

Discovering the Inner World through Fairy-Tales

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Abstract

We present the clinical work, carried out by a team of therapists with autistic and psychotic children, within a *Fairy-Tale Workshop*. By becoming a container for projections, the fairy-tale, the mediating object of the group, helps provide a sense, a form to sensations-emotions that have not yet become thoughts, but which can later *be named*. It enabled and supported the emergence of symbolic thinking within the therapeutic group. A parallel group work allowed parents to get in touch with the children's inner world, and to consider them no longer as a part of themselves, but as having their own life and potential resources to be developed

Key Words: fairy-tale, symbolic thinking, mediating object

Boredom is the enchanted bird

Hatching the egg of experience

Walter Benjamin (1955)

Introduction

In this paper we will present the clinical work carried out with autistic and psychotic children within a *Fairy-Tale Workshop*: it lasted 5 years and we arranged it following the model devised by P. Lafforgue through his numerous seminars and supervisions. Our aim is to shed light on how the telling of folk fairy-tales belonging to the oral tradition enabled and supported the emergence of symbolic thinking within the therapeutic group. The theoretical background, which we share with P. Lafforgue, is mainly drawn from the psychoanalytical thinking of some post-Kleinian authors who mostly looked into the archaic states of mind; furthermore, we also referred to the experience of P. Privat concerning group therapy with children and to reflections on fairy-tales by B. Bettelheim (1975), by R. Kaes (1996) and the

ideas found in the work of C. G. Jung.

D. Meltzer (1975) describes the internal world as an hypothetical *tri-dimensional space* in which it is possible to work through and contain experiences, as we will later see in a more detailed way when analysing some clinical material. From Meltzer's point of view, autistic states, instead, are linked to a *bi-dimensional* aspect of the mind, i.e. to an absence or flattening of the inner world; this is the result of complex defences such as *dismantling*, which would prematurely annihilate both the capacity for thinking and the pain from which the same defences try to defend the psyche.

Psychotic states instead, according to F. Tustin, (1990) entail confusion between the internal world and the external one, as well as the fragmentation of the psychic experience.

Individual psychic life, in Bion's view (1962b), begins with the relationship between the baby and the mother's mind (or its substitute) which acts as a *container* and, through the *alpha-functioning*, transforms disrupting experiences into more *digestible* ones for the baby's dawning mind. Such function would activate the *innate aesthetic tendencies*, typical of human beings: they express themselves in the desire for knowledge and passionate relationships that represents fertile ground for the development of thought and language.

According to E. Bick's *model* concerning the theme of *psychic skin* (1968), the child would emerge from the relationship with the mother with his/her own *individual skin* and is then able to bear bodily separateness. G. Hagg (1983) and D. Anzieu (1985) imagine an initial *skin in common with the mother*, similar to the cloak, which in certain medieval paintings wraps up both mother and child. Furthermore, Anzieu describes how different types of *sensorial envelops*, provided by maternal care, would contribute to the formation of an *individual psychic skin*; for example the *thermal-tactile envelope*, in relation to the experiences of body contact; the *sound* one, created by the mother's voice and nursery rhymes or lullabies which, in all cultures, they sing to their children; the *olfactive* one, concerning the smell of the mother which the baby already recognizes since the first few weeks of life when he still possesses the sensorial keenness of our primitive ancestors; and finally the *visual* one, fully described by Haag (1989) as an *interchange of looks* which gives the child the feeling of being contained in his/her mother's mind. These beneficial experiences, which will be re-enacted later on through falling in love, have an aesthetic quality and protect the child against the danger of losing the *continuity of existing* (Winnicott, 1970).

Due to an unpredictable interweaving of factors, both constitutional and environmental, children with autism or psychosis have experienced the *common cloak* as being full of lacerations and have taken shelter into a locked world where time has stopped.

There is an old debate about the causes for these disorders Do they have an environmental or constitutional origin? This debate can foster a prejudiced view that mothers are to blame for these disorders. However, this has by now been outdated by a more complex view according to which (Bion, 1995) the concept of causality, appropriate for studying inanimate objects, should be replaced by the concept of the interrelation of different factors, which does not pretend to fully explain the mysteries of the mind. Thus everything would depend on the relationship and harmony established between the child's temperament and the mother's: for instance, it may be that a very vulnerable, uncommunicative child may discourage even a well-balanced mother and attract onto him/herself negative projections, while another infant, constitutionally more able to endure frustrations, may provide an insecure mother with confidence and even be able to overcome severe environmental traumas without becoming insane. However, within certain limits, it is possible that, later on, other significant relationships may reawaken the innate, yet undeveloped human potential of these more fragile children. In our clinical experience it is the group itself which, with the therapists' help and backed by other forms of therapy, takes on this function (comparable to the mother's one) which has been called *gamma function* (Corrao, 1998).

