

There and back. Migrants' dreams and myths

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Abstract

Such extreme crystallization of defensive experiences can be frequently observed in homogeneous communities or groups of emigrants of equal origin, too closed in themselves, anchored to surpassed habits, rituals, traditions and ideologies, clearly detached both from the reality of the place which hosts them (rejected because alien) and from the reality of the country they have left, since they maintain themselves still in time without ever evolving or transforming. The homecoming ideal thus loses its dreaming and metaphoric quality which could become a creative component of the thinking activity of each of the single subjects and of the community as a whole, and it is in this way only bearer of individual and collective impoverishment and/or catastrophic actions.

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The title I have chosen for this work originates from one of man's most ancient metaphors which since the beginning of time has tried to express and voice part of that deep emotional magma which hems in and mixes the darkest and deepest fears with a desire to explore and search for something new, implied by every journey and every life. The myth of the return journey (which obviously entails a prior act of going) is common to all cultures and eras... Within the Western culture Odysseus and Ithaca are a clear expression of a universal meaning.

Even folk tales of the most different origins introduce often the theme of the migrant/hero who, after having overcome numerous difficulties during his journey, returns to his hometown and is welcomed and acknowledged by his people. Not wanting to discuss the relationship between myth/legend/fable that has interested many renowned names (Propp, Lévi-Strauss, Calvino and others), I would like today to consider these notions from a less anthropological and a more psychoanalytical and psychotherapeutic point of view.

While I write, I recall Mauricio Abadi's lessons at the Buenos Aires University. In one of his books, "Renacimiento de Edipo" (1960) which to my knowledge has not been translated into Italian, Abadi states: "What the myths narrate between the lines is a tale that, from the beginning of time, every child tells himself and to which every man, later on, listens to with fascination since something apparently unrelated to him hands him back, with a voice that is still familiar, a forgotten corner of his own interior world".

Further on, in the same work, Abadi refers to myths and legends in terms of collective productions which – like the dream for the individual – represent attempts, sometimes masked and hallucinatory, to process desires and fears (unconscious fantasies) which stir inside each individual making up a race or a community.

But how does this collective production take place? Which phases, which paths does it tread? How does communication between “dreaming” subjects, oblivious creators of a cultural object which will in turn contribute to their own formation, occur? Myth is, by nature, protean and multifaceted: it re-constructs itself and it is reiterated in time under numerous versions and interpretations, often coinciding, sometimes similar, some other times contrasting; and every poet, every narrator, every listener, is simultaneously participant and co-author since the theme, the questions and emotions evoked by the myth, echo in everyone. As we know, myth is also polyphonic and polysemous.

Myths and mythopoeia production is a function of the mind studied by many authoritative psychoanalytical authors. According to Bion, for example, myths are created to provide limits, to organize and make understandable the pillars of life and relationships for the perpetuation of the species: it is forbidden to kill offspring, to commit incest, a limit to almightiness. More recently E. Granjon, by posing questions on myths and family pains, comes up with some interesting considerations on the mythopoeic function, taking it as a transformational and processing function and highlighting how psychoanalytic group therapy can help “establish mythopoeia within the therapy group, easing reinstatement of bonds, interphantasmification and individual phantasm processing”. According to Granjon, the therapeutic value of a group comes from a mythopoeic function able to generate new myths starting from what has been deposited here and now inside the group and/or to transform some tales, discovering new ways of narration, in a group associating process, on the bases of fragments and psychic traces.

Nonetheless, understanding what occurs within a group is one of the most developed research themes of the analytic field of recent years and which, even so, still poses many unresolved and enigmatic questions. In his work “Costellazioni oniriche e campo gruppale” (Dream constellations and group domain), E. Gaburri refers to the group as a “wholeness” where therapist and clients are equally involved even in their diversity of roles, and where “thoughts as yet unthought” pause outside consciousness, piloting the group’s mentality. Gaburri asserts: “As myths alternate in the social sphere, indicating changes of the group’s circumstances, culture and mentality, so the alternation of oneiric narration in therapy groups indicates events which produce new meanings. Oneiric narration contains a first approximation of sense; it creates, modifies or destroys links and boundaries which encompassed the previous mentality. When the analyst’s function is adequately abstinent but effectively in contact with the emotional sphere, affective interactions capable to hybridize old thoughts are activated starting from that event. These hybridizations free emotions agglutinated in the group’s mentality, dispersed emotions can freely re-aggregate and evolve into ‘O’. Through these movements, a dream’s event narrated by one of the members is a potential matrix of new spaces for thinkability for the group as a whole. Dreams, therefore, make up a first outline of the path of exploration of the galaxy of unthought thoughts.”

I would like, at this point, to take up again the specific object of today’s consideration. I have been often in contact with migrants, of various origins and

nationalities, I have myself experienced emigration and I have verified personally how much the “homecoming dream” is a constant element which permeates an individual’s life, often crossing over to other generations. However, this dream-myth is not in itself associable to a pathology: as I asserted before, it is something universal which links up to the eternal dialectics life/death of which the journey is but a metaphor. Still, it expresses a pathological case when it becomes rigid, immutable and stereotyped, when it pushes the subject away from the reality around him, making him incapable of establishing new relationships, new caring investments and hindering the search in his life of new sense links.

