Cold Brains and Birthday Cake: The Art of ‘Je ne parle pas français’

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Setting the table

In 1951 there was a case of plagiarism reported in Psychoanalytical Quarterly. The patient, a scientist with a respected scientific position, confessed that he sought treatment because he had a compulsion to plagiarize, and so had difficulty publishing. The man was on the verge of completing a major piece of research when he came to analyst Ernst Kris to report that he had found in the library a book published some time before, and which he had previously glanced at as he was doing his own research, but which he now felt contained the same thesis. On examining the book, Kris found that it supported his patient’s thesis, but in no way reproduced it: ‘The patient had made the author say what he wanted to say himself’ (22). Further, Kris felt that the patient had frequently been under pressure to use the ideas of his close friend, a distinguished young scholar who occupied the office next door to his own. Kris concluded that it was the colleague, rather, who was taking the patient’s ideas and dressing them up as his own without acknowledgement. ‘The patient was under the impression he was hearing for the first time a productive idea without which he could not hope to master his own subject,’ but an idea he could not claim because it belonged to someone else (22).

In imputing to others his own ideas the patient was behaving defensively, argued Kris. The fascination with others’ ideas suggested that the scientist had made a negative identification with the figure of the plagiarist; out of anxiety he diagnosed himself as a plagiarist lest he actually become one. Having experienced a childhood in which he frequently engaged in petty theft, in order to defend himself against the possibility of continuing to steal things as an adult the scientist instead imagined himself to be a thief of ideas: ‘Only the ideas of others were truly interesting,
only ideas one could take' (23). As if in confirmation of Kris's diagnosis, the patient immediately began to tell him how, when he returned to his office from the analysis, he enjoyed walking down a street full of restaurants looking at menus in the windows until he found his favourite dish which, coincidentally, happened to be fresh brains. For Kris, the desire for brains was a metaphorical displacement of the notion that the man believed that he was stealing brains (that is, ideas) rather than childhood objects. Adding another twist, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan argued that the real significance of the case lay in the fact that the man stole but he stole nothing, and he would continue to do so as long as he suffered from 'mental anorexia', which Lacan explained as an aversion to one's thoughts.² 'It's his having an idea of his own that never occurs to him,' Lacan comments.³

Such a leap of interpretation could be explained by suggesting that it was not as a defence against stealing that made the patient identify with the thief, as Kris had argued, but the inverse possibility: the fact that he might have an idea of his own. According to Lacan, the patient preemptively identifies with the plagiarist simply because he doesn't want to acknowledge that he might be capable of offering an original argument himself.⁴

Earlier analysis had revealed that the patient's grandfather was an eminent scientist and well published. But his father, as even Kris notes, wasn't equally endowed and had 'failed to leave his mark in his field of endeavour' (23),⁵ to which Lacan adds the following: 'Is it not that the grandfather, who was celebrated for his ideas, sickened him [the father] of them?'⁶ The patient's refusal in turn suggests to Lacan an extended family rivalry which he, the grandson, wants nothing further to do with.

It is as if desire on which the idea lives has in the patient faded and become cheap – like green ink on a scrap of blotting paper in a café, to recall the words of Katherine Mansfield.⁷ Mental anorexia, then, is a refusal, but it is still a desire: a desire for 'nothing'. In this case, it signifies its presence by the food fantasy for fresh brains which would compensate for the patient's intellectual inhibition. The fascination for others' ideas persists as an empty, unsatisfying gesture, for far from not eating he – the anorexic – is eating 'nothing'.

What can be extracted from this cryptic Lacanian vignette is the association of eating and its incorporation with plagiarism, and the idea of the false or fictional self. The man's favourite dish doesn't nourish him because he believes that these 'brains' belong to someone else. And because his ideas come to him from 'outside' as if they were stolen,