The Fairy-Tale as a Mediating Object

We have been working for many years now in the same rehabilitation centre in the suburbs of Naples and we all came from different training paths; we have often been in charge of therapies for children with severe disorders. The slowness of the progress convinced us that group-work might support therapists, who were often prey to discouragement and boredom, and improve the quality of their relationship with the young patients. But we also thought that a mediating object was necessary, which might promote both sharing on a deeper level and the development of communication. (Privat, 2000).

Each one of us had already broadened his/her knowledge of fairy-tales and we realized that sometimes children freely use, within therapy, fragments of narratives or characters taken from folk fairy-tales. But most enlightening for us was the experience that P. Lafforgue shared with Neapolitan therapists

seven years ago in an ancient convent in Sant'Agata sui due Golfi, near Sorrento: a team of adults watched over a group of children with the mediation of fairy-tales which took on the function of a shared dream, or *screen-memory* (Freud). The experience of fairy-tale workshops seemed at once the right answer to our dilemma. Lafforgue had experimented with them for thirty years in his day-centre in Bordeaux with a great number of autistic, psychotic and deficient patients and had verified their therapeutic validity. He had realised that fairy-tales, with their appeal, attract the attention of children who are locked inside their own world, thus becoming for them the *aesthetic object* they perceived in the mother figure (Meltzer, 1988): this is because it presents itself as a harmonious aggregate of different sensations: the *sound envelopes* represented by the modulations of the narrator's voice, the *visual* one created by the exchange of looks, the *tactile and olfactive* ones provided by the welcoming environment of the workshop. In Lafforgue's view, by becoming a container for projections the fairy-tale helps provide a sense, a form to sensations-emotions that have not yet become thoughts but which can later *be named*, thus resisting the child's tendency to annihilate or *evacuate* them by pathological means.¹

The telling of the tale itself facilitates both the bonding between sensations and emotions, as experienced in the setting, and the link between mind and body; it even strengthens the affective ties both with the therapists and among the children themselves. We will also see something similar to this, but on an adult level, in the parents' group, parallel to the children's, about which we will talk in the last paragraph.

The Team of workers

Ours is an experience of *applied psychoanalysis*: those who work play a therapeutic role but are not necessarily all psychoanalysts: for instance one of us, N., is a psycho-mobility expert and received a psychodynamic training. We have understood, however, how necessary it is for everyone to have capacity for empathy, to feel passionate about fairy tales and games, yet contain personal emotions and, above all, "think under fire", as Bion describes bravely struggling to do during his war experiences.

Since we are dealing with severely ill patients, our team consists of five workers: one narrator, S., two therapists, N. and P., who interact with

¹ W. Bion describes this tendency of the psychotic part of the personality: it leads to the massive expulsion of psychic contents *which cannot be digested* by the mind and which are dispersed into the void and then become persecutors due to the absence of a *mental container* able to receive and transform them. We will see such defence in Marco's and Valeria's cases

children, one observer, who has changed several times in the course of these five years. One of them, C. a Jungian analyst, has continued working with us within the fairy-tales workshop and has collaborated on this paper. The fifth therapist, G., has taken charge of the parallel group of parents.

One might ask why Lafforgue deemed necessary the presence of five adults for a group of four children, instead of one as in the groups proposed by Privat.

We ourselves realised, after an experience conducted by S. for five years with a single therapist and four children, that individual containment is indispensable for severe patients such as these, especially during their unpredictable moments of crisis: fragmentation or abandonment anxieties, which characterize entering a group, and the unavoidable moments of change are particularly intense and destructive², and are almost always expressed in an incomprehensible way and can barely be linked to the event which aroused them.

Though finding out connections between verbal and pre-verbal communications of the individuals and their single stories, the workers during the workshop settings always address their comments to the group as a whole, in order to foster internal cohesion by trying to find links with the fairy tales. Thus they try to focus on the group and on the mediating object, but without ever losing sight of the single child; they mostly attempt to contain what is not immediately clear, as sometimes are the split transferences of the young patients – of which one is not always aware – who at times may prefer one worker and reject another, thus raising havoc among therapists.

The possibility of containing the inevitable difficulties in the collaboration between the therapists is aided by the distinction of roles and by the *inter-vision* meetings, which take place immediately after every workshop setting, together with the observer and the parent therapist, or in some extra after-hours meeting. It is possible there to express and work through the emotions and the tensions experienced by each group in a so-called *transitional area* (Winnicott) and at times discover surprising analogies between the contents brought by children and the ones brought by their parents.

As Lafforgue wrote, the structuring of the workshop, the spaces and times which mark the setting, represents an initial pre-verbal response to the needs of the confused and disorganized child.

