

## **Genius Loci: The Spirit of a Place, the Spirit of a Group**

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### **Abstract**

The author divided the discussion is divided in three parts. The first, which is very synthetic, will cover some of Bion's theories as regards "Work Group Mentality", "Basic Assumptions Group Mentality", and their respective leaders. In the second he introduced J. Bleger's "Syncretic Sociality" concept, which introduces a third type of "Group Mentality" different from the one developed by Bion's theory. The third part, which is the longest, is dedicated to the role of the Genius Loci. The Genius Loci is not a leader, like the Work Group mentality leader or the basic assumptions group mentality leader. However, it performs some important functions for the social and mental life of a group. Work Group and Basic Assumptions Group

**Key words:** group, identity, domestication, mythology, genius loci

W.R. Bion sets "Work Group" mentality against "primitive mentality" (or basic assumptions group mentality) (Bernabei, 1987).

Work Group mentality, as intended by Bion (1961), is a level of mental functioning that implies contact with reality, tolerance of frustration and control of emotions. The capacity of operating as a member of a Work Group is improved thanks to the learning of an activity. What keeps the members of a Work Group together is the connection that is established through co-operation in order to achieve a common goal. There is a similarity between the Work Group mentality and the characteristics that "Freud attributed to the Ego when he spoke of the individual". Participation in a Work Group implies attention, subordination of the pleasure principle to that of reality, trial thoughts, development and use of secondary processes and verbal representation capabilities (Freud, 1911).

Primitive mentality, instead, corresponds to automatic and unconscious functioning, which is different from and opposite to that of the Work Group. The basic assumptions group "is completely opposed to the idea of coming together in order to carry out a specific task". Indeed, when it has to work, it reacts as if some fundamental principle has been shattered. In the group that is dominated by primitive mentality, each member reacts automatically with the others in order to share the basic assumptions and respond accordingly. The members participating in an assumptions group experience a loss of their individuality, they find themselves in a condition similar to that of de-personalization. They use language to convey sensations and emotions rather than to communicate a sense and precise meanings. In the basic assumptions group, unlike with the Work Group, it is words that convey

sound and not the other way around. Language becomes a way of projecting one's emotions into the other group members (Neri, 1975). Knowledge, which is actually a "repetitive knowledge", is attained through a primitive system of reward and punishment. Blind obedience is a virtue. As Meltzer (1982) remarked, "The great fear is to be expelled, the great prize, a place in the establishment."

### **Two Leaders in the Group**

The concept of leader, as developed by Bion, originates from Freud's theory (1921), although it differs from the latter for many significant aspects. I will focus only on one of these differences. According to Freud, there was only one leader. Bion (1961), instead, introduced the idea of two leaders. The regressive, uncontrollable and negative drives are personified and expressed by the group leader in the Basic Assumptions group. The positive and rational functions of the group are coordinated and driven by the leader of the Work Group, who is usually the group therapist (Fornari, 1981; Cotugno A. et al. 1987).

The leader of the Work Group is an operative leader, a leader of thought. He/she is an individual who is able to spearhead the execution of a task that the group has set for itself, but he/she is also someone who pays attention to people. According to Bion, "The leader of the Basic Assumptions group, [...] on the contrary, is not even a person but a puppet. The leader, at the level of basic assumptions, is an individual who has a personality that makes him/her particularly prone to erasing his/her own individuality, which is required by the leadership demands of a Basic Assumptions group. [...]. Thus, the fight/flight group leader, for instance, appears to have a very particular personality, which allows him/her to meet the group demand of having a leader who only asks his/her followers either to fight or to flee."

Bion developed other concepts of a central group figure, such as, for example, the Mystic (1970).

Yet, throughout his entire life, Bion remained loyal to the version that he had developed in Group Experiences.

During one of the seminars he held in Rome (1985), I asked him if a less ascetic environment, a more relaxed condition comparable to the one that is produced by slight intoxication, would have been able to lift the embarrassment and concern that everyone present was feeling. It might also have lessened the effects of great respect and apprehension that the people were feeling towards him. In my opinion, anxiety, respect and embarrassment were causing a block in the communication of thought.

Bion replied in a peremptory way, "If this group prevents the development of thought and mental growth, then I think that it would die. [...] Put in even more general terms, I don't see any reason why the human race should survive: the function of life could be undertaken by some form that is completely different from normal human life, such as a virus, bacteria or bacillus. Some of the monkey features that we have inherited could be much more active and virulent than what we consider as our human characteristics."

