



The last case of Romano Biancoli

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Romano Biancoli presented this case at the Ninth AAPDP/OPIFER Joint Meeting, which took place in Sestri Levante on October 6-7, 2007 (Biancoli, 2007). I believe this is the last case which he presented, because the following year he was already ill and did not take part in the next Joint Meeting. The title of his presentation is: “Analysis ‘of’ and analysis ‘in’ the here and now in the case of a hysterical patient”. Following on this title, on my part I shall focus on the “here and now” of the interaction between Romano and his patient. I shall then report his comments, and finally make my own meta-comments.

The case

The patient, Adriana, is 27 years old at the beginning of treatment. The presenting problem is ambivalence towards her partner, who is 11 years older than she. She also has various physical complaints, chiefly localized in her intestines. Her mother is harsh towards her and prefers her younger sister. Adriana hates her mother. She speaks of her father in idealized terms and describes him as highly well-read.

The heart of the case, in Romano’s presentation, is the first dream, which Adriana only reported in the 41st session. I reproduce it literally.

The howl of a middle-aged woman. She looks like a gypsy, a handkerchief around her head. She is standing on the edge of a cliff. There is a look of horror in her face, at an event which in the dream has already happened other times: she has thrown her

little girl down the cliff. The child is rolling down the steep rock, and on hitting the edges of the rock her body falls to pieces. However, it should magically be put together again before it reaches the bottom.

“Adriana was very alarmed by this dream, which was totally unexpected. She crouched in her chair, frightened.” A mythological parallel occurs to Romano. “Demeter, according to Kerényi (1951), as an old woman who has suffered an offence, goes to King Celeus and Queen Metaneira, who receive her in their house and entrust their son to her for care and education. Every night she holds him over the fire and makes him burn like a log of wood, in order to make him immortal.” Romano then goes on to say: “I tell her the myth, in order to contribute to the faith there is in the dream, a faith – even if magical – in reconstruction and salvation.”

“Adriana then tells me that her maternal grandfather died suddenly one month before she was born. The mother, who was very attached to her father, is in such despair that she has to be hospitalized. The pregnancy is endangered. When Adriana is born, the mother is in such distress that she is unable to look after the baby. Adriana is entrusted to the grandmother, who however is also grieving.”

In the ensuing analytic work self-aggrandizing, but especially aggressive fantasies emerge. “She attacks me and accuses me of ruining her life, I couldn’t care less about her (...).



But when she fears I could reject her, her anxiety at being abandoned emerges.” With her partner “it’s hell. She attacks him, then becomes compliant, she clings to him because he is the only person who can prevent a much-feared breakdown”.

“So it goes on for eight years.” At the end, Adriana has left her partner, has found a good job, since two years she is attached to a peer. “There are still scenes, but they are less violent, and there are also long spells of harmony.”

Romano’s comments

In the theoretical introduction Romano views the “here and now” in the session as an expression of Fromm’s being mode.

Of the mother’s unavailability at Adriana’s birth, Romano says: “It may be a case of the D type of attachment in the *Strange Situation*, the disorganized type, based on a ‘fear with no way out’: the child should approach the mother to receive comfort and tenderness, but if it does so it gets frightened (...). According to the researchers in this field, the outcome of the D type of attachment is psychic dissociation.” Romano therefore describes the patient in terms of a series of dissociations.

In considering the diagnosis Romano modifies the initial description of the patient as hysterical. “What emerges is the picture of a borderline personality.”

In connection with “breakdown”, Romano refers to “Fear of Breakdown” by Winnicott (1974).

My own comments

The reference to disorganized attachment is very relevant and shows that Romano was well acquainted with Bowlby’s attachment theory. Disorganized attachment was first described by Mary Main in 1986 and is the antecedent of borderline pathology. Evolution did not foresee an unavailable mother at birth. The newborn has no means of coping with this situation and can only react with disorganization and fragmentation, as in Adriana’s dream. In describing Adriana’s dissociations due to the severity of the trauma, Romano also shows he has assimilated the trauma literature.

However, in addition to commenting on Romano’s theoretical views, I especially wish to stress his interaction with Adriana when she reported her first dream, and especially his quotation of Kerényi.

In considering this quotation, according to an axiom of human communication (Watzlawick et al. 1967, pp. 54 and 64) we may distinguish between the conscious, and digital, content, on the one hand, and the relational, and analogic, aspect (much older, both in phylogeny and in ontogeny), on the other. Consciously, Romano meant to reassure Adriana as regards the prospect of reconstruction. The relational aspect consists in Romano’s unconscious identification with Adriana’s well-read father.