Such extreme crystallization of defensive experiences can be frequently observed in homogeneous communities or groups of emigrants of equal origin, too closed in themselves, anchored to surpassed habits, rituals, traditions and ideologies, clearly detached both from the reality of the place which hosts them (rejected because alien) and from the reality of the country they have left, since they maintain themselves still in time without ever evolving or transforming. The homecoming ideal thus loses its dreaming and metaphoric quality which could become a creative component of the thinking activity of each of the single subjects and of the community as a whole, and it is in this way only bearer of individual and collective impoverishment and/or catastrophic actions.

I will now cite a brief clinical history, to promote discussion. In a therapy group made up of 5 people – 3 women and 2 men – there are 3 members (apart from myself, the therapist) that have experienced migration:

- Antonella (38 years old) was born in a small town in Italy, has lived in Chicago from 5 to 25. She came back to Italy with her family. She is now married with an Italian man and has a 4 year old son with whom she speaks in English.
- Maria (44 years old) comes from Naples, has lived in Alto Adige until 15, and when her parents definitively moved to Rome she had great difficulty with relationships and school.
- Paolo (49 years old) is from Sicily, where he met his wife who is from Rome, where they have been living for 20 years, and where he often feels disoriented and out of place. He is in full marital crisis.

The group was formed 2 years ago and these specific experiences have had no part in its composition; it is not, therefore, a “group of emigrants”. Nevertheless, more than once there have emerged experiences, dreams or thoughts related to this theme. The following are two dreams narrated by the group.

The first dream is by Antonella: “I’m at a fashion show, I’m happy and excited... then the models start parading and I realize I’m a model too, I’m no longer a spectator, I’m a bit scared but I like the dress I have on, so I proceed. The public applauds and I feel sure of myself. Then I see that in the opposite direction to ours, like she was going back, there’s a black model, she looks like Miss Italy of some time ago... Suddenly I don’t know which direction I have to take, I’m confused, I block and I wake up, full of angst”.

The group, which has listened very intently, spontaneously offers comments and links relating to Antonella’s past experiences, of which she has often talked about, of her

difficulties at school and of how she felt discriminated (“like black girls”, in her own words). Antonella recalls that the “myth” of Italian fashion was very strong in her family, particularly for her mother, who was very fond of dressing well and always took great care of every detail, for herself and her daughters. Someone points out that even today Antonella is always flawless, make-up and accessories carefully planned. With a thin voice she answers that she is never flawless, since, like in the dream, she is often confused, not knowing which direction to take: she often thinks she’d like to go back to Chicago, but she recalls that when in the States she wanted to return to Italy, and so she feels lost. There is a moment of silence.

Maria steps in saying she knows all too well what Antonella is talking about, both for what concerns places and clothes. When in Alto Adige, she dressed very casually, and once in Rome she felt very uncomfortable... the other girls looked more feminine, she didn’t know how to pair, for example, skirt and stockings, and felt much better with a pair of mountain boots. Last summer she went back to Bolzano, and while packing her mountain clothes she felt moved. When she goes to Naples to visit her relatives she feels no such thing ... maybe, she adds, I’ve become a bit Austrian!

There follow some comments that link clothes to the internal structure of each one and the difficulty in recognizing parts of us when alone or with others. The session comes to a close and Paolo, that has followed it with attention, stays surprisingly silent.

In the next session, it is Paolo who brings in a short dream: “I was at a convention with some colleagues and I was holding a glass of sherry... but then it looked like a dancing party and I was embarrassed because I wasn’t dressed for the occasion. So I stayed still. I wanted to put down my glass somewhere, so I walked toward a table. A girl comes up to me and says she recognizes me from the way I walk. I feel a sensation of wellbeing and I wake up”.

The connections of the group and his own immediately develop thoughts that link up to the previous session, as if the girl that came towards him and “recognized” him was a little of Antonella and a little of Maria, giving voice to well known experiences. Sharing deeply at an emotional level what the group is facing, I add that on the group’s table one can “place” emotions and questions and make sense of them together. The group livens up, everybody takes part. Sergio (the other man of the group) says that being recognized by the way one walks is very different from being flawlessly dressed. Thoughts emerge which express mirroring needs, needs of identity and belonging, and memories which link up to a possible (or impossible?) return. From the “return”, taken as a physical movement to a real place, slowly we pass to meanings connected to many other journeys: spaces, people and times of the mind, their essence common to each one of us. While the session progresses in this mood of exchange, I recall – and I think that maybe, it is true for all - the epilogue with which the Grinbergs close their essay “Psychoanalysis of emigration and exile”. “...one never returns, one always departs”.

Finally, I would like to make a technical reference. Because of the reasons I have mentioned, I believe that in therapeutic work with immigrants, it is more useful to use a setting made up of a non uniform group, since the various experiences and origins allow exchange of memories and lives similar in part and partly different. In this way, through the group's inter-subjective and inter-colloquial texture, enriched by various voices, there is a greater possibility that losses and fears, needs and desires are dealt with, thus opening the way, although intricately, for a new and ever pristine thinkability.

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