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Darkness: the obscure object of psychoanalysis

"The benighted traveler may sing aloud in the dark

to deny his own fears;

 but, for all that, he will not see an inch further beyond his nose"

(Freud, *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety*, S.E., XX, p. 96)

Often psychoanalysts question their object of study that is not only therapy or the psychoanalytical theory bur the very stuff of their inquiry. And this stuff, the stuff of which dreams are made, as well as the transference, the unconscious, and the analyst’s listening to the patient, is quite often obscure even to them. It’s like taking a look at something that can never be fully seized, that can never be brought to the clarity and light of understanding and talking. Probably because the age of a “complete” and exhaustive analysis has waned. Analyses, as Freud wrote, are always interminable, but analysts must be ready to face the unknown, the uncanny, the uncertain, even in themselves, not only when patients ask them to shed some light on what is happening to them. So, just like desire, the object of psychoanalysis is dark and probably since they no longer know how to “handle” this object, since they do not have a clear and shared knowledge of it, psychoanalysts end up choosing to join a school. So, they at least feel that they have some theoretical reference points and maybe that they are “right” rather than feeling their way in the darkness of uncertainty and being able to stay in that “negative capability” mentioned by Bion when quoting Keats.

Nevertheless, this darkness is the very stuff of psychoanalysis, its dark object, because its questions are the questions children ask about life and death, the origins and the end, pain and pleasure, encounters and losses. And as André Green wrote, the theories that analysts build about their object, the psyche, are the theoretical equivalent of children’s sexual theories that try to shed light on what is most obscure: why life, where does it come from and why does it end? And how does it start?

***The dark origin***

At the beginning, there is always darkness, obscurity. All the narratives on the origin of the world and the universe, geneses and theogonies, mention darkness followed by light, or chaos followed by order. From the darkness of the primordial world to the clarity of the universe we inhabit now. In the ancient Greek cosmogony, in the beginning, there was a stage of dim darkness where nothing appeared, then from this primordial union couples of opposites emerged – dark and light, cold and hot, dry and wet, high and low – that started to outline different areas in the universe. And by mixing they started producing life. From chaos to order, from darkness to light. Furthermore, the creation of the world was also the triumph of a god: the story of the battle between Titans and Olympians told by Hesiod is the narrative of a return to an original state of dimness and disarray. One could say that the underworld emerged to light: the visible universe recovered its primitive chaotic aspect: a dark and deep abyss, a bottomless opening, the chasm of a space without directions. Zeus’s victory re-establishes order, wards off the danger that *Chaos* returns to light and floods the visible world[[1]](#footnote-1). In another mythical narrative, by Pherecydes, after seizing power Zeus joins with the dark goddess of the underworld, Chtonie that, thanks to the cloth embroidered for her with seas and continents, is transformed in visible land, Gaea. Gods thus earn a space and a domain, while the powers of chaos and *hybris* are relegated in the Tartar, the *dark* underground river. In Homer’s cosmogony light belongs to Zeus, *darkness* to Hades, liquids to Poseidon and they all share Gaea, the earth where all living species are found.

In the Genesis too creation takes place by bringing order where there was disarray, making light come out of darkness. In the beginning in fact “the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.” (Genesis, 1, 1-4). But the separation is not that of light and darkness as if they were two united parts, that previously were fused and then separated, but in the sense of “making a distinction, a difference”. Light in fact can both lead to the night or start the day. There is a light that cannot be totally separated from darkness: one is not possible without the other, just like life cannot be conceived if not in relation to death. There is no light without its complement, *darkness*, there is no order in the universe if not from a previous chaos to which it is always possible to revert.

*In all myths, generation, creation, requires a universe generated from darkness*. Even in Polynesian myths in the beginning there were only primordial waters covered in darkness from which light emerged according to the wish of Ego, the supreme god, that wished to come out from its stillness. The world exists for a divine will and wish and this will is the one that we always find in all human creations. The cosmogonic myth, writes Mircea Eliade[[2]](#footnote-2), is the archetypal model of all “creations”, and its basic function is to establish models for all significant human actions. So, in the *Upanishad* the rite of procreation of a child identifies the human couple as a cosmic couple, where the man-woman dualism becomes the sea-earth dualism. Humans end up repeating in their actions – be they rites of passage, of coupling, of generation – the original myth of the foundation of the universe. And at the beginning there is always darkness, dimness, indefiniteness. What creates anxiety cannot be represented: death, nothingness, void. This is what we find in the most archaic and original psychic situations and also in the scientific explanations of the beginning of the universe.