²F. Tustin (1990) fully describes the catastrophic anxieties of these children when faced with change

On re-reading the reports of the sessions in the attempt to outline its history, one often gets the same feeling of meaninglessness and chaos which we had already experienced when working with these children, especially at the very beginning. We will see in the clinical material how the mediating object, i.e. the fairy-tale, allowed us to find a language of symbolic images through which therapists were able to make sense of the shapeless feelings present in the group, sometimes expressed only at a bodily level, and to highlight reference points or meaningful metaphors capable of activating some responses.

The Formation of the Fairy-Tale Workshop

The group we would like to talk about is an open group, made up of four children between seven and ten years old who, during the period of the workshop, were either about to complete other types of therapy, such as psycho-mobility and individual psychotherapy, or were still attending horse-therapy sessions.

At the start, in 1998, the four children were:

Roberto, 9, whose autism had turned into a rigid and obsessive organization of personality: he had learned how to speak and how to adjust to the environment – for instance he could ride a horse – but some sort of stereotypy still remained: he was unable to play and dreaded any kind of change. Within the group, in all these years, he has taken on the positive function of remembering those who were absent from the workshop; such a function was very painful for him.

Ada, 8, was very isolated and she too was autistic with a very limited and echolalic language; she had undergone surgery several times and since birth had spent long periods in hospital. She did not yet have control over her sphincters and only ate liquidized food. There have been some improvements over the years: she has, for instance, acquired a motor-sensorial coordination, which emerged during horse-therapy. She stayed with us for three and a half years. She contributed to the group with unpredictable elements of pre-verbal language and some short sentences. Later on she started psychotherapy with C. in joint sessions with her mother.

Marco, 8, survived a twin delivery and was very distressed, with problems of psychotic fragmentation, hallucinations and anorexia. His language was very poor and made up of voices and sentences which were not his. At times, after he started to perceive himself as a real person, he had the function of intense expressiveness within the group.

Piera, 10, came to us one month after the beginning of the workshop and only stayed with us for one year; she was most attached to her mother and suffered from a type of symbiotic autism, without any language (speech) and was unable to use her own hands in an articulated manner. She too, like Ada, could not eat solid food. With us she started saying a few words and scribbling with her own hand instead of an adult's one, to which she had initially held onto as an extension of herself. After leaving she was missed very much by her friends; she became part of an educational project in the Centre.

Later on came Valeria, 8, who arrived immediately before Piera's departure: she too, like Marco, was on the border of infantile schizophrenia with a language made of sentences taken from cartoons and adults. Every now and then the therapists would grasp some more meaningful sets of words and would encourage her to become part of the group from which she kept herself well away. Yet during the three and a half years she stayed with us, she ended up accepting the group and at times would even be its leader. Her friends also experienced her departure as a great loss.

And finally Carlo, 10, was with us in the last two years, after Ada's departure; he had post-autistic problems like Roberto, but his obsessive defenses, which made him unbearable to his family, could help the group. He often took on the function of balance and good sense. He had a sense of time and awareness of the value of rules; we consider these qualities, which set in after autism, not a false self but rather elements of growth, a mental container that sustained it.

We told them the same fairy-tale for all the time we deemed necessary, so that the children could fully understand its meaning and contents. For instance, "The Three Little Pigs" was narrated for the first three years, "Red Riding Hood" for one and a half years and finally, in the last six months, "Hansel and Gretel". These gradually shorter times were due to the increasingly quicker evolution of their capacity to internalize.

We believe that the main improvements, some stages of which we will later describe through some clinical material, were represented by: a) an increase in attention and listening spans; b) the overcoming of problems relating to orality, i.e. food and language; c) the passing from playing activities of the motor-sensorial type to symbolic playing based on the dramatization of the fairy-tale; d) an increased capacity to establish relationships with the others, though with pre-verbal modes; e) accepting the group and internalization of the rules concerning the spaces and times of the workshop; f) the capacity to

take on by themselves small responsibilities in relation to the others, such as “working as the lighting technician”. All these forms of learning contribute to the acquisition of the individual *psychic skin* we wrote about in the introduction.

The First Workshop Session

We will now describe the first session, which already potentially contained all the elements which would characterize this particular group throughout the therapy.

Only Roberto, Ada, and Marco are presents. The fourth child, Piera, will arrive a few months later.

At the beginning the children appear very disoriented. They soon look away from N. who is presenting the new experience as well as introducing them to each other³.

Yet they do show a little curiosity during telling of the story, although none of them ever gets into any eye contact with the narrator (this will only happen one and a half years later).

³In some severely autistic children, looking away and distracting one's attention are examples of the kind of defense which Meltzer called *dismantling* and which occurs in a less intentional way than *attacking the link*.





