

The loving couple in the fusional area

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Abstract

This article is linked to a previous one (Piermattei, 2019) that deepened the concepts of symbiosis and fusionality. We have therefore started from the first neonatal life and we are now searching for the traces of that primordial experience in adult life. The basic idea of both the articles is that some primordial quotas remain active throughout the entire life span, in a physiological way. In particular, the experience of the loving couple is investigated here since it is considered one of the human experiences in which the fusional mode appears in all its strength. Indeed, the loving couple builds through this peculiar relational mode, a third space, built by the similarities and concordances of the two partners. Some passages from Emily Brontë's novel *Wuthering Hights* will also be used to highlight the fusional and symbiotic aspects of the loving couple.

Key words: fusionality, symbiosis, loving couple, mother/child dyad.

To indicate what we two were,
for example, what we had in common
and what was different,
was not an easy undertaking.
"I. You-not-I." I tried to explain, with gestures.
She was irked.
"Yes. You-like-me, but only so much," I corrected myself.
She was a bit reassured but still suspicious.
"I, you, together, run run," I tried to say.
She burst out laughing and ran off.
(Calvino, *The Cosmicomics*, 1965)

"I could be locked up in a nutshell and still consider myself a king of infinite space." These are the words that Shakespeare writes in *Hamlet* (1603) and which can now help us to describe the origin of human psychic life. This sentence seems to express the first neonatal psychosomatic state, in which an external world has not arrived yet and the child is almost completely closed in itself, in a space where external objects do appear but are not considered independent objects yet. The new-born sees how far he can tolerate, excluding what causes pain or just questions his world (Ogden, 2016). Without asking questions, then, life becomes a rhythmic sequence of images, sensations, noises, a maternal lake in which gently float.

This seems to be the first form of perception and archaic elaboration of an unknown reality, almost unseen. The child's world is the mother's breast, the mother's arms holding him to her chest and her eyes looking at him, the sensation of the pleasure of ingesting milk, the warm water that borders his body when his mother washes him, the soft covers that wrap him when he is put to bed (Tustin, 1981). But things like the

mother, the bath, and the bed do not exist yet in his mind, the internal world is made of perceptions, sensations, and not objects. As Winnicott has already described: "two babies are feeding at the breast; one is feeding on the self." (1968).

What marks and organizes time, sensations and perceptions are not cognitive and conceptual categories that put a formal order to the world and events, rather the organizer of this archaic age is the rhythmicity of events, sounds, contacts (Ogden, 1989). The (more or less) equal repetition, slow and harmonious, slight but restraining, provides a first form of organization to the experience, it acts as a containing edge to the fluctuation experience in this untraced world. When things are going well, the experience that the baby gets from it is that of a potential space, slow enough to bring out what it is, but also, at the same time, firm enough to support and contain. The new-born can then float gently without falling.

Nevertheless - Shakespeare continues:

"Were it not that I have bad dreams" he writes.

The reality, slowly but inexorably, imposes itself on the child's sight: the breast, arms, and maternal gaze begin to organize themselves into a single form that, painfully, may not be there, may not immediately respond to need. The object shows itself in its entirety and independence, letting the child know that there will always be a difference between them, an unreachability, that will separate them forever. The new-born child thus understands that the external object will never be totally his, will never be himself.

Slowly, and with a huge effort, the child will discover that hallucinating is not enough to make a frustration disappear (Freud, 1899; Freud, 1911) and that, although it requires a high price, accepting the Other existence and entering into a relationship with it better satisfies his needs, this is indeed the only way to truly be alive, vital and creative (Winnicott, 1968).

However, the call of that comforting rhythmicity, of a world that was moving slowly and always similar to itself, known and predictable, the desire to return to being, oneself and one's perceptions, all concentrated in a single point, immobile and controllable, never completely disappears. Everyone will need, throughout their life, supporting answers from designated others, from Self-objects as Kohut (1984) would say it, it will always need vital and genuine interactions and connections.

