
Beyond Trauma: Narrow Thinking and the Inverted Hero

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ABSTRACT. – This study sets out to analyze today’s mentality in the light of the violence-victimism paradigm. Alongside this paradigm the sadomasochistic scene acts as a prototype for elements that might impress on it a fate of transformation and non-repetition. I propose that narrow thinking and ‘selected fact’ are the two poles that differentiate mourning from melancholia, and from passive adherence to a consolidated, prevailing mentality.

Keywords: social paradigm; sadomasochistic scene; mourning; narrow thinking; selected fact.

Introduction

My aim is to examine the theory that today’s prevailing, shared mentality centers on violence and victimism.

In fact, venturing into the 21st century it is evident that the hedonistic, neoliberal paradigm has lost its hold, and has failed to keep its promise of greater wellbeing and safety for everyone. We seem to have reached an impasse in which our culture is incapable of processing its disillusion and defects, or of finding realistic new perspectives. A feeling of helplessness and impotence pervades bringing to the forefront the need for psychic non-work, non-investment, non-thought (R. Kaes 2012).

As the general perception of violence in the form of terrorism, femicide, racism, anti-Semitism and corruption spreads, thus the feeling of being helpless victims grows.

It seems to me that the prevailing mentality rests on this paradigm of violence and victimism (Giglioli 2014-2015).

The paradigm which sets social relationships in antithetical terms of persecutor-victim, and dominance-submission, takes us back to the sadomasochistic scene. This scene holds us hostage and hampers the process by which we give meaning to reality.

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Mourning and Melancholia

Freud's work *Mourning and Melancholia* (1915) was written during the First World War. It describes the pathological outcome of mourning. Melancholia is unresolved mourning, a "psychic hole" created by a sort of psychic haemorrhage (Freud, 1887-1904). Freud's description of melancholia offers an insight into the psychic conditions that, on the contrary, make it possible to resolve and transform mourning.

Firstly, it is significant to note that the term 'mourning', reading Freud's essay, refers to the traumatic experience *tout court*. The author specifies that mourning is not only the loss (concrete) of a loved one, but also the frustrations (conscious and unconscious) encountered with the object, with reality, and with aspects of the self. However, Freud is concerned not with the trauma itself, and herein lies my particular interest in the work, but rather with what happens after the trauma: with how individuals react and how they process and resolve trauma, or how they build their defenses and withdraw into themselves with their narrow thoughts. In other words, we need to understand whether we are working alongside mourning or circumventing it.

Here, briefly, are the ways to process trauma indicated by Freud.

Let go of the object of loss, and dismiss the fantasy of being as one, and identify with the object only occasionally and partially, and then de-identify. This is the first stage. However, to apply these modalities, individuals must accept, and agree to accept, their own ambivalence towards the both loved and hated object. Accepting one's ambivalence is painful, and narrow thinking eludes this experience through projection and the identification of a scapegoat. Yet, this rejection in our internal world involves dealing with an alienating identification and a splitting of the ego into two parts. One part of the Ego is the victim of the other, who is the persecutor. (Freud has not yet formulated the notion of Superego and Ego-ideal, but here he preempts them, and in the 1920s puts forward the notion of the possible degeneration of the two instances under the influence of the death instinct.)

This stalemate in the face of frustrating and traumatic world events, inside and around us, keeps us rooted in a sadomasochistic scene, which swings back and forth between violence and masochism, and so doing risks not to end, nor to find the way to go beyond. In the face of trauma, we oscillate between violent outbursts, screams and rage, and (allegedly) feel like victims. In fact, nowadays it seems that alongside a violent individual we see the profile of a victim: politicians who are victims (of justice), the corrupt, and even those who commit femicide are victims of women who do not understand them; they are alleged victims. A melancholic stalemate prevails as noted by many authors (M. Benasayag, C. Bollas, and S. Zizek, among others). We must remember that the process of mourning never follows a linear path, but continually skirts its melancholic stalemate.

The Sadomasochistic Scene and Mentality

The outcome of mourning is partly determined by the individual's intrapsychic functioning and partly by the structures of meaning shared by the prevailing mentality. 'Mentality' consists of norms and conscious values but also of transmitted psychic functions: modulation of drives, defenses, avoidances, and modulation of the unconscious.

Mentality is also the expression of self-representation that society produces to structure the whole, the 'we', and it rallies the individual to compact adherence. Our mentality testifies to the frailty of the confines of inside-outside, and the transient and moveable confines of the I-group.

