

So Many First Times

Stefano Bolognini

This is the first time that **Psychoanalysis.Today** presents itself to its readers, and the Editors have kindly asked me to write one of the inaugural articles, a contribution I am delighted to give. This is for me an honour, a pleasure and at the same time also a challenge, as the theme proposed for this first edition is neither usual nor academic.

As analysts, we know that in psychic life the concept of “first time” requires complex consideration and should be treated with a degree of ‘suspended’ evaluation: what might appear (and objectively be) previously unheard of for the conscious levels of the Central Ego, might not be so for other parts of the person, and *vice versa*.

Is what the patient refers to us really and truly a “first time”? “How much” is it so and on what internal level? For example, many situations that are recognised in the external reality as a “first time” can be experienced as equivalents to birth, and resonate as such – in a good way and in a bad way – deep within us; a person can unwittingly repeat something unremembered, and may consciously think that it is the first time they have experienced that situation: that may be true historically, but not internally on other experiential levels.

In short, the question that every analyst may ask themselves, when faced with a “first time” story, is: is this *really* a first time...?

The contrast, then, between the atemporality of the unconscious and the temporality of the secondary process can make it difficult to distinguish between “real” first times (“first” temporally and historically) and “true” first times (ie. those at all internal levels); and it may be no accident that the two concepts in Italian “*tempo*” (“*tiempo*” in Spanish, “*temps*” in French, “*Zeit*” in German) and “*volta*” (“*vez*” in Spanish, “*fois*” in French, “*Mal*” in German) are both expressed using the same word in English: “*time*”.

Looking at it from a different perspective, a certain prejudice tinged with suspicion can lead us, as analysts, to sense neurotic repetition also where it would be more accurate to speak of “recurrence”, not necessarily related to pathological, or even death instinct-oriented mechanisms: some repression is physiological and allows for seasonal or occasional recurrences (in many treatments, certain significant dates are recorded and experienced first by the unconscious and subsequently emerge in the conscious). In other cases we can even register positive signs of a deep “rediscovery” (Bolognini, 2006), a decidedly vital development in the relationship with the Self and with the object, which the person nevertheless registers consciously as a “first time”.

This is the case in love affairs where the quality of the experience is radically different from other previous “times”: they may be similar in terms of external events (courtship, kissing, sexual intercourse), but lack the rediscovery of the relation with a deep and powerful libidinal and affective object like that with the original objects.

In any case, it is easy to observe in general how many people reveal their own personal style and basic characterological aptitude in facing and experiencing the majority of their “first times”: except in cases of overbearing predominance of external events, there are people who dramatize every unexpected turn and others who keep a good balance and an integrated internal contact even when faced with an unforeseen and completely new endeavour.

Internal scenarios, underlying anxieties, vital resources and faith in the object relation, healthy or insufficient and pathological narcissistic supplies, temperaments and personal styles all play a determining role in how an individual reacts when faced with something new.

The second aspect I would like to consider concerns the most common defenses with which, in

analysis (but also in life), the inexpert beginners' debut experiences are reported and described to the interlocutor and to themselves.

Very often "first time" stories are in fact defensively idealizing, superficial and do not for the most part reflect the complexity of the real situation, or even the subjective one: the tendency is to tell (or "tell oneself") a simplified, stylized and "rose-tinted" version, mostly to build a self-image that is reassuring, determined and successful.

In retrospectively describing their own "first times", often the narrator tends to hide, for obvious narcissistic reasons, the difficulties and adversities suffered in those debut situations, whatever they may be: this is true for the most classic theme: the first sexual encounter (which is usually mentioned with a smug and triumphant air, or is taken for granted); for the first trip abroad (where the inevitable initial experiences of disorientation and embarrassing language gaffes are glossed over); for the first work experience (in "*Like Wind, Like Wave*", 2006, I already told the story of my first appearance in the hospital hallways wearing a white "doctor's" coat, and it is not a glorious memory...); for the first day at school (separation anxieties of varying intensity, children crying, etc.); the list could go on and on, of course, as life is full of "first times" filled with at least as many ups and downs.

In the majority of everyday narratives, however, many people tend to officially report great successes and positive confirmations of their own innate, indisputable qualities and skills: all happily "easy going", all beyond the ring of fire of the various equivalents of initiation ceremonies, in an atmosphere of glorious narcissistic self-affirmation that hides and denies the very human fears and natural incompetence of the novice.

