**The luminous darkness of passion**

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*Foreword*

The term darkness opens a series of possibilities for formulating a discourse in psychoanalytical terms and also in wider psycho-social and anthropologic terms. Darkness seems to be that locus of existence where things that happen cannot be seen ‘immediately’ but are present in our emotional experience at different levels of consciousness. Such levels can at times be reached through multiple psychic strategies or socio-cultural devices of a religious or ‘ritual’ kind, while in other cases they remain in an unexplored middle ground or can appear totally unreachable.

These contexts induce feelings of strong apprehension and unfamiliarity while, at the same time, they concern experiences that for their dark invisibility allow the recourse to creative resources that could not be expressed otherwise. We can see this in our clinical experience, in social events that today, like in the past, seem particularly harsh, or in artistic or literary forms, or in scientific ‘discoveries’ that, despite their predictive logical-mathematical dimensions, open up mysterious universes that are not easily explained by known experiences. Bion (1970) said that psychoanalysis is like a probe. It is well known, in fact, that in the exploration of unknown areas, the deeper one goes, the wider the unknown becomes.

So, the relation with the dark aspects of existence and the psychic dimensions they refer to are linked to ‘forms of necessity’ that derive from the possibility of facing the intolerable that leaves a trace in the unconscious and in psychic reality and a tight link with those aspects of social relations that interface with it, so that they are basically consubstantial.

This means that the power and the pressure exerted by darkness cannot be disregarded and, for this very reason, humans, individually and socially, need to ‘create’ or ‘invent’ survival strategies. Ways of living that allow to give form or space or expression to the invisible, to the dark side it represents, giving legitimacy to its ‘irreducible’ aspects and finding ‘compromises’ necessary for surviving to the sense of lack of definition it elicits. We cannot think that this is a constructive process if we do not see, beyond the gloom of darkness, also its powerful vitality, its creative force and the bright light that comes from it, along with the need for directing it by making recourse to cultural processes and psychic strategies.

The field of darkness is a mental, psychic and social locus where individuals and groups and the nature of human relations take a form that entails the risk that the human dimension of existence is seriously compromised along with the feelings related to the sense of dignity that is the condition for the possibility of an integral and authentic enough life.

Starting from this purview, the troubles of today’s world, as forms of discontent that are related with the emergence of extremely bloody conflicts between cultural, ethnic, or largely political groups, and the psychopathological drifts related to a sense of widespread unease, should be linked to specific historic contingencies and to the cultural and economic situation we are experiencing. Psychic life is influenced not only by the social dimensions of distress or by the creative and sympathetic aspects of groups, but connects with these aspects at different levels of reality, unconsciously or consciously.

In this sense, today we should bring the relation between psychic reality and sociality, on the ‘negative’ side, as described by Freud with the term ‘drive renunciation’ (Freud S., 1929), back only to a partial condition of existence that can be related to well defined forms of control and to shared and necessary rules. It is important, in fact, to better understand the tensions that can affect both the tendency to sympathy and the destructive modes of social relations by analyzing the complex rules of interaction of social and cultural forms, psychic reality and the bio-genetic components of humans on the ‘positive’ side, seen not as an attribution of value but as a constructive dimension.

This position disagrees with the idea that ‘human nature’, already a quite disputed concept, is basically violent and destructive, and tends to see the aggressive and destructive aspects of human behavior both individually and socially not as innate forms but as deriving from deprivation or ‘traumatic’ experiences that, therefore, produce reactive feelings of intense fury and destructivity (De Zulueta F., 2006, Kohut, H. 1978, Castellet Ballarà S., 2017). At the same time, it can be useful to see that quality of hate and destructive feelings that, related to the human propensity to socializing, deeply and intensely organizes the hostile and enraged response to risky and dangerous situations that are always present at biological, cultural and relational level (Mitchell S.A., 1993, Meterangelis G., 2017). Aggression is thus considered both as constitutive and relational and, in the deep interaction of biological elements and cultural factors, as an expression of the life drive (Perrotti N., 1972) rather than a regression to death (Freud, 1920).

It should be noticed that the fact that someone holds a position inspired by these ideas should not be considered as a denial of the violent and dark side of human beings, but allows to feel great hope also leveraging on the analysis of dissociative defenses that produce uncontrollable fury or distress. So, when fully recognized in its most bloody and troubling aspects, the traumatic reality that gives rise to violence can be more easily elaborated.

