**Migration: when inhumanity becomes ordinary…**

**Virginia de Micco**

*Where thought runs aground it is necessary to persevere in order to think*

*(H. Arendt)*

What greater scandal than to become familiar with an experience of inhumanity, that becomes an almost daily experience, an ordinary experience? Giving us a flood of images which instead, seems to have the effect of blocking out our ability to imagine the horror.

Try, therefore, to imagine holding on to a rock extended over an abyss with one hand: for an incalculable time you will not be other than that hand holding on to that rock, that hand-rock that will concentrate all your possibility of existence in one point in space as in one point in time. Such is the image that Piera Aulagnier chooses to make us understand the essence of psychotic condition, a condition in which we are primarily occupied or, to put it better, focused with all our strength in the necessity of survival. Such effort entails the obliteration of historical time, there is no past nor future, everything is concentrated and sunk into only one instant expanded to infinity, we find ourselves, literally, in a ‘black hole’ in time.

In this horrific present, instead of the usual images that underline the element of dispersion, of fragmentation, in the psychotic experience, I would like to stress an element of extreme and absolute concentration, an experience of sensory ‘density’ so intense that closes every possible space of thought or word. The psyche itself becomes a psyche-rock, it incorporates an inanimate element which allows it to survive: it must become rock as the only possibility to exist and endure.

The image outlined by Aulagnier’s words is translated into tragic reality for hundreds of migrants amassed or scattered, if you prefer, around our shores, liquid boundaries where they can float as wreckage or sink like ‘dead bodies’. Emerging from the water are hands that grasp ropes, ropes to which they will have to hold on for an indeterminate time, before being rescued, if everything goes well. In all that time they become only that: a hand holding on to a rope, a hand-rope that **the more it forgets being or having been anything else apart from that hand-rope, the more it has the possibility of being rescued.** All their being becomes stiff and encapsulated in that segment of ‘limb’ indistinguishable from that piece of rope. And it is precisely in this reducing oneself to zero, in this kind of zero degree of humanity, that all the energies and possibilities of survival coagulate, indeed. But what is left in the psyche of those who have had the experience of being (in the psychosis), or of becoming again (in an extreme situation), a hand-thing, a thing (*Sache*) from the psychological point of view?

We remember how , for Primo Levi, the experience of inhumanity consists precisely of having become a ‘thing’ in the eyes of another human being. This experience will remain indelible both in those who have experienced it and in those who have made them experience it, altering forever their human ‘substance’.

What does it mean to be in a psychic condition of survival, and therefore of reduced humanisation, so to speak? What survives is on one hand what does not die, but on the other hand also what does not live: what does not die *completely*, but also what does not live *fully*. Therefore it is something that remains, endures, but paradoxically in the form of ‘disappearance’, of a *blank*. Survival introduces us to a logic that is not that of loss and bereavement and of the psychic operations connected with it, but that of the disappearance and reappearance, of the cancellation and of the re-emergence: ‘spectral’ psychic dimension in which nothing ever remains dead forever and nothing ever truly comes back to life.

In the ‘positive’ version, therefore, to survive means to continue living (*weiter-leben*), despite an extreme experience, despite the death of something, in the negative one, instead, it means something that does not manage to die (*weiter*-*sterben*), that therefore ‘nags’ the present and for which there cannot be mourning. The experience of survival is evoked when facing each attempt to cancel out the human, as underlined by Fédida, it marks every attempt to abolish the human ‘subject’, that appears when facing the expulsion of an individual or collective subject (a human group with its cultural characteristics and its history) from the regime of what can be represented.

Not by chance authors like Fédida or like Altounian *think* the notion of survival starting from the dramatic experiences of the genocides that have tragically marked the historical period of the Twentieth Century, from the *Shoah* going back to the genocide of the Armenians.

In those conditions in which the mind becomes rock or piece of rope, in which one has to cancel the space of thought, where does the human take refuge and so save itself, in a way?

It is in the body that, despite everything, continues to survive, substituting a mind unable to live, that remains a pure possibility to ‘inhabit’ the present, extreme ‘imprint’ of the human deserting the mind walling itself in the body.

