

Romanian Society for Psychoanalysis  
Psychoanalytic understanding of ageing (from midlife and beyond)

**A Dialogue with the Body during Midlife  
through Piera Aulagnier's Concepts**

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Bucarest, February 10, 2018

**Introductory Words**

The body evinces human being existence: It is the presentation before other's eyes, the carrier of identity, the innermost of each subject, the visible face of the I, it is where the soul shines, and also it is what shows the signals of time passing.

Body modifications echoes in psychic life promoting an exchange —following Piera Aulagnier's thoughts it offers me a channel that allowed the flow of my ideas about midlife.

This paper is a clinical work, and I think it is an example of what I want to state that goes beyond words.

The question on the birth of the body confront us with the helplessness in which human beings are born —considering somatic suffering the first sign of somatic existence. This suffering asks for the help of another specialized one, who will be able through his/her acts, to contain, assist and offer the needed relief. That minimum of pleasure will leave a psychic landmark in the first pictographic traces.

Given the mouth-breast meeting —the first sip of milk is the first sign of life, something that puts psychic life at work. This way *a soma* transforms into *the* body, from now on as a member of human culture, which through affect rescues the subject from absolute helplessness.

This helping other, generally the mother, offers him/herself as a mediator as well as anticipates to wishes, making it easy the psychic awakening and the beginning of a history.

Before I advent, the *infans* offers his/her body to maternal investment allowing to be spoken by her. Long time before birth, maternal object has anticipated —in the figure of a spoken shadow — those statements that close parental wish towards that *infans*. That investment may occur if it is possible for his/her mother to acknowledge the difference that brings about the bare presence of the *infans*.

This is the way how a dialogue with an other begins, opening this way the future dialogue between the I and its body. But this dialogue has a history that comes before —the one that was possible through the exchange between mother/*infans* bodies: feeding, culture and meaning.

It's precisely I's appearance on the scene what makes it possible the appearance of historicization of time. I think that the I can only invest a body with a history —let's say a body that was dwelt for maternal wish waiting for that especial and unique meeting named birth.

In the best of the cases, that meeting will open a relationship system, the threshold towards symbolic and temporary meanings.

Affinity or mismatch may lead to a confidence or reject situation.

Mother is a privileged agent for the newborn imprint body and psychic imprint. Of course, we acknowledge father's importance, but the mother is the first source of pleasure and unpleasure —something that generates modifications in somato-psychic reality. In this way, she will be an important agent in the history that the subject will tell to him/herself. She is the sensorial agent of modification leaving a psychic trace, as an active part of what will be considered as pleasure or suffering.

If pleasure preponderates, then there will be a body unified facilitation.

We must take into account that I-body exchange accompanies individuals all along his/her life. I am speaking of an I which dialogues and questions itself as the author of its own history.

I replaces past time for a history. And from that historicized past time the I will invest an uncertain and unknown future.

The I goes through the different phases of the human life cycle, from absolute helplessness at birth and acquisitions that give it empowerment to adolescence. This is an ambivalent phase between potency of youth and the feelings of bewilderment that permanent changes in the body afford, because the body is felt as something ungovernable.

Midlife is another phase of the human life cycle that confronts the subject with the ungovernable again, in this case through the uncertainty that is the outcome of functions declinations and the landmark of finitude.

An unavoidable «earthquake» happens during this phase, because not only it begins a renewed dialogue with the limitation of time, but also a questioning about one's own identity. In this case the loss of reproductive functioning is one of the really important hints for this revision.

These body unavoidable changes shape different reactions: acknowledgement, resignation, denial, narcissistic unbalance. These feelings result in different discourses between the I and its own reality.

This biographic I will be the main character in the bonds that will take place between the body and its psychic destiny.

The I is the unique biographer, one that has threaded all lived events, from the moment it was spoken until it was the owner of its body —always listening and decoding its own messages.

I speak of libidinal history, the identificatory history —something to be reviewed, always open to possible changes though.

This history was greatly determined by that first glance of acceptance or rejection, accordance or maladjustment between wishes and reality. This first glance leaves an imprint of openness and flexibility, or a feeling of resistance and rejection towards what's different.

This representation will remain under the power of the history the biographer I could build, depending if the I could question the history or if it submitted to it.

We are facing a never ending history, something that will bring uncertainty, though at the same time it will appear as a potentially change helper —something that revalidates psychoanalysis.