Nevertheless, when we go back to the beginning, to the origin, we can never fully find what is irrevocably lost: we cannot find the beginning but only the dispersed traces of what was present in the beginning. Genesis and the sciences describe a universe whose initial event can no longer be traced but can only be indirectly inferred. There have always been two models for explaining the origin: *a single event* that cannot be repeated, that is almost indescribable and gives rise to everything, and a *continuous creation*, from which both being and non-being, life and death, matter and antimatter originate. When science poses the problem of the beginning or of origins it betrays its ability to build an objective knowledge system and succumbs to the temptation of myth. A clear example is the continuity that connects the cosmologic hypothesis of a big bang with the narratives of creation of the Greek and Judo-Christian tradition: an absolute beginning in a precise moment in time, a non-analyzed and non-analyzable singularity that gives rise to a series of regular and knowable processes[[3]](#footnote-3). On the contrary, the quantum void outlines a cosmogony where the origin is not an absolute and single beginning but is rather a place where the forms and distinctions that give structure to our universe fail[[4]](#footnote-4) and are lost in *darkness*. The antecedents of this scientific narrative can be found in pre-Socratic philosophy (in particular in Anaximander’s *apeiron*), in the Tao of the Chinese tradition and in the Hindu principle of Ether. In India and in Japan, the primordial and cosmogonic represent an obstacle to an idea of the foundations and to an inquiry on the beginning[[5]](#footnote-5). On the contrary, the Greek and Judaic cultures consider the act of creating as a founding act that implies the final separation between the divine and the human world. The wedding of Cadmus and Harmonia, from whose lineage Oedipus will be born, the founder of taboos and therefore of civilization, is the last act of a time when men and gods still shared life and experiences.

***Return to darkness and ascent to sense***

After all, we must think there is always a human innate tendency to retrace the origins, to go back to an original, inaugural state. This and none other is probably the nature of the Freudian death drive: the return to a previous state, on the verge of the inorganic. Moreover, there is an inexhaustible drive to find answers to childhood’s inaugural questions that analysis tries to give form to. A need to ascend to an initial point, a point where the object, the other, was not so far, unreachable: after all, there is always suffering in not being able to reach the object, remaining in the unknown, in abandonment or loss. In darkness. This is what artists show as they try to recover a lost “real” or what mystics teach us when they try to go towards divinity, to encounter it. Even if this encounter is always missed, both in the “full” version charged with Eros like in the case of St. Teresa of Avila, and in the negative version of a total void, like in the case of San Juan de la Cruz[[6]](#footnote-6). The encounter with any God treads necessarily a dark path and the mystic union with God is characterized by an initial subtraction and loss. “The mystic is the one who cannot stop moving, that with the certainty of what s/he is missing, knows of every place and every object that is not the one s/he is looking for, that there s/he cannot stay nor be content with that object”[[7]](#footnote-7). It’s the nostalgia of something that is always lost and probably never recovered fully or that is going to be lost again. Something always *dark*. The *Dark Night* of Juan de la Cruz tells about the need for the night, the darkness of the soul and its suffering that experiences its imperfection until the ascent to the mystic union with God. From the night of sense, from the night of the soul, to the spiritual attainment of the divine. *The night, darkness, is thus the metaphor that describes the human condition far from the sense*: the solitude or abandonment of the other that necessarily leads to the prevalence of the negative. Winnicott expressed it well when he talked of those traumatic experiences that make waiting for the mother unbearable for the baby: independent from the object’s return, in these cases only *the negative becomes real* and is extended to the whole psychic organization of the world.

If we try to retrace the origin of psychic life, we find the same darkness, the same obstacle met by myths and science when they intend to describe the beginning of the universe. But from the very beginning light and darkness must be seen as complemental functions that melt into one another. Like the rotation of day and night, in psychic life too, the unconscious always tries to reach the conscious that is seeped in by the presence of the unconscious. “Psyche is extended; knows nothing of this”, writes Freud enigmatically[[8]](#footnote-8). The cognition of the Ego is always undermined by the dark force of the Id, or better the Ego itself, being in part unconscious, “is not master in its own house”[[9]](#footnote-9).

***“Losing sight of”: getting used to darkness***

Loneliness, silence and darkness are distressing situations of which humans cannot totally get rid of, says Freud in *The Uncanny*[[10]](#footnote-10)*.* “Only a few of the manifestations of anxiety in children are comprehensible to us, (…) when a child is alone, or in the dark, or when it finds itself with an unknown person instead of one to whom it is used – such as his mother. These three instances can be reduced to a single condition – namely, that of missing someone who is loved and longed for”[[11]](#footnote-11). Writing about the fear of darkness in the *Three Essays on Sexuality* Freud relates a dialogue between a child and his aunt. “’Auntie, speak to me! I’m frightened because it’s so dark’. His aunt answered him: ‘What good would that do? You can’t see me’. ‘That doesn’t matter’, replied the child, ‘if anyone speaks, it gets light’. Thus, what he was afraid of was not the dark, but the absence of someone he loved”, is Freud’s comment[[12]](#footnote-12).

