

Report on the APPI theoretical seminar with Calum Neill: “Ethics, Discourse and Experience”

Dublin, May 16th 2015

Calum Neill’s “Ethics, Discourse and Experience” was the first presentation, followed by a vivid discussion, in a new APPI series, *Theoretical Innovations in Psychoanalysis*. Carol Owens, a member of APPI Scientific and Training committees, introduced the speaker, but also the whole series while emphasising that: ‘This new series would consider the contributions made by Lacanian theorists to psychoanalysis and provide a forum for exchanges to take place between clinicians and non-clinicians of Lacanian orientation, in recognition of the fact that psychoanalysis as discourse, as practice, as theory, never operates outside the social bond.’

This principle was implicitly present from the very first lines of Calum Neill’s talk. He started from an observation that between the *idea* and its *expression* there is always *communication*, or, in Lacanian terms, there is always *communication* between an *Agent* and *(An)Other*.

Through several iterations, such strings of three translate into a trio of poetry, verse and experience, with a very particular bond between these elements, Neill remarked. Connection between them, in this specific context, becomes readable once the *poetry* is understood as a process of ‘piling up’, ‘creation’, *verse* as a process of ‘turning’, ‘transformation’ and *experience* (if we recall the Latin origins of the word) as something one has ‘gone through and came out of’.

Experience, as one of the key terms in Neill’s title, exists as such, therefore, only as one has come out of it. How it transforms into a poem, the speaker illustrated through a reading of Paul Celan’s “Todtnauberg”. This poem itself originated from Celan’s experience of meeting Martin Heidegger and visiting his forest retreat, a cabin in Todtnauberg. As a Romanian Jew meeting a philosopher with a controversial history with the Nazi regime, Celan certainly had had quite a significant pre-experience of Heidegger, before the two met in Todtnauberg. Calum Neill made this observation while wondering how Celan possibly ‘understood’ this new experience and how the density of such an experience was reflected in the minimalism of the poem.

In this poem, in a form of one long sentence, Neill finds the essential moment in the 'natural encounter' between arnica and eyebright, the mountain flowers as metaphors of healing. Down the lines, however, he notices that the poem becomes more and more about things unsayable, and questions what were all these words the words for to begin with. In a worthwhile attempt to answer his own rhetoric in this unanswerable but thought-provoking question, Neill started from a premise that language functions in two registers: imaginary and symbolic.

This very thought, which in a way concluded Neill's interpretation of "Todtnauberg", also served as an initial thought for him of how, in psychoanalytic terms, the temporal overlapping between the imaginary and the symbolic takes place in the mirror stage, itself based on the questioning of the inside and outside, of identification, of the individual as an identity. He recalled one of Hegel's axiomatic standpoints, that only through an encounter with another, identity occurs. Transferred into a Lacanian framework, therefore, the mirror stage is itself a drama, a 'constructive construct' as Neill put it, something that signifies life in motion; anticipation but never a completion.

Completion, nevertheless, is a promise of the mirror stage. At the same time, mirroring presents a movement from the imaginary, from the realm of meaning, because, if we paraphrase Neill's expression, 'meaning means only to me'. In other words, the imaginary is impossible to share, it does not allow communication and therefore what is once *inscribed* – intended to the Other – belongs to the symbolic and only to the symbolic.

Calum Neill concluded this part of his presentation with a remark that *failure* in communication is, either way, inevitable. In this light, he continued his talk by offering a psychoanalytic, or structural linguistic view of Samuel Beckett's memorable quote from *Worstward Ho* [1983]: 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better.' Outside the context of the novella, he pointed out, these linked sentences might sound like a self-help maxim of encouragement, but we should not forget that Beckett's concern is always language, the language in which a 'comment on' is always an 'instance of' and vice versa.

In a further elaboration of this thought, Neill emphasised that there is no such a thing as meta-language – where there is an inscription, there is also the real of which the inscription is about. Returning to Beckett's piece, he said, if the famous quotation is read from its original context, we can see that the movement without movement is conjured up from the very beginning of the novella, as a movement with no gain, no material, no-thing. However, Neill noticed, the narrator says the words and the words themselves say something. The failure of language, therefore, itself being neither encouragement for resilience, nor a new-age wisdom of the journey, could only mark a direction towards the worst. But in this circulatory form the worst is never attained and in such un-attainability one can find the first steps towards creativity, in literature as well as in psychoanalytic thinking.

Dr. Calum Neill is a lecturer in Critical Psychology and Discourse Analysis at Edinburgh Napier University, UK. He is also the author of *Lacanian Ethics and the Assumption of Subjectivity* (Palgrave, Macmillan, 2011) and *Ethics and Psychology: Beyond Codes of Practice* (Routledge, 2014). Some of his earlier texts on Lacanian Ethics include: *The Locus of Judgement in Lacan's Ethics* (JLS, 2005) and *An Idiotic Act: On the Non-example of Antigone* (The Letter, Issue 34).

Report by Ivana Milivojevic