

An (I-) Consistent Subject

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ABSTRACT. – In order to appreciate the novelty and the scope of Michele Minolli's scientific and didactic parable, L'A, going back in time to their first meeting in 1973, describes the context, the atmosphere, the state of the art and the contours of the landscape in which psychoanalysis, Italian psychotherapy and the 'Center', from which the Italian Society of Psychoanalysis of Relation would later be born, were moving. He then dwells on the first years of intense study and debate of that small original group in which some peculiar characteristics of Minolli's character emerge, above all his confidence, quiet trust, positive constancy in looking to the future, but also his love for joking and subtle provocation, which, in a watermark, seems to transpire also in the two concepts he was most fond of: the notion of *Presence* and that of *I-subject*.

Key words: Minolli; SIPRe; Presence; I-subject.

Our paths crossed in 1973. A lifetime ago! Then, to me, he was Professor Minolli who gave lectures, preferably standing, at his desk. I sat in the front row among a small crowd of students. I no longer remember what course he delivered in that school with the phony name. It well represented the awkwardness of Italian clinical psychology, which was emerging with difficulty from fascist obliteration and Catholic prejudice. Its founder and mentor preached a shabby, limping doctrine, which mixed Freudism, Kleinism, Bowlbism, Relationalism, Frommism, Existentialism, Personalism, and just enough good-natured paternalism. Yet, the story began there in that school - a school that annoyed and depressed me. In my own time I was undertaking a systematic study of the Freudian corpus. I believe that Professor Minolli would recall only the persistence and stubbornness of this student: I took advantage of every opportunity that presented itself to de-bone the self-styled theory, showing that it had no fat, bones or joints. However, maybe for this reason

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in 1977 or thereabouts, he approached me and offered me a course teaching social psychology at his Centre. Although I was flattered by the offer, I had some doubts about the subject matter: I objected that I knew little more about social psychology than I did about quantum physics. However, as his friends and travelling companions have always known, Michele Minolli knew how to overcome obstacles and persuade. In the end I accepted and with good grace. Without having considered or sought this outcome I found myself a part of the Centre - a hotbed which marked the beginning of my clinical, theoretical and educational career. They were intense, curious, furious years that I cannot recall with anything but enthusiasm and nostalgia.

Returning to those distant times the novelty and scope of Minolli's scientific and educational parabola cannot be appreciated unless we consider the context, the atmosphere, the state of the art, and the contours of the landscape in which psychoanalysis, Italian psychotherapy, and the lost, invisible Centre moved.

Nowadays *psychoanalysis* is fluid. It can be moulded as desired like soft, submissive play-dough which can be formed and deformed. Psychoanalysis was different then. It was hard and precise. It loomed solemn and severe, grave and heavy, unscratchable and smooth: a sphere of black porphyry. Psychic energy, apparatus, psychic reality, drive, defence, projection, identification, investment, counter-investment, repression, ego, id, superego: it was all this. More supposed than known, the formal theory, solid, profound and revealing beyond any doubt, commanded deferent respect and supported the monolithic construction, which, only on the surface, was declined and coloured in different cultural dialects.

The Psychology of the Ego, still predominant in North America at that time, took on itself the honour and the responsibility of representing the organic, genuine development of Freud's discipline. In Great Britain, the tail end of the infinite controversies between the Kleinian current and that led by A. Freud and Jones had died down, and the non-linear contribution of the squad of independent authors who formed the theoretical universe generally known as object-relations theory had developed impetuously. Bion, however, freed from Klein's grim control, seemed to open up to new and appealing winds of change. In France, the hermetic, hard lesson of Lacan prevailed. In Germany, reverberations of the Frankfurt School that, through Fromm, had reinvigorated the American culturalist current, were fading. The well-known article by Hartmann (1950) which reinterpreted the 1914 narcissistic Ego as equating to the excessive notion of the *self*, opened the way to robust contamination between the psychology of the Ego and the instances of the object relationship theorists, promoting visions, such as those of Mahler, Jacobson and Kernberg, dominating bookstores, and paving the way for overbearing kohutian revision, which

grew so vigorously as to threaten the dominant position of Ego psychology. Though dissonant, even the non-obvious reflections of Bowlby reached us.

