

Life within death: Towards a metapsychology of catastrophic psychic trauma

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Abstract

In this paper the author offers a phenomenology and a metapsychology for the effects on the mind of catastrophic psychic trauma, defined as the reaction of the psyche to an utterly external event, which the person is helpless to resist, and against which there is no possible defense. The author affirms that the experience of 'infinite affliction' produces a radical break in being which disarticulates the psyche and causes a headlong descent to the most primitive levels of psychic functioning. When there is a complete surrender to the process of disarticulation, it continues until it extinguishes even the most basic level of mental activity, contact with sensation, producing psychic and then psychogenic death. The author then offers a phenomenological and metapsychological analysis of how the process of disarticulation is stopped so that the state of survival is assured, affirming that, faced with this situation of utter emergency, the survival urge instantly mobilizes the organism in furious activity to preserve life and regenerates psychic activity by sensing the ongoing existence of the psychesoma. Then anguish precipitates on to the body and is sensed as psychophysical pain, which diverts conscious attention from the infinite destruction of utter affliction which is thus encapsulated so that, as an experience, it is no longer present to the mind. This assures survival, but it leaves the psyche in a state of non-integration and begins the unending battle for mastery over the deadly inner object, which ceaselessly threatens to become present. This constitutes the precariousness of the state of survival.

Keywords: catastrophic trauma, helplessness, psychogenic death, Muselmanner, symmetry–asymmetry, survival urge, non-integration, omnipotence, self-generation

Psychoanalysts have not been among the principal contributors to the current explosion of the study of what Freud called 'external trauma' (1920). From the psychologists and psychiatrists who have dedicated themselves to studying it we have learned an enormous amount about the effects of trauma on psychological functioning—to give several examples, its epidemiological incidence has been amply studied, as have its effect on neurological and endocrinological functioning and the sequelae of victims' symptoms which go under the name PTSD.¹ But we do not have a structural model of its effects on the mind.

One of the reasons for this is that the psychoanalytic literature tends to use the term trauma in an inclusive sense and so has not focused on this kind of trauma. Anna Freud warned that the use of the term in a sense which is too general could 'in the course of time, lead inevitably to a blurring of meaning and finally to abandonment and loss of valuable concept' (1967, p. 235). She goes on to ask,

Do I mean that the event was upsetting; that it was significant for altering the course of further

development; that it was pathogenic? Or do I really mean traumatic in the strictest sense of the word, i.e., shattering, devastating, causing internal disruption by putting ego functioning and ego mediation out of action? (p. 241).¹

In this contribution I wish to examine trauma in the strictest sense. I will limit my examination to external trauma, focusing on the adult experience of catastrophic psychic trauma, that is, the reaction to an overwhelming event, an event which could not have been imagined, for which the person is totally unprepared, and which he/she is utterly helpless to resist. DesPres, a student of the Holocaust, gives an image of the complete helplessness produced by the traumatic situation: ‘the first condition of extremity is that there is no escape, no place to go except the grave’ (1976, p. 7). That is, it is a death experience². I will attempt to describe catastrophic psychic trauma—its phenomenology—and to present a metapsychological analysis of its effects on the mind.

For lack of space, I will limit my exposition to the moment in which the trauma occurs and to the immediate reaction to it. I will use victims’ accounts of one of the most extreme events in our recent history, the Nazi extermination camps, as the background of my analysis. My hope is that the most extreme form is also the most paradigmatic and that we can study it profitably as we see it writ large, but my intent is to evolve a general model of the effect of external trauma on the mind.

The phenomenology of catastrophic psychic trauma and psychogenic death

In dynamic terms, we might define catastrophic psychic trauma thus: the utterly external event (Grotstein, 2000, p. 51) perforates the psyche, which is helpless to resist it but cannot contain it. In Blanchot’s words, this is ‘the silent and disastrous affirmation of the outside’ (1986, p. 5). The image which best portrays the reaction to the penetration is that of an explosion. In so far as an explosion disintegrates whatever is in its epicenter, it cannot be perceived or experienced or thought for there is nothing left to do so. Another way of saying this is that there is an utter absence, a radical break in being, an instant in which nothing exists. We might say that this is the experience of the end. Grotstein calls this the ‘pure or absolute traumatic state’ (1990, p. 38) or primary meaninglessness, where the ability to encode experience is for an instant rendered totally inactive. Winnicott speaks of ‘phenomenal death’ (1989, p. 93) and points to the paradox, which is at the heart of the trauma reaction when he affirms that phenomenal death is ‘death as a phenomenon but not as the sort of fact that we can observe’ (p. 93). Blanchot provides a metaphor for this paradox: it is an experience which ‘ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact’ (1986, p. 1), or a non-experience, ‘that which, in other words, cannot be forgotten

¹ See, for example, Yehuda and McFarland (1997) and Horowitz (1999) for a good survey of current work on trauma. The literature is practically infinite.