Our conformity to a shared mentality is generally observed, as is our need to find the psychic resources to enable us to move beyond the impasse. We need singular voices, individuals with the gift of awareness who can assume the role of "special envoys of humanity" (Nissim 2015, p. 19). We need a mental function willing and able to process the painful impact of that mix of desperation and beauty which constitutes our existence, and to enrich it with meaning. In this scenario, we necessarily need to embrace our own ambivalence to initiate the mourning process, and engage in giving a "richer meaning to our comfortable existence" (Bregman, 2016).

A brief examination of the sadomasochistic scene may help clarify our understanding of the transformational opportunities it can offer.

The sadomasochistic scene

The sadomasochistic scene indicates that we are in the presence of a perception, however vague and uncertain, of otherness. Sadomasochism is the first partial opening onto differences, encounters, clashes, and onto dominant-submissive relationships, and infinite variations over the history of humankind (Bodei, 2019).

Naturally, these variations are basically intrapsychic but can be reinforced or modulated by experience with the objects. A considerable amount of literature, from Ferenczi (1929) to Mitchell (1988), has been published on the traumatic origin of sadomasochistic tension.

This paper's task is not to consider to what extent hatred and sadomasochism are primary or reactive with respect to adverse environmental conditions. In this study, we shift our attention to 'beyond trauma', to consider what individuals do-decide to process the trauma. We look towards mourning through which subjects' process and transform a traumatic experience, and invest in new relationships; or, by contrast, how subjects are locked into disinvestment condemning themselves to narrow thinking, and forced to direct their frustration outside themselves and the group, aggressively.

The sadomasochistic scene complexifies the primary active-passive polarity (Ambrosiano *et al.*, 2013).

The two sides of the sadomasochistic scene generally occur in a mix, where each of the two components takes part in varying proportions. The fusion, or blend, allows one side to 'modulate' the other. They transform one another; the active half changes to passive and vice-versa; the object is transformed in a dynamic game that punctuates psychic life. Sadism tends to convert to masochism, and vice versa; the attempt to master the experience of loss, mortification and mourning oscillates between the urge to violently dominate the internal and the external world, and submission and enjoyment (erotized) deriving from pain. It is as though there exists a sort of *fort-da* rhythm of the continuous and mobile spool game, in an active-passive, dominant-submissive alternation.

Where this mobility is hindered, pathology develops, and the rhythm then galvanizes into a clear antithesis: I want to dominate, I want to be dominated. "A sharp increase in aggression can turn a man of passion into a sexual offender, while a sharp decrease in aggression can make him fearful or helpless". (Freud, 1938, p. 576). In this situation, the sides are too far apart for mutual modulation.

Sadism and masochism no longer represent two moments of a personal rhythm which bring together the painful aspects of an experience, on the contrary, they become the two poles of a clear and non-transformable antithesis. *De-fusion* means the separate functioning of the two instinctual impulses.

The sadomasochistic scene is still more complex, as well as being pathological, it is vital for our life processes: "it is the guardian of life" (Rosenberg 1991).

Without a component of sadism, we would all be crouching inside the belly of the group in a state of conformism and identification with the mass. With no masochistic component, we might commit suicide at the first frustration. Sadism may possibly be considered a safeguard for our individual development; without a certain pleasure in separation, and in frustrating the other by causing suffering, we would be unable to identify or subjectify ourselves. In parallel, masochism is the first manifestation of a possible interweave of pleasure and pain that can protect the organism and relationship from a death instinct that, in an encounter with reality, could overwhelm it.

Primary erogenous masochism, or, 'pleasure from pain', for Freud, is witness to the fact that where this instinctual entanglement exists there also exists the pursuit of new internal equilibriums in pulsional life.

If this pursuit is to be accomplished, however, it requires the 'interval' of the masochistic drive introduced at the point where excitement seeks instant relief. The interval occurs thanks to the masochistic expedient of interweaving sorrow and pleasure, and allows an 'investment in the deferral' of pleas-

ure. Excitement and relief are bound in a specific temporality, in a 'rhythm': a time for satisfaction, and a time for deferment. Moreover, this rhythm fosters narcissistic development, the development of the psychic apparatus: the wait is not passive but a time for personal reflection and sublimation.

Through these modulations we see psychic life "becoming", swinging between presence and absence, satisfaction and expectation, between creativity and divestment (E. Chauvet 2019).

Passionate investment in the wait allows the subject to tolerate the object's stranger-foreigner rhythm, and opens the way to the process of mourning, non-correspondence, and traumatic mismatches.

If an individual has the psychic means to process mourning (if these have been transmitted by the environment), the oscillatory dynamic and mutual modulation between pulsional drives is possible. The escalation of sadomasochistic functioning, on the contrary, points to a difficulty in facing and transforming trauma through mourning.