This becomes possible through the conservation of one's own identity, something that goes beyond physical and psychical changes.

Just the possibility of acknowledging these changes as well as the limitations that time passing brings about, will open a new and renewed discourse, a new way of relatedness. On the other way round the subject may remain submitted to the given history, something that comes with the feeling of certainty.

The acknowledgement of becoming and the uncertainty that is intrinsic to this feeling is what allows a future. Piera Aulagnier states that «Future time investment has hope as a condition, precisely what will allow the realization of a potentiality already present in the I».

This is a very complex situation, because any subject may foresee naturally the decline and finitude in the other, but it's hard to acknowledge within him/her.

This difficulty is what called my attention because I think as really important to infer the discourse between the I and the body at this moment of the human life cycle.

We must take into account that the body is the presentation before another's glance —and this other is something that helps bringing identity as well as a place in the world. It is what makes our existence visible as individuals —in that specific space where an exchange with others coalesce.

I am referring to our innermost, something that demands an adoption and a re-adoption due to the changes that time passing implies. Nodal to midlife is this re-adoption, because this is a moment on the vital life cycle in which physical changes are preponderantly related to losses.

One of my aims with this delivery is being able to show a particular link that relates the first representations that gave birth to the I-body with those others related to specific changes during midlife —the ones that question the I, in the best of the cases obligating it to modify its discourse.

We'll work together this link through the clinical case I will deliver now.

### **Mrs Ana's Clinical Case**

This clinical case was selected in line with the subject I have just told you about.

Ana is a midlife woman who has a very especial dialogue with her body —something that represents different identifications—, a situation that is present in her bonds, particularly with her husband.

She is a 55 years-old woman, married to the man that is the father of her children. He is a professional and is under psychiatric and psychotherapeutic treatment on account of recurrent depressive states. They have a 27 years-old son and a 23 years-old daughter —both left their parent's house one year ago.

Ana is a professional and runs her own business. Her incomes are the strongest thing in their home.

It's been four years since she phoned me for her first interview: anxiety, listlessness, and anhedonia. She felt really disgusted with her own image, considering her body was unacceptable. She used to wear long skirt that covered her legs —they were «the worst» for her.

It is important to present her parents considering the theoretical frame I delivered. They are Italian —both emigrated to Argentina at different moments. Ana's mother, María, lived till her was 18 in a small town in Italy with a true endogamic lifestyle: she used to go out of her house only on Sundays to go to church for mass with her sisters —though this was common in all the inhabitants there.

María used to wait all week to wear the dress she had sewed, just to walk to the main square where the boys used to gather waiting for the girls to pass by. That was the occasion when she fell in love with one of those boys, though everything remained as an impossible-to-be-fulfilled dream. This was because her mother was asked to travel immediately to Argentina with her children —including Ana—, because her father was asking for them.

In Buenos Aires, she got married to someone who asked her hand to her father. She underwent this situation, abiding the mandate that she had received indisputably. This way her wishes remained buried —giving allowance only to duty and obligation. María even confessed to

her own daughters that she never felt sexually satisfied, but she considered it was important to satisfy her husband.

As she had six children, it is possible to consider that she would have been so busy doing things, that she had no time to think on the way she was living and in her own wishes.

Ana refers to her mother as a really active woman housekeeping —she used to paint the walls and made any kind of task. She is not remembered as someone devoted to her femininity or to her personal care. When she got married she went to live with her husband at her own parent's house —let's say with Ana's grandparents.

Ana was María's second daughter. The first one was pampered and devoted to enjoy, though Ana was put in the place of the caregiver of her siblings, as if she were the extension of her mother.

Regarding her name, she says: «I was to be named Marta, a name I love, but when I was born, birth was really complicated and my mother's life was at risk. This was the reason why my grandmother, really devoted to Saint Ana, gave me this name, as an acknowledgement that everything went well. But I never liked it! According to Catholic Church, we might take into account that Ana is the name of virgin María's mother.

This traumatic birth where Ana «almost kills» her mother, leaves her in debt and guilty for the suffering she brought about. This situation eased her submitting the a caregiver role.

Fully identified with her mother's subjection, Ana played the role so well that her siblings were angry with her, because she wasn't one among them but an adult girl, playing the role of her mother.

