

The engagé psychoanalyst

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Copenhagen 2013, Berlin 2014, Boston 2014, Buenos Aires 2015, New Haven 2015 and again Boston 2015: six international conferences that we have taken part in have had two interesting variables in common: the first, participants aged under 50 were in a substantial minority, a detail which highlights a weak – to put it kindly – ability to attract new generations of colleagues; and the second, the significant absence in the programmes of presentations referring to the Spirit of the Age, to the detriment of the Conference titles themselves, almost always connected with the momentous transformations today taking place: *100 Years on: Origins, Innovations and Controversies*, *Anima Mundi in Transition*, *Changing world: The shape and use of psychoanalytic tools today*, to name but a few.

On the contrary, during the Conferences special attention has often been reserved for papers of a historical and philological nature, which have generally been greatly appreciated, while the fearless few who try to reflect on more critical and innovative topics are elegantly allocated less important sessions held at improbable times.

What the eye does not see, the heart does not grieve.

In the ritual of Conferences (which ought to represent, strictly speaking, a moment of the highest debate regarding the activity carried out within the professional community), the reassuring collective illusion is consumed and celebrated, therefore, that everything remains the same, that the metapsychology of reference, well consolidated and tested, represents the crystalised universe, the flat earth, within which to search for the meaning of every event.

In other words, we are left with the impression that Conferences justify psychoanalysts who allow themselves to disengage from the disquieting events which happen outside the analytical context, reassuring them, what is more, of the fact that within the setting there really is nothing new, in that the roadmap to be used is already well known; consequently there is no need to change or experiment with different instruments.

Off topic: while I write this travelling by train, the inspector asks me for my ticket and checks it with his PDA. Why does he no longer use a ticket punch? I wonder to myself. End of digression and I return to where our subject was interrupted.

The defensive attitude towards movements produced by external disturbance, such as those today taking place in the world around us, bring to mind the first lines of Book II of *De Rerum Natura* (On the Nature of Things) by Lucretius:

“’Tis sweet, when, down the mighty main, the winds

Roll up its waste of waters, from the land

To watch another’s labouring anguish far,

Not that we joyously delight that man

Should thus be smitten, but because ’tis sweet

To mark what evils we ourselves be spared;”

Lucretius’ metaphor has been developed during the course of western philosophy by many authors, but what might it allude to? In accordance with the reading given to it by Hans Blumenberg, we should like to highlight its antithetical contrast: on the one hand, the possibility of staying out of trouble apparently exists, “spectators of the shipwreck” to use Blumenberg’s words, immune to the world and its dangers; on the other hand, the possibility of trying to climb on board the storm-tossed ship to see what might happen equally exists.

The father of metaphorology at this point leads us to Pascal and his celebrated passage: “*Vous êtes embarqué*”. Lucretius’ passive spectator now can no longer avoid being aboard the same ship as was previously observed from afar; the distance between observer and actor has been cancelled, no one contemplating reality can call her-/himself out. This leads us to Nietzsche and *The Gay Science*, to the direct exhortation to philosophers to set sail in search of new values to substitute the old... . “The earth of Morals is also round”, decreed the philosopher from Röcken.

It would seem, therefore, that the phenomena just described represent a reflection of the crisis in the various approaches to psychodynamic psychology in contemporary society, the society of globalisation, digitalisation and acceleration. This psychodynamic psychology finds itself incapable of renewing itself by becoming fecundated by new shoots of thought, and in difficulty when trying to make contact with the social, ecological and technological transformations which ultimately change individuals.

A consequence of such autistic encapsulation by psychoanalysts is the disappearance from the scene of intellectuals summoned to understand the great questions of their own moment in history and also of Humankind, which remains nonetheless also a product of the Culture to which it belongs.

Indeed, we have witnessed, over the last few decades, a progressive loss of prestige and visibility on the part of the figure of the psychoanalyst, who in the guise of the politically or socially active intellectual has now disappeared from the scene, to become merely its passive observer. Whereas in 1965 Cesare Musatti, the father of Italian psychoanalysis, held conversations with Moravia and Pasolini in the famous documentary *Comizi d'amore* and Jung, only a few years earlier, was literally chased by the media for an interview, anything similar is unlikely to happen today. The present *Zeitgeist* requires that on the rare occasions when a “psychoanalyst” appears on a TV programme or in a newspaper, her/his role is no longer that of the “intellectual” (who, thanks to a familiarity with the dimension of deep signification, is able to give a transversal and original reading of socio-cultural phenomena) but rather that of the “expert” (called in, by the increasingly spectacular infotainment-oriented media to clarify some aspect of a generally crime-related news item).