² The movement to a more stringent definition of trauma is reflected in the change in the official psychiatric definition of a traumatic experience. In the *DSM III*, trauma is defined as produced by ‘a recognizable stressor that would evoke significant symptoms of distress in almost anyone’ (1982, p. 111). In the *DSM IV*, the definition is more precise: ‘(1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others; (2) the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror’ (1994, p. 209).

because it has always already fallen outside memory' (p. 28).

We can take the model of the intrapsychic effects of trauma, which Freud evolved in *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety* (1926) as the starting point for our discussion. For Freud, a trauma occurs whenever the ego is helpless in the face of a situation that endangers it, that is, when the 'dreaded economic situation' produced by a 'stimulation which cannot be mastered or discharged' occurs (p. 137). The prototype of the danger situation is the vast disturbance of birth; the infant who has no ability to master the growing tension due to unsatisfied need is in an analogous condition. Later, in a situation of danger, the ego remembers and expects to repeat the reaction to earlier traumas. Then it attempts to bind the stimulation by producing the anxiety which was the original reaction to danger, this time as a signal for help: the reaction to the danger situation which was experienced passively by the ego is repeated actively in the hope of influencing its outcome. In other words, for Freud, the crucial question is whether or not the 'motor helplessness of the ego'—the inability to avoid the trauma which is the essence of the traumatic situation—becomes 'psychical helplessness' (p. 168), or the inability to structure a defense which can remove the ego from the situation which threatens to overwhelm it. If no defense is possible and the stimulation cannot be mastered or discharged, then a trauma occurs. I propose that Freud's model can serve as a basis for a discussion of adult trauma: when the traumatic event encounters an utter absence of defense and total psychical helplessness is established in the mind, then the acute trauma state I portrayed above occurs. My task in this paper will be to analyze the effects of this state on the mind of the adult victim of catastrophic psychic trauma.

From the work of Spitz (1965), we know that the danger of the traumatic state can be extreme: for example, in the case of the infants he observed who were subject to prolonged neglect, they suffered marasmus, hospitalism, anaclitic depression. According to Krystal, the severe developmental arrests this produces are irreversible because, 'if this infantile emergency pattern goes on for an appreciable period of time', it permanently alters the functions of the body: 'the child's pleasure and pain regulatory centers, including those for vital functions, are modified' (1988, p. 147). As Spitz showed, in extreme cases, neglect can lead to the extinguishing of vital functions, that is, it can produce psychogenic death.³ In his theory of primitive mental activity, Gaddini formulated a metapsychological explanation of what Spitz investigated phenomenologically: he asserts that in the period immediately following birth, 'processes ... are intrinsically elementary [and] do not yet call for mental structure' or 'an ego, however primitive' (1992b, p. 198). In Winnicott's terms, 'we have not yet reached a stage at which there is a place to see from' (1988, p. 131). That is, the psychic regulatory mechanisms for restoring homeostasis have not yet

³ Krystal cites one of the most tragic examples of this reaction. Between 1784 and 1838, 146,920 out of a total of 183,955 new born foundlings died at the University of Vienna Children's Hospital (1988, p. 147). In a personal communication, Grotstein reported attending a lecture by Spitz at the University of Pennsylvania in which Spitz 'revealed—using x-rays and post-mortem pathological studies—that most of the foundling home children he had studied in French West Africa had died by the age of four—of advanced deterioration of all tissues of their body including senile brain changes, arteriosclerosis, etc.'

been formed so that the new born cannot defend itself against an accumulation of tension. In this stage of mental development, if the accumulated energy that is normally discharged at regular intervals through coordinated oral activity is not discharged externally (through sucking) 'it will tend to discharge itself internally ... [which] is bound to cause, in the early period of life, direct and unorganized organic responses: that is, more or less serious functional disturbances at the organic level' (Gaddini, 1992a, p. 38). That is, like Spitz, Gaddini affirms that the response of infants to the repeated experience of undischarged tension before they possess the internal organization that enables them to discharge it through purposeful, coordinated activity can be an 'uncontrolled, self-destructive organic pathology' (Gaddini, 1992e, p. 173).

All of this is well known. What is less well known but relevant for our discussion is that the extreme outcome of the adult trauma reaction can also be psychogenic death. Krystal affirms that psychogenic death can occur if the victim of catastrophic trauma completely surrenders to the situation in which no action is perceived as possible. If this surrender occurs, he/she falls into a state of immobility (catatonia), and abandons all life-preserving activity. He calls this a 'potential psychological "self-destruct" mechanism' (1988, pp. 143–4) and affirms that, once the process of total surrender starts, it is no longer voluntarily terminable but may only be stopped by the intervention of an outside caretaker (p. 164), and that, if this does not happen, the victim will die.⁴ I assume psychogenic death as the most extreme outcome of catastrophic trauma and will attempt to provide a metapsychology, first, for the trauma reaction that results in psychogenic death and, afterwards, for survival. But since psychogenic death is virtually impossible to observe on a phenomenological level, I would like to illustrate it with descriptions that have come to us from survivors of the Nazi extermination camps, where it occurred on a massive scale. Over and above those who were immediately selected for the gas chambers, a large percentage of inmates gave up and died within days of their arrival at the camps. Others survived but later were psychologically annihilated before they died physically. They were called the *Muselmänner* or in Bettelheim's words, 'walking corpses' (1960, p. 151). Levi describes them as those who 'through basic incapacity, or by misfortune, or through some banal incident ... were overcome before they could adapt' (1979, p. 96). They no longer engaged in life-preserving activity, no longer conserved their energy or tried to find food (a necessary activity for persons