The reaction to the vulnerability of the self and to ‘narcissistic’ weakness, along with the organization models of the self that predispose to hostile responses, are factors that can orient us in facing the phenomena deriving from human violence and destructivity.

We can then keep in due account also the creative and sympathetic aspects that human groups express and that are necessary for guaranteeing the survival of individuals, groups, cultures, and the human species without neglecting the dark side of experience.

I will try to present some examples from my clinical experience (che non è in questa versione per ragioni di discrezione), from literature and from references to cultural contexts along anthropological and psychoanalytical lines to shed some light on the various ways in which darkness appears in the lives of individuals, groups and cultures.

*The Mediterranean: Africa’s graveyard*

A psychoanalytically oriented working group made up of the staff managing a center for the reception of asylum seekers provides stuff for reflection. The group includes staff members and some refugees, mostly coming from various sub-Saharan African countries, who perform various jobs in the center itself.

In a recent session, great anger emerged in two members of the group both coming from Mali, one a cultural mediator, the other waiting for a residence permit for over two years. A feeling of darkness is perceived in the group when they tell they saw a video shot in Libya, the country where they embarked to come to Italy, where some black refugees are sold like slaves in unlivable conditions. They are very angry at Europe and at the Italian government that has agreed with the Libyans to allow them free hands in this shameful trade. A. says he can no longer think. D. adds that he feels like he is riding a bicycle but doesn’t know where to go. He is sorry for what is happening in Libya, but he is even more worried for the current situation in Italy, for his future and for the frequent examples of racism he is witnessing.

They feel fear for their inability to contain the outbreaks of fury and resentment in society and even in the center where they are expressed through the distress of an especially mentally fragile and violent inmate. A. tells of a story he read in the newspaper about a young black man who was swimming on his own in a river and drowned and people insulted him calling him 'negro' and did not help him. D. adds that one should never swim on his own and that the guy had made a mistake.

This comment allowed me to link the group’s experience of these events to their traumatic experiences on the boats when they were saved from shipwreck but saw hundreds die. They define the Mediterranean Sea as *the biggest African graveyard*. In addition, A. says that black Africans have been enslaved first by the Arabs, then by the Europeans and now again by the Libyans. It is a sad destiny that repeats itself.

I suggest to the group to think of how the image of the loss of dignity of a person enslaved and sold and treated like a thing is an intolerable mage that elicits a sense of loneliness and desperate disillusionment that they have felt in their experience in Libya where they saw their travel companions die and feared for their own lives. The future too is seen as uncertain and they are afraid of not being able to think and that anger can explode out of control.

I am struck by the feeling of disorientation of the group in the light of the impact of external reality and the perception of the loss of identity of African men who risk losing their dignity as men with a culture, thus being accepted only because they are ‘victims’ of some injustice, or rejected as hated foreigners, but never for what they can bring of new and vital. They are still locked in the inescapable experience of migration and survival (Beneduce R., 2016, De Micco V.2017) and today they are mired in the swamp of Italian bureaucracy that for them is dark for its length and the incomprehensible principles it is based on so that it forces them to wait passively, despite the decorous conditions they live in, and leads them nearer to the loss of their humanity expressed at its worst by slavery.

With an allusive smile D. says that he knows what is going on in the world, something he expected but cannot say, something ‘prophetic’ that he cannot share because it concerns a secret knowledge. That smile is halfway between a request for complicity and the expression of a bashfulness that he cannot share because he is afraid he might end up being ashamed of it as he would not be taken seriously but mocked for his faith that supports him in this hard and heavy waiting period that is however present in the group as an expectation that for the moment is still dark.

*Sardinia: literary paths of darkness*

A last stimulus in our discussion of darkness can come from literature in Sardinia, an island in the Mediterranean that is a part of Italy but has a peculiar culture with a social structure that used to be based on sheep farming and on agriculture on rough and difficult terrain. The dialect spoken there is similar to a language and the island has generated quite a few intellectuals of high cultural standing.