The psychoanalyst-expert is a “normalised”, perimetrical figure, who betrays the original deeply *engagé* nature of psychoanalysis.

The illness which affects the various approaches to psychodynamic psychology has a specific name: endogamy, or, to use Bachofen’s terminology, a return to the matriarchy, an all-out abandonment of hybridisation, debate, risk, openness to new ideas, all of which are elements – and here lies the true paradox – present in the vigour, the intellectual curiosity and the research of the founding fathers of the discipline.

Marx was a revolutionary, unlike the Marxists. Freud was a revolutionary, unlike the Freudians. Jung was a revolutionary, unlike the Jungians.

These intellectuals changed the world like few others have done. They were like giants and we are like dwarves in their presence.

However, there is something more that we can do: stand on the shoulders of these giants, lean against them and try to see a little further than they themselves were able to see. In other words, we must become, as Bernard of Chartres proclaimed, “dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants”.

Metapsychology, from far horizon which includes, contains and oppressively limits, should become the solid base on which to found inspiration and exploration, on which to calculate risk, the port from which to set sail. And society, instead of being the mere aseptic and neutral framework in which the individual destinies of patients sort themselves out, should go back to being considered as

a concomitant cause in their existential affairs.

Psychoanalysts constrained within the metapsychological frame of reference could thus be assimilated to the “militant” intellectuals, in their function as a check a posteriori of a given ideology and its defence.

We prefer to distinguish, in the name of freedom of thought and with Popper’s conviction that theories can be falsified, such intellectuals from those who are *engagé* in the way of the organic intellectuals as postulated by Gramsci. Let us not forget, to return to Lucretius, that one of the oldest meanings of *theōrein* (as in “theory”) is that of “to gaze upon [a spectacle]”, a meaning which evokes a distancing from reality, and not the one given earlier by Pascal.

We wish to contrast, therefore, the figure of the “militant psychoanalyst”, easily identifiable by the epithet that recalls to which “church” s/he owes obedience, with the one who is *engagé*, in Sartre’s acceptance of the term.

“To speak is to act;” wrote the French thinker, “anything which one names is no longer quite the same; it has lost its innocence”.

Sartre was speaking of writers, of critics. We know that we treat and cure by means of our relationship with the patients, a relationship which is made up, in turn, of communicative acts which are mainly linguistic in nature. Therefore, to all intents and purposes, we are writers and critics.

Just as the *engagé* writer knows that the word is action, even more so must the psychoanalyst know: s/he also knows that “to reveal is to change and that one can reveal only by planning to change”.

Words are “loaded pistols”, if we speak, we shoot. “(...) Since [the writer and, in our case, the psychoanalyst] has decided to shoot, it is better to do so like a man, aiming carefully at the target, and not like a child, at random, closing one’s eyes and just for the pleasure of hearing the shot”.

And again: “Most critics [psychoanalysts in our scenario] are men who have not had much luck and who, just when they were on the brink of despair, have found a nice quiet little place as cemetery caretakers. God knows cemeteries are quiet, and none of these are quite so pleasant as the library. That is where the dead are: they have done nothing but write, they have long since been cleansed of the sin of living, and besides, their lives are known only from other books that other dead people have written about them. (...) They have a passion only for matters which have been filed away, disputes which have been settled, stories whose end is known. They never bet on an uncertain outcome... . (...) [Those who] know something of psychoanalysis will be perfectly happy,

explaining *The Social Contract* by the Oedipus complex and the *Esprit des Lois* by the inferiority complex, fully enjoying, that is, the recognised superiority that living dogs have over dead lions”. Thus says Sartre.

Finally, on the political level, the psychoanalyst should be *engagé* in the original sense of the term. For our existentialist philosopher, the intellectual must be committed, *engagé*, and flee from the temptation to act irresponsibly; s/he finds her-/himself in her/his era and must decide to choose it. The intellectual must align her-/himself with those who aim to transform both humankind’s social condition and the conception it has of itself.

This re-emergence of the psychoanalyst from the ivory tower of everyday practice therefore seems to us to be of vital importance in a world in which the “experts” drawn into the debate increasingly belong to the field of neuroscience, an area heavily at risk of being at the twofold service of a neo-positivist reductionism, on the one hand, and the savagely brutal economic pressures of big (pharmaceutical) industry on the other.

But why resort to the terminology of Sartre to characterise this new attitude of the psychoanalyst?

It is at this point that some preliminary remarks of an etymological nature become necessary.

In common parlance *engagement* means “commitment”. The term derives, in fact, from the French *gage* (from the Frankish **waddi*) meaning “security” or “pledge”. Moreover, a further etymological root connects the Italian cognate *gaggio* to the Lombardic **gahagi* (Med. Lat. *wadium*), by which was meant a plot of land enclosed by a hedge given as recompense to soldiers who enrolled in the army and who thereby became *ingaggiati*, that is, “engaged” (in the military sense).

