

States of the Self Between Body and Psyche

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The human race is going through a new, 'terrifying' experience. It begs the question of whether entering into contact with others is possible, be they our loved ones or the rest of the world. Much has already been said and much will still have to be said about the pandemic, which has caught everyone unawares. The current situation is 'exasperating' a feeling of disorientation we experience in relation to the physical. As we steadily get more and more accustomed to alternative forms of relating, there is something that is going through a process of rarefaction. These new forms of relating are mediated by new means of communication, which do connect us in real time, but also distance us from each other.

All this is relevant in the analyst's room, too, '*with its walls which I will miss so much*,' as a patient commented before switching to remote analysis.

The body grows distant. It protects itself from relating to the other, and this can go as far as isolation and nigh-complete 'autarky.' (For example, I think of the extreme modality of adolescents suffering from the Hikikomori syndrome.)

Will the necessary distancing from contact with others inevitably provoke a change in the relationship we have with ourselves as well?

This contrasts with the clinical evidence we consult daily, which suggests that the body and the Self are the depositories of experiences which cannot be integrated.

Those who turn to an analyst do so for various reasons, but no analysand, I believe, is free from a deep sense of solitude.

Solitude can be, at one extreme of a continuum, that radical feeling described by Roussillon (2017), 'which drives the subject away out of the human condition and obstructs the symbolisation process.' This is angry, distressed solitude – that of one who has gone through traumatic events, or unbearable pain, and has lost the ability to be in contact with others and with themselves.

At the opposite end of the continuum, we find that ability to be alone with oneself – that basic condition of the Self which Winnicott (1975) addresses when he describes the child's fundamental step in growth where he learns to be confident and to trust the continuity and solidity of the object and of the Self.

Solitude, in the first case, is the motor which can drive a person to land on the analyst's couch, like a castaway on an atoll (Golinelli, 2003), forced to sacrifice a part of themselves to save everything. In the other case, solitude is, instead, a personal conquest which can feel like the capstone of years of analytic work.

Perhaps each person yearns [\[1\]](#) to exercise that exquisitely human right to exist as a whole object, in the fullness of their own being. And that is possible when the individual has been able to experience an object capable of containment and continuity, who furnishes them with a foundation with which they can recognise the object world and the Self as separate, as distinct, but also as necessary for

one another.

Bollas (2018) spoke about solitude of the Self and how within it a dialogue unwinds between the Ego and its 'arrogant' effort to keep internal and external realities together and to speak in place of 'me.' 'The 'me' he talks about is neither the Ego nor the unconscious, and nor is it the Self. It is, instead, what occurs in the dimension of experience, where the 'I' acts as spokesperson for the 'me,' which, in turn, functions as a depository for our internal and external objects.

If we were to stop talking to ourselves, there would be no 'me,' it being the interlocutor of the incessant, intense effort which constitutes the perennial foundation of our mind and of the possibility we have – when we are in contact with it – to feel whole, to be ourselves.

It is James Joyce's 'stream of consciousness' – that articulation of conscious ideas, nevertheless rooted in an unconscious matrix. Perhaps Th. Ogden (2016) describes this more meticulously than other analysts in his clinical reports, by including everything in the aegis of reverie.

When that dialogue with oneself, which guarantees the feeling of existing as unique, unrepeatable beings is interrupted partially or totally, the individual is deprived of a part of their Self, and gropes around in search of affective, emotional, impulse-driven fullness; fullness one needs to feel alive. This is the one who enters in the analyst's room, in the dialogue between analyst and analysand, which has to start over in order to give sense back to the subject.

The two actors in the analytic scene participate in a shared illusion of being able to communicate, not only through words, but also through inter-psychic '*porosity*' between them (Neri, 1993, p. 49), transmission from Self to Self, united by a shared quest for the subconscious dimension, in precious intimacy which comes from the pleasure of an inner reality, with respect for the separateness and the uniqueness of the subject (Poland, 2018). This is the novelty of a psychoanalytic encounter, which validates the need to be a Self, aware of not being able to exist as isolated individuals, but only in communication with the rest of the world. If, as Bion says (1979), an analytic function of the mind exists, we can use it and cultivate it with the goal of facing the subconscious complexity which both analyst and analysand are interested in deciphering and understanding. This is even more accentuated in a context such as the current one, where a danger looming over all of us threatens to make us regress to expressions of solitude like ones gone wild.

Now I will share a clinical vignette in which the 'body,' with its complex, multiform language acts as the protagonist in the dynamics of an analytic couple at work.

A small analytic event

At length, having entered the front door and come along the brief stretch which reaches my office's door, where I await her, the patient looks at me. The way she looks at me reminds of how new-borns have looked at me, thinking of those I have been familiar with, mostly in my own home. It is a penetrating look; it reaches way down, unveiled. Sometimes it leaves me feeling in deep distress, because I am aware that I cannot hide anything from her – no feeling, no emotion which might go through my mind, not even a bit of Monday-morning fatigue. Hers is a look which does not tolerate ambivalence.

