

Broken dreams – Dreams in transit: narrative transformation of the “ignorant emotions” of adolescents

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Abstract

The paper describes how the group with adolescents can provide a relational space where to express and transform by means of **narration** the *emotions* that are almost always *ignored* and most of the time *ignorant* (meaning that they *cannot be told*) of kids attending a school with a high drop out rate in the suburbs of Rome. The narrative plot is identified, within the framework of the group of adolescents, as a sensor regulating the possibility of making sense of ignorant-ignored feelings and conveying them to the group of peers and the adult world. The narrative transformations, which have a very high therapeutic value, of the *ignorant emotions* related to the *transforming dream* of Silvio, an adolescent belonging to a group conducted in a school (the dream being to become a soccer player), are compared with those of the *broken dreams* of the leading characters of two works by a young Italian writer, Andrea Carraro: Tonino in the novel *L’Erba Cattiva*, and Germano in the short story *L’Altalena*.

Key Words: group with adolescents, means of narration, drop-out.

This paper is the result of my experience in confronting the *ignorant emotions* of adolescents, young people I have worked with individually or in a group for over fifteen years in secondary schools.

I use this expression, *ignorant emotions*, which I borrowed from the title of a film by the Turkish director Ferzan Ozpetek, *The ignorant fairies*, to refer to the emotions that cannot find a narration to hold them. By placing the adjective “ignorant” next to the word emotion I mean to emphasize “how hard it is to understand adolescent emotions when they are not attuned to the shared acceptance contexts,” when they appear as obstinately “ignorant” with respect to our adult *clichés*, for indeed we are used to dealing with emotions that can be told. When we are confronted with emotions that are barely tamed and educated with respect to our narrating standards, we run the risk of “denying and disowning them” (M.Valvo, F.De Bei, 2004). We do this because emotions can be expressed only within a context of communication and relationship between an adult-therapist and an adolescent. When such a context is being co-constructed in therapy, like in school and with friends, emotions are no longer simply the “*ignorant*” emotional states we are used to seeing translated irreflexively as adolescent *enactments*. Instead, they can become the emotionally rich expressions of an adolescent narrative self (J. Palombo 2002), of the *cohesive self* of an adolescent who is capable of talking about him/herself and his/her story, while managing to stay in contact with his/her emotions. Such a process in less fortunate

and/or highly problematic adolescents may never mature or, if it does begin to develop, it may be disrupted, generating distorted or stiff *self-narrations* where emotions are unable to flow into a consistent narration.

This happens especially because the emotions of such adolescents are *ignored emotions*, and because of this they eventually become *ignorant emotions*. They are *ignored* not only by the adolescent who experiences them but also by those who surround him/her. If this *other from oneself* were capable of *not ignoring them*, he/she could help the adolescent to make his/her emotions surface in the relationship by expressing them through narration. That is why I decided to define them using the adjective *ignorant*, which I feel has a considerable relational value. Indeed, it *always takes two* to ignore an emotion in a relationship, especially in a therapeutic relationship. When a young person feels that the therapist is ignoring his/her emotions, he/she *leaves him/her on his/her own*, just as the therapist left him/her on his/her own, with the mutual feeling that his/her emotions are there, but they are crude and incomprehensible. In my clinical example, you will notice that there are many such moments of emotional dystonia with the emotions of Silvio, the adolescent I shall discuss, who constantly tries to make me, at least, not *ignore* what perhaps he is not aware of himself yet.

In my work with adolescents I tend to prefer the group setting to provide a relational space for the expression and transformation – at times even through narration – of the almost always *ignored* and in most cases *ignorant emotions* of the young people I see in the schools of Rome's suburbs and hinterland with a very high drop-out rate. They are 14 and 15 years old and join my groups – which start at the beginning of the school year and end in June, and which the kids can return to the following year – after two or three counselling sessions which they autonomously decide to attend. Deciding to sign up for a counselling session is the first step these young people take to go from *doing* something with themselves (for instance, find the way to put themselves in social or school risk situations) to *thinking* about themselves (*thinking* that talking with this person who has introduced him/herself to the class to propose a session may be useful for him/her). Participating in the session is the first opportunity they have also to *talk, talk about themselves*, to a person who deals with them professionally.