Previously, in 1958, an important conference at New York University had taken place, organized by Sidney Hook, in which the scientific nature of psychoanalysis was examined by the philosophy of science (Hook, 1960). The judgment of the epistemologists was inexorably negative, despite the strenuous defence of Arlow and Hartmann, due to the impossible operational translation of psychoanalytic statements. Psychoanalysis, however, did not take this on board and continued undaunted convinced of its clear and definitive status of normal science. In fact, in 1961, the Edinburgh Congress had seen the triumph of the orthodox restoration, against the latest disturbances of Alexander's provocation (*corrective emotional experience*) (Alexander & French, 1946) and the reaffirmation of the uniqueness of active cognitive factors in the form systematized by Eissler (1953). A year earlier, at only forty-nine, David Rapaport had died.

In this more general context, Italian psychoanalysis played an ancillary and modest role. The Gentile reform of 1923 had expelled psychological sciences from all schools at all levels and had crushed, together with psychology, even the nascent psychoanalysis. Consequently, at home, Kleinian and Lacanian positions, necessarily imported, prevailed, since for a long time aspiring analysts had had to look to London or Paris for their training. A new wave arrived in 1971 when Rome and Padua instituted the first degree courses in psychology. We could then begin to look to the future with more confidence even if the condition of clinical psychology and psychotherapy remained bleak. In 1989, the Ossicini law laid down a precise legal framework for the professional role of the psychologist. Thus, on a daily basis therapists' studies could expect to receive the unwelcome visit of the police, risk closure and be reported for unauthorized practice of the medical profession. This was on the initiative of a magistrate who was perhaps motivated by the wish to draw attention to the problem, and motivate the legislator, rather than by ill will.

It was between the solemn, safe scenario at the top, and the modest and insecure scenario at the bottom that the Centre busied itself. You might have described it as a secret, subversive *Carbonari* cell, concealed and marginal, disrespectful and rebellious. The *Carbonari* met just off a consular road, which cut through an ugly, working-class district of Rome, half-empty rooms, shabby green Formica furniture. Its pretentious name was suited to the time, evoking the original intention of Michele Minolli of rooting locally, in his non-elitist, proud plebeian vocation. It was called: *Democratic Psychoanalysis*. On Thursdays we had course lectures that qualified us for nothing; the presence of students was surprising, unexplained and inexplicable. Lectures were not the main activity,

however. Every Tuesday from half-past seven into the night, we studied, talked, discussed, reasoned and argued. To the bitter end! Generally, there was no agenda, but even when there was we always talked about the *thing*. The *thing* was 'psychoanalysis as it should be', but we didn't know how it should be. There were no maps. We sifted through the existing maps with meticulous logic and criticism and with less and less regard for the sphere of black porphyry.

One Tuesday after another an idea slowly took hold: why not set up a psychotherapy school, which would function as a tool to pursue, seek and develop the *thing*? Schools usually promoted promising, captivating and ready-to-use recipes, we wanted one that, making a clear declaration of not knowing, would provide tools for analysing standard maps and would work to devise a theoretical compass, an instrument, which would enable us to navigate in the open sea and build a concept network with the routes we would explore. We were just as shy as we were crazy and presumptuous. In our way and without knowing it, we put into practice the profound meaning of the term *theorein*, which, according to accredited etymology seems to mean 'navigating by looking'. I am sure that, to the end, Michele Minolli thought of school and teaching in this way. And I, with him.

To start a school you need to make the necessary preparations. The Centre, born a cooperative, did not seem to be the right platform. Even the name sounded irrelevant. I distinctly remember the day Michele began to speak of us of the *thing* as *Relationship Psychoanalysis*. It was SIPRe! Before my eyes, I can see his calm, confident smile, which lit up the notary's dull office when we formalized and certified the event. Outside, in magazines and books, serious psychoanalysis continued to concern itself with noble things: drive, the id, the super-ego, repression, total, partial, and split objects. We spoke, animatedly, of subject, subjectivity, interaction, relationships, casting our eyes far away towards the promised but unknown domain of subject theory. On one of those evenings, someone happened to utter the dirty word - intersubjective. Mostly talk centred on the past, much more so than on the future. We went through the plot and scrutinized the knots (and joints) of received theory. We knew that the combination of psychoanalysis and relationship - against the theory of intrapsychic processes and subject theory - was like water and oil; that a non-reductive consideration of the relationship would imply a new theoretical framework and a different and alien conceptual weave to the psychoanalysis of the drive, psychic energy and repressed unconscious.

