
THE DARK, THE DOOR, THE MIRROR

Extracts from clinical cases (1970-1981)

by

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(English translation by C.F. Russell)

As a convinced Freudian I have always attached great importance to symbolism and the interpretation of dreams. Years ago, recalling past experiences, I was overcome by a kind of intuition which translated itself in the formulation of three settings which, even in the waking state, can bring out the existence of those phantoms that we "child" adults believe to have forever overcome. The three settings are:

- 1) To sit comfortably in a darkened room, preferably alone in the house, with back towards an open door, for 45 minutes.
- 2) Similarly but with back towards a closed door, for 45 minutes.
- 3) To sit in front of a mirror, alone in a room, observing oneself for 45 minutes.

At the same time recording one's thoughts, feelings, impressions on tape.

The setting of the "door behind" one obviously derives from my work in Freudian analysis - behind the patient is the analyst.

The open door implies an act of will, of courage: through the door, phantoms can enter and exit in a dynamic and dialectic exchange which transforms them into tangible "things" which we can compare with ourselves. The dual role taken on by the subject-object, analyst-analysand, is noteworthy: outward transfer and verbalization of the emotions, awareness of them brought about through the mute presence of the door-analyst, the mirror-analyst, which we manipulate by projecting and identifying.

I remember the door of my bedroom and of my parent's bedroom, the symbol that closing or opening it took on, the anxiety unleashed by those experiences: it meant "being with" or "not being with"; being in or out. Then the mirror. Who can ever forget the symbol of truth it was for Snow White's stepmother? Who has never asked their mirror for confirmation? . . .

I am going to transcribe here a few significant tapes without interpretation, since I consider these procedures valid for any type of psychotherapy and readers can make

their own interpretations according to their own frames of reference.

The need of therapy I would suggest repeating the same situations after a period of time and comparing them. All cases reported here were organised by the patients at their own homes.

Here then are the recordings, including patients (like Case 2) who have given up therapy. This is indicative of what strong defense mechanisms may be released in the individual as soon as they realise that their symptoms are under threat.

CASE 1 - "Open door" - Ornella, 1972

I'm no longer afraid of the dark . . . ghosts and evil spirits no longer come to visit me up here. Perhaps I have always been in darkness, even more so in life, but impalpably, with short, shallow everyday breath. There's a dread of death forever at my side that frightens me more in light than in darkness.

I have eaten up all the devils and spat out their bones. I am myself. The darkness soothes and protects me and the truth basically satisfies my reason: as though seeing spatial relationships between exterior objects forced me to weave them into my interior objects, but it's like not wanting to resemble a bad mother. It's true she can no longer frighten me, since at this stage I have overcome the force which rejected me, held back inside an uncomfortable and deserted uterus even before my legs, once their awareness extended to the body, dragged this fear after them.

Immobile and incredible recognition by the blind of the blind. The others were born from populated uteruses and came out only after hearing their roll-call. I am going backwards: I want to take my friends, but they all have immeasurable ages, immeasurable like the dark. Even if I touched myself, I wouldn't be able to say how big or small I was in the dark. My hands refuse to talk to me; they could make things disappear in the dark . . . like the others in a scene when the curtain drops. Who would notice? Badly informed and informing badly. The dark is my pure, strong, unwitty but pre-humorous courage. The oscillating dots which disperse during the day throng and dance together in the dark. Perhaps I am one of them, but the most stupid one, because it's convinced of having lost the way back, deceiving itself into thinking that the way is always the same and that the dance that by day it desperately wants to keep an eye on, is always in the same place.