⁴ Psychogenic death is a phenomenon which for the most part has gone unstudied, but it is much more common than we recognize and would merit further study. Krystal quotes the coroner of the City of Baltimore: 'Every year men die after suicide attempts when the skin has scarcely been scratched or only a few aspirin tablets have been ingested' (1988, p. 144). Hospital workers also witness psychogenic death: they successfully treat people for non-lethal conditions who then inexplicably die. For example, in a personal communication, when I questioned Dr Christopher Haughn, a surgeon at Akron City Hospital, he immediately thought of several cases of patients who had died of inexplicable causes after successful surgery during the previous year and was quite sure that, if he put his mind to it, he could think of more. All of them had been autopsied, and no organic explanation for death had been found. Several of them had communicated the fact that they knew they were going to die several days before they did. There are many literary portrayals of psychogenic death. It is the theme of Melville's short story 'Bartleby', and numerous other literary characters go to psychogenic deaths: to name only a few, Shakespeare's Ophelia, Richardson's Clarissa and Emily Brontë's Catherine and Heathcliff. See also Stern (1951a, 1951b and 1968), Coolidge (1968), Engel (1971) and Dimsdale (1977).

who were performing exhausting physical labor on a few hundred calories a day); they no longer avoided blows; and they no longer looked at the other prisoners or their surroundings (Krystal, 1968, pp. 34–5; Niederland, 1968, pp. 64–6). Even the faculty of perception was destroyed: they no longer avoided the people or objects that lay in their path. They were, indeed, walking corpses, for, like corpses, they could be looked at but could not look back. This psychic death was recognized by the other prisoners as the sign that physical death was imminent, and their destiny was so threatening that they were universally avoided.

Their life is brief, but their number is endless; they, the Muselmanner, the drowned...They crowd my memory with their faceless presences, and if I could enclose all the evil of our time in one image, I would choose this image which is familiar to me: an emaciated man, with a drooping head and sagging shoulders, on whose face and in whose eyes there is not a trace of thought (Levi, 1979, p. 96, translation modified).

In psychological terms, Levi's description makes it clear that 'the eclipse of the word' (1988, p. 79), the absence of any 'trace of thought' (1979, p. 96) shown by the Muselmanner was not simply a blockage of the passage from inner to outer, from thoughts to spoken words but a destruction of all mental activity and hence of all individuality, subjectivity or personal being. Hence the narration of this state from within is impossible, and Levi can only describe it because he has not lived it. 'When the destruction was complete, what had been accomplished was not recounted by anyone, just as no one ever returned to tell the tale of his own death' (1988, p. 64, translation modified). The Muselmanner were 'disintegrating' (1979, p. 95), and their state 'signalled the approach of definitive indifference' (1988, p. 79), after which physical death was inevitable.

Catastrophic psychic trauma and the metapsychology of psychogenic death

Taking psychogenic death as the most extreme outcome of the catastrophic trauma reaction, I will now attempt to provide a metapsychological analysis of the entire traumatic process up to psychogenic death. As we have seen, the reaction to the traumatic event in experiential terms is paradoxical (it is an experience which cannot be experienced), and Matte Blanco's metapsychology can provide us with a way of explaining how this is possible. First, we must note that we are describing it as a process or in spatial-temporal terms, which is necessary to think about it. But an explosion is not an event which is a process. The closest we can come to rendering it accurately is to say that, from the point of view of experience, it happens in an instant. Or, more accurately, we might say that the explosion does not happen; it is. Or, to use Blanchot's paradox, 'something which never takes place happens nonetheless' (1986, p. 14).⁵

⁵ Matte Blanco has described this kind of psychic event: 'we find that at a certain moment of time we do not find it [in consciousness], it is not "there" and at the next moment it is already "there". It is an illusion to think that it took place or developed "passing" from one moment to another; it simply made its appearance without the mediation of time' (1988, p.132). According to him, this is the characteristic of all deep psychical processes, such as projection. I would ask the reader to bear in mind that I will of necessity continue to reason in temporal terms about an event that is not a process.