When lights are dimmed in order to evoke dawn or nightfall, as in the Three Little Pigs, Ada tries to escape from the room, but she is held back and calmed down by N.; she laughs and utters incomprehensible words. When the lights are switched on and the curtain is drawn, the children breathe a sigh of relief, as if waking up out of a bad dream. They are very attentive to the nursery rhymes that mark the beginning and the end of the story. The rhymes will stay the same even when the tale changes, as will “ring a ring a roses” which precedes the end of the session.

A brief comment by P. describes the turmoil in the group and their need to escape; “

“They were probably a little scared when they heard the wolf howling in the dark of the night, they did not want to hear the story.” N. and P. invite them to draw. They hand out wooden tablets of different colours, one each, onto which they lay a paper sheet while sitting on the floor.



In this first session the rivalry (which will disappear after a few weeks) among the young patients manifests itself in the fight for the paper sheets and felt-tip pens, as usually happens with all children. The anxiety-arousing quality of their fighting⁴ pushes the workers to go and get some more sheets and bigger pens in order to calm them down. At first we too feel a little stiff, as if incapable of finding the right words for this first experience of ours.

From the very start we realize that each individual's problems become amplified and transformed by the group, but which also helps discover their meaning.

Roberto wants the purple tablet to draw on and, invariably he will always ask for the same one for the following five years. It evokes in us an impression of bereavement, which is a constant theme in his environment, as we will later

⁴ F. Tustin tries to explain these children's terror relating imaginary rivals (for the possession of the maternal breast) whom would threaten their survival. It is then a much more anguished rivalry than the usual one which is found in groups of children at the beginning of therapy.

learn, but at the same time it expresses an untimely sense of death present in such lively small children as these.

As soon as the attention is drawn away from her, Ada shows similar feelings by continually switching on and off the light, like some sort of swaying between life and death. One of the workers breaks off this bewildering game and tells her that she can be the lighting technician whenever she feels like it (this will only happen two and a half years later). N.'s soothing massage on her feet calms her down and soon after she manages to draw a line on the sheet. Later the group will make such gestures their own (switching on and off the light), before and after every holiday period, to mutely express feelings about separation, experienced as tearing apart the *continuity of existence*. We will later understand that perhaps Ada is communicating in her own way, the intermittent experience of her mother's presence every time she was admitted to hospital during the earliest years of her life.

Marco draws with great difficulty, tears up the sheet on which he has left colorful traces, but the workers still put it in his folder to show him that even doodles may mean something. We will only later understand that he is expressing, more intensely than the others, the fear of being robbed by our looks and attention, of being devoured by our questions and comments on their drawings, or indeed any of their communications.

Roberto, for instance, will always hurriedly answer that his is a "tower". After a few years he will call it a "mountain". Also the other children, in the following sessions, will draw houses with no doors or windows, like his tower, which represents their common fear of relationships. Gradually there will appear some sort of opening, seemingly casual, temporary, but laden with hope.

We are supported, through all this chaos, by the perception that the children seem to have initially grasped the musical aspect of the fairy-tale: one at a time they start crooning the songs from the "Three Little Pigs", while scribbling on their paper sheets.

Roberto, while pacing in a meaningless way up and down the room, tries to walk out the door before the end of the session, as if to escape from the locked tower inside his head, thus expressing, within the context of the group, the sense of a space which is *too full to bear*, saturated with voices, smells and footsteps. The sequences in the narrative about intrusions may be re-evoke other and more confused primitive bodily experiences which have already occurred for them; perhaps these sequences within the tale activate their defense which consists of erasing from the drawings all the doors and

windows which are present in the tales.

The children soon start re-enacting the knocking sound, which suggests the image of somebody asking to get in. Maybe they are asking us to get into our thoughts.

Experiencing the Body and the Tri-Dimensionality

After a few weeks, besides imitating sounds from the tale (Knocking, howling), body fantasies of the anal type start to appear and are expressed through frequent emission of wind or scribbling on the walls⁵ (Ada).

At a certain level, we consider scribbling on the walls as *anal*, like smearing similar to animals marking their territory, but this may also express the need *of sticking* to the surface on which they draw, a level which Meltzer would define as *bi-dimensional*.

A *transitional area* then starts to happen which, which a few months later, will allow us to arrange a schedule for the staging of the fairy-tale, soon after the narration and before the drawings. We use large cube-shaped plastic cushions, used also in psycho-mobility, to build a little house, as well as a piece of cloth for the roof and some rags for dressing up.

⁵ P. Lafforgue has provided an in-depth description of these anal phantasies which he came across in all his workshops when tellina the tale of the Three Little Pigs and which he referred to as the images of expulsion present in the tale.