“I continued to walk, everything had crumpled inside me, I did not know where I was going, maybe I did not know anymore if I was alive or dead, but I continued to walk, step after step, like an automaton, fear and anguish had disappeared, I was holding on to my feet, I became my footstep, at the end I had deep lesions that nearly reached my bones...” (Abdel, 38 years )

These are actual ‘deformations’ engraved in the body, that remain as indelible, although unreachable, memory of the moment in which mind and body have become ‘a thing’. It is therefore the *incorporated survival* of the hand-rope or of the hand-rock, that remains as ‘a signal’ of the black hole in which the mind has become rock or a piece of rope. It remains, indeed, as a pure indicator of a fracture of the psychic which cannot be translated in a *signifier*, something that could indeed ‘signify’ for a psychic system: this is the only possible ‘memory’ of the survival.

*Surviving...literally: Anitha*

Anitha lived perennially on the doorstep, she had arrived on one of the many sea tramps in which identity, origin and provenance are already scattered and confused... a whole slice of their humanity which for a long time seems indispensable and of which they then discover they can also do without, they can also live (or, better, survive) without. In the same way Levi described how the Auschwitz deportees, as soon as they arrived in the camps, lost outright a whole portion of their identity and became ‘other’, they became humanity in a survival state, that is humanity without humanisation.

Rumour had it she had lost a baby but nobody knew really where or how, she remained all day in a corner by the main door of the homeless shelter, looking out, as if she were waiting for someone; in the evening she remained on the threshold of her bedroom, she could not lie down and rest, she remained half awake, waiting... she seemed to have entered into a ‘suspension’ of time.

She clenched her fist until her tendons were twisted as if to hold on to something she did not want to let slip away, but her hand was empty and yet it was immediately clenched again. Her gaze seemed to be liquid as if she continued to stare at the expanse of the sea waiting for it to bring something back to her...

Many women have lost their children in the sea, they have not been able to hold on to them, they have seen them 'disappear', not die, and they seem to wait for the sea to bring them back to them. The tragic news of these last few months has made this experience almost 'familiar' and everyday; but to lose one's own children in the sea has remained for a long time a 'fact' at the limits of the conceivable for many immigrant mothers and those who have helped them. Often the work of therapists results in remaining by them, waiting, without ever being able to talk about what happened: what happened *cannot* have happened. In fact can we really talk about what is simply unimaginable? Also for Anitha all this could not in any way be remembered, it 'survived' in her, as she survived to herself. All her body and her days had become a living 'monument’ surviving this unthinkable 'loss', expelled from the representation but also from perception.

Anitha's 'twisted' hand will be able, then, to start 'to mean', to *point out*something, a direction where to look, only if she meets another psychic apparatus that will have to look in her place, bear instead of her the sight of the unimaginable: it is this terrible 'knowledge' that often therapists are called to guard.

They have to guard this unimaginable without claiming to be able to imagine it, to 'picture' it, because it has to be, first of all, recognised in its dimension of unimaginable, of annihilation of the ability of psychic representation, because if one really tried to represent it, this would cause devastating effects, incompatible with maintaining the status of subject.

*Lampedusa: imagining the unimaginable*

"In our daily acts of listening, in fact, we are confronted with these daily challenges to the imagination" (Fédida, 2007). With these words of Fédida we can summarise well the essence of a therapeutic 'approach', that is as patient as it is determined, able to take advantage of clues and traces as physically indelible as psychically tenuous so that they are always about to disappear: traces of survival of the human, for which we have no words and that nevertheless demands words. It is not only a question of surviving *the* trauma, but of surviving *in* the trauma, to dwell in the inhuman until the space of a word, the possibility of a testimony re-appears, heralded often by the ability to start dreaming again.

This is why 'surviving' means being inhabited by what survives, hosting in oneself a part which is dead, mute and submerged next to the 'saved' but inevitably mutilated part. Ferenczi has pointed out already that the outcome of a serious traumatic event entails an “adjustment with blanks” (1932, p.131 and following), referring to a sort of psychic scar, of mutilation of whole psychic areas which are not retrievable.