This would situate it in the realm of sensation-feelings which tend toward limitlessness, or infinity, which Matte Blanco has theorized in the following way. Perception and logical thought are located in the spatial-temporal dimension: we perceive entities localized in space and think thoughts which follow one another temporally. In other words, we can perceive and think about things which are distinguishable from each other. On the other hand, sensation, which can be localized (as, for example, pain in a tooth), tends to expand until it is no longer localized (as anyone who has suffered from toothache can witness). The same can be said for emotions.⁶ That is, sensations and emotions have their roots in levels of unconscious psychic functioning where the differences, distinctions and separations to finite human thought and perception gradually dissolve until the hypothetical state of indivisibility (or infinity) is reached. An emotion is by definition unperceivable and unthinkable when it is infinite (or, in Freud's terms, completely unbound): that is, I cannot feel it to be my experience, for my experience can only be of what is finite and differentiated. Nothing can 'contain' infinity. In Matte Blanco's words, 'when we face emotions... of an intensity which is felt as tending towards the infinite... the experience of emotion leads one to feel the possibility of a catastrophe, of disintegration' (1988, p. 140). It is my thesis that the traumatic explosion totally breaks the bounds that contain or limit the anguish that is the reaction to the violent event, so that the infinite emotion instantaneously disintegrates the mind. If we think of infinite affliction (Blanchot, 1986, p. 25), it would be so unlimited that it would be completely unlocalized and uncontained. This means that it would be everything and everywhere, so that as an experience it could no longer be registered consciously because, being everything and everywhere, there would be nothing outside it which could register it as experience. In Blanchot's words, this is 'unmanifest anguish' such that 'were you in anguish, you wouldn't be' (1986, p. 11), or in Matte Blanco's terms, this is an experience which is 'alien both to thinking and to feeling ... it hangs in a state of suspended animation in no man's land' (1988, p. 81). In other words, the infinite emotion destroys the internal-external duality on which the existence of the 'I' is predicated. This means that the external event and the internal event are simultaneous, synchronous or the same thing, or that there is no longer an outside from which it came or an inside which can register it. Yet another way of saying this is that, if activity in the spatial-temporal dimension of perception or thought is a basic characteristic of the conscious mind, then the explosion, which renders the psyche inactive, cannot be registered in consciousness. It follows that emotion, thought and memory can only survive if the experience of infinite affliction is not present to the mind so that, even at the instant of its occurrence, it cannot be felt or thought and so cannot be remembered as experience.

⁶ According to Matte Blanco, deep and primitive emotions imply: '*generalisation of the characteristics or features attributed to the object so that all features of this type come to be contained in it; maximisation of the magnitude of these characteristics; and, as a consequence of both, irradiation from the concrete object to all others, which in this way come to be represented in it*' (1975, p. 243). The end point in this process is the absolute indivisible mode 'where everything is everything else' (1988, p. 54) or where time and space cease to exist and whole and parts become equivalent.

We cannot imagine an emotion which is infinite, but only one which is in the process of breaking its bounds. In the case of catastrophic psychic trauma, we might imagine it as an immense tidal wave of anguish which mounts and mounts and which will overwhelm, sweep away and destroy everything if it cannot be stopped.⁷ This experience is utterly unbearable. But, although we must think about catastrophic psychic trauma in temporal terms, it is not a process. That is, the impact of the traumatic event is not at first resisted until its action finally perforates the 'protective shield' (Freud, 1920). It is an absolute sudden absence, an instantaneous irresistible proliferation of affliction that nothing stops.

Given the human capacity to erect defenses against painful experience so that it is repressed (the Kleinian oeuvre, for one, is a monumental exploration of this capacity), we can only think that if the mind could stop the anguish, it would. We must therefore deduce that, since nothing stops it, there is nothing which can start into action and move to contain the emotion, or to divert it, or to stop it. That is, a state is established in the mind where there is an absolute absence of defense, an extremely archaic state of the mind, before 'I', even before the sense of self, a state of abject helplessness. Matte Blanco's metapsychology gives us a way of conceptualizing how this reproduction of the archaic trauma state occurs: the traumatic event is lived as symmetrical to primitive traumas where the organism has undergone an experience which endangers its existence without having the capacity to structure a defense. That is, the adult experience of catastrophic psychic trauma is not similar to (and therefore slightly different from) these archaic death experiences. Rather, it is catastrophic because, even when it does not involve a direct threat to life, it is lived as symmetrical to or exactly the same thing as the earlier experience, and thus it produces exactly the same reaction: now, like then, there is nothing to stop the proliferating lethal emotion.

This does not mean, however, that psychic activity is halted tout court, as is witnessed by the fact that consciousness (or ego functioning) can be continuously active even at the moment of the event. True, it can be lost momentarily, or it can be altered and result in perceptual distortions which bear witness to the fact that there has been a blow to the spatial-temporal dimension of consciousness. This is true because if, on the one hand, the explosion precipitates the mind into the infinite (or, what is the same thing, the null) dimension, on the other hand, this psychic explosion occurs in a body which is not exploded by the event—for it happens to a mind which indwells in a soma which continues to register the external world through the senses, asymmetrically.⁸ This means that the explosion is at the same time both total or infinite and limited and discrete and this is the reason why, although it destroys everything, it also leaves everything intact. Blanchot states the paradox thus: 'being lacks without giving place to not-being' (1986, p. 18) and 'one dies unphenomenally, unbeknownst to all and to oneself, wordlessly, without leaving any trace and thus

⁷ In Freud's terms, it is a 'constantly increasing instinctual demand' (1926, p. 144), before which the ego is helpless.