The staging, carried out by the children themselves with our help, contributed to the increase of their attention span during the listening, just as if it made it easier for them to approach the symbolic element of the fairy-tale. The building of the house, a new object shared by the group, allowed us to better observe the children's relationship with the *third dimension*. The image of the house recalls that of the body which they are rediscovering through their bodily fantasies as full of orifices marking the border between inside and outside.

Someone, like Piera and Ada, are afraid to enter. The former will always find it impossible to enter (as well as to dramatize the fairy-tale) but after about a year she utters a few little words in relation to what is happening in the group. The latter, who will remain longer, will be able to enter the house and, after a long time, even accept a part in the staging.X

The Group Membrane

An important stage in the formation of the group is the one in which the so-called *group membrane*⁶ is created. Such phase enables the establishment of an entity characterized by the sharing of unconscious elements, different from total of its individual members⁷. As we have seen, at times the others later on imitate the gesture of an individual, as an element of a common pre-verbal language, for instance switching on and off the light or a drawing such as one with no doors or windows.

Some very archaic phantoms are shared within the group; at first they are experienced with extreme concreteness, for example the ones which appear in fairy-tales through the images of the wolf or the wicked witch. The reactivation of needs linked to oral dependence evokes the phantom of the devourer and stimulates the opposite need to escape, which we saw in the first session.

It could be said that such problems connected to being devoured have an *organizing function* in the development of thinking within the workshop⁸. They appear very clearly in the pre-verbal communications of Valeria, the young patient who comes in the second year shortly before Piera leaves. She seems acutely to fear, almost explosively, any dependence on the group and the acceptance of its rules, as if *entering it* meant *being devoured by it*. Her defenses consist of continuously attacking the links. Her contradictory and seductive way of establishing relationships and her talking through incoherent borrowed sentences, though with her own passionate emphasis, contribute to making the workshop atmosphere more chaotic but livelier. At times Valeria takes on the leadership – which is positive both for her and the group – and she gets all the others involved in breaking the rules: they roll together over the cushions in the playing area instead of sitting on the bench opposite the narrator during the narration. The workers try in different ways to lead them back to listening, but they stubbornly refuse. We find out we are entering a new phase and we must be very careful and work through the anxiety and the sense of uselessness that we feel.

Privat (2000) believes that the stage during which the young patients determinedly oppose the adults is an extremely important one within the formation of the *group membrane*.

In October of the following year we can retrace, as if in a dance image, the

⁶ See D. Anzieu, 1981b

⁷ See W. Bion, 1961

⁸ P. Lafforgue 1985

representation of such an *imaginary membrane*: it is the moment when the children, whilst waiting for the session, start playing tag and going round in wide circles, like sparrows, all of them running after Valeria into the hall outside the room.

Discovering the Link and the Relationship between Container and Contained

At this point, one and a half years after the beginning, the relationships among the children, who at first seemed to ignore each other, become more passionate and intense and they manifest themselves through primitive modes: there is a great deal of wind emission and burping in the little house in which the fairy-tales of the “Three Little Pigs” is being staged and there is a lot of red coloring in their drawings. Theirs is still *body language* and it appears in their smelling and touching each other, and later on by imitating the mannerisms of an absent member when remembering him. Each one seems to start recognizing his/her own emotions as if *mirroring* each other. For example Roberto, during a session in October of the second year, says: “He is peeing”, while he is about to play the wolf, and P. understands that he is thinking of Ada, absent on that day, who always rushes to urinate when scared of something. He calms down after this comment and plays his role well. We learn from our colleague G. that something similar to this *mirroring* is also taking place in the group of parents.

The relationship of *container-contained* (Bion 1962b), necessary for the development of thought, is implicit in the experience of *tri-dimensionality* and in the setting-in of the *group membrane*. We can see it represented, for instance, in one of Ada’s very primitive games: during some sessions (in the second year), she puts the felt-tip pens back *in* the box and takes them *out* again, and then tries to put a foot in it, as if engrossed in one of her internal explorations while the rest of the group stages the fairy-tale *inside and outside* the little house.

Such *container-contained* relationship within the group is also activated by the workers’ *rêverie*. Another of Ada’s games, repeatedly enacted, consisted of taking the laces *off* of a shoe and trying then to get an adult to put them back *on*: it seemed to us only a stereotype which took her away from the interaction with the others. In a session of *inter-vision* our questions on the personal meaning that shoes had for each of us eased our feeling of boredom about those repetitive gestures and allowed us to approach her primitive world. A few sessions later Ada finally managed to fit a lace *into* the hole revealing that behind that apparently meaningless game, there was the

possibility for a thought: the attempt to create a link.

All that lacing up and unlacing is then taken up by the others, as if it represented the bonds which tie and untie themselves within the group *which contains us*; just like the shoes contain the feet which come and go, the feet of a friend who leaves or somebody else's who arrives.