CASE 2 - "Closed door" - Barbara, April 1979

I feel as though I were small; not in years but in the sense of something small surrounded by so much greatness . . . I'm not afraid. I thought I felt frightened when I was thinking today, remembering when I was small and frightened even to stick a leg out in case something bit it. It happened all the time, but I don't feel frightened anymore now . . . I feel quite empty. I am aware of being completely relaxed in this chair and my head feels slightly heavy. I haven't exactly achieved total darkness: a little light is

coming in through the window. I want it though; so I'm closing my eyes. I repeat that I feel no sensation of fear, but I don't know if I could . . . if I could manage to turn my head at this moment. I feel quite rigid . . . I'm surprised I don't have that feeling of fear I've felt so many times before. I don't know: when I go to bed alone in the evening here, it's almost as though I need to go to sleep immediately for fear that if I read in bed or watched TV, I might feel frightened; do you understand? So, I try to go to sleep immediately. Therefore, I'm surprised that I don't have that sensation of fear here in this situation in the dark . . . this is paradoxically in contrast with the fear I had when I was small. I was terribly afraid of the dark, unable to sleep. Just imagine, I have always thought I would die of fear; that an overwhelming, oppressive sensation such as that could lead to death. It therefore doesn't seem reasonable to stay here now in the dark . . . I am unable to feel sensations of any great importance. If I were in a more comfortable position, I would fall asleep. My head feels really heavy. I don't think this depends on the situation, however. Indeed, I feel quite calm. I was more agitated before when I was preparing the tape-recorder. I switched off the light, took a chair, and now, . . . yes, I have that feeling of smallness in relation to my surroundings. I know exactly how small I am and where I am . . . and this surprises me. I can hear noises, which usually makes me jump, but not this time. Perhaps I prepared myself without realizing, because I thought enough about this moment both yesterday and today. My calm is real, though. I'm trying to imagine someone who might come up to me from behind, but it doesn't

disturb me . . . however, I'm anxious to get to the end of this half-hour, mainly because I feel tired and would rather lie down on the bed. I feel quite weary. Must be because I've been on the go all day . . . I think a little music wouldn't go astray . . . I feel tired and want to sleep: these are the only sensations I have, though infused with a certain sadness. No, I don't like the word "sadness", rather "feeling of emptiness" - I don't know how to define it - that something which stays with me the whole day, that sense of dissatisfaction, of uselessness of everything I do, perhaps . . . (ringing sound) Oh, Christ! that made me jump. Damn it! I set the alarm on the half-hour so as to keep the time to a minimum. Well, I'm not really excited about getting up and switching on the light. These sensations of mine seem somewhat disappointing. I would have liked something a bit more spectacular, I don't know . . .

CASE 3 - "Mirror" - Mario, March 1980

(He begins to speak after five minutes)

Life beyond life: the title of a book on the existence of death. Perhaps you've read it. It's as though I were speaking to you. You had it next to the bed. On extra-terrestrials, on the landing strips in Latin America . . . and I feel stupid talking to a recorder; it seems idiotic . . . I'm looking at myself in the mirror and it's giving me the impression of a reflections of tears, as though I were crying. Maybe it's true that I pity myself and that a warrior shouldn't indulge in anything and that I'm indulging in self-pity. I think that's

the way I am. At this stage I think I have nothing, or perhaps that I'm hopeless in the sense of being in the shit. Nothing interests me anymore. Yet even here I'm acting, because I don't think talking to a microphone is something real. I don't believe in it much. Is what I'm doing now right? . . . is it right staying here? If I grew wings on my back, and my head turned into the body of a crow, and my nose and chin came together to form a beak, not so much for the pleasure of flying as for knowing that things outside normality exist. I can't stand it any longer: always doing the same thing. Not that I can't stand it, it doesn't stimulate me anymore. Reading those books by Castenada disturbed me. Perhaps you didn't understand this. I feel like telling you to go to the devil. but I don't know why, if it's for what I said to you last time or for some other reason . . . I hate you. I have actual feelings of hate sometimes. It bothers me that you represent reason, rationality, and that you therefore set limits. I believe in those books, and the one I gave you to read is nothing compared to the others. Of course you won't believe in such things, otherwise you wouldn't be carrying on the profession you do. How can you stand this job, all day in that room, deprived of the liberty to do what you want, in that room with those stupid paintings and that conglomeration of objects suggestive of a brainless schoolgirl.? And if I clam up when I come to you, you do the same, so I clam up on purpose. You're like a machine. At the most you say: "What are you censoring?" Don't you think it's stupid? It means you don't understand anything about a person. Of course, if I stopped