I would now like to share with you how I have approached the “lifestyles marked by irreflexiveness” of adolescents.

In my approach, I associated the story of an adolescent who transited in one of my groups and that of two adolescents who are the main characters in two stories written by a young Italian novelist, Andrea Carraro. This writer became famous with his book “*Il Branco*”, which was made into a film by Marco Risi, and whose plot revolves around a gang rape involving adolescents.

I will compare Silvio, who joined one of my groups because he could not curb his impulse to “*get into fights*”, against Tonino, the main character in Carraro's novel *L'erba cattiva* (A. Carraro, 1996) who failed to become a professional soccer player and succeeded in killing his father, and Germano, the main character in the short

story *L'altalena* (A.Carraro, 2003), who failed in his plan to disrupt the serenity of some children in a playground and succeeded in fulfilling a dream.

I will contrast the three different outcomes, Tonino's fatal one in the novel, and the more or less fortunate ones of Germano in the short story and of Silvio in my group (Tonino commits parricide and suicide masked as an accident; what appears to be a death wish in Germano merely results in a bruised knee; Silvio fails as a soccer player but becomes his young cousin's coach). I will contrast the fates of the real and fictional characters to better bring into focus an assumption. This assumption, which can also be considered as a *theory of change* in adolescence, applies to all young people in this age bracket, not just the ones who expose themselves to risks through behaviours they have not reflected on much or at all, but also the ones who do not seem to run too many risks. I shall introduce my assumption starting from a Norwegian moral fable. This little story offers an angle from which to see Tonino's *broken dream*, Germano's *fulfilled dream* and the dream of Silvio, the boy in my group, which was *broken and transformed into* something else. The moral fable tells the story of a boy, who, in a sad, squalid and degraded environment, was discovered by a gentleman trying to build a car with four boards of wood. The gentleman could not help trying to destroy that unlikely attempt to transform the wooden boards into something usable, according to his adult yardstick. "It will never become a Ford," he commented sententiously. But the boy was quick to reply, "One must have a dream in life and mine is to buy a Ford!" (B. Fregard, 2004). The assumption that I would like to put forward is also my personal compass to steer my work with adolescents in the direction of change. In this sense, I present it to you as my temporary *theory of change* in adolescence.

I believe that adolescents *save themselves*, they literally *save their lives*, their lives as individuals who can *afford to live*, if they **have a dream**, if *they are so lucky* as not to see this dream broken by adults, and especially if, when for one reason or another their dream is broken, they can find another one. According to this assumption, what really matters is not the dream itself but the *ability to dream* (S. Biferale, 2004) and to *cultivate dreams*, moving from one dream to another, and thus come to believe *with some confidence* that one of the dreams - it does not matter which - shall eventually come true. In adolescents, the *ability to dream* comes before *having faith or confidence* that such dreams may come true. This *confidence* in adolescents comes later. I actually suggest that one should consider the gaining of such confidence as one of the aspects that marks the transition from youth to adulthood in the sense proposed by Conrad: "You proceed - and time, it proceeds as well - until you see a *shadow-line* ahead, which tells you that you must also leave the region of your early youth behind"* (J. Conrad, 1917). Claudio Neri, whose notion of *having confidence* is rather close to that of *having faith*, speaks of "faith in the goodness of life", faith as the "effect of a series of experiences, and also as the result of numerous occasions

* Courtesy translation.

when one had confidence in someone or something and received answers that were consistent with one's expectations or needs" (C. Neri, 2005).

When adolescents manage to capture a dream and hold on to it for a while, long enough at least to be warmed by it, they do not worry about its fulfilment (about how to *buy a Ford*). Their *having confidence* seems to be confined to an unshakeable faith in acknowledging their right to go from one dream to another. In the title, by placing next to the noun "dream" the adjective "in transit", I have tried to convey this sense of trans-iting, of having the courage and will to *go through a dream*, but also of sensing that dream as *transient*, as fleeting by its own nature, but also as the reflection of a state of passage of one's own *self*.

