

The sheaves. A dream recounted in Group. (From “The Young Joseph” by Thomas Mann. From “Genesis”, Chapter 37, Verses 1-32)

Giovanna Goretti

Abstract

The biblical story of Joseph, intertwined with "the young Joseph" by Thomas Mann and analytical affairs of a patient illustrating the vicissitudes of narcissistic object links within the pervasive and influenced, of projective identification.

Keywords: dream, group, narration, relation between brothers, narcissistic object

“I dreamed.....”, “I had a dream.....”

“The Young Joseph” pronounced these words on waking from a short nap. That hot afternoon he had, unusually, laboured in the fields with his brothers, but heat and fatigue, to which he was not unaccustomed, had defeated him. For him life had reserved a more elevated and noble role because he was handsome, the son of his father’s favourite wife, the child of his father’s old age. It was for this reason he felt so different from his brothers, so detached... He had dreamed another dream a few days earlier and had told it to Benjamin, his little brother, begging him not to tell it to anybody, perhaps because he himself was awed by its content, so wild and grandiose, so immensely grandiose.

He had dreamed that while he was asleep on a hillside, lying on his back amidst the flocks, an eagle had seized him and borne him away in its claws, carrying him higher and higher; an ascension which seemed never ending until, passing from heaven to heaven, the eagle laid him at the feet of the One. From His voice he had heard that he would be appointed God’s page; king, prince, sovereign of all the hosts but he had also heard another noise, like a bellowing, which swelled through the ranks of the invisible angels and resentful voices saying <<*but who is this who comes to take service amongst us? Was he not born of the white drops of semen?*>> Favoured by the Lord and resented by the Angels. With the condition of his life on a more immense scale and with even more superb privileges, the greater and more widespread seemed the hatred and hostility. As Joseph finished recounting his dream he heard the timorous voice of his brother asking him: <<*but didn’t you even remember us, your brethren, any more, for example me your little brother?*>> If he didn’t think of any of them>> Benjamin seemed to be saying <<*who or what could bring his brother down to earth? But also, if his brother didn’t think of him, what would become of him?*>>

There is often a young Joseph among our patients. One who rises as if borne by an eagle, pursuing a brilliant career. One who knows the art of making oneself loved by the powerful. Why does he come for analysis? Perhaps those vertiginous heights he reached, perhaps the difficult condition of being held, like Joseph, with his legs dangling, in the claws of the eagle. What kind of life can this be? So far from earth,

from the things on earth which give earthly pleasures: a flower, a dewdrop, a child crying, laughing or going to sleep. Perhaps he needs analysis to remember “the child” in himself, that child he leaves so far behind him every day; who reminds him, tormenting him deep inside, of “everyone he was so fond of”, the whole group of brothers, parents, cousins, aunts and uncles, neighbourhood or parish pals, cell companions, that he doesn’t see any more, that he no longer remembers even on holidays. Life bears one far away, certainly. Tastes and interests change. But in the torment caused by sleepless nights, the young Joseph sometimes experiences the acute sensation that he abandoned them because they were no longer any use to him, perhaps even an obstacle to his projects. And sometimes he realises that he no longer finds them within himself: they have disappeared, been cancelled and this feeds the momentary terror that he might, himself be cancelled, not exist for anyone. “Whoever remembers me in the places I have worked before?” And then perhaps he has to “cure” a hidden paranoia, a permanent sense of being hated, despite the fact that he often displays the conviction that everyone loves him... He knows what they say of him, or supposes he does: “the trickster, the dandy, the scoundrel, the naive young man, the simpleton”, the insults that Joseph’s brothers hurl at their hated brother. He feels everyone is against him, he doesn’t know how to obtain the respect of his colleagues, who, perhaps exaggeratedly so, attribute his success solely to his skill in convincing, flattering, manipulating...