The ability to tolerate and face external reality, the frustrations it causes, the inevitable distance of others who are now external and different, is not something that can be achieved at once and definitively. Rather, it is a continuous movement of recalibration between the change that can be tolerated and what must keep safe, unchangeable. A continuous reorganization between the environmental demands, which increasingly demand cognitive and psychic presence and the internal needs that still push towards stasis, the reassuring rhythmicity that may be forgotten at a conscious level we can still feel flowing in us in relaxing moments.

It is precisely this aspect of the psyche still fluid, sheltered from the truth of external reality, that is described with the concept of fusionality. A psychic mode of internal

organization and relationship, dating back to the first moments of life, perhaps even before the child enters the schizo-paranoid position, so that some authors have postulated a third position, prior to the two already postulated by Klein (Bleger, 1967; Ogden, 1989; Pallier, 1990). This mode remains operative, in oscillation with the other two positions, for the whole life in the internal world of the subject. It seems, indeed, that the Self boundaries are not established once and forever but are rather continuously reformulated, therefore the movement between fusionality and identification remains always active and, above all, necessary (Soavi, 1990).

The fusional mode appears as a way to approach reality that exalts the similarities, the consonances, the sharing areas with the other and that instead places in the background the differences that indicate the separateness from the other, its unattainability, its being out of control and never really being able to be grasped in its entirety. In doing so, he tries to find that intermediate experience area in which one's Self and the external object are no longer clearly and inevitably separated, different and distant, but rather can return, at least for a moment, to being almost the same thing.

The loving couple is probably, among the human experiences, one of the most representative of this relational mode. Indeed, the intermediate fusional area that is created between the two partners can be considered the core of the love relationship. From the game of projections and introjections that the two reciprocally put into action, a third, intermediate area is created, built by the pooling of similar aspects, of concordances, of those harmony areas that one has found in the other.

Just think about the subgroup formed by the union of two sets: a new intermediate area, formed only by the common elements of the two. In this zone of coincidence, the differentiation from the other is cancelled so that the two sets become, by joining, a single new space, a common area in which it is no longer possible to distinguish between the elements of one and the other. Also, the way two colours merge creating a new one, in which it is now impossible to distinguish the traces of the two original objects.

In my opinion, these images describe the experience that two subjects live when they find themselves in the other, finding their own characteristics, their own experiences in the person in front of them; when they share moments of intimacy, which take place along the score of a direct, bodily communication, not mediated (or just barely) by the conscious level of the psyche. Looking into someone's eyes and feeling like floating into that gaze but also contained by it, held together as perhaps one is not in the dispersive rush of everyday life, which can make one feel fragmented, confused. The sensation that one's own body is continued by that of the other, De André used to sing: "I thought it's nice that a guitar starts where my fingers end up" (1981). This is the kind of sensation that seems to characterize the fusional experience and the moments of intense fusionality that the couple can experience: the perception that where one's own body limits are imposed, another can be inserted. In these moments, the other is felt so close, so similar in that area of resonance that it can be felt not

only as external but also as one own extension. We can thus extend our living space, breathe the air of the other, take a breath of air outside ourselves.

We are not talking about horizontal movements, projection, introjection and projective identification. These cannot be used within the fusional mode because the distinction between inside and outside is momentarily suspended, cancelled.

The fusional mood indeed originated from a time when the distinction between me and not me had not yet been noticed and, therefore, the ability to use mechanisms such as projective identification has not been achieved yet. Rather, it is possible that, in adulthood, massive use of projective, adhesive and introjective identification may lead to the re-establishment of a fusional condition (Tagliacozzo, 1990).

In *Wuthering Heights* (1847) Emily Brontë tells us a story that is probably not about love but certainly about fusional. Her book narrates the relationship between Heathcliff and Catherine. The two know each other as children, both, though different, alone, wild and roughneck: They both still work on a primitive register and build on it their relationship, which will always remain only on this level.

Before continuing, it is important to point out that the story of Emily Brontë does not talk about the healthy fusional that is present in every relationship, it rather speaks about such a strong symbiotic fantasy that it does not tolerate any interference, unable to enter into an oscillatory dynamic with more mature relational modes. The characters of the novel are destined to live an arid love, unable to give life to a creative and vital couple. However, in this case considering the most radical aspects of fusional can help to better understand it and to deduce its physiological and functional aspect.