I have become convinced that typically a dream stays the same, is believed in too much, held on to for too long, by adolescents whose lot has been a life that is so poor, limited, miserable and needy as to have to attach - like Tonino did in Carraro's novel - their temporary ability to survive in the adult world to a single and unique dream, which is fixed and unchanging.

What dream did Tonino pursue steadfastly in *L'erba cattiva*? Playing soccer on an important team. He almost makes it. But when he mentions to his father Umberto (who also wanted to become a soccer player when he was young but ended up an alcoholic instead) that two talent scouts from an important team will be coming to watch him play, his father decides that he must find him a job. Consequently, the manager of Tonino's team tells the talent scouts not to come anymore, since the young man's father is not willing to authorize that his son, who is still a minor, be signed up. Tonino kills *this father*, when he finds out that he has gotten drunk and beat up his mother yet again. I believe that Tonino might not have done this if he had not felt that he had nothing to lose after his father's decision, which apparently did not change the course of his life but irrevocably changed *the course of his dreams* for his life. When he finds out that his mother called the police, Tonino starts to run, wearing shoes with smooth plastic soles, on a snow-covered precipice from which he falls and dies, with the police officers at his heels; he escapes knowing that he has nothing to lose. Before any of this happened though, Tonino's dream was broken, swept away by his father's sudden need to feel he still had the paternal authority he had lost long ago, when he started saying that if Tonino wanted to drop out of school it was fine by him, but at that point he would have to find himself a job. By saying this the father wanted to make up for his life as a failure, but at the same time he was preventing his son from fulfilling his dream, the same dream he had lost long ago. Tonino's coach deals the final blow. "You're unlucky," he tells him, "If you'd been born into a different family, with your talent, you would have gone a long way." For these young people, not having one's dream broken by adults seems to be a just matter of *luck*, of *fate*. They were born into the *wrong* family. That is why there is no room for their dreams in the world of adults.

Germano, the main character in the novel *L'altalena*, is presented to us as he is cultivating a horrible dream. Together with his three no-good friends, he wants to ruin a childish dream, that of swinging higher and higher on a swing. He wants to do

this by unbolting the swing and preparing to watch the fall of innocent children and its foreseeable consequences. His sadistic trick could cause no major damage or result in tragedy. These four troublemakers have been deprived of their childhood and now they feel the need to take it away from other children. But something gets in the way of their plan: a dare among the 4 adolescents. They will make a sort of *Russian roulette* (each one of them will go on the unbolted swing for two minutes to see who will end up with his ass on the ground). But Germano gets carried away with his dream. The dream is to cling like an adolescent Tarzan to the branch of a tree that stands in front of him when the swing comes loose and sends him flying in the air. "If you all pushed I would have made it," he later said, blaming his friends for the failure of his risky dream. When the beams of the swing come off and Germano's body "flies into the air, forming a long arch like a meteor over the entire open space and crashing into the blue slide on the opposite end of the playground, instead of Germano there's a puppet-like body thrust on the ground." One would even imagine that it is a *dead body*, lifeless, but instead Carraro tells us that "instead of Germano" there is "the smiling mask of a madman". Although Germano provides a realistic motivation for his behaviour ("I wanted to cling to the branch ... If you'd all pushed, maybe I would have made it ..."), I believe that he produces that inexplicable smile because maybe he is still all in his dream, the dream that he came close to, but did not fulfil entirely. Germano has come back into contact with his *broken childhood*, the same childhood that he wanted to break for the children on the swing. By suddenly becoming a child again with his dream, Germano saves himself from an attempted suicide masked as a dare (that is how an adult would see his irreflexive request to be pushed higher and higher). His childish dream, which surfaced again in that adolescent body, has saved the children in that park and has saved him, as he "touches his aching knee several times" muttering "nothing broken, all the better ... I lucked out."