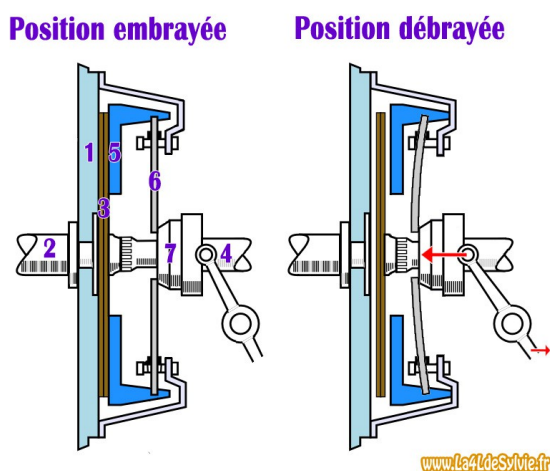
And so we immediately run up against various semantic marks which hook the word *engagement* with various dimensions of meaning: war, recompense, pledge. Over time, further threads of meaning have sprouted, which highlight one aspect or another of the original marks. Remaining within the dimension of war, for example, we use “engagement” when we speak of the rules which discipline the military employment of weapons, or when a missile locks onto its target. In the thread relating to recompense, Dante uses the term *gaggio* in Canto VI of his *Paradiso* to talk of the reward for the souls of the blessed. Moreover, it is certainly true that the mark of meaning which has prevailed in many languages is the one pertaining to pledge and commitment, which has constellated a galaxy of meanings which goes as far as including the English “to be engaged”, indicating having made a formal commitment to get married.

Umberto Eco in *Lector in Fabula* reminds us that every word is a distillate of texts, a microcosm of meanings expandable by different *interpretants* up to the possibility of *unlimited semiosis* (“We might say that among the interpretants of the word /child/ there are not only images of children or definitions of the type “a young human being below the age of puberty” but also, for example, the episode of the Massacre of the Innocents” Eco, 1979; p.35). By embracing this stimulating complexity, we should therefore like to “play” with the terms “*engagé/engagement*” to try to redefine in a novel way the figure of the psychoanalyst today, in the terms just described. As this is a purely semiotic deliberation, in order to conclude, a digression in this field of knowledge becomes important, recalling that semiotics embraces the English term “engagement” as part of the theory of enunciation as elaborated by Émile Benveniste, and later adopted in the development of structuralism in an enunciative direction by Algirdas Greimas.

Engagement as *débrayage*

Allow us at this point to continue by means of a second premise, followed by a concrete example borrowed from Woody Allen.

The premise is of a practical nature: in the field of mechanics, “engagement” (French: *embrayage*) refers to the act of bringing a mechanism into operation, as in the clutch of a car, where the transmission between engine and gearbox is gradually activated, enabling the movement generated by the engine to be transferred to the wheels; “disengagement” (*débrayage*) occurs when the clutch pedal is depressed, interrupting the transmission and enabling the gears to be changed.



In applying these terms to the creation of a text, “disengagement” is understood to indicate the fundamental operation by which an enunciator produces an utterance, *becoming detached from it in*

the very moment in which s/he produces it (in Greimas's definition: *schizie créatrice*); vice versa, by "engagement" is to be understood the locking into place again of the enunciator *within the utterance*. The example taken from Woody Allen will help to clarify the use in semiotics of the two terms, again with a premise that also a piece of cinema is, in the semiotic sense, a text, which can be assimilated in many ways to a written or spoken utterance.

In *Annie Hall* an exasperated Woody Allen (Alvy Singer) directly addresses the cinema-goer to express his annoyance with a presumptuous intellectual standing behind him in the cinema queue, and calls on Marshall McLuhan in person who, in a cameo role which has become famous, reprimands the pedantic individual who has irritated Alvy.

Every film, like every text, *is always the fruit of an operation of disengagement* which "unhooks" it, as an autonomous product, from the complex apparatus which produced it, ranging from the screenwriter to the film crew and the complex operations of post-production: of all this "extratextual" generative apparatus no trace remains within the film, and the cinema-goer can enjoy the "possible world" (Umberto Eco) which takes shape as the film unfolds. But when Woody Allen looks into camera and addresses and consults the viewer directly,



the narrative fiction becomes interrupted for a moment: it is more the film director – a veritable *deus ex-machina* – than the film character talking to his public, and so the author reappears within the text, in the same way as Alessandro Manzoni does when he addresses the famous "twenty-five readers" in *The Betrothed*. We can speak in this case of "engagement".

