

# **Golems as precursors of an Oedipal function in a group of children**

*Ronny Jaffè*

## **Abstract**

By presenting three clinical vignettes of a children's group psychotherapy, the author intends to point out how certain games are golems which lead the way to a group Oedipal function.

In the paper, the author makes extensive reference to Freud's "The Uncanny"; as a matter of fact, the group, by using certain games and through playful dramatization shows levels of disorienting anxiety and psychical blindness which, if adequately contained, monitored and interpreted by the analyst, can lead to an Oedipal drive to knowledge encouraging the treatment of suffering and psychical trauma.

**Key words:** Child group analysis, golem, uncanny, precursor of the Oedipus function, digital child

## **Introduction**

Approaching and developing the introjection of an Oedipal function in a group of children is a difficult, demanding process. It starts from afar and finds its tracks in a chaotic, confused dimension, in an often undifferentiated mixture where frequent traumatic elements come into play and may overlap with one another.

My experience as children's group leader and later as supervisor has taken place in institutions, and, as we are well aware, institutions receive and try to treat multi-problem situations and often compromised situations: deprived children, traumatized children, children in whom psychotic disorders and, in any case, serious disorders are preeminent. Therefore, dealing with a group shared by deeply suffering children is sometimes a titanic enterprise as shown in a book with the evocative title: "Caos, labirinto, villaggio" (Jaffè R., Zanetti L., Zanni L., 2009); so, by reviewing a few clinical vignettes, I am going to refer to this text as well in order to show how the Oedipal function of the analyst's mind can reverberate on and include the whole group through a fruitful receptive process which is assimilated by the group thanks to the analyst's ability. Especially in the early stages, this implies the analyst's constant and careful ability to fluctuate between a containment function and the strict and authoritative preservation of the actual and mental setting: such fluctuation evokes the mastery, the courage and the competence in listening to the subtle vibrations of the compass and the sails during an often stormy navigation.

The group, particularly in the beginning, is in contact with pre-individual and archaic states of the mind: as Gaburri argues in the book's foreword, the group is not "simply needed to socialize....(because) otherwise one fails to consider a share of undifferentiated archaic components which the group activates by mobilising, before

speech, an area involved with the prehistory of the Oedipal complex” (Gaburri E., ibid, 10); an individual and collective as well as ontogenetic and phylogenetic prehistory going through the different strata of the civilization processes, from the remote times to the present age of post-modernity and of the digital era; today’s children, sadly and dramatically defined by sociologists as digital children, are immersed in this era. These digital children are able to cognitively use the web as if it were their own golem, thus dispersing, splitting and sometimes annihilating the emotional sphere that, like a tsunami, can devastate their minds which are still in a stage of formation and development.

As Virginia Ungar wrote as early as 2012 "the media directly impose on the child the whole range, from the most internal nucleus to the outside, which in the past would have been offered by family, school, religion and the State... and the children of our time live many hours a day in what has been called a virtual reality. A name given to a reality created by technology, which is neither real nor imaginary, neither true nor false, which, however, has such strength and meaning as to modify the notion of private and intimate." (Ungar V., 94-5, 2013); since a very small age, the locus of what is intimate and familiar can be compressed and even invaded by the digitalized world, a new dimension unknown in the times of Freud, Klein, Bion which is being dealt with by contemporary psychoanalysts.

Transformers, Pokemons, Yuguioh or Magic cards have become the golems of the digitalized child, but maintain that archaic and primary dimension which is well-represented in the book "The Golem" \* by Meyrink (1915) and in the short story "The Sandman" by Ernst T.A. Hofmann (1815) \*\* to which Freud extensively refers in his essay "The Uncanny" (1919). In this regard, many commentators argue that Freud was referring to the short story "The Sandman" having however Meyrink’s "The Golem" in mind which had been written four years before "The Uncanny".

Let’s now address the children’s therapy group and the tools given to them such as sheets of paper, games, pencils that seem to have a very different flavour from the all-powerful drift of hyper-modernity and hyper-digitalization.

Actually, in the age of post-modernity, the analytical work with children, be it an individual or group treatment, with its pencils, felt pens, paper, toys, sometimes usually very simple, sometimes unsaturated, seems to occur in apparently outside-of-time, old-fashioned, faded places having an ancient flavour as against videogames, chats, virtual images which do not need a position in space and can be used any moment, at home, in the street, at school, in public or in small secret places, perpetual golems which are never switched off unlike the Golem of Prague. In this age of hyper-modernity, the therapy room assumes therefore a really specific significance that is unique and original because of its space-time aspects of which the analyst is a participating custodian. This is also due to that particular Oedipal function of the

mind embodied by the analyst's readiness and motivation to take care, pay attention, support, identify himself, comfort and also be creative and inventive: a tri-dimensional functioning of the mind which means being able to receive within oneself the child's anxiety as well as his destructive and evacuative aspects and to share with him the burden of his emotions without getting confused or lost with them.