I would now like to compare the dreams of Tonino and Germano, with that of Silvio, the boy who joined a group that I lead. The group is attended by some 12 young people, aged mostly between 14 and 15, coming from different classes. It meets once a week for an hour and a half during school hours at a technical school in the Southern suburbs of Rome with a high drop-out rate. Silvio was attending the group for the second year. He joined the group to get help in curbing his impulse to become involved in violent fights, which was uncontrollable the first year and disappeared during the second year. Silvio, like Tonino, dreamed of becoming a professional soccer player. He was a promising athlete until 3 years ago, when a banal accident forced him to stop playing soccer and stopped his dream. With many doubts and conflicts, he had recently started to toy with another dream: to work on television. He started considering this because he is a distant cousin of Costantino, who is very popular with adolescents and starred on Costanzo's *Buona Domenica*, a show which the members of my group followed passionately. On the Sunday after one of our sessions, Silvio was supposed to be on the show in the audience and he said that if Costantino were to try to involve him he was willing to participate in the show. Two

years ago, he told us, Costanzo himself had said to him, when he accompanied another cousin to the show hosted by Maria

De Filippi, that he could make something of himself because he did not follow a particular fashion. "You," he said, "are very original yourself." But Silvio was also afraid of fame. "If I become famous," he would think out loud with the group, "and I make money, then I won't have any whims anymore. I won't live like I do now ... if I start living my life like Berlusconi, for instance, I'll get sick of it because if I want a Ferrari then I can get a Ferrari **You don't have dreams anymore** ... you don't have anything to go for, you've got everything you want." He was also wary of playing a part like his cousin Costantino did at Costanzo's show: "My cousin," he considered, "isn't like that in real life, he doesn't have a steady girlfriend, he's the type who goes from girl to another." Silvio was not like him, he did not seem to be willing to let them manipulate his life to become a television character. When I asked the group if they would go and talk about their life in public he answered firmly that no, he would not talk about his life. "Rather, I'd lie and take the money," he said. During that session, Silvio, driven by his need to identify with the fates of famous people, suggested that we take one minute of silence to remember the singer Gabriella Ferri, who had died a few days before. He then asked himself, moved, why "all the people on the planet who've got money, like Pantani and Gabriella Ferri ... important people who've got it all, go and kill themselves." Sara replied, "If you've got money but you don't have someone by your side, what's the point?"

Silvio responded to Sara's remark saying that it was stupid to think that people kill themselves "because nobody loves them" and made the example of professional soccer players who "instead have someone to love them! A player," he said, almost moved, "has more people who love him than all of us together do." This statement also revealed one of the main reasons why he had cherished the dream of becoming a soccer player: the need, which is so common among adolescents, to feel they are surrounded by the love of many people who are willing to give something important to them, even their life, and make them feel they exist and that their existence means something to them. "If Totti's about to be run over in the street," Silvio observed, "everyone's gonna rush to save him, first of all to save a life, and second of all because if you save someone you become famous ... right?" The doubt (do you become famous or not?), which was turned over to me, the adult present in the room, reflected Silvio's uncertainty and conflict over becoming famous vicariously (through Totti or cousin Costantino of *Buona Domenica*) or by making his own way, pursuing a dream of his own. An adolescent like Silvio, though, believes that a game, played for the sake of playing, can first of all *make people love you* and then make you rich and famous. He said, "If we wanna make money, we've gotta work, get up at 6 in the morning ... instead, they have a good time playing soccer ... I could do that too ... when they go home at the end of the day they've made 10 billion." When Alessio said to him that "that's not a job ... it's a game," and I added, "a game that eventually became a job," Silvio immediately subscribed with that point of view. "Like me," he said, "the day before yesterday I started going to the track to ride my bike." But he