For example, Catherine describes to Nelly, a trustworthy housemaid, the fantasy at the basis of her relationship with Heathcliff: "But surely you and everybody have a notion that there is or should be an existence of yours beyond you. What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?" This seems to be the fantasy behind the fusional mode in general: the desire and the search for an existence space that is outside of us but still ours. This sentence expresses the sense of an intermediate space which was empty, which marked the end of a person and the separation from the other but which is now vital, filled with the experiences of similarity of the two: what previously marked the end of a subject now becomes a new area of existence. Using this space, the individual can momentarily abandon the total responsibility of his own individuality, lean on another leg, draw energy from the other vital force. When this exchange is reciprocal, both participants, while renouncing to certain parts of themselves and burdening themselves with those of the other, are nourished by this area of communion, by this two-way exchange, and therefore feel enriched, vitalized by the presence of the other in their area of existence and by being able to extend into that of the other. This bond can be so strong that it may evoke the feeling of being one with the other, Catherine says to Nelly: "[...] Nelly, I am Heathcliff - he's always, always in my mind - not as a pleasure, any more than I am always a pleasure to myself - but, as my own being. So, don't talk of our separation again: it is

impracticable; and -". This sentence seems to express the deepest core of the fusional question: the desire that the Other is positioned not outside of one's Self but within it and that, at the same time, the core of one's Self can reside outside one's bodily boundaries. Catherine says that separation is not possible, not because the two cannot be physically separated but rather because, even if distant, their relationship continues to exist, even distant Heathcliff would continue to be the depositary of the truest and most genuine core of Catherine's Self.

This fantasy may also imply deadly, annihilating aspects, which have very often been underlined by the psychoanalytic literature (Anzieu, 1993; Ruszczynski, 1995). The extreme of fusional need seems to be the desire for dissolution and total incorporation into the other which implicitly contains in itself the renunciation of one's individuality and, therefore, a death sentence. Heathcliff describes this fantasy of mortal dissolution, talking to Nelly and telling her about his dream of reuniting with Catherine who has been dead for years now: "I want to tell you what I did yesterday: got the sexton, who was digging Linton's grave, to remove the earth off her coffin lid, and I opened it. I thought, once, I would have stayed there, when I saw her face again - it is hers yet - he had hard work to stir me; but he said it would change, if the air blew on it, and so I struck one side of the coffin loose [...] and I bribed the sexton to pull it away, when I'm laid there, and slide mine out too [...] and yesternight I was tranquil. I dreamt I was sleeping the last sleep by that sleeper, with my heart stopped and my cheek frozen against hers'.

'And if she had been dissolved into earth, or worse, what would you have dreamt of then?' I said.

'Of dissolving with her and being more happy still!' he answered".

Reaching together with the beloved the complete rest, dissolve into the total homeostatic quiet that unfortunately, only death can give. This is the dream of a man who has now given up and who perhaps never wanted to share a life with his beloved. These deadly fantasies may cast doubt on the positive value of fusional sharing. However, it is good to keep in mind that these too are physiological, reverberation of the first neonatal symbiosis, representatives of infantile quotas that always remain active in a part of the psyche. Moreover, it is important to underline that there is a difference between the fantasy of total fusion and the real moments of partial fusion (Fonda, 2000). Indeed, if the former contains devitalizing aspects, the latter seems to bring out more the vital and creative aspects of this mode of functioning. The fusional sharing can, in fact, occur at very different levels of dissolution, involving the Self entirely or partly only. Therefore, there are also many fusional moments in which the boundaries of the two selves are not so affected and modified as to jeopardize the individual's existence in favour of couple's dissolution, rather these can be enriching and vitalizing for both members. Using the words of Tagliacozzo (1990), one can say that fusional sharing "goes from the indispensable, anguished and concrete need to the re-establishment of consistent stability of the containment functions".