The temptation was to understand *relationship* as *object relationship*. However, we found the philosophy of object relationship confusing and cowardly: a way of not taking seriously either the past (metapsychology) or the future (subject theory). The black porphyry sphere had neither a nook nor a cranny in which to place or hang such a thing as a *relationship*.

Psychoanalysis explained dreams, symptoms, fantasies and relationships. Everything. Specifying psychoanalysis with the genitive meant simply applying the process of explanation to a particular object, as in the psychoanalysis of civilization, or art. On the other hand, if we said *psychoanalysis of* dreams or *of relationships* it meant the 'process of explanation of...' and it was a useless redundancy, which sounded awful. But that is not what we meant. We considered the *of* as specifying psychoanalysis and not one of its objects; it was irreverent and improper, an over-indulgence that seemed inconceivable, and which could not be seen as anything other than obscene by the professionals. The fact is that we were increasingly convinced that the sphere of black porphyry had a soft and yielding belly, not adamantine at all. This was what emerged from our analyses, study, and evening, almost nocturnal discussions. We knew that a heated debate was underway in North America and the subject of that dispute was referred to as the *crisis of metapsychology*. Soon the affair, as it matured, changed signs: in a flash, the result of the crisis was death; the outcome, unexpected, of the Rapaportian undertaking of theory formalization and validation.

All this happened at the dawn of the 1980s shortly after the end of a decisive decade: between 1967, when the collection of students' writings in honour of Rapaport appeared, and 1976, when, edited by Gill and Holzmann (1976), the collection of essays in honour of G. Klein, who also died prematurely, was published.

As soon as we could we studied those texts. The *Carbonari* of the Centre went into disconsolate mourning, which, however, soon began to sound like a Nietzschean promise of the exhilarating possibility of intellectual adventure. The feral event, on the other hand, went almost unnoticed in the psychoanalytic universe and the rage of the dominant clinicism.¹ Moreover, Rapaport's entire theoretical work had gone quite unnoticed. Much more deafening was the clamour of the diatribes between the dying Psychology of the Ego, Kohutism, Kleinism, the innumerable souls of Object Relationalism, Lacanism, Hermeneutics. Little did we know that the *war of paradigms*, which would characterize the next two decades, had already begun. In any case, we were losing not only solicitude but the very idea of general theory. This death, much more serious than that of metapsychology, was sanctioned later and with no grieving by Wallerstein's ecumenical proclamation (1989) on one and the many different psychoanalyses.

The brief, but dense essay from 1990 (Minolli 1990), which appeared in the first issue of *Psychoanalytic Research* and is opportunely re-presented here,

¹In Italy, neither specialized journals nor psychoanalysts or professors reported on the crisis of metapsychology. The first to speak about it authoritatively was Giovanni Magnani (1981), a Jesuit from the Gregorian University, followed by Giordano Fossi (1984).

exemplifies in a very clear way the recursive plot of the study, research and work of that small group. The plot, whatever the topic under consideration, included three moments in a rigid sequence: i) Careful, punctual and neutral historical and historical-critical study of the texts (essentially Freudian, but not only); ii) Theoretical-critical analysis in the framework of the internal logic of the theory and of the epistemological assumptions on which it was built; iii) Finally, based on the results of these analyses we could and had to look at the possible future development of the theory.

Lo specifico del metodo psicoanalitico (Specifics of the psychoanalytic method, Minolli 1990) not only exemplifies this methodology of study and research, but reveals the great amount of critical and theoretical work of the previous ten years, especially in the central, theoretical-critical part, dedicated to the Rapaportian lesson² and in the final part, which proposes a non-reductive and more organic reinterpretation of the method when, in a completely obvious way for those times, it states:

“The focus of attention cannot simply be ‘words’ or ‘behaviour’, which are both restrictive and irreducible, but instead, the relationship, whose purpose is to overcome transference-countertransference bipolarity and is committed to understanding what is produced in the Organism-Object space, conceptualized as a system”.³