immediately explained why cycle racing could not become his dream. As he did so, he revealed to us his personal story as an adolescent, which was characterized by a broken dream. “I,” he said, “cycle for fun. I couldn’t do it seriously because I have a problem with my left knee and right shoulder! I can’t play soccer either, that’s why I quit ... if I’d kept on playing, I would have really gone far! ... My meniscus is ruined and my shoulder is dislocated!” It had happened for a banal foul against him. His grandfather, who was the manager of a team linked with Roma, could have had the orthopaedic of the Roma team operate on him. “But I refused,” Silvio surprised us, “because I was scared.” Reasoning as a rational adult who is unable to truly believe in adolescent dreams and ignores the underlying emotion that is presented to him, I objected that perhaps Silvio had refused not just out of fear but because he really did not want to become a professional soccer player that much after all. When he added that it happened when he was 13, I commented that at 13 “one does not want to become a soccer player in life and therefore one does not undergo risky surgery.” In replying, Silvio was not misled by my comment as an adult, an adult who had not lived his adolescence much. “I can go ahead and have surgery now [that I’m 17, he meant to say], but when I was 13 they told me, ‘you need surgery’, and at first I said ok, but then a month before the operation I spoke my father and said to him, ‘Hey dad, I’ll have surgery later on’ ... and then when I made my mind up, my shoulder got dislocated at the gym and they told me I’d have to have both shoulder and knee surgery together.”

“And you,” I commented, “said no.”

“No fucking way!” he replied.

He said, “The doctors told me that I shouldn’t do any sports! I should just walk ...”

“But,” I insisted, ignoring the emotion of complete block that he wanted to communicate to me, “this isn’t a life sentence ... it’s just a sentence that prevents you from becoming a professional soccer player or a cyclist.”

“I,” he answered sadly, “played soccer for a lot of years ... I started when I was six. You do the maths. How long is that?”

“It’s a long time.” I counted for him, “from 6 to 14, that makes 8 years.”

“And,” he went on reminiscing, “I wasn’t even 6! One usually starts at 6, but since my grandpa’s the manager of a soccer team, I think I started kicking a ball when I was 5! I was the youngest on the team ... When I was 12 I was already training at Trigoria (the Roma team’s training field, *editor’s note*) ... they’d call us for the game ... then I hurt my knee and I didn’t feel up to it ... but not because I didn’t wanna become ... but because I’m scared” (his shifting to the present tense tells us just how scared he still is).

My need to ask him whether “it was the surgery that he was so afraid of” proved useful because it allowed Silvio to reveal the real reason for his fear. “No,” he answered, “It’s that I would’ve had to have general anaesthesia. When you’re 12 you think, ‘maybe I’ll never wake up.’ When they anesthetized even just my shoulder I screamed that I wanted to stay with my shoulder out of its socket for the rest of my life.”

After admitting this weakness, which was so contradictory compared to his flaunted adolescent omnipotence and to the propensity to risk of a boy who, for a whole year, could only tell us about the fights he got into, Silvio could also confess where his dream had temporarily moved to. He did this by showing himself as a person who is capable of living dreams vicariously, but no longer through his famous distant cousin, rather through a young cousin of his.

“Then there’s my cousin,” he suddenly said. “He’s 10 ... I was his coach for some time ... I was his assistant coach.” He corrected himself at once and specified that he was not assistant coach but rather “his head coach”. This correction revealed Silvio’s conviction that the first and most important person on a team is the coach and that at just 17 one can transform the dream of playing the game out in the field into that of *training someone else*.

Perhaps because I too wanted to hold on to that new dream I observed that, given his situation, he could “be a coach but not a player.”

My comment opened the floodgates of thoughts and emotions. He said, “Now my cousin is really good ... he’s great! He’s amazing! He’s 10 and is taller than me! Maybe he’ll even hit the big time ... unless something hits him! That’s what always happens! For one game, I ... and I wasn’t even supposed to play in that game!”

Talking about that boy had taken him back to the pre-adolescent trauma that he had had the chance to work through for the first time that day, by narrating about himself and his emotions during that group session, where he proved himself capable of bringing out his adolescent *narrative self* (J. Aplomb, 2002) and transforming the “*ignorant emotions*” on account of which he got into fights into *narratable emotions* which were indeed *narrated* to the group that the adolescent Silvio belonged to.

“I guess you must have ...” I tried to reply.

“I’ll never forget that moment,” he said, interrupting me, as if in a dream.

To relieve that pain, which I felt was impending heavily over the entire group, I talked about the famous players who were so driven that they went back to playing.

Silvio threw me off with his remark. “But they were *already famous*,” he said.

I asked him if he meant that “when you’re not *already famous* you’re not that driven because someone like you might not necessarily become a Del Piero?”