Certainly, the young Joseph had been so clever and crafty, so compelling and convincing when he sought to obtain what he wanted from his father, his mother’s veil, the symbol of primogeniture. “The scoundrel” had begun by letting his father win at chess. In his intuitive wisdom he knew that nothing like letting an aged father win could make him more indulgent towards his young son’s requests. And his father had indeed given in to those requests, still lucid enough, in truth, to say <<*and so be it, even if it might appear you can do what you want with me*>> but not strong enough for his years? Or for the love he bore towards that child of his old age? For his secret desire to gaze on him, wrapped in the splendour of that veil, handsome like his beloved wife, Rachel? Or did he want that young son dead and wished to provoke the jealous anger of his brothers against him? Or did he want that anger directed against himself, he who had also benefited by a primogeniture not his due. But who can unravel that unfathomable series of infinites which is the unconscious? he wasn’t strong enough, I was saying, to want to resist, to have his own will and sustain it, to be a father, not the aged father of the favourite son. Thus, with the concurrence of Jacob and his unfathomable unconscious, Joseph had achieved his plan, step by step, by transforming old, vague words of his father into a promise and a promise into something, which had to be achieved immediately. He had asserted rights and complained about injustices. He had ultimately requested to at least be able to see the veil, which was already his, only see it. He therefore succeeded in getting his father to remove it from the trunk in which it was folded away and carry it on his tired, old arms before his eyes. And Joseph addressed this tiredness with tender, filial care and said <<*leave it, don’t tire yourself, I will help you to hold it*>>. And on saying these words, he had taken the splendid veil from his father’s arm and with a few, quick,

adroit gestures he had draped it over his body. And thus it became his, and letting it to be understood that he still had a filial disposition towards obedience, he had humbly asked: <<*I have put on my robe, must I take it off again?*>>, knowing full well that those words would have prompted the inevitable reply that they did, in fact, prompt: “keep it, keep it.”

Enactment: this is the technical name given to that relational process which develops according to a script in the mind of a member of a couple in his/hers past experiences, in his/her inaccessible memories and in which another member, believing himself to be free, ends up by participating, playing the role assigned to him by the script, and to which, for some reason he/she also adheres intimately. Some think that the theoretical dominion of enactment falls within the concept of projective identification because they see “inscribed” in certain relational behaviour the fantasy of thrusting themselves into another person in order to “move” that person from within, thus obtaining complete control. And as soon as Joseph’s brothers, who knew the dynamics between father and son, saw their brother asleep covered by the veil, they did not hesitate to think “our poor father gave it to him, but he wheedled it out of him”. His brothers knew that you could “wheedle” something out of someone without using force by relational processes – words, tones, accents, pauses, syntactic constructions – aimed at weakening the convictions of another, confuse him, convince him, ingratiate oneself with him, dominate him, even give him the impression of still being able to decide for himselfof course, it is necessary for the other person to participate, that in that moment he says “and so be it”, as Jacob did, and resign himself. This is why we speak of collusion: the son wants to convince and his aged father wants to be convinced, even if perhaps there is always one who has more power over the other. And it is of this that his brothers accuse Joseph, of abusing his power over Jacob to obtain what he wants. They themselves fear dominion by their brother, that he might “bend their will”, the dominion of word and thought, and the perverse use of word and thought against those used to working with their hands and sleeping with the cattle...

The young Josephs in analysis always ask that we “give in” to their requirements and infinite needs. The analyst doesn’t have an easy life with them. He is either identified with the figure of the jealous and less intelligent brothers, left to sweat over a hard, ungrateful job while the Young Joseph flies to Paris or Washington, meets Clinton or Madonna, stays in exclusive hotels to ponder upon the fate of the world, or treated like a father always on the brink of losing his paternal authority. This is because he has effectively been rendered cautious and uncertain through fear that the young Joseph might get his way with the analyst or with the analysis (but also worried by the fear of losing - “by resisting”- in flexibility and interior freedom), always having to defend himself against the other’s capacity to wheedle and obtain. He also knows that once the young Joseph has obtained what he wants, he will fall out of love, lose interest, think of other things. He himself affirms this and his life is a testimony to it: he has done it many times, with women, with jobs, even with psychotherapists ... Forewarned... but what a hard life has the man forewarned. Things are a little easier when the analyst is seen, and succeeds in presenting himself as Benjamin, satisfied