In many of the migrants I have met, the experience of crossing the sea remains as a moment of pure terror, similar in some way to the descriptions of the experience of the psychotic onset of the *Weltuntergangserlebnis*, experience of real 'overturning' and subversion of the world. A world that has lost its known characteristics and its reassuring coordinates, which remains 'suspended' in the liquid darkness of the night on the open sea and that could reformulate and reform itself in completely unpredictable and unthinkable ways. Everything could change and transform and seems suspended on the brink of an abyss. An abyss which has opened also in the structure of the Ego that experiences all the way to the end, all its dependence on those meta psychic and meta social referents that 'guarantee' (Kaes), indeed, cohesion and stability. In these extreme experiences, in which the psychic (function of both intra psychic and intersubjective link) and symbolic (cultural) coordinates that stabilise the perception and the representation of oneself can be lost, a violent anguish of fragmentation recurs, anguish that is linked to putting out of action, at least temporarily, those vital processes of identification and mirroring linked to an efficient function of the *Kulturarbeit*. Therefore the terror seems to remain for a long time in the eyes, so to speak, and unable to proceed towards the mind: many remain blocked in an experience of psychic 'freeze', in a sort of frozen trauma.

The experience of terror that seems unable to be assimilated by the psyche will have to remain, then, confined and frozen in an outside-psyche and 'imprint itself' in the flesh; there it will remain until it can be thought, transformed again into a 'human' experience. But to return to being 'human', to return to being subject of one's *own* history, will mean to go through the experienced horror again, to let it pass from the eyes or the hand in which it had remained frozen, encapsulated, to the mind, bearing its devastating de-structuring potentiality.

When finally the terror can begin to reduce its grip and the images of the horror occupy the mind, then they can finally begin to 'see' what until then had remained 'trapped' in those terrified and at the same time blind gazes, with which those who have survived seem to look at us from the borders of the inhuman. Often the beginning of such process is heralded by terrifying nightmares that the migrants themselves recognise as a point of no return, a moment of extreme criticality in which the scenes of horror until then only 'endured' are re-lived. To plunge into the nightmare is equivalent to beginning the task of mourning with the associated lacerating experiences of guilt related to 'letting go' permanently what has been lost in the terror.

*Incubation*

When the inhuman begins to transform again into human they will need to “find a place for what has happened. This place is psychotherapy” (Fédida, 2007).

This place will be a specific place, it will be in many ways the place of nightmares (*incubus*, in Latin): as in all massive and precocious traumas an *incubator* will be needed before being born again (remember how Leon and Rebeca Grinberg already equated the migrant experience to a real experience of rebirth). The therapists' mind itself will have to function for a long time as a sort of incubator, first settling for providing conditions of survival without being able to present itself as an object that is *too* human, that cannot be psychically invested yet; then they have to *incubate* in their mind something that those who are still trapped in the inhuman do not have the mental instruments to transform in anything communicable, utterable. It is something that, in a way, can be only 'inoculated', almost like a virus - a defectual life form that, to express itself, needs a host who can provide them its psychic instruments. An unbearable image is literally 'put in the eyes' of another in order that his psychic apparatus can 'look first into what you have seen', suffer first what has remained frozen. Maybe only when one can begin to see one's *own* wound in the wounded sight of the other – an other who has *let himself bewounded* in his humanity by the inhuman- maybe only then, as I was saying, the mind that has crossed the desert of the inhuman can begin to*fill up,* to*get crowded* with nightmares.

To dream one's own trauma will mean then not only to ensure the *survival of the object*, that allows a form of reparation of the horrific identity wound inflicted, but also a *survival to the object*, to come back in some way to life, as the task of mourning always demands.

But for those who die in the sea, far away from their own land, it is a specific mourning, in their *tomb of water* things are different, in the words of Ariel in Shakespeare's *Tempest*:

"Full fathom five thy father lies.

Of his bones are coral made.

  Those are pearls that were his eyes.

  Nothing of him that doth fade,

  But doth suffer a sea-*change*

  Into something *rich and strange*." 1

Something *rich and strange*, perpetually alienating: that inhuman which we have survived and that now survives in us.

1Shakespeare W., *The tempest,* I, 2, 398. (Italics are mine)

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