Others, by contrast, remain tragically attached to the trauma of failure, without ever using the escape route of elusive denial or maniacal rejection, and from that moment on they rearrange themselves so as to avoid outright all possible repetition of the experience: they are "*first and only timers*".

Some, structurally "*losers*", simply and sadly resign themselves to a fate of castration and exclusion, with the "outright loss" of their basic narcissistic "capital" and serious consequences for their own sense of self; while others project their own feelings of worthlessness to the outside world: this is "the fox and the grapes syndrome", in which there will not be a second time, after the first unlucky attempt, because the object or the situation "are not worth it".

Others, finally, will protect their own narcissism by blaming their failures on external malicious persecutors.

In contrast to this, and still speaking in general, it should be noted that popular beliefs grant a curious exception to the obvious disadvantages of the inexperience of "*first-timers*": this is the popular myth of so-called "beginner's luck", which is credited to novices, when talking about gambling, where individual skill is rendered less influential by the preponderant importance of chance. In short, we are in the realm of magical thought, and therefore of regression to rather primitive modes of psychic functioning.

It is different in the case of narcissistically "*self-confident*" individuals, sustained by a strong faith in themselves, who thanks to this positive basic "capital" face the obstacles inherent in first time experiences with a genuinely positive attitude, which actually facilitates their task: they can truly face first times without the burden of too many negative phantasms, and this allows them to live the experience in a more serene and humanized way.

However, it is a common experience that in most cases real "first times", in any field of life, are not conducive to "American film star" behaviour: that happens, in fact, only in films: there they move around in an aestheticizing dimension, leaping out of cars with an intense expression, abandoning them in the middle of the road with the doors open (yet no one steals them); they confidently and unhesitatingly drive around cities they have never been to, as if they were at home; they try something they've never done before and succeed straightaway, opening up new horizons and bringing them to a "turning-point" in their lives, etc. etc.

In his acrobatic high speed chases, 007 jumps into the first car or leaps onto the first motorbike he finds on the street and, without hesitation, drives off with amazing masterly skill; a real person, on the other hand, would lose a considerable amount of time just figuring out how on earth to start it and where reverse gear is, and so on.

The “first times” of these characters are fake. They serve to create the narcissistic illusion for viewers, on the basis of the pleasure principle, that omnipotence is achievable, and that all they have to do is believe and recover their mastery.

True first times, in most cases, are sketches, rough drafts, more or less experimental attempts by trial and error that “turn out as they turn out”; sure, legend has it that Cimabue spotted the future great artist in little Giotto thanks to the perfect circle the shepherd drew in chalk on a stone, without the need for any further attempts or corrections.

But art historians know very well that even the best and most expert artists from every era made corrections, so often in fact that the technical term “*pentimenti*” (literally “regrets” in Italian) was given to these types of changes.

Life is about learning, growing, changing, improving a little at a time, slowly, painstakingly: this is the true reality, in most cases, beyond the idealizations and the exciting plot twists that we would like to see happen, as the ancient Romans used to say, “*cito, tuto et iucunde*”: “swiftly, safely and gladly”, like in the fables of the olden days and the cartoons of today.

The same is true – we all know well – for analysis, even if after certain sessions it may seem as if the patient has substantially and definitively reached a “turning-point”: however, a consistent positive occasional progress is one thing, whereas a deep, stable, structured and lasting change, as a result of a real maturing process, is quite another. In our clinical reality, there are no miracles and it takes a lot of time, patience and work to change a person.

And **Psychoanalysis.Today**?

The first edition, which you are reading now, has been dubbed “Issue Zero” to symbolize its uniquely experimental nature.

It is, nonetheless, a sort of birth, and this excites and moves us, even if we are aware of its initial limitations; the parental equivalents APsaA/NAPsaC, EPF, FEPAL and IPA are happy and eager to provide nourishment, care and support to this new editorial creature to help it grow into a worthwhile, useful and original publication, with what we hope will be a long, healthy life ahead of it.

At the same time, we know that it will take a long time and a lot of work to develop and truly consolidate it. We are starting out with what we have and what we know, driven by a strong shared desire to present the different psychoanalytical trends around the world in a direct and unconventional way.

All of us, the officers of the partner organizations and the Editorial Board members, have worked hard to lay the foundations for a real and continuous collaboration, one that is both respectful of the regional specificities and open to innovation.

In this creative climate, with this “first time”, **Psychoanalysis.Today** is born, in the true sense of the word, determined to grow, develop and spread contemporary psychoanalytical thinking far and wide.

Bibliography

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