

Sheherazade and Bluebeard*

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Abstract

With the evocative title of this paper “Sheherazade and Bluebeard” a well known tale that was written many years ago, I aim to portray how often during psychoanalytic sessions a patient will refer to literary texts, making quotations from stories and tales when he/she is unable to express his own fantasies and emotions. There are gradual steps that are made, the tale is referred to, it creates an atmosphere, there are the remembered dialogues of the characters and the silences. By having selected a particular tale, not only does the patient show his difficulty in expressing his complex state of mind, but he signals his inability in grasping that which is essential to him. Through this paper I shall also be dealing with the more psychoanalytically based topics of separation and memory, and with the aid of the relationship of “tale telling” that gradually establishes itself between analyst and patient we will see how these topics are in fact interrelated.

Key Words: tale, report narrators, literary text, autistic object.

The first point that I aim to illustrate can be explained in these terms. Quite often in analysis a patient will refer to quotations from literary texts when he/she is unable to put into shape a certain ensemble of fantasies and emotions. The choice of a certain work of art, rather than for example, an account of a real life event, is in some cases and in certain phases of therapy indicative of a particular state of mind. The sense of the story is expressed through the use and combination of certain words, the atmosphere that the author conjures up in the silences and dialogues of the characters: it would in no way be possible to simply extract the content, as in such an operation the meaning would be destroyed. By having chosen a story, not only does the patient show his difficulty in expressing his complex frame of mind, but he also signals out that he's aware that he can't grasp that which is essential to him (the response of the analyst, a meaning, a confirmation) rejecting those feelings, sometimes in contrast with such a need, that he wished not to have. He has understood that the sense is bound to the whole. A second point that I will focus on, is a more psychoanalytically orientated problem: the possible articulation between separation and memory.

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As well known, problems that are relative to establishing and accepting separation, are central to the clinical work inspired by the post-kleinians; conversely, memory is fundamental in all of Freud's first essays, for him, the reintegration of memory was considered to be essential towards the outcome of psychoanalytical therapy. I aim at showing, with the use of a clinical case study how these topics are interrelated.

Before getting to the main points, I shall briefly mention the set out of the paper. The first part of the paper focuses on some aspects of Franco's analysis; through the novel Sheherazade, which Franco spoke about at a certain point of therapy, the interest will concentrate on memory alterations. The second part of the contribution will begin from the intuition that the Sheherazade novel gives hints of a previous situation "lived but not experimented" by the patient. In response to the evocation of this novel, another, second tale appears in the analyst's mind. Without communicating his own associations, the analyst uses the tale as a "grid" and obtains a better understanding of the relationship. In the final part of the paper, some theoretical observations on forgetting shall be developed.

When Franco began analysis he was a university student; after which he began to professionally work in the field of literature. He decided to start analysis due to his difficulties in engaging in and benefiting from affective relationships: in affectively significant situations he tended to close himself up and give up at the first sign of struggle or difficulty, drawing from this behaviour a further and renewed sense of delusion and self depreciation. Franco's mood was erratic and would easily change, sometimes he felt threatened and persecuted; more precisely, it was as if a veil hung over his life making him feel a sense of uselessness, precariousness and shame.

The analytic relationship was strongly determined by the necessity of not making the persecutory elements resurface, those that had led him to live with great difficulty his significant relationships. Thus, the analyst had to be completely understanding, accepting and trustworthy. However, in analysis it was possible to uncover them, through avoidance mechanisms, persecutory feelings and envy. The persecutory side was mainly recognizable through the repetition and rigidness of the undertaken roles. Envy was recognizable through the non recognition of any autonomous capacity of the analyst, making any form of interpretative activity difficult. Any kind of interpretation, especially if proposed using a standard speech (for example, using the formula "I believe that this element of your dream means that..."), would create an excessive and alienated distance. However, he maintained a positive relationship with the silent presence of the analyst and also with his particular way of proposing the psychoanalytical viewpoint. For example, brief comments within the speech of the patient proved to be useful, they took the comments further and highlighted certain elements of the discourse.

Franco would arrive punctually to the session, and he'd usually talk a great deal about detailed facts of the day, the emotions he'd felt, the dreams and nightmares. The physical presence and the notes taken by the analyst were lived as an integral part of a whole. What I intend to say is that Franco didn't clearly distinguish his account from interpretative comments, on the contrary, it was as if they constituted one experience: the analytic session.

Such a relative non distinction was important for the ongoing of the therapy. The presence, voice modulation, the brief inserted discourse along with the repetitiveness of the four weekly sessions, offered a kind of ample and supple plot of containment in which Franco's troubled stories took place.

This was furthermore animated by feelings of acceptance that would transform into stories that the patient could keep to himself from one session to another.

