unknown, the hidden distress that is buried beneath words and even perceptible affects?

One more word, this time about what I owe to Lacan, whose seminars I faithfully attended throughout the late fifties. We were relatively few there at the time and all felt a bit like the first followers of Freud; we had the feeling that with Lacan we were inventing psychoanalysis, that he was waking us from the dogmatic sleep into which psychoanalysis risked lapsing forever. Yes, Lacan was very good at waking people up!

On to my third notable encounter, which took place after Sartre and before Lacan. This was with Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who I imagine is not that well known here in England, except to philosophers. Even then, I am not so sure, given the tendency that Husserl's phenomenology, so prevalent in France, and the Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy of Russell and Wittgenstein have of mutually excluding each other. Merleau-Ponty was no opponent of psychoanalysis, quite the opposite in fact. After he succeeded Jean Piaget as chair of Child Psychology at the Sorbonne, I remember that Merleau-Ponty dedicated some lectures to the work of Melanie Klein, who was virtually unknown to French analysts at the time, and to the opposition between her views and those of Anna Freud on the psychoanalytic treatment of children.

Merleau-Ponty was never my tutor, but a very dear friend whose premature death affected me greatly. He had a profound influence on me and on the philosopher I have ceased to be. Of course, we never forget our first vocation, but it seems to me that whatever our initial training, be it medical, psychiatric, or psychological, once we are convinced by psychoanalysis we need to break with that initial calling in order to explore the *terra incognita* and to engage fully in what Freud called "the other scene."

It is on the psychoanalyst that I have tried, and am still trying, to become that Merleau-Ponty's thought has been the most decisive. His style has also had a powerful influence on me. It is a style as far removed as possible from the technical language of philosophers, a style so suspicious of the hold that concepts have over us, that some have qualified it as literary. It is as much as a psychoanalyst as a writer who would like to ascribe words and meaning to the mute language of things that I am most in his debt.

Everything I have written about the visible and the invisible, about oneiric perception, about the necessity of words to become flesh, to be incarnate, about the alliance between the sensorial and the intelligible, and between the eye and the mind (to echo the title of one of his most brilliant essays), my constant refusal radically to separate the real from the imaginary, and in a more general sense, my quest to challenge every clear-cut separation in favor of the undifferentiated, the undivided, the intermediary realm, to such a point that I am labelled a specialist of the “between” and of the “in-between”—all this stems from my contact with Merleau-Ponty and my reading of his works.

Between, in-between, this leads me conveniently to my fourth decisive encounter: with the “Middle Group” and Winnicott.

For twenty-five years, between 1970 and 1995—just imagine, a quarter-century—I ran a journal, the *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse*. The editorial committee included André Green, a member of a different society, the S.P.P. (I belong to the A.P.F.), Didier Anzieu, whose rigor and originality you are all familiar with, Guy Rosolato, who was still very influenced by Lacan’s teachings, Victor Smirnoff, who was curious about everything and spoke many languages flawlessly, including yours, Jean Pouillon, an ethnologist close to Lévi-Strauss, and Jean Starobinski from Geneva, a man of immense culture whose knowledge encompassed medicine, psychology, literature, psychoanalysis—in short, a representative, I fear, of an “endangered species.” As you can see, this committee, which later included Masud Khan, was itself a sort of “Middle Group.”

It was Masud who championed the publication in our journal and in the series “Knowledge of the Unconscious” of authors such as Marion Milner, Bion, Meltzer, Fairbairn, and Margaret Little, and especially the publication of books and articles by Winnicott.

Winnicott was a revelation, not only for our team, but for a great number of French psychoanalysts. He was our transitional space. Winnicott freed me—freed us—from Lacanianism. Analysis could no longer be reduced to a *game* whose rules were fixed from the outset; analysis was *playing*, just as the capacity to dream, the dreaming, is more important than the dream content, the textual object to be deciphered, and just as an analytic treatment would only be *words*, merely *words* if there was no *experiencing* involved.

We all know the inscription in one of Winnicott's books: "To my patients who have paid to teach me." How I cherish this paradoxical formula, so full of the humor we often lack, and with which I'm sure we all agree! It is well-established that it is our patients, each with his own particular history, way of thinking, fantasies, suffering, neuroses, all different from our own—it is these human beings, whom we first meet as strangers, who, in the end, make the analyst. We are never done with this particular encounter. I think we would also agree on this point.

I'd like to specify how I proceed in my own writing. It is often words straight from the couch that set me off, as if they had some revelatory power and could set my thought in motion. I'll give you two brief examples to illustrate my point.