Summarizing, it’s the absence that generates anxiety, and *darkness* is the canvas on which the representation of absence is displayed: a negative of the representation, an absence that can be unbearable. The child’s distress in the situations mentioned by Freud as well as that of an adult in a peculiar state of regression, like when falling asleep or before waking up or during an analytical session, generates the need to find a “positive” perception, a possible representation that allows him to bear the “darkness” of the lack of representation. And we know that one can even hallucinate in order to bear the absence. Better, hallucinations become the basis of the possibility of thinking that derives precisely from the absence, from the *darkness* of the perceptive field. When the breast is absent, it is hallucinated, if its absence is bearable, that is where thought begins. Here Bion returns to Freud. But sometimes the distress for the absence can cause a perception that generates a *negative hallucination*, that Green designates as the “representation of the absence of a representation”. When an experience is neither recognized nor repressed, it cannot even enter the system of representations and appears as a “hole” in perceptual experience. Darkness in this case protects the subject from an excess of distress. A negative hallucination is therefore at the basis of a psychic action that aims at not perceiving a present object and for Freud precedes any positive hallucination.

For Freud, the unconscious should be considered as a dark region where one cannot see directly, but only through its derivatives, its “formations”: slips of the tongue, dreams, memory lapses. He invites psychoanalysts to look at the unconscious even if they risk seeing nothing. “Into this obscurity only a single ray of light is thrown by psycho-analytic observation”[[13]](#footnote-13), Freud somehow reassure us. It is the darkness that the analyst looks at, in danger of seeing nothing or very little. So, the analyst often finds himself in the situation described by Freud when he talks of the fear of darkness: when the experience of analysis is troubling for the analyst who feels in his countertransference the distress of the uncanny, of the familiar and the foreign at the same time, of the unknown intruding in his own psyche. This is what happens in the situations that are on the verge of decipherability, of understandability, that challenge the analyst’s capacity for resisting as he must face experiences that not only are transformable but also extremely difficult to understand or express. These situations are “at the limit of analyzability” and challenge the possibility of the minimum clarity required for an analysis, as in them sense is always uncertain, elusive, and one seems to move in a “dark” place no longer anchored to a system of possible deciphering.

This is especially true in the analysis of borderline cases where the difficulty in seeing clearly for an analyst subject to the patient’s anxiety becomes extreme, at times unbearable. In these situations, the feeling of obscurity, darkness, muddle, is intense and caught between the negative of repression and the negative of masochism of the negative therapeutic reaction, as Green noticed. The tragedy of the negative therapeutic reaction, the darkness it determines, resides in the impossibility of giving up the fulfilment of wishes with the transference object, but remaining fixated on it. A fixation that is expressed as an unquenchable and unmanageable hatred that keeps the subject tied to the object while rejecting it. This is what analysts experience more and more often in the treatment of borderline cases where the darkness of psychic events forces them to look away in order not to be invaded by the negative.

***Darkness today: total transparency and expulsion of the other***

A certain darkness seems to envelop the world today, at least as seen from the West, a condition that seems characterized by the end of differences and by a sort of universal uniformity. The absolute transparency of information, the possibility of accessing everything, turns subjects into opaque objects deprived of identity, but the big corporations know everything about them: tastes, preferences, habits. Everything seems equalized: all over the world today we do the same things and consume the same products, human beings seem less and less the subjects of their choices, of their destiny, and increasingly mere consumers. The freedom of citizens gives way to the passivity of consumers[[14]](#footnote-14). If the great illusion of the internet was to make information accessible to all, now we are drowning in information and we no longer know what to do with it: it seems useless, uncertain, if not false. It doesn’t tell us anything about what is happening, it doesn’t become knowledge, it only makes us slaves of ourselves[[15]](#footnote-15), in an increasingly confused and *dark* perception of the world around us. Everything is extrojected, there is no interiority, no pause, everything is exposed and accelerated, and in this constant exposure sense is lost, all is dark though at the same time accessible and transparent. If there is nothing to hide, if there is no *darkness*, nothing is left to say, everything becomes an obscene exposure of words and bodies. The pervasive and constant communication of information, the exchanges, do not draw us closer but farther apart. *This is today’s darkness: the more communication is – apparently – clear, transparent, continuous, the more we lose sight of otherness and differences and all that creates distress, because the otherness of the other is painful, because it cannot be reduced to what we are*. The other never corresponds to us perfectly, is never exactly what we want. For this reason, sameness, conformity, prevail along with the absence of distance that does not generate closeness, but cancels the enigma of the other. Thus, every true experience, which involves the otherness from oneself while retaining that sentiment of obscurity, disappears.