After many years during a session, Franco spoke about the Thousand and one night and in particular of Scheherazade that is the framework for the whole storybook. On other occasions he had commented on books that he dealt with, sometimes applying analytical categories to the texts; in this case the way of proposing the tale was different. He introduced Sheherazade as an association, he mentioned it many a time, always showing that it was an organic part of the analytical relationship. From a certain viewpoint, it was as if Franco was telling me that now he'd understood that analysis contained many different emotions. Franco also marked out that he could partly identify himself with me and with my way of intervening during the session, without making the gap between him and myself too big, between the material side and interpretation.

The Sheherazade novel nicely illustrates the ensemble of emotions that were mostly present in analysis. In particular, when Franco would speak about it, it occurred to me how Sheherazade lives in a condition of conviction and delayed death, as through the apparently tranquil course of this analysis I'd often felt a sense of persecution and death. The "instalment death" had been shifted from he who had experienced the first situation of unsustainable abandonment (Franco, the Sultan) to he who had become his companion.

The Sheherazade novel, as I previously hinted, can also be considered a useful introduction to the topic that I shall be discussing in the second part of my contribution (remembering and forgetting). In fact, this novel represents an intersection between memories and terror: a memory emanates a death threat in the present.

The Persian Sultan Shahyat was an intelligent and fair monarch. He had a brother called Sciahzaman, that he loved and had great esteem for. Sciahzaman had fallen in love and married a woman whom subsequently he had discovered to be unfaithful with a gigantic black slave. He had also assisted the infidelity of the Sultan's wife, towards his brother: "In the royal palace, some windows overlooked the garden. Looking in that direction, Sciahzaman saw the palace doors break open

and twenty maidservants and twenty slaves come through, amongst which he saw the beautiful wife of his brother. They reached a fountain and sat down, then she called a black slave, e moved forward, hugged her and united with her carnally". Sciahzaman told his brother about the scenes he had witnessed. The impression that was recalled influenced the Sultan: he became despotic and ruthless; from that moment onwards he decided to daily contract a new marriage and after each first night as newlyweds he would have his young wife killed. In the village there was only one remaining girl who had reached marriage age: Sheherazade. In order to escape the destiny of all the women that had preceded her, she asked the Sultan to listen to her tales before performing the act. In this manner, from night to night there was a delay to her sentence, up until the sultan accepted to love her.[†]

I shall leave the novel in the background and provide ulterior elements in regards to Franco and in particular his relationship with certain memories. The exclusive possession of some memories seemed to be of great importance to him: after years, he'd spoken with effort and in an incomplete and sketchy manner about it in analysis. He almost used them as "autistic objects" having the ability of isolating himself and guaranteeing a certain self coherence: if by chance the secret was broken it would cause an irreversible crisis to his existence.

The relationship he kept with such memories was furthermore complex: he could not forget them, as if an aspect of his personality that was never truly developed was linked to each of them.

Expressed in different terms, these memories were constructions aimed at maintaining a separation, but also a form of contact between two aspects of personality: Franco as an adult person and Franco who had lived a betrayal and an uncontrollable abandonment. The memories had a protective character as much as a persecutory character, they enabled to give some kind of shape to that which was unthinkable and distressful, they provoked terror and shame but it was exactly this that guaranteed Franco not to be totally in the grasp of madness (in other cases, of endless need).[‡]

During the course of analysis I was gradually convinced that there were other important aspects that needed to be highlighted. In some moments, the "memories" would surface up closer, they would in that case lose nearly all connotations of past events.[§] Maybe they shouldn't even have been called memories; talking of memories implies a past and a present, these mental constructions had on the other hand a scarce temporal consistency; moreover it seemed as if time was used, almost like a space, to keep at a distance something that was completely current. Furthermore the most real essence of these "memories" wasn't a fact, but an emptiness. It was as if a thought, an un-thought emotion, a nonexistent part of personality had attracted a clutter of stereotyped images made available by the

1. Anonymous. *Thousand and one nights*, Penguin Classics 1973

2. S. Freud (1899). Screen memories. *SE*, 3

3. F. Corrao, "Memoria e Oblio" in *Rivista di Psicoanalisi*, XXVIII, 3, 1982, p. 345

familiar and social repertoire: a certain episode of clumsiness, a small persecution, the arrival of a relative, a photograph, a word, etc. The whole thing had then been delimited and surrounded by mystery and myth. Within the memory, or better still in a “deposit zone” of the mind, a kind of room of reminiscence and horror had been built up: a mental zone that attracted curiosity and was the cause of Franco’s insecurity and mood swings.

In absence of experience, this part of the mind and the deposited elements had acquired a static character.