### **First golem: Pinguinetto**

I'm going to focus my attention on some sessions in which, in my opinion, it is relevant to introduce the metaphor of the golem as a precursor of an Oedipal function. The first session is centred on Pinguinetto which turns from golem into a therapeutic object thanks to the analyst's function and to the intuitive quality of a child and of the group as a whole.

It's a perspicuous example of "a precursor of the Oedipal situation... a precursor of a private Oedipal myth, which is the means through which a child is able to establish a contact with his parents " (Bion, 1963,115) bearing in mind that "the infant, due to his congenital predisposition, has a premonition that there is a breast and if this premonition encounters reality, i.e. the existence of a breast" (Bion, 1967,171) from this originates a "realization" and a "concept" as shown in the grid (Bion, 1963,129).

The first stage of the session is characterized on the one hand by provocations and on the other by mimetic and archaic tendencies of excited and confused proto-sexuality: at a certain point, a girl, probably the most mature in the group, says she is preparing food for the group, as if she were assuming a maternal role towards the other group members; at the same time, one of the objects which had been in the room ever since, a neglected and at least apparently meaningless object, happens to undergo an amazing transformation: it becomes an object of the group: sure enough Leo catches sight of a stuffed animal on the closet and hugs it and calls it Pinguinetto under the attentive gaze of the other group members: Pinguinetto takes on the meaning of "a true phenomenon of personification of the childlike parts which until that moment had remained split and could not be represented ...a totem, a golem turning into an object of common love" (Gaburri, *ibidem*, 11-12); Pinguinetto, unlike a series of other objects in the room that could represent something uncanny and disturbing, becomes a shared object thanks to the acknowledgment of the bond between the little patient Leo and his therapist against the backdrop of the "choros"; Leo's gaze seems to be characterized by an "amazed astonishment" (Di Chiara, 1990, 441) in identifying the object which thanks to the therapist's and the group's presence is set completely apart against a whole series of other potential golem-toys which, like alien shadows, can alter and blur the necessary structures underlying the mental and space-time setting.

Therefore, Pinguinetto assumes the character of a "selected fact" (Bion, 1963), since this element becomes the first group toy characterized by a meaning, a precursor of a playful, symbolic, representative ability which can unite the group by making it

possible to create a familiar and reassuring atmosphere, a “heimlich” place (Freud, 1919, 87), that is a place that can also be free from the influence of the ghosts, demons, monsters which have often shrouded the children’s group, and reach a warm and comfortable dimension.

### **Second golem: The Genie of the Lamp and the giant chicken**

The golem, in the Jewish mystical tradition referred to by Freud especially in "The Uncanny" (1919), is like "an alien shadow altering and blurring the stable structures of reality" (Pilo-Fusco, 1994, 31) and it seems to me that it can be a very evocative *mythologhema* in indicating the objects in the room which conjure up a sense of apprehension, bewilderment, perturbation, in a sort of ambiguous uncertainty caught between the unanimated and the animated, to which a magical and all-powerful meaning is attributed.

In the group I am referring to, for instance, in view of the summer separation, Dario conceives and gives voice to the “Genie of the Lamp” who among his other tasks “has that of making a giant chicken appear, which is too big, and the child throws himself on the ground spreading his arms to mimic the enormous size of the chicken looming over him” (Jaffè R., Zannetti L., Zanni E. *ibidem* 63). It’s a clear example of a fantasy which has its roots in animism and is characterized, as Freud pointed out, "by human spirits who were populating the world, by the narcissistic overvaluation of one’s psychical processes, by the omnipotence of thoughts and by the technique of magic which was built on this power." (Freud, 101, *ibidem*). The chicken, usually something familiar to any child, assumes, through the omnipotence of the childlike thought, the features of the "unheimlich", the harbinger of a ravenous hunger destroying everything, because it would like to devour not only the contents but also the container itself, a chicken – a giant made of clay like the golem of Prague – an "artificial soulless being" (Wiesel E. 1983,45) in which we don’t know if we are dead or alive, male or female, whose corporeal reality has no boundaries and no consistency, it is not tangible. It is something shapeless, all-powerful, chaotically instinctual and, above all, it cannot be given the power of speech, “it is mute” (ibid. 54). To mimic and ride the chicken is a way to control the primeval fantasy of the chicken becoming a disruptive and destructive force; the group really seems to be staging a golem endowed with dangerous superhuman powers which rebels against its own creator in order to destroy him; Dario as well, and the group with him, might be at risk of collapsing from the bridles of the chicken aimed at undermining the setting, had the therapist not intervened in her saving function which is able to contain the untamed, destructive forces circulating in the setting.