I believe that the prevailing paradigm of violence-victimism indicates that individuals (and the group) have stalled; they find themselves before an opportunity to process the trauma but are unable to approach it. The stalling makes them feel helpless, and, so anger and hatred grow, and sadistic and masochistic acts are activated, in the name of illusory *anti-passivity*, *anti-helplessness* mechanisms.

Us, sadistic and masochistic pleasure both clearly express an illusory cry of triumph in the versions: 'I master the world', and, 'as a victim I rise again triumphant' (Assoun, 2007, 39).

The impregnation

The sadomasochistic scene introduces the perception of the object as other, yet, if not processed, has only a narrow perception, limited to the dominant-submissive dyad. There is no alternative. In this sense, this scene tends to make relations unchangeable. It favors compact aggregation, a sort of mass of two, or, a group aggregated as mass. Lacking the psychic means with which to work on development, there persists a need to remain bonded, a need to remain impregnated.

The prevailing mentality today seems to be the result of a 'hypnotic stalemate' that suspends 'individual and group thinking' and draws us automatically into the winning logic of economics and violence. Every day we see the spread of a numbing torpor which serves to quell anguish and the fear of existence.

More accurately, we could call it a self-hypnosis of the individual; a sort of 'self-induced *trance*' invades the mind and holds back freer, more fully-developed functioning. (Rizzi, 1999).

The outcome seems to be that instead of enriching our existence with

meaning, we look for compact and illusory refuges, prepackaged ideas and thoughts to protect ourselves from need, from limits, from vulnerability. Alternatively, we isolate ourselves with our electronic objects.

Freud (1921) had already spoken of a mental functioning which, with Gaburri, we defined as being a “mass identification” that occludes thought, and aggregates individuals in an impersonal and undifferentiated way, like anonymous specks in a swarm (Gaburri *et al.*, 2003).

The dimension of this shared, compact mass, gives the individual the impression of having strength and power, and extinguishes desire for knowledge and subjectivation.

Between individual thought and shared mass mentality a hiatus must be introduced, a relative ‘conflictuality’ between individuation and belonging must be felt. The two mental conditions, the individual and the mass, have different functions, among these there must be ‘passages’ for individuals to be able to leave the undifferentiated group and develop a personal search for meaning, to adhere, then to differentiate in a rhythm which constitutes psychic life.

The group itself can become a ‘workplace’ for the development of knowledge and culture, or it can lose this resource, conform to existing knowledge, and run aground on the predominant paradigms.

Submission to a shared mentality and its paradigms is a type of “unconscious impregnation” (Freud, 1927). Imagine an unconscious mental space where individuals are impregnated with the mood and emotional state, in the first instance, of the family, and second, of the reference group.¹ Impregnation is a continuous transmission between generations and individuals, a dialogue between the internal and external world, between the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’.

In this psychic functioning individuals do not exist as such, but only inasmuch as they are unconscious affiliates in this impregnation (which is also an important component of the possibility-relative to understanding and sharing, and so is not to be demonized).

Additionally, skin is useful to define the limits of our physical composition, but is hardly an adequate definition of our mind. The individual does not consist of an ‘individual mind’ but of an apparatus that captures the experiences around it. (Bion, 1962).

Part of our psychic apparatus is rooted in culture, surpassing subjectivation, which as a result, continually limits the specificity quota that we could realize (Benasayag, 2015).

¹These days impregnation is transversal: it concerns Western and Eastern tribes, different generations, ethnic groups and religions, the bitterness and humiliation of the older generations disillusioned by the inability of the capitalist system to defeat injustice and colonialism, and it concerns the uncertain future facing the new generations. (Khosrokhavar, 1995).

It would be unthinkable and unhealthy to completely disengage from a shared mentality, in the first instance, because of the unconsciousness of both the shared mentality and the impregnation mechanism, and secondly, because it would be the gateway to psychosis. It is possible, however, to create a breach in one's terms of membership and establish differentiation quotas that give credit to new, unpublished ideas.

In the conflict, maladjustment and anachronism become elements of a rupture-opening with present-day society and the mentality that impregnates it (Balsamo, 2017).

When automatic adhesion is untouched by conflictual tension, the group becomes a "*gros animal intolerant*" (Weil, 1942) able to do all things, but incapable of thought. The *gros animal* responds only somatically to the excitement it feels all around.

"Today's malaise may well be about the disappearance of individual identity swallowed up with the yearning for a wellbeing without divergence (...) that stifles personal specificity in group excitement". (Gaburri, 2006, p. 18).

