

Two steps forward, one step back

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Text of a presentation for the IPA webinar on 15th October 2022 to mark the publication of Psychoanalysis of the Psychoanalytic Frame Revisited: A New Look at José Bleger's Classic Work, a collection of papers edited by Carlos Moguillansky and Howard Levine, in the IPA Psychoanalytic Classics Revisited series (Routledge, 2022). Previously presented in Spanish at an IPA webinar on 14th May 2022.

I first learned of the work of José Bleger thirty years ago when I was a candidate. I was asked to translate, for the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, a Letter to the Editor by the Spanish analyst Rafael Cruz Roche (Roche, 1992), commenting on Thomas Ogden's article on the 'autistic-contiguous position' which had appeared in 1989. Cruz Roche wrote that Ogden's observations held no surprises for psychoanalysts whose language and culture are Spanish, since in an article in 1962, and again in 1967 in his book *Simbiosis y Ambigüedad: estudio psicoanalítico* (1967a), José Bleger had proposed the concept of the 'glischro-caric position', to which Ogden's concept was practically identical.

In the same year as *Simbiosis y Ambigüedad* was published in Spanish, an English translation of the sixth chapter of the book, which is about the psychoanalytic setting, appeared as an article in the *International Journal* (Bleger, 1967b). The translation included some errors, which made it hard for an English reader to fully comprehend. For example: Bleger uses the Spanish phrase '*miembro fantasma*', which is equivalent to the English 'phantom limb', the well-known neurological symptom following an amputation which indicates the existence of an internal 'body-schema', as described originally by Head and Holmes (1911-12), and later discussed from a psychoanalytic perspective by Schilder (1935). In the 1967 translation, however, this phrase was rendered as 'ghost member', which in English makes little or no sense and which fails to convey the parallel to which Bleger was drawing attention, between the neurological symptom and the manifestation of the psychoanalytic setting when it is disrupted. This parallel is an important observation by Bleger because it reveals the intimate connection between the

physical nature of the setting, including the bodies of the analytic couple, and the psychological phenomena that occur when the setting is disturbed. It is connected with Bleger's adoption both of Politzer's (1965-66) 'concrete psychology' and of Pichon-Rivière's conception of the three 'areas' of mind, body, and external world (see Bleger, 1973, p. 29), and with his assertion of a 'principle of equivalence' between the three areas, which he regarded as a necessary corollary of his radically anti-solipsistic view of ontogenesis.

To take another example: Bleger is careful to describe his project as follows: "I wish to examine what is involved in the maintenance of *an ideally normal setting*." To clarify this, he writes: "The problem as I present it is similar to what physicists call a thought experiment [*'experiencia ideal'*]: a problem that does not occur totally or precisely in the form in which it is defined or presented, but which is of great usefulness (theoretical and practical)." Now the Spanish phrase '*experiencia ideal*' is a translation of the German word '*Gedankenexperiment*', originally used by 19th-century physicists, and which became well-known when Einstein used it to explain his theory of relativity (Einstein, 1982 [1922]). The standard English translation is 'thought experiment', although the German is also often used as a loan-word. In the 1967 translation, however, this is translated as 'ideal experiment', which is simply a word-for-word substitution and which not only fails to convey the meaning but could be understood in almost the opposite sense of an 'optimum' experiment, which is to say one which could in principle be realised.

More serious than these errors of translation is the fact that because the article appeared in isolation from the rest of the work of which it was the culmination and final substantive chapter, and without any reference to this context, it was impossible for most English readers to appreciate its clinical and conceptual roots in the multi-stranded arguments of the preceding chapters, which deal with, *inter alia*: primitive undifferentiation; symbiosis; ambiguity; autism; the deposited and the depositary; the glischro-caric position as a precursor of the paranoid-schizoid; the agglutinated nucleus as equivalent to what Bion (1956) had called the psychotic part of the personality; the factic and syncretic egos; and the syncretic nature of participation.