A patient of some sixty-odd years has just gone to visit her elderly mother who, as they say, is not all there. After her visit, she comes straight to a session, still filled with an intense rage like that of a child when her mother refuses to do what she expects from her. So, somewhat foolishly I admit, but one should never be scared to admit one's own inadequacy or stupidity, I tell her: "You don't really think that at her age and in the state she's in, you have the power to cure your mother, to *change* her, do you?"

Then the idea came to me, and I'll freely confess it is not a very original one, but it had never forced itself upon me in that way before, that the desire to change one's mother comes from the fact—among others—that no matter how you qualify her—bad, good, good-enough—the mother is not interchangeable. And it is precisely because one cannot exchange her that one persists obstinately in changing her at all costs. By changing her, I mean either curing her from her depression, from her madness, or else devoting oneself to rendering her less absorbed in herself, ensuring that she attends us without watching us too closely—in other words, being present without being intrusive. We can all find father-substitutes. It is even the precondition for girls to overcome their Oedipus complex, and boys can choose their teacher or their analyst as a father-figure, not having dared to confront their own fathers directly.

However, in my opinion, there is no *ersatz* for the mother. She is irreplaceable, she is unchangeable. An analyst can try all he likes to "act the mother" (as Ferenczi was accused of doing); he is *not* the mother.

This same patient made me think—not a very “scientific” thought I’ll admit—that passion, including transference passion (that is, when the fire erupts not only behind the scenes but on stage too) could have its origin in the mother-daughter relationship, while the origin of love—including transference love—is to be found more on the side of seduction. If the father is not a little bit seductive, that is to say, if he does not recognize his little girl’s femininity, does not recognize in her the woman she will become, the daughter will feel scorned.

I am probably oversimplifying. Maybe I am rambling. I will leave it to you to judge.

Another example. One day, a patient, then nearing the end of his analysis, recounted to me a dream about—and these are his words—“a desert that stretched on further than the eye could reach.” This image, these words immediately connected in my mind with the words a friend of mine had addressed to his daughter with unusual violence. My friend had just lost his beloved mother after a long and painful illness. He was racked with grief. His well-meaning daughter, who could not stand to see her father so despondent, told him, “Just think, Grandma is not suffering any more.” His reply was immediate and scathing: “You understand nothing, you don’t understand that I will never see her again.”

Never to see her again, never to be seen by her again, to lose forever your first mirror, your mother’s gaze . . .

This second example was the inspiration first for an article, and then a book called *Lost from Sight*. The first example I gave was the origin of a reflection on the negative therapeutic reaction.

I would have been utterly unable to write about the complex relations between the unconscious and the visual, and unable as well to write on the work of the negative, without those words. I repeat: I need words straight from the couch, with all the associative connections they stir in me, in order to address the questions that torment me in a more reflective, and thus more “secondary” manner.

There is one encounter I have left out so far, probably the most important of all: I mean my encounter with the works of Sigmund Freud. Let us never forget that we owe psychoanalysis to him—*his* psychoanalysis, he used to say—as well as our existence and our profession as analysts.

This encounter has been unforgettable and, above all, inexhaustible. I have embarked innumerable times upon the speculative, not to say slightly mad, adventure that is *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*; I have read and reread my favorite short works, which I love for the way they show how the uncanny lurks at every corner of our everyday lives, as it does in “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis.” What is transference if not an uncanny sensation, both on the couch and behind the couch?

Do not misunderstand, I am certainly not in favor of an exegesis, of a Talmudic commentary on all Freudian texts. It is rather that Freud’s texts are for me a unique and inexhaustible source of inspiration. A source, not an end. Let us think with him, against him sometimes; not just repeat him with greater or lesser success. This same counsel stands also for those seeking to emulate any other analyst after Freud.

A work of thought is great when it allows people to think, when it is presented neither as a dogma nor as a closed system. A great work is a gift. This gift is called transmission. You cannot reduce this gift to the transmission of knowledge, even if this is necessary within some limits, nor can you limit it simply to a skill, for it is up to each individual to learn the skills himself through experience.

What then is this gift? To transmit the conviction that analysis is irreplaceable—it’s what I was just saying about the mother, in fact . . .

I remember someone asked Anna Freud once what the most important quality in an analyst could be. Without a second’s hesitation she replied, “Curiosity.”

I would venture to add, though in essence it’s the same thing: the ability to think against yourself. Baudelaire used to claim “the right to contradict oneself.” In my view, it is more than a right, it is an absolute necessity for the mind, just like the psyche, to stay in conflict with itself.

Well, over to you now, Anne-Marie. And please, don’t hesitate to give my *narcisson* a hard time!

34, rue du Bac
75007 Paris
France

Translated by Christine Miqueu-Baz