²It is not important here to enter into the merits of the methodological arguments of that essay, except perhaps to focus on the most decisive and crucial point, which may not be clear to the reader. The conclusion of the theoretical-critical analysis is that ‘the path taken through adherence to the historical-clinical method inevitably leads (...) to solipsism’. It may seem strange and even paradoxical that the relationship taken to its extreme consequences ends up in the black hole of solipsism, but it ends up there because of psychic continuity, whose analysis, for reasons of space and delimitation, Minolli chose to avoid. The stumbling block was also known to Rapaport, who in fact writes: ‘We all have our own private world in which each object of so-called reality has a specific meaning by which it is or becomes part of our psychological continuity. In other words, the unspoken implications for the psychoanalytic theory of the ‘tell me everything and we’ll get to the root of the matter’ injunction imply for the psychoanalytic theory that all objects of the external world - animate, inanimate, human, inhuman objects - are for the individual like figures in a dream, as in Alice in Wonderland, where they say, ‘Do not wake her because we are all in her dream and if you wake her we will all disappear’. To be really precise we would have to say that this is one of the epistemological implications of psychoanalytic theory’. Rapaport later concludes: ‘But - to consider the interpersonal question more directly - the other principle concerning the conceptual structure of psychoanalysis is that this bipolarity of the patient and doctor situation is also a basis for conceptualization. The result is a contradiction difficult to reconcile. The contradiction consists in the fact that this bipolarity is not really a bipolarity since the analyst is part of the continuum. It is a difficult situation that leads to many complexities’. Rapaport D., 1944-48, pp, 124-125, note 9.

³Minolli M. (1990). *Lo specifico del metodo psicoanalitico*. Ricerca Psicoanalitica, 1(1), p. 10.

Founding and promoting a school, (which hardly displayed captivating and palatable models of theory and treatment), carrying through, for weeks, months and years, an essentially do-it-yourself research project and also founding a Society - when we hardly came close to the twelve apostles in number - took a high dose of boldness, ambition and pride bolstered by a propensity for dissent and rough polemics. Our pantry had plentiful supplies of these ingredients. However, we were lacking in certainties, quiet confidence, and positive constancy in looking to the future. These rarer ingredients were provided by Michele Minolli who, with a light, but firm hand, added them continually to the pot and stirred them around. He was capable of doubting and uncertainty, but not capable of discouragement and demoralization.

This inclination for calmness and tenacity emerged completely at the birth of a creation he was particularly attached to and which he was deeply proud of. In the early 1980s - I no longer know if it was on one of the Tuesdays or relaxing with a glass of red wine - he advanced a proposal, with a calm and very serious air: the opportunity and necessity of founding a journal. It was crazy! Nobody took him seriously. Of course, who could not like the idea? But it could only be an unrealistic, wonderful dream, a free-flowing fantasy of desire. We did not have the cognitive, economic or organizational means. Where and how could we have found authors, not to mention readers? He talked about it infrequently, but now and then, however little the encouragement he received, he returned to the question. In the end, it was time that told who was right and who was wrong. This was no fantasy, but a staunchly pursued project. The magazine came out in 1990 and celebrates its thirtieth birthday this year; the issue is dedicated to the person who more than anyone desired, imagined, wanted and nurtured it.

His optimistic, confident imperturbability at the helm, reassuring the crew, went well with his love for jokes and subtle provocation. I'm not talking about his goliardic and playful teasing when, sipping from a glass of red wine, we savoured spaghetti after hours of debate or lessons. His inclination to provoke had a more serious side. It was his way of distracting listeners from the commonplace and banal, and pushing them, subversively and with a flash of surprise, to observe things from an unexpected and unusual point of view, with unbound eyes. It could have happened during heated discussions on clinical cases or taking students by surprise in an introduction to a lesson. But it was not as simple as that. I believe that his aptitude to provoke played a role - neither light-hearted nor instrumental in this case - in the elaboration of the two concepts of which he was most fond: the notion of *Presence* and that of the *I-subject*.

Since its first appearance at the dawn of the twentieth century, psychoanalysis had dramatically shattered the unity of the subject and the quiet security of man - especially Western man - in the ascendancy of consciousness. Freud was presumably referring to this when, on the deck of

the George Washington within sight of New York and the Statue of Liberty, he said to Jung: ‘*They don’t know we’re bringing them the plague!*’. The notion of presence does not ignore nor, I believe, intends to soften that radical break in the self-understanding of man, which is the crucial nucleus of the psychoanalytic revolution, but suddenly recalls, in a dialectical way, the opposite pole, that of unity and intentional tension, which already characterizes every form of subjective existence at a biological level, in which every expression of life on this planet manifests itself. Besides, in particular in his last works, *presence* harks back to a diligence akin to the Delphic and Socratic maxim, and to the importance of being ready, which a subjective self-realization cannot ignore.