The stillness of time, had the final effect of inducing and confirming the idea that at the origin of such memories lay a traumatic event rather than, as it had been in reality, the accumulated product of continual heaping up of disparate elements.^{**}

Up until this point of analysis it had been possible to detect only the coactive re-emerging of interest for the memories during the phases of analytical separations. The Sheherazade novel made it possible to establish a more defined relationship between memories and separation related crisis, it further allowed to grasp the manner in which he used memories to contrast the idea of being alone.

This comprehension surfaced during a series of associations and mental tasks. Franco’s quotation on the Sheherazade tale, had the effect of spontaneously triggering off in me the association of a second novel, this became a grid with which to revise the analytical relationship. The found tale (Bluebeard), placed as a hidden scene which reactivated at each separation, took account of Franco’s mood swings and the influence that something that he had not experimented directly, but that he “remembered” had over him. I shall add some passages from Perrault’s version of the tale:

Bluebeard had married a young woman who was very much in love with him, his happiness with her was paradisiacal. However, one day Bluebeard had to leave and before his departure he made a number of recommendations to his young wife; he handed over the keys to all the rooms of the castle, but he ordered here to not open one of them. The thought of that secret hiding place made her overwhelmingly curious, to the point that she went against her husbands orders and entered the room.

“ What did she catch sight of when she glanced inside? There was a bloodstained basin in the middle of the room, and inside it were the chopped up body pieces of Bluebeard’s previous wives, adjacent to the basin stood a tree stump and on top lay a shiny axe”.

The young woman closed the door and pretended that everything was normal, but what she’d seen left its mark. ††

4. C. Neri, “Unthinkability and psychosomatic symptoms” in *Int Journ. of Psychoanal. Psychoth.*, X, 1984, pp.611-12

5. C. Perrault, *Tales from olden times*, New York: Meredith Press, 1967

The fairytale initially depicts a blissful situation. The other side is sensed through the potential separation, that activates an uncontrollable curiosity and vivid hallucinatory fantasies. One could hypothesize that the latter constitutes an attempt of recalling through the stimulation of the senses the concrete presence of the partner. However, such an attempt doesn't bring to a renewed union. The sadistic fantasies that are triggered off by separation brighten up the scenery colours. Hallucinations merge with immediate and concrete perceptions of fragmentation; alongside fantasies of killing he who abandoned and betrayed. "To hallucinate – to remember" doesn't bring comfort, it too becomes terror. Terror is directly felt as a confrontation with a tremendous persecution on the way out of the secret room. Furthermore, terror is felt as a transforming risk from he who opened the forbidden room: becoming an unrecognizable monster even for the dearest of people. ^{†† §§}
Taking into account the two tales, it struck me how in analysis Franco had undertaken a differing route to the one which had brought to and created amalgam – memories.

The Bluebeard tale refers to "hallucinated – memory" the tale of Sheherazade points out the necessity of not repeating behaviour that is memory induced. Bluebeard builds a time motionless room; Sheherazade overlooks the prior events (the betrayal and fate of previous wives) considering it to be a false construction.

Bluebeard's blood smeared room constitutes a densely rich aggregate of hallucinations and memories. Sheherazade suggests a necessity of developing the condensed essence and the seeds of anguish that it contains.^{***}

Remembering – from Sheherazade's viewpoint - isn't casting light on an obscure part of past life; it doesn't involve retrieving something that's been repressed, but it's about giving shape to feelings and aspects of personality that hadn't ever risen. Forgetting, on the other hand, isn't putting things aside, but emotional un-thought detachment from the seed of false memories, thereby transforming traumatic un-thought in infinite narrations that are elaborated through *Réverie* and by *Working Through*, leaving behind in the past the initial situation of hatred and investing on a new love object.

The forgetting device that Sheherazade invented is that of proportion and contextualizing. Sheherazade places the massed element (that with her reiteration is placed outside an affective spatial – temporal dimension) in relationship to the finiteness of daily and human life (Thousand and one nights). As in analysis, such contextualizing doesn't directly occur but through the activation of a transitional situation (the sentence and execution suspension) and transferral (the distress, abandonment and death shift).

Ultimately, the tale expresses the indispensability of the function that Sheherazade carries out. In order for the oscillation memory – forgetting to occur, it's of utmost

6. S. Freud, *Constructions in analysis*, (1937) in SE 23

7. F. Corrao, "Microillusioni in gruppo" in *Gruppo e funzione analitica*, IV, I, 1983, pp. 14 - 17

8. F. Riolo, "Memoria e coscienza", in *Rivista di Psicoanalisi*, XXVIII, 3, 1982, P. 289.

necessity to be at one with an immensely kind person. Fusion is opposite to grabbing onto an idea: forgetting in the sense of oblivion, implies a trusting abandonment.

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