In more precise terms from a semiotic point of view, "disengagement" is therefore the fundamental operation which connotes the "act of enunciation", understood as the mechanism of mediation between language as an abstract system (the *langue* of Saussure) and speech (*parole*) by means of which *langue* concretely takes on form: it establishes a universe of discourse defined in time and space in which certain *actors* move, a universe more or less independent of the empirical subject which initiated the enunciation. This universe can be, as in the previous example, the narrative

universe of a film, but also any utterance as recounted by a patient, such as: “lately the greengrocer has been selling me fruit which doesn’t taste of anything at all, and which I have to throw away”. Let us pause to look at this last example. From a psychoanalytical point of view, we might say that in this utterance a piece of the patient’s emotional life has been “disengaged”, one which we take on, if we adopt an *analytic field* model, as originated by the relationship experience with the therapist. A very direct and “saturated” interpretation might sound like this: “you are telling me that in this period you feel the analysis is of no use”. What is it that the analyst is apparently doing here? S/he is trying to bring back to the “here and now” and the “you and I” of the analyst-client relationship that fragment of emotional life which has been projected – inside the utterance – into an elsewhere both in terms of time and space and of actors (the greengrocer’s shop and a certain time-frame). In semiotic terms, *the analyst is apparently explicitly hooking up again the utterance to the situation of enunciation*, that is, the analyst’s consulting room in which the patient and analyst interact as the only protagonists. Indeed, interpreting the transference, the analyst therefore proposes an engagement, which moves in the opposite direction compared to the patient’s disengagement; the aim would be to promote the process of psychological growth by means of the re-internalisation of the emotional experience which had previously been “unhooked”.

In actual fact, an intervention of this type, if not finely-tuned, might risk representing an engagement which was strident and potentially persecutory, like a sudden and unexpected look into camera accompanied by a “yes, I’m talking to you!”, which would interrupt the cinematographic pretence, on a par with the famous engagement by Baudelaire: “*Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!*”



An extreme, involuntary, even overwhelming, case of engagement was the famous, and perhaps legendary, showing of the film *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de la Ciotat* (*Train Pulling into a Station*) by the Lumière brothers, which in 1896 resulted in a mass exodus from the cinema by the fleeing terrorised onlookers, convinced that they were seeing a real train arrive: it may be said that

interpretations which are excessively direct and “saturated” run the risk of causing the patient to lose sight of the transitional and ultimately symbolic dimension of the analysis experience; *in these cases the patient may feel “assailed” by the analyst, experienced as a concrete person who is transforming the relationship into a “personal matter”*.

As a consequence, we are convinced that the analyst must pursue engagement, modulating it, however – according to the patient and the moment of the analysis – in order not to raise excessively the temperature of the emotional atmosphere during the session, with the risk of activating negative reactions in the therapy. So let us talk of the so-called “narrative interpretations”, which respect the “possible world” chosen by the patient. Going back to the previous example, it is a matter of respecting – for a variable period of time – the “actors” on stage, and trying to tune into what the patient felt during the encounter with the “greengrocer”, without rushing to deconstruct the latter into the figure of the analyst, and simultaneously remodulating one’s activity during the session to try to sell the patient better “fruit”. Sometimes a partial deconstruction of the patient’s account by means of the use of indefinite pronouns is possible right from the start, preparing the ground for the more direct engagement which is the interpretation of transference, as in the case of a very “unsaturated” comment such as: “it’s frustrating having to deal with *someone* who gives us things of no use”, knowing that the true interpretation, to quote Bion, may be given “six sessions later, six months later, six years later” than when it was thought of.

From a semiotic point of view, therefore, the psychoanalyst is *engagé* when s/he works respecting the patient’s text, and moves in line with it, faithfully within the “limits” that Umberto Eco places on the interpretation of a text, differentiating it from the “use” of that text. Interpretation distinguishes itself from use inasmuch as it recognises in the text the “right” to limit semiotic drift, which cannot be infinite, seeking, in other words, to respect the *intentio operis* without superimposing the *intentio lectoris*: if someone read as closed a text as that of a railway timetable in search of deep and hermetic significations consistent with a secret truth cryptically expressed in long sequences of abbreviations, destinations and times, s/he would not be “interpreting” the timetable but would be “using” it for purposes which were entirely private and, in particular, extra-textual (as well as, in all probability, absurd...). Similarly, *mutatis mutandis*, a dogmatically “*militant*” and non “*engagé*” analyst constantly risks “using” the patient’s text, instead of “interpreting” it, and therefore deforming it under the distorting lens of the “*intentio lectoris*” of her/his own School.