and grateful for the confidence of his older brother. Like Benjamin, the analyst perceives above all that Joseph's great enterprises distance him from the earth and from his humanity. He/she is amazed at, and questions himself/herself on the extent and depth of the patient's forgetfulness. He/she quietly tries to reattach some threads to keep him a little tied to earth and is sometimes able to make him feel the pain of those claws in his flesh, those claws which keep him far away – in Board of Directors' meetings, business luncheons, unforeseeable holidays – preventing him from coming down to confront himself, his analyst and the work during the session. <<*When you were telling me those things,*>> said one of my examples of a young Joseph, <<*I felt all hot here, under my tie....*>>, those words indicating that a heart was beating under that tie, the heart of the child which, in the illuminating words of Hillman, is not a stage of existence but one of its states, one of its immutable faces. Joseph's brothers, even though they cursed him and accused him over the veil he "wheedled", did not physically attack him. One of them had said he did not wish to become a new Cain and kill someone who was pleasant and agreeable only because they were not. He seemed to know that he would have been eternally remembered by everyone as the one who, full of rancour and envy, had killed his brother because he was handsome, good and loved by his father. He would have been the protagonist of a second edition of the legend of Cain and perhaps another Unumuno, prepared to point out the intolerable perfidy of the new Abel, would not have been born. Despite the fact that the brothers criticised Joseph's just as unbearable perfidy (had he not discredited them with their father, accusing them of ignoble actions?), his subtle manoeuvring, his scornful pleasure at parading himself in front of them, showing off his diversity, his privileges; despite the fact that they could see, and it tormented them to see his abuse of power over their aged father, whose disgraceful surrender to his son's flattery made them mad with rage and shame, there persisted the doubt, that maddening doubt that they were simply envious of his handsomeness, grace and intelligence, which made their rough life even more intolerable, the doubt that he was in fact pleasant and they were not. This doubt tormented and restrained them.

Their distress highlights the uncertainty inherent in the theoretical concept of projective identification, that psychic mechanism capable of "putting" into others disturbing emotions such as envy, jealousy, sense of injustice, rage, hate. But when one is tormented by these sentiments, with what confidence can he affirm "it is him, it is her, it is they who are putting these feelings into me?" It is true that we have a collective knowledge about the existence of individuals who lend themselves to becoming the object of envy (or hate or jealousy or even love) or have a propensity to arouse anxiety, terror, guilt or confusion. This is demonstrated in the language by the verbs "make oneself envied", "make oneself hated", "make oneself loved", to make someone jealous, to cause anxiety, to terrorize, to make someone feel guilty, to confuse. Why do they do it? In those far-sighted lines in which M. Klein formulated the concept of projective identification, the aims were described with particular clarity: "*to hurt, to control, to take possession*" For the perverse pleasure of disturbing another's mind and because by "occupying" another's mind with strong

emotions, its intrinsic freedom, its independence is limited. It becomes a mind held as hostage. Alert to the precarious equilibrium of self, we think that if certain individuals did not have the urge to arouse certain feelings in others, they would feel they themselves were nothing. Or perhaps they too would feel devastated. It has also been said that sometimes one wants the other to understand “what one goes through” when one feels invaded by a particular emotion. It is certain that Joseph, before adjusting to that privileged relationship with his aged father, will have raised his eyes to glance at his older, stronger, more capable, more independent brothershe will have envied them many times over. Now it is the brothers who envy their younger brother’s fortune, denied to them, to cultivate his mind and sharpen his ingenuity, who envy his undoubted privileges. They envy. Someone might think, perhaps they simply hate the ostentation of these privileges. But who can “measure” the extent and depth of the ostentation, if not with the eye, which beholds it, the body, which unknowingly replies? Inevitably one comes to consider the projective identification an inter-subjective process, much more complex than the primitive formulation made us think. So complex, that the dynamics between Joseph and his brothers undergo the undeniable impact of their aged father. As his biblical premonition reveals “they will raise themselves full of jealousy against me and against you” or his recommendation not to show himself to his brothers with the veil on; a recommendation and a premonition showing awareness of human nature. But how can Jacob know it if not through himself, through his own intolerable jealousy for his young son who will survive him, through that ancient, unbearable envy of one’s first born brother? And so the jealousy and the envy of his brothers, is whose? To whom does it belong? Who feeds it? And what possibility do we have to defend ourselves against these “*exported*” feelings?