We have recently learned from C. who had in therapy both Ada and her mother, that the mother had worked in a shoe factory before her baby was born.

The possibility, though intermittent, to perceive the group as a *container* of thoughts allows each person to start and express their own psychic problems: this is the process which E. Bick (1968) defines as the creation of an individual *psychic skin* stimulated by *the group membrane or the common psychic skin*. D. Anzieu (1985)

We will now report two examples of such *use of the group*⁹ on the children's part. One year after the beginning of the workshop there was a sudden, terrible crisis of Marco who, on a Monday, did not want to come to the workshop: he recalls, while crying, the rainy day when his mother took him to the hospital for an EEG. He slurs his words, but in his own voice. Until that moment he had always used somebody else's words, alien and recorded voices with no musicality. He now expresses, also on behalf of the others, the painful understanding of the meaning of the workshop in which one rediscovers the fears, outlined in the fairy-tale, and the anger about still needing help after so many years.

In fact when a breach opens in the wall of their defenses, these children face, in a dramatic way, the questions that the *Homo Sapiens*¹⁰ had to face: the meaning of life and his/her place in the world. This would be, according to Meltzer, the *tri-dimensional aspect* of the mind, the access to which entails intense pain. We will see how terrible it is also for parents to accept this experience.

Another example of the discovery of the group's *containing function* is a session in the third year when Roberto's drawing suddenly changes: no longer any locked tower, but skies with clouds and open spaces and it comes to mind that the three little pigs leave home to get to know the world. After

⁹D. Winnicott (1968) would talk of *use of the object* which corresponds to Bion's *container-contained* model.

¹⁰ As Marie-Lise Roux wrote in a wonderful article "*La contrainte à la représentation*" in *Psychanalyse et Préhistoire*, août 1994

the drawing, shortly before the final *ring-a-ring o' roses*, he too tells us about his problem through a game: he builds a house for himself and shuts himself inside. He seems to be telling us that he does not want to share it with the others. Strangely we all get goose pimples from the fantasy that he might have built a coffin in which to bury himself. Only after a few sessions, during which the game is repeated in a similar way, do we witness a transformation of his autistic shell, previously represented by the usual *tower* in the drawing, and his usual meaningless pacing, as a prisoner, just disappeared. We believe that he wanted to convey the bewilderment he perceived, when imagining the possibility of a larger psychic space, which emerged in the new drawing: a *new idea*¹¹, which escaped his usual control. He drew back from it and took shelter in a new type of shell, represented by the house, from which Marco and Valeria forcefully manage to pull him out. After this session we are exhausted, yet we feel that the enlargement of the inner space and a deeper communication within the group, though harbingers of panic, make us feel more alive. Accepting the mind-body *separateness* entails going through the terror of being born all over again, and Roberto defends himself from it through his game.

After three years the children are no longer afraid of making eye-contact with the narrator, and only at this point she feels she can start adding to the narration the thoughts of the wolf sitting on the chimney top of Jimmy's little house: *he is already imagining how he will eat the three tasty morsels*: the wolf too can have *thoughts*. At times it is possible for the therapists to tell the children that *the wolf is inside of us* and it emerges when we perceive jealousy and anger and feel like beating up the others. The children listen pensively. Previously it would have been impossible to talk to them this way.

At this point we decide it is time to tell a different fairy-tale: this time it will be "Red Riding Hood", in which there are hints of the existence of an inner world: for instance a) Red Riding Hood, once far from her mother, decides to take a different road from the one she promised she would, and b) the wolf pretends to be kind and reassuring, but he is secretly thinking of devouring both the girl and her grandmother.

¹¹ W. Bion (1966), writes about the *new idea* as of an inner experience characterised by strong emotions which breaks into the mental container thus jeopardising it.

Hansel and Gretel and the De-Idealisation of Parents.

During the last year of the workshop we dwelt particularly on the problems involved in separation.