The provocativeness of the notion of the *I-subject* is more subtle. The term appeared in his dictionary as early as 1985. I believe it occurred in the context of a study on the Freudian *Project*. He never listened to those who, at that time and for decades later, objected to the useless redundancy of the formula: after all, an *I* is always a *subject* and a *subject*, if human, is always an *I!* He exhibited the *I-subject* as a kind of banner to which he dedicates the long and thoughtful reflection of *Essere e divenire* (Minolli 2015).

The subject could not be enough because the *subject* is ... everyone! The *I*, on the other hand, is by definition single, unique, unrepeatable and, from this point of view, the formula is not redundant, but refers in a way, and even provocatively, to its singularity. From the start attention to singularity has always been central and prevalent not only in his clinical and teaching philosophy, but also - much harder to pin down - in his theoretical and scientific vision. He was naturally interested in the subject and subjectivity, but at the centre of his attention there was always that single precise subject, not the myriad of Giuseppees, but that one unrepeatable Giuseppe. From this point of view, the provocation hits the mark because clinical psychology inexorably raises the problem of singularity at the cost of clashing with the needs of the scientific viewpoint. Even the general sciences have always to do with singularity: ‘this rabbit is not that rabbit’ and ‘this volcano is not that volcano’, but there is no doubt that ‘this Giuseppe is not that Giuseppe’? has a very different meaning. Here and there, especially in *Essere e divenire*, a certain impatience visibly surfaces at being prevented from stating that knowledge and science can involve subjective singularity.

Minolli was fully aware that both of these notions could make the listener suspicious of a shadowy area where the scent of a remnant, or reference to unspoken essentialism could be detected. Especially since his predominant look at ‘this one unrepeatable Giuseppe’ is accompanied by a marked preference for a phenomenological and almost philosophical point of view, which inexorably favours the *what is* over the *how is*. In *Essere e divenire*, while normally looking from above at the *what is*, *what is before* and *what is after*, and continually contrasting one thing with another and excluding this

and excluding that to get to the outline of the *what actually is*, at the same time, with each step, he points out that what he sees from above, which he is painstakingly delineating, is, in any case, the effect of processes, a configuration emerging from a multiform and often unpredictable complexity of intertwining factors and procedural plots. This is to preempt a situation where, due to the dualistic imprinting of our culture and the omnipresent, underground spirit of essentialism, the reader may not understand or consider the importance of the rooting of the procedure, ending up prey to that automatic entifying assumption, continuing to consider the I to be a *thing* based on *selfhood*, autonomy, consistency and creativity at its inception.

I believe this shows the task that Michele Minolli set for research; the way forward for those who would welcome, develop and enrich his legacy. By explicitly and critically analysing the assumptions that his vision is based on - an uncommon approach not to be taken for granted - he traced the lines of the life parable of each I-subject: from their space-time finitude, the specificities of biology and the environment, and concrete, past experiences, to the possibilities offered by consciousness, and the consciousness of consciousness, and to prospective access to creativity and the overcoming (relative) of limits. All this, however, is to be considered the effect of processes - a singular and unique configuration that comes from a multiform complexity of factors and procedural plots. The work to be undertaken with consistency involves investigating, theorizing, and describing the actual processes that produce the contours of the panorama from below - a panorama that Michele Minolli passionately delineated and described from what he observed from above.

He was very fond of the noun *consistency*, and the adjective *consistent*. We could say of Michele that he was a consistent I-subject! He would have appreciated the compliment.

If I happen to be near those parts, I will be sure, as was the noble custom of the ancients, to pour a cup of your sweet wine onto the bare earth you loved. If there is solitude and enough silence I know that a light and amiably provocative voice will reach my ears: 'It's good! ... Drinkable! ... just slightly too cold! ... Only a little! ... a fraction less and it would be perfect!'

That is what you would have said. *Sit tibi terra levis*.

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