With no experience of the conflictual connection, a monotonous thought circulates amongst us which focuses solely on how to get by. Binary thinking approaches the issues with a 'for-against', 'yes-no' attitude more suitable for referenda than for making the experience more meaningful. However, massive adherence to a consolidated mentality means we can elude mourning, avoid an encounter with our own ambivalence, with our own hatred, and always consider ourselves to be on the side of reason, whether we are victims or persecutors.

'Narrow thinking', even when it is not put into actual practice, tends to put walls between 'us' and 'others', anchoring any dialogue to these antitheses. Anxieties, related not to life but to *survival* may surface, encouraging stockpiling, corruption and violence (Ambrosiano *et al.*, 2016). Conformism spreads rapidly and automatically.

When we do not have (or we do not use) psychic means of giving our existence meaning, 'violence' spreads. When there is a gap in the processing of meaning, a tension to destroy, to blow things up proliferates, or to take things and bring them down. As a victim, I have every right to do so.

Emancipation and subjectivation are no longer invested in as they no longer arouse passion and exploration.

I think of the many adolescents that we meet in our professional capacity as psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, some paralyzed before an exam which stands as a barrier between them and growth, afraid to ask for help and afraid to find there is nobody to offer it, fearful that growing up means becoming 'grey' and dulled. I think of the many adults who ask themselves, and us: Is it worth living if we must die?

The inverted hero

Faced with these situations, contrary to what we generally believe, socially, we do not need to inspire-identify ourselves with leaders with clear, distinct, linear ideas who 'know' how to solve problems, on the contrary we need "inverted heroes". (Monaldi *et al.*, 2017).

Inverted heroes are individuals who can pass by dominant mentalities without being excessively impregnated by them, who can act as suspended witnesses, special envoys of humanity.

This description is not meant to refer to individuals with particular qualities, but to a 'function' of the mind, open to the multiple, contradictory resonances involved in contact with reality, and giving way to emotion every time.

This mental function, which, from the narrow focus of our gaze, widens to encompass ideas, memories, associations, fantasies, pain and excitement, limits and utopias, and leaves these free to meet-mate in the mind, to intertwine and transform (Ambrosiano, 2019). This mental function, which, incidentally, led Freud to found psychoanalysis, releases new energy into the mind, helping us to emerge from the hypnotic daze around us.

Associative thinking is neither simple nor automatic, it requires us to tolerate an apparent passivity, and a dependence on thoughts that can arrive unbidden and may take us by surprise.

This is the function known as 'thoughtfulness' which hesitates, stumbles, prevaricates, lingers, retraces its steps, and wanders, and precisely for this reason can be used as a substantial method of processing reality.

"Thoughtfulness is a hindrance for those who want immediate solutions, (...) the timespan required for thoughtfulness, which dwells on things and is willing to give things the respect they deserve, the timespan of questions asked, and of answers which are never definitive and peremptory. Unlike machines that produce immediate responses at the insistence of stimuli, human cultures have generated spaces for hesitation and reworking that encourage perplexity, suspension" (Resta, 1997, p. 5).

Thoughtfulness made curious, charts unprecedented pathways of knowledge, passionate pathways, insofar as they are animated by an interest in the extraneous otherness of every phenomenon and event (internal and external).

Thoughtfulness, like the free associations that punctuate it, promotes its share of maladjustment, and produces a singular background noise which interrupts the unanimist and monotonous discourse of the mass group. It contaminates consolidated ideas, hybridizes them, moves them and transforms them to welcome new resonances.

The 'inverted hero' is not the one who 'knows' but the one who can pause thoughtfully in search of the meaning of experiences. Thanks to this,

mental and group spaces come alive with singular energies promoting the development of individuals and the group itself. Thanks to this pause in associative thinking we glean new meaning, and notice that a fact, an emotion, an accent, which, all of a sudden, give new meaning to the experience, offer unexpected perspectives able to direct action.

Natural destructiveness

Expanded thoughtfulness, freely associative thoughtfulness is frightening, it makes us feel alone in the face of reality, and causes automatic connection with the group and its beliefs to falter. Above all, it opens the way to an awareness of aspects that we would prefer to avoid.

Leaving the narrow mental precincts that fear builds around us, thoughtfulness forces us to meet, seemingly by chance, aspects that we would like to elude: the fact that in our contact with reality, internal and external, beauty and horror are always together; the dimension of limit, of death, of unredeemable human destructiveness punctuates our perception of things. In this sense, impact with reality comes as quite a shock.