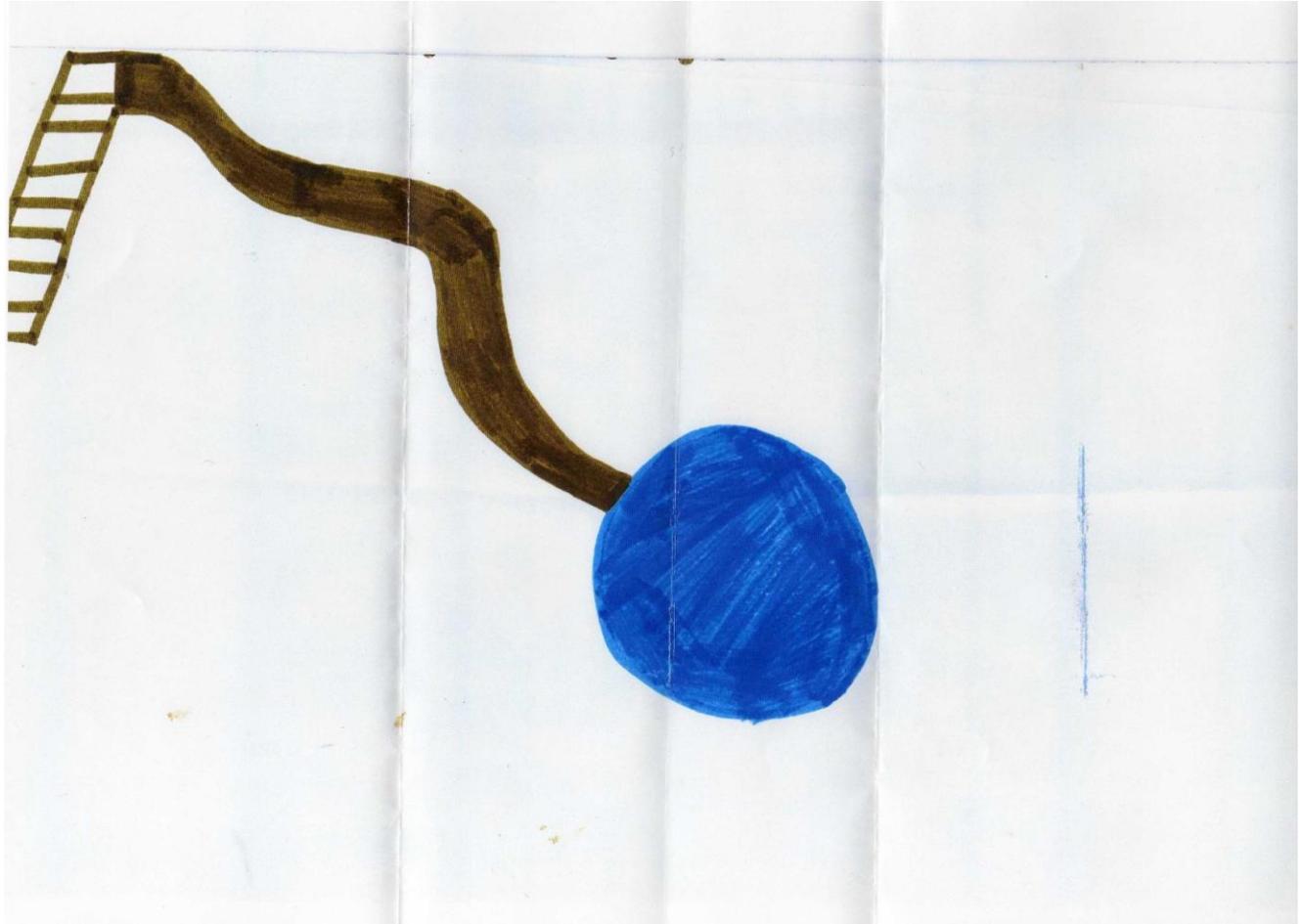
When we decided to tell the story of “Hansel and Gretel” (two children lost in a forest), feelings of abandonment were present in the group and these were due both to Valeria’s sudden departure a few months earlier and to the nearing end of the workshop. Because of the atmosphere, we feared that everything we had worked for had been lost: we again met with defenses such as inertia and lack of attention, which we first faced five years earlier: we were afraid we had to start everything all over again. We too, as workers, were oppressed with feelings of uselessness and powerlessness and made a big effort to acknowledge them, both in ourselves and in the children.

The themes featured in the new fairy-tale are as follows; de-idealization of parents, weaning and the struggle for survival in a world which is very difficult to make sense of. We also continued to work on our thoughts on the ambiguity and complexity of the mind, which we had already started with “Red Riding Hood”. In the latter tale one could already sense the presence of a contradictors mother who warns her child of danger yet by herself, as well as an unrecognizable and disquieting grandmother and finally the wolf disguised as a kind and decent person. In “Hansel and Gretel” adults fiercely let children down, though they manage using their own resources. By then our patient were almost teenagers. In the inertia with which they responded to this tale we perceived, besides a feeling of hopelessness, a new secret struggle against us: we stood for the abandoning parents or the deceiving witch. Only Carlo, who had only been here one and a half years (after Ada’s departure), was able to take on, with irony, the role of director of the dramatization and to get all his friends involved. Finally we joyfully discovered a positive character, the duck, which we had left out at the beginning in order to shorten the tale. The boys often wanted to stage the sung sequence in which the duck, after the witch’s death, ferries the two children across the river in search for the parents whom they were now ready to forgive.