Bion restated the conviction that the only thing that really mattered for the members of the seminar group was to think that it was necessary to proceed in this way without worrying too much about the “monkey features” that were present in the members of the group. After many years, I still believe that the question that I had asked him was not irrelevant. In my opinion, Bion attributes an almost exclusive importance to thought. Instead, I believe that affective sharing and the experience of belonging are just as important as thought. Furthermore, I believe that affectivity and thought must develop and proceed on the same footing.

In my opinion, the net two-way division that Bion suggested does not consider everything that, though not being a “Work Group”, is not however simply unaware and un-evolvable (i.e. primitive mentality). I believe that Bion’s model does not shed enough light on the connection between sensorial, emotional and affective experiences and on the most developed aspects of mental life. Such relationships are of a variable order and are based upon occurrence. They are certainly not only automatic and deaf, as the idea of primitive mentality and basic assumptions seem to suggest.

### **Syncretic Sociality**

Syncretic sociality, as worked through by Bleger (1967), values the importance of sensorial and self-perceptive experiences and how they are shared in the group. These experiences - sharing of physiological rhythms, common perception of space and collective regulation of mood - are an essential foundation of the experience of belonging. Other elements - the same session time, same room, the regular presence of the other members, the consistent attitude of the group leader in his/her most repetitive aspects, feed syncretic sociality as they confirm that the group experience is something familiar, stable and reliable.[1]

As regards syncretic sociality, individual distinctions or individual identity do not exist. Describing the group as a gathering of individual people who speak, discuss and interact, would say nothing about syncretic sociality. Rather, such a description would shed light upon "evolved sociality". The image of a bed of mushrooms might help our understanding. Someone who looks at a field sees mushrooms sprouting in different areas (evolved sociality). If he/she were to look at the same field through an optical device that is sensitive to infra-red light rays, he/she wouldn't see the mushrooms but a dense network that joins them together (syncretic sociality). Beneath the field, all the mushrooms are connected by a dense yet thin network that connects them and feeds them: the mushroom bed. If someone were to tread over this invisible area, even if he/she did not step on the mushrooms he/she would nonetheless damage them as a result of the pressure exercised by his/her feet. The single mushrooms could become spoilt and die because the network has been damaged.

Syncretic sociality is similar to the mushroom bed: it is something that is common to all members of the group and, although you don't notice it, it is essential for the life and the wellbeing of the individual participants.

According to Bleger, syncretic sociality and evolved sociality are not in contrast. On the contrary, they are interdependent. Syncretic sociality is the basis for the development of evolved sociality functions and it keeps the "non-changing aspects" of identity alive. These, in turn, are fundamental for the expression of identity, which changes and transforms. Conversely, evolved sociality prevents syncretic sociality from flattening out.

Consequently, an attack on one or more of the elements that keeps syncretic sociality alive (stability of location, group tradition, etc.) often causes struggles between subgroups. According to Bleger, subgroups that are firmly counter-opposed are not created because there are different opinions, but because there is an identical lesion in the syncretic identity. Each subgroup feels this lesion. Each subgroup senses that something that allowed the members to identify with the group in its entirety has been damaged. The subgroup attributes the damage to the other subgroup and copes with it (poorly) by triggering an internal struggle.

### **Genius Loci**

The idea of the Genius Loci (1992, 1995) collects these reflections. The leader of the Work Group oversees the group's activity as it is trying to carry out a task. The leader of the Basic Assumptions group is the expression of the forces that oppose the Work Group. The Genius Loci regulates syncretic sociality and works through the connection between the affective life and rational life of a group.

The "Genius Loci" function rotates among the members of a group. Like all other functions within a group, it is performed by the group members and the analyst. Functions and people (who personify them alternately), however, do not identify themselves.

The "Genius Loci functions" are closely linked. In particular, the Genius Loci:

- maintains the group identity (or place identity) and ensures affective continuity in times of transformation and change;[2]
- fosters a feeling of belonging, without using counter-opposition between "group" and "non-group" or between "us" and "the barbarians";
- maintains the possibility of exchange between what is recognized as internal to a group and what is considered as external;[3]
- develops participation in group activity;
- maintains harmony in a group (or place) by weaving together different elements;

- takes care of and regenerates the habitat;
- transforms wild and extraneous objects and places into something familiar and welcoming (domestication). [4]

## **Mythology**

I would now like to address the mythological figure of the Genius Loci.