Whereas in the Pinguinetto case Leo was delegating the function of care and transformation to the analyst, here we are in contact with irrepressible archaic and primeval ghosts: the analyst is therefore strongly challenged to assume a function of containment, a salvific but also interpretive function, in order to make it felt, through

words, that this awesome silent monster has been created to control the suffering for the forthcoming summer separation which evokes the sense of emptiness and absence the majority of the children live in. The hyperbole represented by the extension of the chicken should have the function of “not making the group fall prey of excessively destructive anxieties connected with the summer separation” (63) in which the traumatic ghosts of emptiness, degradation, loss can reappear like demons in the children’s minds. As if the gigantic dimension of the golem might illusorily conceal the nothingness in which the children are sometimes immersed.

### **Third golem and its transformation:**

#### **From the blinded mummy to the found gaze**

The narrative skills made possible by the analyst may result in shared games, tales, cocoons of thinkability opening the way towards a reflection on oneself, on one’s own stories, griefs and wounds.

It is at that point, that the group can embrace fear, anger and its violent suffering “because of a distorted relationship with their parents, so everyone can relate their own trauma connected with the absence of the maternal object and the failure of the paternal function ” (Jaffè R., Zannetti L., Zanni L. 165, *ibidem*), elements shared with varying degrees by all the children in the group. So, they start telling their stories and playing with group members who are staging themes regarding mating, jealousy, maternity, such as the one in which "Arianna is staging the pain of childbirth... and here comes Leo who enters the role of Arianna’s saviour...a mother invoking the arrival of a father who can save her" (*ibidem* 175) and therefore save and protect the newborn baby.

As Lombardozi and Ruberti wrote in the book’s afterword, the children’s therapy group by means of "a kaleidoscope of stories and group narrations and of shared individual perceptions can give rise to a sense of identity and identification through the contact with sexuality" (Lombardozi A., Ruberti L. 198, *ibidem*), love and parenthood, because it has been possible to share together the suffering of one’s own tragedies and family traumas in which also very confused and promiscuous aspects have been circulating among excited, violent and proto-sexual elements.

In conclusion, we can argue that the group takes a journey which goes from chaos towards a shared co-habitation characterized by a drive towards discovery. The analyst herself who offers thoughts, mind, words, corporeity can gradually turn into a figure that can be interrogated about the common destiny of the group and of the individual, and who can extend her function from being a figure able to embrace, fill, alleviate to a figure making it possible to be open towards the enigma as an indirect manifestation, in speech, of what is hidden." (Corrao, 1992, 31).

The journey undertaken by this group of children, as any other group led by psychoanalysts, started from a chaotic confusion characterized by rage, impulse,

excited and destructive rampancy under the aegis of the myth of Dionysus, under the pressure of "trans-subjective forces" (Corrao, 51, *ibidem*) and proceeded, through the Oedipal function of the leader's mind, towards the Oedipal drive to knowledge, interrogating oneself on oneself, the other, the group in its affectional and separation bonds.

In the children's play, if we follow the development of the gaze and curiosity themes, we witness a very suggestive transformation: the group has started to play various games such as blind man's buff, turning off the lights in the room, and, specifically, has used bandages to make a mummy in order to tie the body and obstruct the senses, including sight, a game "which was the expression of a catastrophe" (Jaffè R., Zannette L., Zanni E. *ibidem*, 47) linked to family vicissitudes; a mummy as a way to hold back "too strong, intense, deep, fragmented and chaotic emotions" (*ibidem*) which, if they emerge, will make the group feel the emptiness, the absence, the precipice. There was something grand and uncanny in the representation of the blind mummy which made me think of the tragic tale "The Sandman" (Freud, *ibidem*, 88,) in which Nathaniel, bewitched by Coppelius's gaze plunges into the void.

The mummy, as Nathaniel's story, refer to something alien, unknowable, mortiferous. They refer to the terror a child can experience and feel when he is in contact with a sense of disorientation. If this is due to the absence of containment and family warmth it produces the dramatic sensation of fluctuating between *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, hence the trusted *heimlich* can become dreadful and upsetting; he lives in the threatening sensation he might fall into the world of uncertainty, which might cause a psychical disintegration. In this regard, it is crucial, as pointed out by Bion, to distinguish between "the fragments of the Oedipal pre-conception and the fragments of the fragmented Oedipal situation" (Bion, 1963, 116), and we can imagine how hard it is to find one's bearings while navigating in a group of children who are struggling among fragments having different origins.