Norsa and Zavattini (1997) expressed the ambivalence of these two aspects, the deadly and the creative one, affirming that the presence of a common space can be exploited by the two members to favour the containment and the integration of their own genuine Self or to evacuate and misunderstand painful, disturbing aspects. They also affirm that fusionalità implicitly contains a creative and constructive aspect and a destructuring one, which maintains individual divisions and negations.

The moment of falling in love can be characterized by a disruptive fusional fantasy, however, it does not necessarily have to be annihilating, on the contrary, it can allow the creation of an area of healthy illusion (Saraval, 2003) in which one can express his Self in a real, intimate and deep way. Through this, the subject can find in his own life that area of experience that had already been lived in an archaic age, in the first months of life and that was perhaps considered lost forever, or that had been sought in many small activities and that now seems to come back, giving new life, new strength and creativity. Once again we create that space with large but restraining meshes in which the individual can, through the contact with the other, experience also and above all a contact with his or her own self more genuine and authentic, more creative and vital. An experience strongly similar to that of the new-born that find himself reflected in the eyes of the mother, seeing there the confirmation of its existence.

Over time, if this first idealization was healthy enough, if it was on real and sufficient similarities and if it is malleable enough to tolerate the inevitable frustrations of everyday life, this initially disruptive fusional experience reorganizes itself to adapt to the needs dictated by external reality. The idealization is in part forced to anchor itself more to the real, as in the original phase, frustrations recall the existence of external reality, the difference and the separateness of the two subjects.

However, this communicative mode is not interrupted, instead it remains parallel and alternating with a more adult and mature one, which makes it possible to recognize autonomous existence and separateness from the external object, allows one to distance oneself from it and still maintain one's individuality. When these two relational modes are well balanced, the couple's relationship can be a creative space, which allows them to approach and distance themselves gently, enjoying moments of fusion as well as moments of individuality. It is even possible that the very presence of this relationship, the support of the other person, favours mature and individualizing movements, which will allow the subject to enjoy more of his own experiences of independence (Castellano, Velotti, Zavattini, 2010). Some authors speak of this as two positions that oscillate and alternate, to a greater or lesser extent according to the characteristics of the two partners, the collusion of the couple and the events of external reality (Fisher, 1999).

This oscillatory movement between different modes is exactly what Catherine and Heathcliff cannot do, their symbiotic need is so strong that it cannot be mediated by other modes of relationship. The protagonist girl splits these two types of love into two different men because she cannot integrate these two modes. In the end, she

marries Linton, with whom she has a much more superficial relationship than the one she lives with Heathcliff but with whom, precisely because of this distance, there remains that separateness necessary to remember that the other is an object out of himself, an indispensable requirement for having a relationship. However, given the impossibility of integrating different levels of experience, too much distance remains to feel real intimacy. Catherine describes her feelings for the two men as follows: "My love for Linton is like the foliage in the woods: time will change it, I'm well aware, as winter changes the trees. My love for Heathcliff resembles the eternal rocks beneath: a source of little visible delight, but necessary." The girl speaks here of two different loves for two different men but this statement can perhaps also be used to describe two different levels of psychic experience. One can perhaps say that there is a more mature mode of relationship, through which one can love another for what he really is, for his real characteristics. This is a level of relationship in which two Egos relate to each other while maintaining their separateness and their differences. But there is also another level of relationship, more subterranean and archaic. At this level, one does not love the other for what he really is, but rather for the functions he performs, for the levels of collusion and similarity that have been found. The beloved is not perceived in his autonomous existence, rather he becomes a part of the Self of the subject to whom specific functions are designated. A last quotation from Catherine explains to us that her love for Heathcliff was not born from his real characteristics but from that area of resonance created by the similarities, by the concordances between the two: " He shall never know I love him: and that, not because he's handsome, but because he's more myself than I am. Whatever our souls are made out of, his and mine are the same."

To experience a full, realistic but creative, fusional but not annihilating experience, these two modalities must be present and in harmony (Soavi, 1990): without the first one there would be no anchorage to reality, without the second one creativity, imagination, vitality would be lost.

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