The Greeks and the Romans associated every place with a particular deity. Every fountain, valley and mountain had its own protecting divinity. The Genius Loci was a lesser, local god: it did not live on Mount Olympus but in a given town, hill or area of the countryside.

There were various types of Genius Loci. Nymphs lived in fountains, streams and the sea: they were not immortal but generally enjoyed a long life. The Naiads, nymphs of springs and lakes, brought fertility. The Dryads were the spirits of trees, woods and forests. According to very ancient myths, every Dryad was born to protect a tree and lived in it or in its proximity. Since the dryad died when its tree fell, the gods punished those who had caused the destruction.

In order for a town or fortress to remain intact, the deity had to continue living there. Rooks represent the Genius Loci of the Tower of London. According to legend, the Tower would have remained intact as long as the birds continued to dwell there. Geese are connected to the Genius Loci of the Capitol in Rome. In 390 B.C., when Rome was invaded by the Gauls, the squawking geese woke up the consul Manlius Marcus Capitolinus who was thus able to chase away the invaders.

The Genius Loci - as I have already mentioned - had a particular relationship with the harmony of a given place and endeavored to preserve the appropriate balance between water, wind, vegetation, buildings etc. It became irritated if the characteristics and harmony of a specific place were altered as a result of actions or gestures that were extraneous to its nature.

Homer, in the *Odyssey* (XII.205-6), described how Nymphs continually wove different elements together. He narrates that in the cave where Odysseus found refuge upon reaching Ithaca: "There [were] some wonderful stone looms where the nymphs [wove] sea sparkling fabrics..."

## **Domestication**

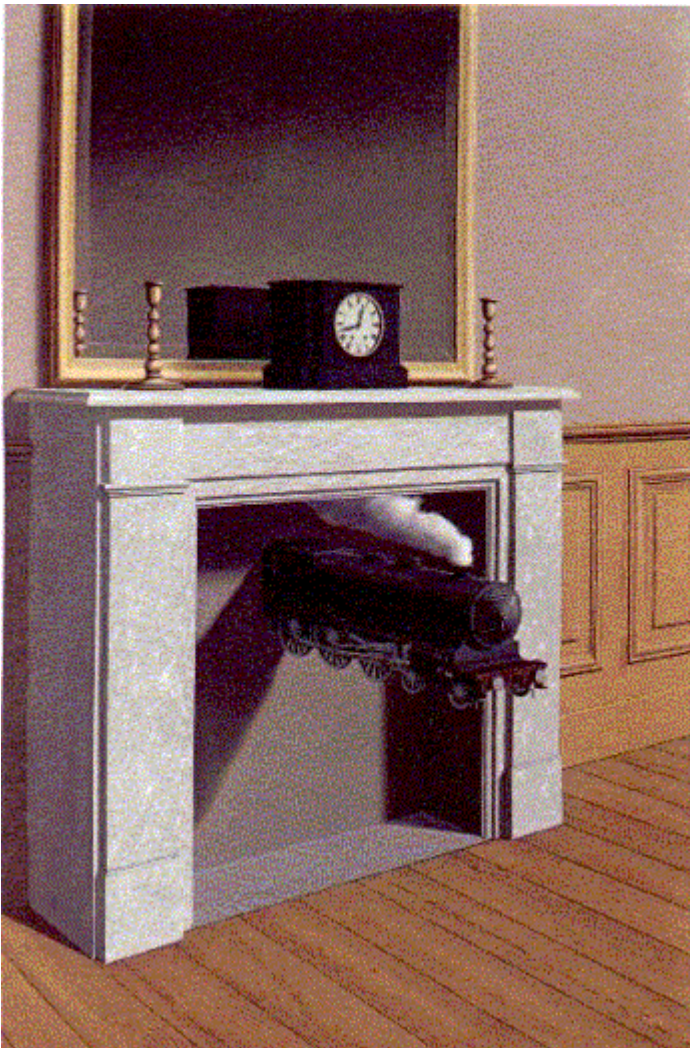
The Greeks and Romans suggested that places can have a soul and become the habitat of a spirit, a Genius Loci. The places earn their soul through the deposit and accumulation of affects that are brought by the inhabitants over a long period of time. Such a process is characterized by various moments and stages.