When Joseph says “I dreamed”, in the heat of that afternoon – after the dream of the eagle, after the “theft” of the veil – they, the brothers, continued talking about harvesting and threshing, as if they hadn’t heard: it was their way of defending themselves. But Joseph said that the dream concerned all of them and this stimulated their curiosity and so they also said “so be it....”, like Jacob. And then Joseph recounts that in the dream, he and his brothers were working in the fields, cutting and binding sheaves. There were twelve sheaves because their little brother, Benjamin, was also in the field. Continuing his tale, Joseph said that his sheaf was upright in the centre and the others, which formed a crown around it, made obeisance to it. Joseph doesn’t appear to notice that his brothers’ expression changed when he announced he would tell his dream, a fleeting apprehension came over their faces. Neither does he notice, at the end of the tale, their silence, their pallor, their hatred. Was he indifferent to the mental and emotive life of his brothers? Was he ignorant even of its existence? Since he had never imagined nor tried to interpret their feelings, his brothers had often encountered difficulty in distinguishing in his behaviour ingenuousness from impudence My young Joseph had once candidly revealed that the thought “the other isn’t suffering” allows one to function in an efficient manner, for his own sake and for that of the company. Green spoke of a function that denies the object, which denies the other the statute of another similar to him, denying him the capacity for

suffering. Green considers this the functional process of the death instinct. Did Joseph “unknowingly” seek his own death by the hand of his brothers by telling them that dream? “I have never heard such disgusting idiocy in all my life” said one of them sullenly. These words were followed by an explosion of anger and a hail-storm of venomous insults as well as the sense of an affront that that artful, impudent brother was paying them, by forcing them to listen to that dream. Laconic, the biblical text, simply states: “the dream provided the bait for envy”.

Can a dream provide bait for envy? Because, in the eyes of his brothers, did it reveal God’s preference for Joseph and proof that also the Highest one had been seduced by his arts, as the literary text suggests? Or had the brothers correctly understood it as the epiphany of a situation in process, as the revelation of a condition in which with horror they recognized themselves, identifying themselves, hatefully emasculated, in those sheaves which make obeisance? Like the brothers, it can also happen to a psychoanalyst to see himself/herself reflected in the dream of a patient in a way he would prefer not to see himself/herself and, like them, feel the impulse to flee far away.

The rest of the story is well known: the brothers pass from the fantasy of homicide to the idea of a trade with the Ishmaelite merchants to whom they sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver. Those merchants brought Joseph down to Egypt, where he will achieve great honours in the service of the Pharaoh. Joseph will later summon his brothers to Egypt, obtaining their respect and veneration.

If the dream of the eagle seemed to announce the possibility of that soaring, upwards flight terminating in a megalomaniac psychosis, the dream of the sheaves seemed to testify to a cure for that condition, thanks to the adoption of less devastating solutions. Compared to the first dream, which has the heavens as a theatre and the invisible hosts of angels as a cast, the second dream deals with daily confrontation with necessities and the realistic means of satisfying them. Joseph has regained contact with the earth, by replacing the eagle’s claws with the containment assured by the circle of sheaves-brothers and by their reverent acknowledgement. The Joseph-sheaf is able to keep itself upright thanks to them, thanks to a numerable and identifiable quantity of objects, which hold him up and are in turn “held” by that perverse process of exhibitionism, having perhaps had to manage Joseph’s autodestructive impulses on his behalf. By making himself hated, but not enough to be killed; by making himself envied and admired and also stimulating their gratitude, Joseph is “kept” on earth by his brothers who offer him that continuous amount of attention, which he needs to feel in order to exist.

“My” young Joseph “surrounded” himself with young people to whom he gave, generously, opportunities of professional growth. And it was very clear to us that the gratitude and admiration of those young people nurtured and sustained him, making him feel important and capable of doing good things. Freud recognised the quota of narcissistic love present in every object love. Kohut recognised that we need objects, which feed our self-esteem throughout the course of our existence and has partly absolved us if we use others valuing more the function they carry out for us than their individuality. As shown by Joseph’s dream in which all the sheaves are equal, as if

his brothers had totally lost their individuality – which they did possess as the novel describes – and existed only as persons who pay respect and homage.

Benjamin, perhaps, had a different role, stemming from a different relational dynamic. When he asked Joseph his little question “didn’t you even remember us” he invited Joseph to carry out a labour of his own, i.e. to realise the icy solitude of life above the highest heaven and to “choose” a different solution on earth.

In 1921, Freud, who is considered the theoriser of the isolated mind, with reference to how much and in how many ways others cooperate in the individual task of living one’s existence, wrote: <<*In the individual’s mental life someone else is invariably involved, as a model, as an object, as a helper, as an opponent; and so from the very first individual psychology, in this extended but entirely justifiable sense of the words, is at the same time social psychology*>>.

References

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Giovanna Goretti. Psychiatrist, psychoanalyst with training functions of the SPI-IPA.

E-Mail: goretti.regazzoni@libero.it