⁸ In Matte Blanco's thought, asymmetry presupposes the spatial/temporal dimension, is concerned with differences between objects, and respects the principles of causality and non-contradiction.

without dying' (p. 32).

If we translate this into dynamic terms, the action of the explosion on the mind is to disintegrate it: in other words, psychic structure is disarticulated so that the parts are no longer in relation to each other and functioning as a whole. As we saw above, this can be visualized as an instantaneous headlong descent to the most primitive levels of psychic functioning.

This view of the action of the traumatic event on psychic structure leads us to an understanding of psychogenic death. If there is a complete surrender to the descent, no rearticulation of the self is possible from within, for the primitive condition of absolute helplessness is established in the mind. In other words, the survival urge⁹ is inadequate to the task of maintaining life and succumbs. We might say, with Freud, that it can no longer contrast the 'inertia inherent in organic life' (1920, p. 36). This means that psychogenic death occurs when the survival urge, whose task in structural terms is to preserve the basic unity (or oneness or articulation), which is the primary characteristic of the self, is unable to do so. This would indicate that the psyche-soma is no longer invested libidinally and so the self cannot resist the process which disarticulates it. We might imagine this by saying that the self has given up on the task of combating the effect of the explosion. Then the creative energy which has animated the psychological matrix of the mind (Ogden, 1986) abandons it, and the matrix, the ground of its being, dissolves, leaving the psyche-soma to fall toward death.

In other words, if the process of disarticulation cannot be stopped, the action of the explosion continues until it extinguishes even the most primitive level of mental activity, which is contact with sensation (Gaddini, 1992e; Matte Blanco, 1988; Tustin, 1986). Then, although the body momentarily survives, it is lost to the mind or, rather, there is no mind to perceive it.¹⁰ In other words, the self has no felt existence and therefore does not exist. Gaddini provided an image for this process: it is a collapse into the 'gigantic, monstrous, and all-enveloping non-self' (1992c, p. 112), where the self is dispersed and disappears. This is psychic death. Physiological survival cannot continue after psychic death for, when the process of disarticulation is not stopped, it continues until it involves organic functions which are also disarticulated;¹¹ this is the 'uncontrolled, self-destructive organic pathology' (Gaddini, 1992e, p. 173) which is the response of the organism when it is unable to

⁹ I follow Gaddini in using the term 'survival urge' rather than life instinct (or drive). After Winnicott and in contrast with Klein, Gaddini asserted that in the period immediately following birth, 'processes ... do not yet call for mental structure, and still less for an instinctual activity and con instinctual experience' (1992b, p. 198). Therefore, in the state of complete helplessness, before the structuring of psychic regulatory mechanisms, we cannot speak of drives, at least in the sense Freud uses the term in 'Instincts and their vicissitudes', because there can be no 'psychical representative of the stimuli originating from within the organism' (1915, p. 122). Winnicott, too, noted the need for a term that would 'go back to the impulses of the foetus, to that which makes for movement rather than for stillness, to the aliveness of tissues and to the first evidence of muscular eroticism' (1975, p. 216). He used the term 'life force'.

¹⁰ Grotstein affirms something similar when he says that one way 'to combat this infinite emotional turbulence [is] by obliterating either the perception of the experience or the mind that cannot bear the experience' (2000, p. 297), although he is talking about the genesis of psychosis.

¹¹ I am indebted to Luigi Scoppola (personal communication) for this idea of the psychophysical process that leads to death.

organize even the most primitive psychic defense. This leads to psychogenic death.

The phenomenology of survival

But most victims do not die: after the explosion comes survival. We might use another of Blanchot's paradoxes to portray the state of the survivor of catastrophic psychic trauma: he/she is one who has 'disappear[ed] without dying (or die[d] without disappearing)' (1986, p. 119). I would now like to examine the mechanisms that enable the destroyed to survive. But, in order to understand them metapsychologically, we must observe them phenomenologically, and accounts of the Holocaust in which extreme experience has found representation can help us do this. In his accounts of Auschwitz, Levi returns again and again to an image which represents the sensation that the self is disintegrating: the inmates live on the verge of collapsing into 'the dark and the cold of a sidereal space' (1979, p. 62, translation modified) of cosmic solitude, empty of anything human. The 'unceasing apprehension that polluted sleep and had no name' of the victims of the Nazi extermination camps is 'the atavistic anguish ... of a deserted and empty universe crushed under the spirit of God, a universe from which the spirit of man is absent: not yet born or already extinguished' (1988, p. 65, translation modified). We might see this as the most primitive experience imaginable; it recalls Gaddini's description of the helpless new born's 'sensation of a separate self that is fragile and whose boundary is uncertain ... and that of a dark and limitless external space in which it is possible to be obliterated for ever' (1992e, p. 165). But the inmates' anguish, however painful, is a sensation-feeling registered by an 'I' and therefore, in Matte Blanco's terms, is asymmetric or finite. Therefore it is a sign of the continuing existence of the self, and we might say that it is a defense against disintegration. In *If this is a man*, Levi recounts the definitive nightmare dreamed by Auschwitz inmates which represents the process of disintegration and how it is stopped. In 'shapeless nightmares of unheard-of violence' (1979, p. 69) they dream of themselves as:

... another symbolic procession: it is us again, grey and identical, small as ants, yet so huge as to reach the stars, welded together, countless, blanketing the plain as far as the horizon; sometimes fused into a single substance, a horrifying mixture in which we all feel trapped and suffocated; sometimes marching in a circle, without beginning and without end, with blinding vertigo and a sea of nausea rising from the praecordia to the throat (1979, p. 68, translation modified).