Moreover, E. De Martino (1964 and 1977) speaks of the "domestication" of objects. The objects that surround us are "domesticated" objects. "Domesticated" objects are obvious. A fork, a chair, a lamp are objects that raise no doubts, we do not question ourselves on them. They are objects that we recognize at once, we use them with the



greatest of ease and they contribute to defining our identity. When we see them they evoke a feeling of being at home, of being in a familiar world. (Freud, 1919).

Under certain circumstances, the domestic quality of objects may be lost. Duchamp, Dalì and Magritte show how an ordinary object can become something disturbing. When the object begins to change its domestic nature, it appears partly “domestic” but also partly strange and incomprehensible. In this painting by Magritte, the fireplace, which is an object symbolizing the house and family, has lost its domestic character. There are no logs inside it, no fire, no smoke, but instead a train travelling at full steam (De Leonardis et al., 2000).



When an object loses its domestic quality, it can no longer be used. Likewise, when the Genius Loci leaves a place, that place loses its soul, it becomes an easy prey for an enemy.<sup>5</sup>

### **An example of Genius Loci taken from literature**

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The presence of the Genius Loci is very frequent in groups, especially in institutions. Surely, we can all easily remember somebody who, without necessarily being conspicuous, actually represented the affective and vital center of an institution. Novels and short stories provide a host of examples of the Genius Loci of a group or a family. In Simenon's novel, "The Donadieu Family", the Genius Loci of the clan is a house servant. In Karen Blixen's short story, "Babette's Feast", it is the cook. In Jean Giono's "The Hussar on the Roof" (1951), the Genius Loci of the city is a modest nun.

I would like to refer to Giono's novel, for I believe it highlights two of the functions of the Genius Loci that I have pointed out: a) "domesticating" and making objects and places accessible; b) regenerating the habitat.

Giono's nun, in particular, is working to remedy the damage caused by an epidemic to people and to the social and relational fabric. Jean Giono describes them vividly. He depicts the scene of the desolate town struck by the epidemic as it is seen through the eyes of a young hussar. The knight enters into various houses. At first, he is not aware that what he sees are the effects of cholera.

"Hidden in corners or, preferably, in window recesses (the desire to flee), there would be a man or a woman transformed into a dog, groaning, coughing, barking, ready to fawn on the first-comer; one or two children, as inflexible as justice, and eyes like eggs; [...]."

The knight, Angelo – continuing his exploration – sees how the effects of cholera have already spread throughout the whole city: "[...] They all had rigid, monolithic behavior, with wide open eyes, and when they died, it was without a word or a groan and always far from their homes, burrowing into a dog kennel, or into a rabbit warren, or hutches, or curled up in the large baskets used for brooding turkeys."

Giono not only describes the disastrous transformations caused by cholera, but also the transformation in the opposite direction. I mean, from shrunken, frozen terror to an almost normal life. The character that fosters the positive transformation, the new "domestication", the Genius Loci of the town, as I have mentioned, is a nun.

"[...] an old nun. Who was as round as a barrel. Two claws of a little black moustache clipped her mouth together at each side."

The nun performs little, effective rites which "re-domesticate" objects and relationships. "She would come into a house that had been struck by cholera." "A few, very simple gestures sufficed to bring the house and its inhabitants back to normality." A very effective rite is the coffee-mill rite. "Often, when the sight was so horrible that goose bumps appeared on the skin, this is what she would do; sit down, put the coffee mill between her thighs, and begin to grind coffee. In a flash, the man or woman stopped being a dog. With the children, however, it was both more tricky and easier, they would be immediately attracted by the nun's enormous bosom; then, with a very simple gesture, she would push her pectoral cross aside." Another more complex rite reconstructs social roles, functions and goals. "At other times (but

always with exact and unerring science) there would be other solutions than coffee mills. She would enter one of those bourgeois houses where the kitchen is out of sight, where all the furniture is under dust sheets. There were always places where the corpses were extraordinarily pungent. Here, most of the time, the sick people had not had much care lavished on them. Generally no one had had the courage to keep them in bed; they had been left to get up and wander about; the tendency had been to flee from them. The armchairs were overturned as if after a fight, the tables no longer stood directly under the chandelier, the music stand was smashed; people seemed to have been bombarding each other with waltz music. A dead man had streamed in all directions before collapsing over the piano.” “Immediately, the nun would pull the table back to its place, pick up the chairs, straighten the armchairs, collect the pages of music. She would open the door into the bedroom. She would ask: “Where are the clean sheets?” These words were magical, they gave her the most lightning victories. No sooner spoken than the rattle of a key-ring would be heard from among the huddling monkeys. That sound itself had a virtue so powerful that a woman would emerge from the huddle and immediately become both a woman again and immediately mistress of the house. Some of these women whose faces were more particularly smothered in bedraggled hair would still totter a bit, and even, in their giddiness, hand her the keys. But the nun never took them. “Come and open the cupboard yourself,” she said. After that, they would tidy up the bed. It was only once the bed was made that they would deal with the corpse, and then thoroughly. But already the wheels of the house were turning once again, and already death would strike another diabolical blow in this family without destroying anything essential.” What is it that renders the nun’s actions effective? Giono gives us some clues:

- The nun is not afraid of contact with bodies, be they dead or alive.
- Her actions are few and simple.
- To her, objects and gestures are as important as words.
- The nun knows that there is a set sequence that she must follow: one gesture follows another, a given action cannot be carried out before another one makes it both possible and effective.
- Above all, the nun doesn’t perform operative functions - for instance, she doesn’t stand in for the mistress of the house - instead, she carries out activities that are symbolic.
- A further characteristic of the nun has to do with time and pace: it is her placid essentiality.



“The nun would have been very surprised had she been told that two thirds of her worth came from her physical appearance, her large pot belly, the pout of her big lips, her large head, her big hands, her large-woman’s placidity, and her large feet under which the floors always shook a little. It was this bulk that authorized miracles. Had she been more agile she would have been able to make twenty gestures, among which the good one might have passed unnoticed; however, fat, clumsiness, and weight allowed her to make only one. But it was the good one. And there it was, as indisputable as the nose on one’s face. People were forced to believe in its virtue, for it was an old and ordinary gesture that they themselves had made a hundred thousand times, and of which the consequences were certain.”

### **Three Brief Clinical Illustrations**

Jean Giono provides us with an “all round” image of a Genius Loci which is able to restore domestic quality to objects, and also to enliven and cure. People who take on the Genius Loci function in an analytic group, do so in a less heroic and conspicuous way. In fact, they usually operate in secrecy and silence. In order to do his/her work in the best way possible in the small group, it is better for the person who carries out the Genius Loci function not to be excessively idealized. Genius Loci operates well if the spotlights are not too bright.

I will present three illustrations involving patients in my therapeutic groups who were able to revive the other members’ participation in what was happening during the sessions. When carrying out the function, each of them was driven by personal motivations and each paid a certain price for the intense involvement in the life of the group that this function provides. However, each person had a great deal to gain from the possibility of employing his/her own skills and from receiving recognition for the function that he/she provided. For these three patients, it was certainly an important experience to be part of a “human” community and they were ready to work in exchange for this privilege. An additional significant motivation was the need to engage in “reverie”, which had been missing from these people’s lives in their infancy.

I would like to add that the therapist must allow for this function to be carried out by the individual group members, who alternately play this role, without interfering. In fact, we are dealing with something that is very useful both for the group and for the individuals. Volunteering interpretation might cause double damage.

I will now come to the three clinical illustrations. Antonia, a woman in her early fifties, founded her effectiveness in fostering affective participation by the other group members upon the fact that she never avoided her duties when there was pain, joy or worry to be shared. However, Antonia was drastic every time she felt that a member of the group spoke without showing real participation. It was just "small talk". The characteristic way in which Antonia called the group members’ attention to use their responsibility and commitment to the work they were engaged in was “Giovanni (or Maria, or Isabella), we have heard all about the wrongs you suffered at

the hands of your mother (or father, or boss) and the damage that it has caused you, now tell us how you are feeling and what you want to do”.

When Antonia finished therapy, a similar function was carried out by Fabiana. Fabiana's style was completely different from Antonia's. Fabiana expressed herself, first and foremost, through changes in her clothes, earrings, hairstyle and facial expression. Fabiana's clothes, hairstyles and facial expressions were a colorful stage-scene, subject to changes, which were sometimes spaced out in time and other times appeared at briefer intervals. The changes in clothes surely reflected Fabiana's moods and her personal transformations. Nevertheless, they also represented the introduction of something new into the group, a stimulus that initiated group sharing. Fabiana's verbal interventions were built onto this visual and mimicry basis and they usually activated a very intense confirming or contrasting relationship with another member of the group. The emotional intensity of this one-to-one relationship would then spread, and a discussion would ensue which all the people present took part in.