Salvatore Niffoi, a contemporary Sardinian writer, in his numerous novels puts us in touch with the archaic aspects of Sardinian culture with a creative use of a syncretic language mixing Italian and Sardinian and a poetic inspiration that expresses powerful passions in a ‘traditional’ culture based on shared cultural codes that regulate social feelings that oscillate between hate, envy and the wish for revenge. These are the expressions of the dark aspects of experience that however coexist with similarly powerful feelings of love, social support and individual sympathy. These relationships are based on sharing a harsh environment that allows the deployment of relationships based on strong passions and sensibilities between individuals, social and natural environments where bodies express all their poetry.

Violence, represented by blood as a dark glue, is based on the need for responding to the humiliation related to an existence colored by a strong sense of caducity. At the same time, despite the harshness expressed by this context, the social feelings elicited can be contained by the rules that govern the relations between persons in a difficult environment and allow a life that can guarantee a relative and provisional sense of trust and authenticity thanks to great cultural mediations. In a recent interview Niffoi stressed the fact that Sardinia today complains the loss of its identity just like it happens in other more general social contexts and this entails the risk of a trivialization of existence. His position, however, is not entrenched in nostalgia but in his latest novel, *Il venditore di metafore* (The seller of metaphors) (2017) Niffoi represents the evocative and creative power of storytelling. The protagonist, born in a peculiar situation like a mythical character, driven by a strong inspiration, dedicates his vagabond life in the heart of Sardinia to telling his stories, metaphors of life, that translate the harsh aspects of living into shared truths that give dignity to characters that become protagonists. Hate can be expressed and addressed with a little less fear and the love of Mataforu for a woman, saved by what we could call the bodily touch of his tales full of affects, is expressed in all its poetic sweetness. Even death when evoked cannot be separated by the power of life. The novel tells us that it is important not to lose the link with the dark aspects of existence that contain also a luminous drive to life.

*A few final reflections*

The three different contexts I suggested concern areas of experience that I consider contiguous. Although they cannot be reduced to one another, they allow us to think of connections that can help us find a common trace.

The situation of the group at the refugee center allows us to get in touch with the position of persons who decided to emigrate for different reasons. In general, they feared for their lives for political reasons, or wanted to flee from unbearable living conditions, poverty, climate change. The experience of migration, however, is also the expression of a vital project and of the aspiration to a fuller life since the conditions they left behind took place in contexts of cultural disruption.

The traumatic aspects of emigration and the encounter/collision of cultural differences are strictly related with the identity crisis that affects both the refugees and the places they reach. In the psychic and social space thus created, the dimension of darkness appears in different but complemental ways. From the side of the ‘receiving’ societies there is a risk that the relation with the others is expressed mainly with a sense of unfamiliarity and invasion. On the side of the arriving refugees, the danger is the loss of the right to live in a dignified human way which entails a feeling of invisibility and inefficacy. All this translates into tensions that can lead to, and frequently evoke, dangerous destructive behaviors (Lombardozzi, A., 2017).

The literary works of Niffoi, and of other Sardinian writers, denounce the risk that a strongly ‘traditional’ society is exposed to great transformations that can destroy the balance that allowed to contain the pressure of conflicting feelings such as hate, love, vendetta, solidarity, through rituals and social rules.

Already in the 1990s the Italian psychoanalyst Francesco Corrao (1992) had highlighted some tendencies of today’s world and the way in which passions are part of the new social processes. He suggested that our current cultural situation could be better represented by Dionysus, the orgiastic god of Greek mythology, than by Oedipus. Conflicts take a form that stresses chaotic feelings of dispersion and fragmentation and a widespread sense of caducity. From a different purview, Heinz Kohut (1977) paid special attention to the vicissitudes of a ‘tragic’ man that risks being overwhelmed by the sense of his own vulnerability and for this reason, in order to face the dark side of passions, needs both to recognize their power and to create a more stable basis for his existence, gaining a consistency of the individual, group, and social self within the confines of a shared cultural mediation.

These considerations force us to take account of the dimension of the risk of expressing anger though violent and destructive behaviors (Beck U., 1986) that is always present in human societies and in individuals. We need to contrast them seeing their power and at the same time the vital elements that generate them, because the subjects that act in this way are exposed to experiences of deep humiliation. In this sense, a group, dreams and storytelling can represent some areas of experience and project a *ray of intense darkness* on the processes of dislocation and fragmentation and the traumatic experiences that derive from them with the "*expectation of a creative response from our unconscious*" (Grotstein J.S., 2007).