Because of the circularity of communication (Watzlawick, op. cit., p. 46), the unconscious relational aspect of Romano’s intervention was in response to an equally unconscious request on Adriana’s part that he should identify with the well-read father. Romano complied with this request with his scholarly quotation. In this he responded to Adriana’s urgent need to find an alternative to her rejecting mother. In the tradition of Melanie Klein this is called projective identification: Romano agrees to identify with a projection of Adriana’s. But “projective identification” is a term of psychoanalytic “technique”. I put the latter term in quotation marks, as Fromm (1978) did. We can describe what happened in terms closer to actual experience. Adriana’s infantile part, terrified by the mother’s rejection, turns to her father as an alternative. Romano, impelled by the terrifying image of the child’s fragmentation, is predisposed to comply with this request. He already does so with the conscious content of his communication, but even more so with the unconscious relational aspect of the scholarly quotation. A further comment is that Romano was basically predisposed to comply with the request of adopting the role of the good father because he himself, presumably, had this experience. One last comment on this “projective identification”: in addition to being familiar with the parental role, Romano was obviously also predisposed to complying with the request by the fact of actually being a well-read person.



There is a further level in my comments. Applying Bowlby's ethological frame of reference, we may view Romano's behavior as the activation of an innate pattern of caregiving, complementary to a child's attachment behavior.

Finally, Romano's behavior corresponds to Fromm's description of motherly love: "Motherly love (...) is unconditional, based only upon the child's request and the mother's response" (Fromm, 1947, p. 106 of the American paperback edition).

We may try to integrate fatherly love into this frame of reference. The prototype of parental caregiving is motherly love. The father's parental caregiving is primarily addressed to the mother-child couple, as in the depictions of the Flight into Egypt. But in the case of maternal unavailability, the father – as in Adriana's original experience with her father, which was reactivated in the relationship with Romano – may replace the mother by addressing parental caregiving directly to the child.

I go back to Adriana's initial trauma in order to make more explicit Romano's reference to Winnicott (1974, pp. 173-182). In this short paper Winnicott discusses the fear of breakdown. Here are some relevant quotations. "Fear of breakdown is related to the individual's past experience". This experience is universal. "We all know about it". "Not all patients who have this fear complain of it at the outset of a treatment". The term may indicate "a failure of a defence organization". "But (...) a defence against what?" Underlying this defence is an "unthinkable state of affairs". Here Winnicott is describing the disorganization of a child in the preverbal phase rejected by the mother. In this phase the trauma is not encoded verbally, it is unthinkable, it can only be felt as terror.

Another relevant Winnicottian concept is *holding* (Winnicott, 1965, p. 43). Confronted with the kaleidoscopic borderline pathology of Adriana, and especially her fear of annihilation, Romano – after the initial holding – provided a satisfactory holding environment throughout the treatment.

There is another aspect in Adriana's case which was not discussed explicitly by Romano

but which was implicit in his description of her behavior. Her seductiveness leads one to think that, after his first lifesaving intervention, the father may later have been disappointing through a seductive attitude, which was reproduced by Adriana to master the trauma and seek a compensation. Although Romano does not discuss this explicitly, he shows implicitly that he did not identify with this negative aspect of the father and did not respond to Adriana's reactive seductiveness. If the assumption of a seduction is correct, a picture of multiple successive traumas emerges, typical of borderline pathology. Romano then would have provided a corrective experience not only for the initial trauma with the mother but also for a later trauma experienced with the father.

Conclusion

With the Kerényi quotation Romano reveals his culture and his humanity, With the other authors he quotes he also reveals his scientific culture and his affinities. In his references, Bowlby (through Parkes et al.), Fromm and Winnicott are three authors who have in common a caregiving attitude towards the child. In the references of this short paper, next to my own references and to Kerényi 1951, I also place Romano's references to these three authors: Fromm, 1976; Parkes et al. 1991; and Winnicott, 1974.

One final comment

I make this final comment in reference to the title of this meeting. In reading Romano's paper and in writing my own I had the experience of being in communication with his mind and of relating to it. I feel that he communicated with me both at a conscious and an unconscious level, that I reacted to these communications, and that I transmit this relatedness to my listeners and readers. This is one way in which he is still alive.

I end with a quotation from Francesco Ferrari, a non-Freudian Italian psychotherapist from the beginning of the last century. The quotation is from *Solatium*, a booklet he wrote to comfort a dying friend: "What can cease to exist in this ever-lasting Unity? Nothing, really. The world of yesterday becomes the world of today, and those who were become those who will be" (p.



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