In another group, the function of Genius Loci was taken on by Rodrigo. Sometimes Rodrigo spoke from the very beginning, other times he remained silent for almost the entire session. When he intervened, he usually started off by pointing out how important participating in the group was for him. After this testimony, which was an especially heartfelt ritual, Rodrigo took into consideration, from an affective point of view, something that someone had said, or that was going on in the group, which had not been yet been addressed. The result was intensification of emotional participation which could either have been lost or blocked.

### **Genius Loci and the Group Therapist**

The Genius Loci is devoted to the group, to the community, but is not part of the hierarchy. It recognizes the existence of authority but doesn't follow its logic. Usually the Genius Loci works side by side with the group therapist, who is also the person with responsibility. However, in exceptional cases, it can radically oppose authority. A most famous case is that of Antigone in her strenuous opposition to Creon.

There is an event that leads to the contrast between Antigone and Creon. Eteocles and Polynices, Antigone's two brothers - sons of miserable Oedipus - fought against each other and died beneath the walls of Thebes. The first one died defending the city, the second attacking it. Creon, the king who had taken the place of Oedipus, ordered for the first one to be buried with all honors and for the second one to receive no burial. His corpse was to be fed to the dogs and crows. The two brothers were different in Creon's eyes. Antigone, instead, beheld them as being equal. Creon followed political reason. Antigone the affective logic.

Creon was unbending with Antigone, for he suspected that she was challenging his new power as king, thus constructing a counter- power of some kind. In actual fact, Antigone was motivated by affective drives and reasons, not political intent. However, Creon's error is comprehensible. Power and affect are not completely separate from each other. Affect can attract and wield power (Gediman, 2000).

The Genius Loci and the person who is responsible for the group seldom find themselves in contrasting positions. As a matter of fact, as I said, it is much more frequent to find agreement than contrast. One of the areas where there is agreement is the development of group thought. [1]

The Genius Loci is able to recognize the quality and characteristics of the shared atmosphere. It probably discovers them through intuition. The Genius Loci is usually not entirely aware that what it has discovered refers to the situation of the group. It signals the discovered quality through some comment or marginal remark. For example, “Yesterday I was at a dinner, the food was really horrible” or “I feel lively, as if I were expecting something, but I'm not sure what.”

These contributions - which are often out of place as regards the group situation or are constructed in such a way as to indicate an opposing quality to that which is present - may easily go unnoticed unless they are grasped and developed by the therapist. The therapist will take it up, without bringing too much attention to the person involved. [2]

In this way, one achieves fundamental assistance for the activation of group thought. In order for group thought to be triggered, it is necessary that the members have common points of reference. One of these is the shared theme. What is more important than the theme, however, is the fact of coming into contact with the common emotional and affective situation. In fact, a dynamic core of fantasies evolves inside such a situation. Coming into contact with this core stimulates creativity.

The contributions of the Genius Loci and of the therapist allow to recognize the qualities and the features of the shared atmosphere, one in which up until then they were immersed unawares. Moreover, they allow them to become attuned to the core of fantasies that are active during the session. (Telfer, 2001). [3]

This discovery is a key, it produces a “click”. One can see a clarification of difficulties, a coming together between what is explicit and what is implicit in the discussions among the group members, greater propensity towards authenticity.[4]

## **Conclusion**

In order for thought to surface in a small therapeutic group, it is not sufficient for the latter to have a rational setup (Work Group). Indeed, the group must also have a relational setup (Syncretic sociality).

This is where the Genius Loci comes into the picture.

The Genius Loci activates, regulates and highlights affects.

Syncretic sociality (the mushroom bed) - when it is well kept and tended to - feeds dreams, discussions, interpretations of the group members and of the therapist.