We can see that this nightmare portrays a process which, if unchecked, will lead to the final disappearance of the dream 'I'. The dreamer is unable to maintain the sense of the basic unity of his self: he is dissolving into identity with his fellow prisoners, who take on the characteristics of infinity (they are either 'fused into a single substance' or 'small as ants, yet so huge as to reach the stars', 'countless' and 'without beginning or end'). This process of dissolution (or the failure of asymmetric perception) threatens to engulf the dreamer, to blind and suffocate him; surrender to it would be the beginning of the end, for a blinded self which is suffocating would be unable to protect itself.

But the dreamer does not surrender. The scriptwriter/director of the dream (the 'dreamer who dreams the dream' in Grotstein's terms, 2000) produces the sensation of nausea, which is potentially infinite ('a sea') and therefore overwhelming, but in the dream is limited and contained in the throat. This nausea is the most primitive possible defense against disintegration, the registering of a psycho-physical sensation. Thus it serves to recreate the sensation of an inside that is separate from the outside and is therefore the sign that the dream 'I' continues to exist. This forces (and allows) the dreamer to awake from the nightmare and to return to the 'I' who registers that the dream has occurred.

Levi then goes on to describe another dream which we might see as a more evolved defense against dissolution, the defense of incessant mental activity which destroys sleep and torments nights at Auschwitz.

We try in vain, when the nightmare itself or our discomfort wake us... to defend sleep from their intrusion: but as soon as we close our eyes, we feel our brain start up, beyond our volition; it knocks and buzzes, and, incapable of rest, it fabricates phantasms and terrible signs, and endlessly shapes and agitates them in a grey fog on the screen of our dreams (1979, pp. 68–9, translation modified).

Here the mind is permanently mobilized to defend survival: against the will of the inmates who want only to sleep, it continuously generates 'phantasms and terrible signs' which keep returning the dreamers to the waking state, where 'I' exist and perceive that I exist. The self, threatened with annihilation, will not let 'me' disappear for more than a moment, not even to go to sleep. The fact that this incessant activity is a torment bears witness to the ferocious, ruthless and automatic nature of the survival urge when it is operating in extreme conditions. Levi himself found this 'astonishing' (1979, p. 62).

In one of the volumes of her account of her imprisonment at Auschwitz, the French resistance fighter Charlotte Delbo describes the experience of the well-known traumatic reaction of numbing and intrusion in a way that can help us understand it structurally.

Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self... I feel that the one who was in the camp is not me, is not the person who is here, facing you. No, it is all too incredible. And everything that happened to that other, the Auschwitz one, now has no bearing upon me, does not concern me (1985, pp. 2–3).

While the skin enclosing the memory of Auschwitz protects her 'present self' from its ravages, Delbo's memory of the catastrophe is 'external', and she remembers the experience as impossible: 'that is why I say today that while knowing perfectly well that it corresponds to the facts, I no longer know if it is real' (p. 4).¹²

¹² This reaction is common to survivors of catastrophic events. Levi wrote that 'today, at this very moment, as I sit writing at a table, I myself am not convinced that these things really happened' (1979, p. 109). Or as Sigmund W, a survivor of Blechammer, Gross Rosen, Buchenwald and Dachau, put it, 'It can only be told, I think it is important to be told, but it cannot be felt, it cannot be experienced. I cannot even experience it' (quoted in Langer, 1991, p. 142). Or as Leon H, a survivor of Auschwitz, said, 'Who will believe it? Nobody believes it. Because I don't believe it myself' (p.94).

In other words, the constitution of the 'impermeable skin' isolates Delbo from the experience of the catastrophe so that it is not present to her mind, and she can only remember it from a distance. In our terms, this indicates that she has not surrendered to the trauma experience. But the impermeable skin that separates her 'present self' from the felt memory of her experience is a fragile container. 'Alas, I often fear lest it grow thin, crack, and the camp get hold of me again' (p. 2). In fact, a skin barrier can leak or break and, when it does so, what Delbo calls 'deep memory' or 'the memory of the senses' which 'preserves sensations, physical imprints' (p. 3) erupts and disintegrates her anew. She describes this state:

The suffering I feel is so unbearable, so identical to the pain endured there... that I feel it through my whole body which becomes a mass of suffering; and I feel death fasten on me, I feel that I am dying (1990, p. 3).

The metapsychology of survival

We are now able to venture a metapsychological explanation of the processes of the mind that permit survival, for it is my contention that, although Delbo is describing retraumatization by memory, nevertheless she and Levi enable us to get close enough to the reaction to the traumatic moment to be able to think about it.