When telling her history, she said that she had never thought not to obey to her mother and grandmother's orders. Conversely, she was thanked by both.

Of course, she paid a high price, because she put off her infancy and adolescence, stages of her life she can't remember with satisfaction.

Ana's mother —according to what Ana describes— invested subjection, denying her own body as a source of pleasure and enjoyment. From that standpoint she looked at her children, especially to Ana, who took those ideas, views and speech as hers.

I will deliver some sayings of the patient:

«I think I was born rejecting my body.»

«I never felt myself a pretty girl: my sister was beautiful and I was obliged to accompany her with her boyfriend when they were out. I felt ridiculous in that situation, but I did it anyway.»

«When we were in the corner, my sister used to tell me to leave them alone, but I was so ashamed that the boys could look at me that I avoided passing where they were.»

«My mother sewed our dresses and my sister was always asking for the hem of her skirt to be shortened, to show her legs, and I used to ask for it to be enlarged just to hide my legs.»

«I always had a conflict with my body. I could slim down, but that was not enough: I remained feeling ugly, fat and old.»

«I always looked at me with rejection and I felt sorry for my body, for my face. Up to this moment I feel ashamed with a male gynecologist.»

«When I met my husband I had already abandoned high school. He was already a professional and through his support I could graduate.»

This self rejection and undervaluation is anchored in parental expectations that preceded her. Their parents were individuals whose main target in life was to achieve the satisfaction of basic needs and to buy their own house. Father working hard out of their home, and mother doing housekeeping trying to satisfy her children's primary needs —it's important to mention that as births were so frequent, there was always a little one to be cared for. From María's side we must consider that she didn't get married being in love with her husband.

Now, as elders, they remain gathering the entire family at home, but —as Ana says— «meetings are just to eat.» In this is recent comment of the patient, we can find a kind of freedom of thought impossible to achieve time ago.

We may wonder why Ana ask for a help during midlife, why at this specific moment of the vital life cycle she felt an ungovernable listlessness and the anxiety of feeling in a no way out road.

Following the theoretical line about the discourse human being have with their body, we may think that the signals of ageing turned her own image unacceptable. This situation started a kind of an ungovernable feeling that was extended to her whole life.

Again —as it was the case with her career— her husband suggests to her the beginning of a psychoanalytic treatment, and it was his own psychoanalyst who refers Ana to me.

Ana begins her treatment with a strong resistance to go deep into her innermost. The content of her sessions was mostly related to her working activity and complains towards her husband's lack of collaboration at home. Psychoanalysis proved that she was truly envious about the pleasure he gained through working as well as the spare time he could enjoy. This pleasure was also something Ana felt that he gained through sexual relations —something that was in the place of duty without enjoyment and satisfaction for her. She was sure that this lack of sexual

desire was the consequence of her body maladjustment, therefore she didn't want to be seen so badly.

When their children left parental home to begin their own lives, the couple felt more exposed to the difficulty of lovely exchanges. But this situation was stressing because Ana discovered a series of messages and photos her husband had with another woman, which content was about sexual excitement she instantly gained when she watched her photos.

This brought about a series of discussions between them which lead her to the decision of abandoning marital room. Though Ana felt really angry, it was the first time she felt her husband as someone valuable and sexually desirable —she began to fight to get an other one by her side.

At that moment of her analysis we —patient and analyst— could acknowledge the work really achieved, allowing her the questioning of the identification with her mother. Though Ana went under impulsive face and breasts surgery she could also get herself emotionally involved in the marital situation she had discovered.

Ana continues with her psychoanalytic treatment having increased her sessions, trying to find new discourses, something that slowly approaches her to a change where pleasure could be predominant.

The fact that she could get a more valued image of herself at this moment of her life, is precisely what leads to the control impulsive behavior.

They went into a true midlife crisis as a couple, and they are currently in a renewed dialogue, trying to acknowledge each other differences.

Ana says: «I feel really enthusiastic about decorating my house, I spend all day trying to make it look prettier.» When I listen to this statement I understand that she is referring to the renewal of her relation with her body. This was one of the main targets of her analysis, because this also implies a way of modifying a future for her, let's say: to-have-a-future, something that lacked for her from his birth. As Piera Aulagnier states that «the investment of future time has as a condition the hope that it will allow the realization of a potential that already exists in the I.» And this situation is really present in her psychoanalytic treatment.

Thank you very much!