It was not until 2013 that an English edition of the whole book was published, edited by Leopoldo Bleger and me, in a translation that we made jointly with

Susan Rogers of the APA (Bleger, 2013 [1967]). During the intervening forty-five years, the Spanish text was reprinted seven times, and José Bleger's work generally continued to be widely read in Spanish.

So what about the nine years that have passed since we published the English edition of *Symbiosis and Ambiguity*? Is José Bleger's seminal work on the setting now better known in the English-speaking world? Well, yes and no. Certainly, the unexpected consequences of the pandemic have, very recently, forced a sudden and radical change of setting upon on many analysts and many patients, and this has led to a change globally in many analysts' awareness of the significance of tacit elements of the setting. There has also been a noticeable concomitant increase in the frequency with which José Bleger has been cited in the Anglophone world. I have the impression, however, that many colleagues who cite Bleger's text have not actually read it, or not carefully, and unfortunately it seems that the 1967 translation in the *International Journal* is still the version that is usually cited.

There have been some important exceptions to this general overlooking of Bleger's work, with excellent papers in English by authors such as André Green (1975), Haydée Faimberg (2012, 2014), and Ricardo Bernardi and Beatriz De León De Bernardi (2012). Horacio Etchegoyen (1991) quoted and discussed Bleger extensively in his book on psychoanalytic technique, Rogelio Sosnik (2011) and David Scharff (2018) have each reviewed *Symbiosis and Ambiguity* at length, and a collection of papers edited by Isaac Tylim and Adrienne Harris was published in 2018. More recently a series of webinars in English and French organised by Marilia Aisenstein and Eléana Mylona of the SPP, on theme "The frame on both sides of the Channel", included a number of papers referring to Bleger's work on the setting; and in a major article published this year in the *IJP* Danielle Bazzi (2022) has explored Bleger's debt to Kurt Lewin and George Politzer.

An important development in psychoanalytic publishing in the English-speaking world in the last twenty years has been the rise of *PEP-Web* as an online resource. In addition to Freud's complete works in both the German original and the English *Standard Edition*, most of the major psychoanalytic journals (including, now, both the Spanish and the Argentinian *Revista de Psicoanalisis*), *PEP-Web* includes the texts of nearly one hundred classic books in English.

Currently only two of these are translations from Spanish: Heinrich Racker and Ignacio Matte-Blanco. Clearly, it would be a considerable improvement if the whole of Bleger's *Symbiosis and Ambiguity* were to be available on *PEP-Web*. We have requested this and I understand from David Tuckett, who is the CEO of *PEP-Web*, that it will be included in 2023.

Meanwhile, the book edited by Carlos Moguillansky and Howard Levine (2022), the publication of which is the occasion for this webinar, represents another step in the long, slow process of bringing José Bleger's thinking to English readers, which sometimes seems to me like a very slow dance whose basic movements are: two steps forward, one step back. I recently had an opportunity to read all the other contributions, which are diverse in character and range widely and deeply in their explorations.

My own contribution to the book addresses questions of embodiment and presence in the psychoanalytic setting, the social and institutional constitution of the body schema, Bleger's two settings and the problematic idea of an 'internal' setting. To explore the implications of telecommunications, when the classical setting is modified as for example when working remotely by telephone or video, I describe in some detail another 'thought experiment' in which the setting is modified by technology in a more radical way than is actually possible. I imagine the analytic couple meeting only via their avatars, not in a virtual world such as *Second Life*, but in a world in which the avatars exist as robots interacting physically in real space. The point of the thought experiment is to underline the fact, which I believe is central to understanding remote analysis, that Bleger's concept of the setting implies that the telecommunication system itself will inevitably become a depository for the psychotic part of the personality. The body itself is part of the setting and, like cyborgs, we cannot avoid interiorising the technology, establishing a symbiotic relation with its invariant properties.

I have no doubt that this book will stimulate new interest among English-speaking colleagues, and I hope that some of those who read it will be motivated to find out more about the conceptual and clinical background to José Bleger's thinking about the psychoanalytic setting. In the long run, provided that psychoanalysis and humanity can both survive for long enough, I

have some hope that his pioneering work will become as well known to English readers as it has already been for decades in the Spanish-speaking world.

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