I deserved the answer I got from Silvio, which showed how much self-esteem he still had. “I don’t wanna brag or anything ... But for how I played when I was 12 ... now I would beat the shit of Del Piero for sure!” I asked him whether someone had told him that when he was 12.

He answered confidently that “there was ... there was ...”, and I couldn’t help responding that if he was really that good, they should have signed him up with an important team.

He said, “The managers of the Palermo team came to watch me.” He went on to add that whenever talent scouts came to watch players ... he was always among the ones to be evaluated. “Maybe,” he said, “it’s because I was the manager’s grandson, but on our team it was always the same four guys ... then me and another guy had the same

problem ... and one of the other two who's the same age as me plays with the youth league!"

I observed that when an accident like that happens when you are 13, if your parents really want you to become a soccer player, they still have enough influence to convince you to face up to the fear of surgery."

Enrico silenced me, saying, "Maybe there are parents who aren't a pain in the ass and don't want to force their decision on their son!"

"My parents," Silvio added, "didn't tell me 'you must have surgery' or 'don't have surgery'. They said to me, 'if you want our advice, have surgery. But only if you're aware of what that means and of what they'll do to you.'"

"Then," he added, "I decided whether or not to have surgery. I decided not to, and that was that!" Even though it seemed that with these words Silvio had wanted to close the matter once and for all, I felt I needed to ask him whether he had ever regretted the decision he made when he was 13. He admitted that he did. He said, "Now they told me I have no choice, I have to have surgery ... if only I'd known this back then!"

I asked him whether after surgery he would go back to training in order to play at the competitive level.

"Maybe," he replied tersely, "but I'm also aware that there are fewer chances I'll ever become a professional player."

"Because," I suggested, "you're too old now."

"Yes," he admitted with a veil of sadness.

"Those years are gone for you!" I whispered bitterly, almost to myself.

It sounded absurd to me as I said it, but, although Silvio was only 17, already his dream had to move on, though it did not disappear altogether. And this was not only and not really because there was already a young cousin that he trained who was ready to take up that dream and bring it to life, but because a boy like Silvio, unlike Tonino in Carraro's novel, also thanks to his parents, to the social and cultural context surrounding him, but especially thanks to his ability not to ignore his emotions anymore, is capable of keeping alive his ability to dream and proves that he can transit in new dreams when those of his childhood and early adolescence have been shattered.

I made this remark, which was meant to reflect Silvio's conviction that his years as a soccer player were gone, not because I identified with Silvio through the empathic sharing of his experience, but rather for the need to empathically give voice and support to the *self-object* function (in this case, a *mirroring self-object*) that the group was performing at that moment for Silvio and that, generally speaking, every group with an adult therapist I believe performs for its adolescent members. By *self-object* function I mean the function inside the individual that is activated by an object that is hardly or scarcely distinguished from one's self and which can be performed by a person or by a group (C. Neri 1995)¹. By activating this function, I was not trying to

¹ According to Kohut, the self-object is a internal function of the individual that is developed and maintained through the ongoing relationship with an object of the outside world that has the ability to feed it (Kohut H.,1984). According to

deprive Silvio of his dream, suggesting that it was no longer dreamable at the age of 17. Rather, I was empathically sustaining, together with the group which was functioning as Silvio's *self-object*, the ability of his *narrative self* to transit, which allowed him to evolve from the dream of an age (13) to that of another age (17) in which he could represent himself, with his dream, in that boy-cousin.

What I wanted to convey to you through this narration of an adolescent's emotions to a group is the sensation that Silvio's dream is meant not only to live on but is even capable of evolving. It is the possibility of having and cultivating such dreams and allowing young people like Silvio to overcome the irreflexiveness of compulsive *enactments* (*getting into fights* with peers) and the impossibility of being in touch with one's emotions, which are "ignored" by him and by his life context, and therefore *ignorant*, and become capable of playing with them and filtering them, thus succeeding to convey them in a narration shared with the rest of the group.

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Neri, the object of the outside world that feeds the "self-object function" can be a person as well as a group (Neri C,1995).

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