Exhausted from wandering, Malaparte feels the need for solitude, for home, for his home in Capri.

Arriving in Naples, waiting to embark for the island, he exchanges two words with the man standing next to him:

"Damn flies, I said.

That's right, says the man.

Why don't you fight the flies? In Northern Italy, in Milan, Turin, Florence, even in Rome, they made war against flies.

There isn't a fly left in those cities. We killed them all.

Eh. But even in Naples, says the man, we fought the flies, in fact we made the war on the flies.

So why are there so many flies in Naples?

Eh. What can you do, sir, the flies won!" (Malaparte, 2009, p. 445).

Malaparte's joke after the First World War makes a statement about the inevitability of violence and human aggression, understood as 'nature', which is, at the same time, benevolent and destructive. External nature resembling that of our internal world, where violence has a hold on the body, and sticks like a swarm of fat flies.

The inverted hero is able to tolerate (at least for a few moments) feeling idyllic tones, nostalgia, sadness and fury, amazement, passionate wonder, and horror at the same time without interruption. For this reason, the inverted hero is capable of "tearing apart areas of silence, attacking clichés, corroding widespread and stale feelings, producing new meaning" (Pannella, 2014, p. 9). Paraphrasing Pontalis (1992) we could say that associative

thoughtfulness is capable of arousing a ‘sexual excitement of the spirit’, a fever of knowledge, an eager and irrepressible curiosity.

The emotional perception of the beauty of life and the world carries with it the possibility of its destruction (Freud, 1915). Our regular and routine efforts tend to keep beauty and horror quite distinct and distant. It is precisely these efforts, which are automatic and driven by a fear of reality, that draw the mind into narrowness of vision, anesthetic conformism.

Associative mental functioning makes us feel dependent and passive, for this reason it is eluded and feared, but it is also capable of facing the complexity of the world, our experience with the internal and external world. Through this functioning we meet, as if by chance, our hatred, alongside our love, our deadly instincts alongside vital ones. This sets off a processing of the trauma of human frailty and the components of violence that inhabit it, without having to deposit it elsewhere, on migrants, on women, on Jews. Being in mourning means going beyond the disquieting impact with reality and with otherness, which (fortunately) remains irreducible. Moreover, it means emerging from the bottleneck of antithetic thoughts of good-bad, white-black, male-female, active-passive, dominant-submissive.

The selected fact

The figure of the *inverted hero* who does not know and seeks associatively displays a function of the mind that enriches, with resources and new energy, the hesitant, fragile project of ‘democracy’ (Bodei, 2019). Without this pause in wavering thoughtfulness, every rational solution, every organizational project, every new law, feeds on the known and fails to engage reality: both the individual and the group risk sticking fast to known categories, unable to cope with the novelty of today’s problems and difficulties.

In order to be able to acquire a design key and transform the apathetic, bloody confusion that we are experiencing, we should find a space in the mind (of individuals and groups) in which there is some ease in resuming an ‘intimate and shared work’ of processing absence and incompleteness, *i.e.*, that processing of mourning that lets individuals have their say, even politically, once more. (Ambrosiano *et al.*, 2013)

Associative thoughtfulness broadens the scope of meaning, it wanders, hesitates and explores, until the moment when, in the midst of these digressions, something appears that aggregates the scattered elements in a new configuration. These unprecedented configurations are revealed by a feeling of excitement that something new has emerged; a feeling of amazement and relief at having found-discovered something coherent and unexpected that conveys meaning. The mind can welcome this unconscious discovery, give it a name (make it conscious) and establish it as a ‘selected fact’ (Bion,

1962) from which we can temporarily interpret the experience, represent it, and ‘promote action’.

Within the oscillation of aggregative and disaggregative functions, we choose a ‘selected fact’, a thread that arranges the observed field in a new way. This mental functioning limits the risk of our rationality being saturated by the prevailing mentality, incapable of authentic planning.

Planning, to be truly such, needs to be bright with novelties, even with small utopias (Donaggio, 2016) which unlike the great utopias of the twentieth century, do not have clear, precise goals, but perspectives whose purpose is to observe how the transformative path is going while walking.

Conclusions

This paper highlights the importance of mourning as a means of dealing with reality, a way to broaden the mind and find ways out of the violence-victim paradigm, and to be heard. An ‘extended mind’ internally activates various psychic functions so as to be in tune with the variegated, dark extraneousness of things. The violence-victim paradigm draws the individual and group into a closed view of the world where free movement of either thought or action is impossible. The risk is to be stuck in a condition of substantial passivity charged with anger and hatred.

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