Life is impoverished and new forms of violence and abuse emerge. Human relations are reduced to exhibitions of a subject that only looks for “likes”[[16]](#footnote-16). Facing otherness and listening to the other is no longer possible.

“The time when there was another is gone. The other as mystery, the other as seduction, the other as Eros, the other as wish, the other as hell, the other as pain, have all vanished. The negativity of the other leaves room to the positivity of the same. The proliferation of the same gives rise to those pathological changes that infest the social body. It is not prohibitions and taboos that make it ill, but rather hyper-communication and hyper-consumption, not repression and denial, but laxness and success. Depression rather than suppression is the pathological symptom of our time. The destructive pressure does not come from the other but from within. Depression, for its pressure coming from within, develops traits of self-aggression. The depressed achieving subject is mortally wounded and suffocated by himself. Not only the other’s violence is destructive. The expulsion of the other gives rise to a different destructive process, that of *self-destruction*. The dialectic of violence is applicable in general: *a system that does not acknowledge the negativity of the Other develops self-destructive traits*”*[[17]](#footnote-17)*.

In today’s society, devoted to consumption and success, losers are excluded from the general system of enjoyment and see themselves as responsible for their own failure. And inevitably they become depressed. This is where psychoanalysis could play its role not only therapeutically but also ethically. If the neoliberal society makes us constantly indebted, it also makes us endlessly guilty. Not by means of obligations and prohibitions but through a constant invitation to participate and share, it is possible to access the human psyche and affect it in a pre-reflective way. Distress and anxiety are the brand of our times, anxiety for being excluded and marginalized. Or does this only happen in the West? The East seems to experience the exhilaration for having reached affluence, access to information, pleasure, possessions. But in today’s borderless world religions and ideologies no longer rule, in their place prevails a thought based largely on economy’s laws so that all social relations are based on competition and success, that corresponds to the triumph of narcissism thanks to the subjugation of the other.

This other is disregarded as a subject, is no longer other from oneself. Maybe only lunatics are able to see what is hidden to our gaze: that we are not truly free but, as Lacan said, insanity is the limit to our freedom. *Insanity seems to be a flash of light in the darkness that envelops us* because only lunatics show us the degree of our alienation that we mistake for freedom. The effort we make to be always “connected” makes them laugh because they are always disconnected and in so doing they can show us *the limit to our freedom*.

The only possibility, then, is to return to looking at otherness as it is, to darkness as other from ourselves. Psychoanalysis is probably still one of the few human domains where the “sacredness” of the others, its life and identity is valued, a place where the listening of the difference and an openness towards the other can still be experienced. This is why psychoanalysis is still and always will be outdated, because its voice is the voice of silent listening, its gaze is the gaze of one who takes care of the self through the other and its darkness is the same darkness of human existence.

1. J.-P. Vernant, Les origines de la pensée grecque, PUF, Paris, 1962. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. M. Eliade, *Traité* *d’histoire des religions*, Payot, Paris, 1948. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. M. Ceruti, “Origini di storie”, in AA.VV. *La narrazione delle origini* (edited by L. Preta), Laterza, Bari-Roma, 1991, p. 63-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*., p. 64. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. M. Detienne, “Fondare, creare, pensare l’inizio tra Grecia ed Israele”, in AA.VV., *La narrazione delle origini*, op. cit., p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. “To come to the knowledge of all/ desire the knowledge of nothing.

To reach satisfaction in all/ desire its possession in nothing.
To come to possession in all/ desire the possession of nothing.
To arrive at being all/ desire to be nothing.”

(Juan de la Cruz, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. M. de Certau, *The mystic Fable*, vol. 1 and 2, The University of Chicago Press, 1975 and 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. S. Freud (1938), *Findings, ideas, problems*, S. E. XXIII, 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. S. Freud (1916), *A difficulty in psychoanalysis*, S. E. XVII, 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Freud (1919), *The Uncanny*, S.E. XVII. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. S. Freud (1929), *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety*, S. E. XX, 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. S. Freud (1905), *Three essays on sexuality*, S. E. VII, 224, note 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. S. Freud (1912-13), *Totem and taboo*, S. E. XIII, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. B.C. Han, *Psychopolitics*, Verso, 2017. All Han’s citations are translated by the A. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Today’s man, “who thinks he is free, in in reality is a slave: an *absolute slave* whoexploits himself without a master”, in B. C. Han, *op. cit*. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. “Unlimited freedom and communication reverse into total control and surveillance. Even *social media* increasingly look like digital panoptics, patrolling social space and ruthlessly exploiting it”, *ibid*. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. B. C. Han, *The Expulsion of the Other*, Polity Press, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)