these sittings, it would be my failure, not yours. Your conscience would be clear. In the opposite case, the credit would be all yours. That's why I don't know what to do, and because those books really disturbed me. I should go to Mexico or take up a life like that of that anthropologist. There's no comparison between this monotonous life and that other one! Maybe these things, these sittings and what is said in those books are contradictory, since they have re-awakened my desires for omnipotence, whilst according to you and those like you, these desires are illusion. For the book, though, they are reality; discovering like Peter Pan that you can fly, but not just that . . . that you can always be discovering new and disturbing things. If only I could go to Mexico, study there, have other experiences, instead of being here doing this disgusting course in Medicine, or continuing to come to you and waste my time. For example, coming to you when I was ill or had the tremors was OK because I knew I was about to discover new things. Now, nothing. I think you are making a mistake . . . those books fascinated me, especially the figure of that witch doctor, Don Juan: the same fascination I had for L--- and for my Junior High School teacher, even greater. You perhaps . . . you have never been this for me. Perhaps if you had been a male, perhaps this is what I was looking for. It's as though all those books I read had blurred the reality of this analysis and everything else. I'm not interested in discussing these things with you, because if I told you I wanted to become like D.J. or live like Castaneda or in a dream dimension,

you would take it as a metaphor. But for me it's real. As far as you're concerned, what's in these books is unreal or just nonsense. Knowing that this is how you think bothers me. It makes me nervous. Another stupidity was telling me not to ask you if you had read the book I gave you, considering the importance I attach to it. I think you are making me do these recordings because you don't know what to do and you want to see the differences. Yet you should know what I have, not me. I don't know; I hoped you might help me in this, but it isn't the case. I could pay anybody to sit behind me in silence and tell me these things. If you have a technique, why don't you use it? I'm thinking about a dream I had a few days ago: my father had rented a house at the seaside; I was with my father, my eyelashes were wet and in partially closing them, I could see my father arriving by car; but it was a kind of prescience, like looking through a telescope; then he arrived but he wasn't driving; my aunt was driving. He introduced me to two men and I was embarrassed as though being with his sister and my mother were improper. The place was fascinating, the house isolated, rocks instead of beach, strip of sea, the sun gradually passed, it became cold; almost a Nordic country, Norway, then a vision of an exotic flower, carnivorous though; a child approached it, perhaps me, then it bites the child's hand and it hurts

him; that child is in part myself. It was a flower, an orchid, an unusual flower emanating fascination, attraction and not fear, but almost dread. It could be the symbol of a woman, perhaps the vagina, I don't know, but a woman. I don't know why an orchid, a flower without scent, like cold beauty which ensnares you, a kind of siren who first enchants you, lures you, then imprisons or kills you. Confronted by such a siren or anything like that, I would go towards it, even if I were aware of the danger. I recall a fairytale my mother used to read in which a boy became trapped by ice or perhaps an ice-queen, very beautiful but cold and bad like a diamond, like glass. I don't know if this could be a mother-symbol, but it is definitely what I think of women; no, not what I think but an idea that I have of women. Then the orchid conveys to me the idea of sexual desire, of making love, of being attracted and desiring. It seems to me like a vagina, but a thousand times better than a vagina because it seems purer. So women seem to me beings who have power, most women. I have an idea that I must free myself from this strange power, from this subjection or subjugation I have towards them, but . . . I really don't know what comes first: whether the desire to be in love and to have a woman or to be free, change everything, run away to new experiences; like that in the book.