There can be no relationship without affects. There can be no thought without relationships. [5]

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[1] The Genius Loci operates in this by performing a function which is comparable to that of a 'spokesperson'. Pichon-Rivière (1977, 1995) specifies that the

‘spokesperson’ is the member of the group who at a specific moment manages to feel some intuition about the fantasies, anxieties and necessities that permeate the group. When the ‘spokesperson’ expresses something, he/she does not speak for him/herself alone, but for the group in its entirety. He/she is usually not aware that he/she is bringing something out that will be significant for everyone. On the other hand, the ‘spokesperson’ doesn’t directly and clearly illustrate what is happening in the group, but rather provides a ‘sign’. It is a ‘sign’ that indicates something that, up until that moment, was hidden or implicit. If the ‘sign’ that is supplied by the ‘spokesperson’ is to be effective, it must be picked up by the therapist who gives it significance and then develops it. So far, I agree with Pichon-Rivière’s observations. There are, however, some differences between the notions of ‘spokesperson’ and Genius Loci that I would like to point out. Pichon-Rivière assigns to the ‘spokesperson’ the function of identifying what is surfacing from the point of view of the process of a group that is engaged in its endeavor to gather knowledge. Instead, the Genius Loci indicates an emotional and affective quality of the atmosphere in the group. The ‘spokesperson’ corresponds to a function that can be taken on by a member even for just one session. The function of Genius Loci is taken on with greater continuity and duration. The ‘spokesperson’ operates very closely with the therapist. The Genius Loci has greater autonomy as compared to the therapist.

[2] At times, it is the analyst who provides such contributions. In this case, he/she acts directly as Genius Loci. More often, however, the therapist collects and re-launches the marks of the Genius Loci.

[3] Foulkes speaks of something that is very similar, for which he uses the term “location.” The most important difference between what Foulkes refers to and what I have tried to describe, lies in the fact that according to Foulkes the whole task is carried out by the group leader, whilst, in my opinion, it is usually carried on through the synergy that exists between the Genius Loci and the leader. Foulkes (1977) writes: “The task of the leader is not only to perceive the meaning, but also to place it into the appropriate dynamic setup. I have defined this process as “localization”. This process of localization or location may be better understood by keeping Gestalt in mind [...]. Localization assumes that the leader is aware of the pertinent form of observable phenomena. This allows the leader to pick up on the key [...] which the group is speaking in any particular moment.” Foulkes provides various definitions of



this concept. The most prominent refers to the localization of illness. “The patient’s problems represent only one aspect of a more complex problem of a group [or of a family]. I have called this phenomenon, “localization of the disturbance.” It could turn out that the most important cause of the disturbance is not at all in the patient, but, for example, in his wife, in-law, etc.”. However, he also provides the definition that refers to the work of the psychotherapist in the group and that has many points in common with the function carried out by the Genius Loci. I would like to thank Francesco Pieroni for these precious indications.

[4] Such a propensity can also be seen as an attenuation of fear of the unknown and of relating with other people and with oneself (Pichon- Rivière, 1995).

[5] I would like to thank Mercedes Lugones for these precious indications and for the thorough reading of the text that she contributed.

[1] Heinz Kohut (1978, 1984) would perhaps speak about the relationships of the twinning Self-object.

[2] The idea of the “everything is here in the moment,” as formulated by Taubes (1993), was of great help in understanding the change in the perception of time that occurs in particular stages in a group’s life. I am referring to periods like those that follow a suspension of therapy for a summer holiday, or even for transition periods that coincide with the leaving of an old group member or the arrival of a new participant (Levison 2000, p. 313-316; Bates 2000, p. 317; Akhar 2000, p. 230). They are periods in which the perspective of time shortens enormously. The overcoming of

moments such as these is certainly not the exclusive task of the group's Genius Loci. We can affirm that the Genius Loci, if left to itself, cannot but fail. Facing a crisis implies negotiation and establishment of a new basic makeup. This complex duty may be carried out only by the analyst and group together. However, the Genius Loci has the essential function of guaranteeing affective continuity.

[3] A 'sign' of failure of the Genius Loci function is the change in the "internal-external membrane" which loses its permeability properties and becomes, instead, a rigid boundary.

[4] Bion (1961) describes how "Specialized Work Groups" cope with disturbing emotions, thus saving the rational set up of the group. Specialized Work Groups (Church, Army, Aristocracy) have the duty of containing primitive emotional drives that continually come to the fore, preventing them from becoming an obstacle to the functioning of the Work Group. For example, the "Aristocracy" Specialized Work Group can isolate and "ideologize" the messianic drive proper to the basic assumption of "coupling", steering it in the direction of a harmless attention for the family trees and marriages of the ruling families. "The existence of specialized subgroups [thus] ensures that the group has the possibility of resorting to an inoffensive means for expressing its basic assumptions". The Genius Loci instead is based on the idea that emotions and affects are an integral part of any form of Work Group, even highly evolved ones. It is therefore a matter not of neutralizing but of fostering an exchange and a union between affects and thought.

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