As we saw above, the impact of the catastrophe explodes the psyche and disarticulates its organization, precipitating the mind to the most primitive state of mental activity. If complete surrender to this process does not occur, then the furious activity of the survival urge bridges the gap in which the self and the world¹³ were utterly absent and permits the constitution of a barrier against the definitive loss of the self. We might portray this experience thus: within the self, paralyzed by pain and immobile with terror, the life force, beyond thought and beyond volition, instantly mobilizes the entire organism in furious activity to preserve life.

In the most primitive state, according to Gaddini, the 'basic mental organization [is] magically auto-sufficient and validated by the prevalence of bodily functioning' (1992d, p. 129) (or, as Tustin put it, "the early ego is an auto-sensuous ego" [1986, p. 44]). If we accept this analysis, it follows that in survival after catastrophic psychic trauma, the mind, impelled by the urge to protect survival in a situation of utter emergency, halts the process of disarticulation by sensing the on-going existence of the psyche-soma. In this state, experience is the sensation of unbearable psycho-physical pain. We have seen Delbo's portrayal of the 'memory of the senses': 'I feel [pain] through my whole body which becomes a mass of suffering; and I feel death fasten on me, I feel that I am dying' (1990, p. 3).

In *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety* (1926), Freud had indicated that it is the arousal of the 'pleasure-unpleasure agency' which gives the ego 'the power to arrest the process' (1926, p. 144) which results in helplessness. If we go back to the image of the tidal wave of infinitely proliferating anguish that mounts and mounts until it threatens to overwhelm, sweep away and destroy the mind if it cannot be stopped, we can understand the necessity for this reaction and how it functions at the moment of

¹³ Or inner objects, the living sense of the presence of the self and others.

the trauma. Psycho-physical pain arrests the infinitely proliferating anguish because it attracts attention, impels attention, necessitates attention; this automatically diverts awareness from infinite mental pain and focuses it on psycho-physical pain which, while unbearable, is not utterly so since it can be sensed, which means that it is limited and contained by the body and then registered by an 'I'. This reroots the mind in the body and halts the fall towards death. In Matte Blanco's terms, pain starts a process which restores asymmetric perception.¹⁴

For, unlike the pain of the moment of impact of the catastrophe, which was limitless and therefore literally unbearable, this pain has a limit. In her description, Delbo calls this limit death. In other words, the death which Delbo feels fastening on her is not the death of her body, which is unthinkable, but the sensation that the state of pain which threatens to become infinite and destroy her can end. Thus, pain bears witness to the continued existence of the self: the sensation of pain is a sign that the body is still alive and that the mind perceives it. Another way of saying this is that the pain which violently forces itself into consciousness automatically validates the existence of the internal world and thus provides confirmation of the continuing in being of the self. In this state of pain and terror, the 'I' ceases to function except on an extremely rudimentary level: the executive functions of the 'I' are in abeyance. Freud explains this in economic terms: the inhibition of the ego occurs 'when [it] is involved in a particularly difficult psychical task' because it 'loses so much of the energy at its disposal' (1926, p. 90). We might portray the experience of this state in the following way: I lose myself as I know myself and disperse leaving only a pinpoint of myself which possesses consciousness of myself although the rest of myself is not lost altogether because I sense its existence. I am in utter pain, but my pain is also dispersed outside but near me. My ability to think and feel and do is in abeyance, although I remember that I know how to think and feel and do.

If we think of this state in Winnicott's (1965, 1989) and Gaddini's (1992d, 1992e) terms, it is similar to the state of non-integration in which only a primitive ego remains; the activity of the ego in this state consists in the registration of sensory experience and this activity tenuously holds the self together. This return to the state of non-integration is the symptom of the frantic effort to prevent a catastrophic collapse. As we saw above, survival depends on halting the fall toward death by mobilizing the defenses of the mind in its most primitive state. This is the state in which the illusion of magical omnipotence obtains. The illusion of magical omnipotence is proper to the infantile stage of non-integration and the environment protects it by responding to the infant's needs so that it can have the experience of omnipotence (or primary creativity, or not needing anything it cannot provide for itself so that survival is guaranteed) and go on being in peace without facing too often the primeval terror (Tustin, 1986) of its abject helplessness, its absolute dependence.

¹⁴ Matte Blanco theorizes the process I am discussing thus: there is 'a very fleeting instant of... "becoming aware" ... when sensation is in consciousness in a naked state, not clothed in ... propositions, not even rudimentary ones. But... as soon as it arises in consciousness, sensation is caught by thoughts... inextricably combined, existentially, not conceptually, with establishment of relations ... this establishment of relations is to a great extent of the type observed in perception (asymmetrical)' (1975, p. 230).