The drive to navigate in this chaos allowed the group to observe and figure out the mummy also through the ironic expression elicited by such a figure when, for example, Ciro said that "there is a group mummy" indicating Leo who was going around with a basket on his head ... a mummy, therefore, that is moving around and provoking laughter in the group" (Jaffè R., Zannetti L., Zanni L., *ibidem*, 49) or in another session in which "Leo wraps himself up in a rug, Lucia says he is a salami and Ciro goes and wraps himself up with him and now they really are two salamis" (*ibidem*, 50); it's a perspicuous example of how the group-therapy function makes it possible to transform a distressing and mortiferous condition into a shared vital condition which favours the passage from Nathaniel's unescapable and bloody blindness caused by the elusive Sandman, blocking any possibility but the precipice, to the curiosity of getting in touch with the enigmatic Sphynx that, even at the cost of great pains, can open the doors to knowledge and hence to remedy and treatment for the future.

## Notes

1. The Golem, according to various legends of the Kabbalah, is an artificial being created through magical rituals and resembles a giant made of clay and endowed with supernatural powers.

Most Kabbalah versions describe the Golem as a monstrous creature that rebels against its creator. However, there are other interpretations, such as for example in Elie Wiesel, where the Golem is interpreted as a powerful saviour and protector capable of defeating cruelty that, once it has accomplished its work against evil, disappears and dies behind the words of his creator.

2. The Sandman - Der Sandmann - is a tale by E.T.A. Hoffmann narrating the story of Nathaniel who grew up under the nightmare of a fairy tale told by his nanny. According to this story, the Sandman would pour sand into the children's eyes until they jumped out of their bleeding eye-sockets. Years later, Nathaniel meets the scientist Spallanzani, creator and inventor of the doll Olympia, similar to a human being, and he falls so deeply in love with it that he loses his mind. In the meantime, an uncanny figure from the past reappears, the alchemist Coppelius, who causes Nathaniel's death: Nathaniel, who has freed himself from his fascination with Olympia, is contemplating the underlying city from a high tower together with his fiancée Clara, but Coppelius bewitches him with his gaze and forces him to plunge into the void. (Freud, 1919, 88-89)

## References

Bion W. R. (1962), A theory of thinking, *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, v. 43:306-310.

Bion W.R. (1963), *Elements of Psycho-Analysis*. William Heinemann, London.

Corrao F. (1992), *Modelli psicoanalitici Mito Passione Memoria Laterza*. Bari 1992.

Di Chiara G. (1990), La stupida meraviglia, l'autismo e la competenza difensiva. *Rivista di Psicoanalisi* n. 36, 1990

Freud S. (1919), *The Uncanny*. S.E. v. 17.

Gaburri E. (2009), Prefazione, in (a cura di Jaffè R., Zannetti L., Zanni L.E.) *Caos Labirinto Villaggio*. Roma, 2009.

Hoffmann E.T.A. (1815), Der sandmann, trad. t. *L'uomo della sabbia e altri racconti*. Mondadori, Milano, 1987.

Jaffè R., Zannetti L., Zanni L.E. (2009) (a cura di), *Caos Labirinto Villaggio*. Borla, Roma, 2009.

Lombardozi A. Ruberti L. (2009), Postfazione, in (a cura di) Jaffè R. Zannetti L., Zanni L. E. *Caos Labirinto Villaggio*. Borla, Roma, 2009.  
Meyrink G. (1915), *Il Golem*. Newton, Roma, 1994.  
Pilo G. Fusco S. (1994), Il simbolismo kabbalistico del Golem, in (a cura di) Pilo G., Fusco S. *Il Golem di Meyrink G*) Newton. Roma, 1994.  
Ungar V. (2013) Cambiamenti ed invarianti nella psicoanalisi con i bambini in (a cura di Corrente G.) *Duale gruppale il lavoro clinico con bambini e genitori* vol. 1. Ed. Magi, Roma 2013.  
Wiesel E. (1983), *Il Golem*. Giuntina, Firenze, 2009.

**Ronny Jaffè** I am training analyst of the Italian Psychoanalytical Society and I am President of the Milanese Centre of Psychoanalysis since 2016.  
I was vice president of the European Psychoanalytical Federation.  
Since August 2012 I am member of the IPA Ethical Committee.  
I worked in the past in Infantile Neuropsychiatric Service as individual and group psychotherapist (I have a formation in the Italian Institute of group psychoanalysis based on the Bionian thought).  
I have published several works on individual and group psychoanalysis and I was co-editor of the book "Caos, labirinto, villaggio".  
Co-editor of the volume "Beginning Psychoanalysis", Routledge, London.

Email: [ronny.jaffe28@gmail.com](mailto:ronny.jaffe28@gmail.com)

**Translated from Italian by Maria Carla Bellucci**