A humble, helpful animal and the sibling bond allow Hansel and Gretel to get out of dangerous situations; no longer figures who lend themselves to being idealized, such as the wise brother in the “Three Little Pigs” or the hunter in “Red Riding Hood”, similar to a good father. Sometimes the boys, stimulated by Carlo, asked each other about their future, thus activating within the workshop the sibling-like relationship, which is present in the tale.

As an example of such change we would like to report one of Roberto’s last

drawings: in it, instead of the usual “mountain”, there was a “swimming pool” – taken from Carlo’s drawings – which one could get into by sliding down a water-chute: we linked it to the river at the end of the tale and it seemed to represent a more vital and welcoming container.



The Parental Group

The therapist of the parental group, by using her own *rêverie*, also established a contact with the patients’ verbal and not-verbal communications; sometimes it was possible to correlate them to similar ones from the tale workshop. The group was mainly made up of mothers.

The therapist’s intention was to build a *transitional space for thinking*: she intended to enhance the more mature and fully developed aspects in the personality of the parents, differentiating them from the more infantile and primitive ones which unintentionally may have colluded with their sons’ or daughters’ pathology, thus interfering with their individuation process.

Group work allowed them to get in touch with the children’s inner world, and to consider them no longer as a part of themselves, but as having their own life and potential resources to be developed.

In the first year of their group there mainly emerged feelings of shame and guilt, together with anguish and fears, which made it difficult to build a therapeutic alliance: coming to terms with one's child's problems meant accepting *one's own* need for help. At the very moment when such a thought dawned on them, fears of manipulation, intrusion and control emerged, similar to the children's most archaic fears of being devoured and which were related to the wolf figure. Only the construction of *a solid stone house*, represented by the *therapeutic alliance*, which gradually developed, allowed all the group members to keep the *persecutory wolfing thoughts* at bay.

In order to work through such themes and build such an alliance, it was mostly necessary to support the mothers' adult capacities and take in the stories being told concerning the relationships with their children. The therapist's comments focused on the on-going progress of the group and linked it to the phantasmal events of each individual story: She would interweave symmetries which helped the establishment of the so-called *group membrane*, which we also saw in the children's workshop. At the same time, as in a benign circle, when the group-space began to delineate as a place for discussion and sharing of the pain, each one was able to discover, less reluctantly, the narcissistic wound of having such a troubled child.

This process was similar to the one we observed in the children's workshop: after the establishment of a *group membrane* there was the possibility of the development of an individual membrane, as psychic container skin occurring.

The story that each mother initially presented only concerned her own child, but it gradually emerged that it was about herself. From there an interweaving between reality and phantasms unravelled, between the real child and the inner one. The language that was being used for such narration was sometimes verbal but more often was the one of the acting-out or dreams.

Gradually the mothers began to listen more profoundly to each other. They were able to understand aspects of the emotions involved in each other's personal histories, and light on unknown sides of each's personality. At times such perceptions were precise, but also distorted by the projection of their own feelings. Through such *mirror-effect* the patient saw also herself, her own displaced part reflected into the others.

Yet it was the difficulty of having to work through this *mirroring process*, arduous to contain and recognize, which prevented Mrs Z. from continuing the therapeutic work at the end of a much-desired pregnancy supported by the group. Probably she felt she had to protect the expression of her own

healthy side from her own destructive qualities, which she had projected and perceived in the others. Mrs Z. did not come back, not even a year after her baby's birth. However the work for years with the group allowed her not to interrupt the bond that her older son had with our workshop: she asked her parents to accompany him there.

The feelings present in the two groups sometimes represented the two sides of the same coin, and talking about them during their *inter-visions* allowed the operators to understand the latent ones of each group: for example, the *phantoms* about greed which had been evident in the three fairy-tales told in the workshop. In the latest stages before the end the food issue reappeared in the group of the mothers; it had been much debated in the previous years when discussing the difficulties they had had in feeding their children. But, while they underlined their children's increased hunger (almost a metaphor for the therapeutic nourishment they had begun to appreciate), their children, during their workshop, expressed, through their inertia, terrible feelings of desolation (which we described in relation to Hansel and Gretel) as if refusing the mental food, by them perceived as too bitter in that particular phase. We were dealing with the same splitting of conflicting emotions, difficult to integrate, that we found in Mrs Z.

From another point of view,¹² – on which the therapists had shed light once they became aware of their counter-transference – the fairy tale proposes a reflection on the positive aspects of separation from parents: it exposes Hansel and Gretel to the dangers of seduction represented by the chocolate house, but it also allows them to mature, to become autonomous, to develop a capacity to use their own resources and to perceive truth. Yet in the final phase of the workshop, after slowly becoming conscious of the pain, signs for hope appeared not only in the parents' group but also within the boys' group, even though many of the problems would remain unresolved.

¹² B. Bettelheim (1975) suggests an interpretation of this fairy-tale in relation to weaning.

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