For months, the beginning of the session has been a trying negotiation. The patient is irritated and distant. Sometimes she projects weariness on me and thinks that I do not want to be with her. So, she falls silent. Alternatively, it is her body which 'talks': it hurts in one place or another and all she

wants to do is sleep, to crawl into a cocoon represented by the bed in her house – never openly associated with the couch, even if ... Her final stab at the end of one of these sessions could be that the session is over and *'nothing has changed!'*

Further along in the analysis, every so often she expresses the desire to show me things, but the process through which she gets to showing them to me is always long and complex, including prolonged silences. I struggle to understand why it is so wearisome, but I wait until she reveals that the hardest thing is not showing me those things, which are important to her in any case, but getting up to take them from the bag which holds them. The distance between the couch and her bag is about two metres; this means taking three or four steps, in the end. Later, she will say that making the decision to stand up and take those few steps is part of the problem, because in those two metres she has to cross, I will watch her and she will no longer be protected by the couch, which she needs for defending herself from the unknown that her steps might reveal.

I think those are steps of separation from a familiar part of the analyst, one that is reassuring because it is well-protected from a request the super-ego might make. (In analysis, one lies on the couch.) It is as if this made her feel like she was being watched by a parent couple, which approves of her and watches her lovingly as long as she behaves like a good little girl, quiet and composed, but which does not welcome the urgent push to move, to explore new territories, or carnal or sexual knowledge. There is something I do not understand right away in the distress I perceive in her behaviour just before standing up. She has done it already a couple of times, always with the goal being to show me something, but the distress did not diminish. So I had allowed her to get up, thinking that the distress was tied more to the content of what she was showing me than to the movement.

When she sits down after having brought me the object, she seems to move into a different moment of transference. She, who usually speaks at the limit of audible sound, is more confident, in touch with her Self, now that I welcome it.

What she shows me and what she says are the prelude to a transformation, activated through the passage *'ingrediens,'* which has opened a new space of knowledge for her.

A Gradiva is to be found at the foot of the analyst's couch, 1 metre by 50 cm in pleated raw silk, hung on the wall. The patient has admired it since the first time she lay down there.

Only now do I understand that she who stands up from the couch is a sort of Gradiva, who lets herself for the first time reveal an aspect of her Self, a light hearted one – she who always seems oppressed by the weight of the negative. I have the sensation that up until now, she has kept me at the threshold of her internal world, having me experience all her boredom, melancholy, effort, difficulty with being, her complaining streak.

By welcoming her act (standing up from the couch during the session), her body, and her Self – depositories of yet-unintegrated experiences – seem to reveal a part of her, formerly concealed, hidden in fact behind the weight of her body and the words she uses.

This enactment, constructed together, opened a door which was closed before and which will probably close again. In the meantime, however, it has made viewing something different possible, something light, which belongs to the 'airy' part of the patient's psyche. Too often the patient has been weighed down by a body that seems to allow the expression of a psycho-somatic part which closes, stiffens, blocks attention and treatment, in repetition.

By taking those four steps, she was able to go out momentarily, as if emerging out of a wrapping, out of her stone body-prison, displaying something else. And so she lets us glimpse the Ariel hiding behind and inside the earthy, corporeal Caliban (Shakespeare, 1621).

I experience the relief myself: together, we have experienced a 'different' moment, both of us freed from the oppressive defences, at times persecutory. Now we are the masters of a symbolised lightness.

'Lightness' is the first and most famous of the beautiful *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* by Italo Calvino (1988).

For him, lightness is the added value the best literature offers us, because it removes weight 'from human bodies at one point, from celestial bodies at another, from cities, from language... lightness and weightiness always go hand in hand, they are two opposites and you need to find the right weight. Sometimes it seems as if the world is turning to stone, a slow petrification which does not leave out any aspect of life.' (p. 32). It takes the mythological hero, Perseus, who flies on winged sandals, to behead the monstrous Medusa, who petrifies those who look at her. He does not deny her existence. On the contrary, he recognises her fragility. However, he also knows that out of it, flying creatures are born – such as Pegasus – and beautiful things – such as the corals Nymphs adorn themselves. The analyst/Perseus of our millennium is aware of the monstrosities of the world, and she takes on her own portion of the weight. She can even offer acts of tenderness, because she knows how fragile that monstrosity is.

What is lightness for my patient? It is a part of her Self which she can finally allow to emerge, once she has come out of the compulsory, repetitive dimension of its opposite, that is the euphoric and negating frivolousness. After long depressive processing, thought and idiom are no longer weighed down by defences which oppress, inhibit, and charge their words with negativity and distress, or which make them manically frivolous and unsubstantial, when melancholy has become light sadness.

Later on, the patient will say that she felt that the feelings, the words, the looks entered in the analyst as if in a refuge and they became less frightening. If the analyst was not frightened, then she could also think that those thoughts were less frightening.

This is the specific characteristic of the analytic approach, that is 'of that product of curiosity joined with and put at the service of the analyst's respect for the patient's introspective efforts' (Poland, 2018, p. 43). It makes soothing the peculiar feeling of loneliness I referred to at the beginning possible, as well as the distress of being incomprehensible for one's own loved ones and the ever-present world around us.

Will it still be possible to experience and listen to the body and its complex communication through a screen?

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[1] To exist (...) wholly harming neither the Self nor the object' (Spadoni, 2007).