This preserves the necessary illusion. But in the case of survival after catastrophe, there is no protection except what the self can provide for itself. Therefore the survivor is constrained to an activity of self-generation which paradoxically is both necessary and impossible and so also inherently precarious. It is necessary because the only survival resource at the moment of the catastrophe which can act to arrest the process of disarticulation and the plunge toward psychic death is the furious activity of the survival urge; the alternative is psychogenic death. This means that the survivor must omnipotently perform the impossible task of generating the ground under her feet from her own substance. Another way of thinking of this is that the experience of annihilation or the precipitation into the null dimension necessitates an omnipotent activity to contrast this dimension.¹⁵

But, as well as being immediately necessary to protect survival, self-generation is also necessary to the process which will gradually permit the survivor to re-member an 'I' which is not hovering on the edge of annihilation (or existing in a state of non-integration) and which can therefore function in the world more or less intact. This means the gradual reintegration of the ego until it reaches the more evolved level in which the mind operates as the container of psychic space in which thoughts can be thought and feelings felt, purpose determined and actions originated. But also here, the self, destroyed by the eruption of the utterly external event, inscribed with the memory of its own absence and the absence of the world, and thrown back on to its own slender resources, must regenerate itself without backing and with no ground under its feet, or in utter aloneness. To put it in Winnicott's terms it must engage in defensive self-holding (1965, 1989). As we have seen, survival and then the gradual remembering of the mind depends on the encapsulation of the experience of disintegration so that it is not present to the mind. But in Grotstein's words, the traumatic memory 'is not like other memories that can be repressed.

It is "remembered" in the zero dimension; that is, it becomes, in Matte Blanco's ... terms, an "infinite set" (i.e. "symmetrized," without boundaries in either space or time and without end)' (2000, p. 87). (Therefore, it cannot be reintegrated into consciousness. Then, precariously encapsulated within the self, it ceaselessly threatens to break the barriers which contain it and to become present as infinitely proliferating anguish. This compels the survivor to use her slender resources in a never-ending battle to prevent the return of the primeval terror of her own abject helplessness. In experiential terms, he/she lives in a state in which the ground under his/her feet continuously crumbles and must be continuously regenerated. Therefore the self is both permanently immobilized and permanently mobilized and can find no resting place. In other words, the result of this state of being is the destruction of basic trust.

One effect of the never-ending battle over memory, which is the never-ending battle to preserve the coherence of the self, is that it destroys links to the past and pre-empts the future.

¹⁵ Grotstein quotes Bion as saying that 'one is reduced to feeling omnipotent because of one's feelings of helplessness and vulnerability' (2000, p. 297).

In other words, precipitation into the null dimension compromises the spatial and temporal dimension of the internal world. On the one hand, the absolute rupture in the continuity of being brought about by the trauma produces a discontinuity with the past self and the past life, which destroys the sense of the past as the root of personal being. In experiential terms, the 'I' who existed before the catastrophe could not have had the experience and been itself, and the 'I' born of the experience is not that 'me'. Thus, the 'I' who existed before the catastrophe can only be remembered externally and life before the catastrophe, although it is remembered as an event, is lost as experience. Tradition, in the ample sense in which Winnicott uses the word (1971a, p. 99), is destroyed. On the other hand, the fact that after the destruction from the outside the mind must reorganize itself to prevent destruction from the inside means that the 'I' feels continually threatened with extinction 'by the threat that has come to be ceaselessly present' (Adorno, 1966, p. 364). The simple assumption of life is destroyed: being alive is no longer natural. Therefore the assurance of the future is lost.

Catastrophic trauma also effects the spatial dimension of the mind, and hence the capacity to attribute personal meaning to experience. The creation of meaning depends on the possibility of encountering objects in internal space (Winnicott's potential space), where the person can rest secure in the feeling that both inner and outer reality exist and that they are separate but related (Winnicott, 1971b, p. 2). But the massive intrusion of the violent event is literal, concrete and total; there is no possibility of holding it in inner reality, and in it there is no place for me. It is an event which cannot be personalized (Grotstein, 2000, Ch. 2, pp. 37–57); there is no 'I-ness' (Ogden, 2001, p. 156) in it. Therefore, in so far as it is present, it explodes potential space (the space of potentiality), compromising the inner space in which a narration of experience can unfold and short-circuiting the process by which meaning is ascribed to external and internal events. Thus the survivor is compelled to silence or to engage in an endlessly inadequate attempt to subjectify the object (Grotstein, 2000, p. 158), in order to restore the sense of the self as the felt origin of motivations and actions.

This battle to protect survival erodes the rhythm of safety (Tustin, 1986) on which the assumption that one will go on being is grounded, just as it undermines the Background Presence theorized by Grotstein, the 'spirit of comforting protection', the 'principle of continuity', which resides in the psyche and provides the 'sense of comfort that someone stands behind us in our effort to face the world' (2000, pp. 18, 19).¹⁶ To use Virginia Woolf's beautiful image, the sense of the 'luminous halo, [the]semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end' (1925, p. 154) is lost. This constitutes the ontological precariousness of the survivor.

¹⁶ As Freud put it, 'the situation to which the ego is reacting is one of being abandoned by the protecting super-ego—the powers of destiny—so that it has no longer any safeguard against the dangers that surround it' (1926, p. 130).
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