



## THE IDIOT'S DREAMS: RÊVERIE IN CHILD PSYCHOTHERAPY

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When exploring the frontier of the “border” cases, that is treating severely damaged patients, either by organic pathologies or by severe physical traumas or even by catastrophic emotional events, the classical technique is often forsaken to pioneer new trails, and we may utilize intersubjective actions. Some of these actions may occur very directly and suddenly, only later revealing their meaning in the *après coup*; others, on the contrary, may be the result of a not always easy or painless choice; in either case, these actions can have a great therapeutic meaning. I ventured to follow one such trail, together with the child I am going to speak of in this paper: the little “idiot” (as he used to name himself). He was suffering from an extremely severe phonologic disorder, which allowed him to utter only inarticulate noises; yet, a rich and deep internal world peeped out in the sessions, a world imprisoned but not completely annihilated by mutism. For many months, I have been trying to lend my voice to this world, by agreeing to narrate “my own” dreams within the play that was taking place in the sessions: in other words, I have tried to make use of my rêverie and capacity of identification in order to express the awful anxieties connected with the child’s impossibility to communicate and to be understood: that is, with his huge loneliness. This work of “translation” did not take place with interpretation dresses, but as a repeated narration of dreams and nightmares, apparently mine yet, actually, deeply belonging to him. In this way a first step has been taken towards the raise of trust and hope of being understood, an indispensable requirement for him to finally get—after many years of work—to express himself and to make himself understood.

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I have been treating deprived or traumatized patients, children and adolescents, for many years; for some of them, the trauma may lie in having to live with congenital or chronic diseases, such as dwarfism or other serious neuro-psychiatric disorders.

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In a previous work (Arfelli, 2002), I stressed the importance of *enactments* that can occur during a session, even in a dramatic way, with some traumatized patients. An *enactment* can actually be a meaningful source of communication, of a transforming kind, on condition that the therapist is receptive to it and decodes its meaning as a symbol of a catastrophe that has happened and cannot otherwise be represented or expressed (Ferenczi, 1929; Bonomi and Borgogno, 2001; Borgogno, 2004).

In such situations, an *enactment* often takes place unexpectedly, like a sudden and unthought acting out that overwhelms the therapist and upsets both the setting and the normal verbal sequences. Only with hind sight, by means of his capability of *working through*, will the analyst be able to reconstruct the true meaning of the sequence and to transform it into those words and thoughts that the patient could not use, because he did not yet know them.

Nevertheless, in other clinical situations, patients may be likewise unable to symbolically represent and perform—particularly with words—thoughts and emotions connected with their psychic pain, but it will be necessary for the therapist to “lend” them his own symbolic functions for the time needed, in order that patients are able to find those functions within themselves (Borgogno, 1999; Borgogno and Vigna-Taglianti, 2007).

The therapist must then decide with more awareness whether to “come into play”, and make use of a technique that apparently draws away from the classic psychoanalytic method, particularly because it is founded upon inter-subjective actions. In reality, it is actually a deeply therapeutic technique, since it is ideally connected with the most authentic “core” of psychoanalysis (Vallino, 1998; Vigna-Taglianti, 1999).

I am referring here to those situations where a child therapist must play, dramatize and even dream, for and with his patients, if he really wants to reach them and make their nucleus of deepest suffering thinkable again. With these patients it is sometimes even more necessary to put forward, in a lively, authentic and original way, that analytic function that Bion (1962) named *rêverie*, in order to give birth to creative solutions that allow the coming out from conditions of relational *emphase*.

I would like to illustrate these thoughts of mine through a clinical case: Sandro.

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When I met Sandro for the first time, 9 years ago, he was a 7-and-a-half-year old-boy who underwent many hospitalizations in order to resolve—quite unsuccessfully—the diagnostic question: is he an “organic” or a “psychic” child?

Sandro does not speak, except in a very personal way: he says very few words, such as “hello, yes, no, mum, dad”; otherwise, he makes sharp and

inarticulate howls, like a deaf-mute. "It seems he is a mental deficient", his mother says.

He is very aggressive (even in nursery school he used to kick, punch and spit at any frustration), he is provoking, intolerant and quick-tempered. He is uncoordinated and moves unceasingly, twirling about like a spinning top. He eats insatiably; he has many tics and stereotyped movements: he makes strange gestures with his hands, repeatedly touches the ground, kisses or licks window-panes and "barks".

Such a set of symptoms would surely suggest a diagnosis of psychosis, but Sandro's desire to communicate is strong and undeniable: with his gestures and glances he tries to make himself understood, and his desperate and furious frustration is very evident when all his attempts fruitlessly fail.

The medical tests he underwent have shown a very tiny cerebral malformation, which accounts for his huge clumsiness.

The outcomes of Sandro's evaluations are nearly paradoxical: the neuropsychiatric diagnosis is of "severe apraxia at phonatory level", while the phoniatric one is of psychosis.

Sandro cannot receive help: regarded as unsuitable for speech therapy, as he is psychotic, as well as for psychotherapy, as he is apraxic, he is referred to "facilitated communication": this seems to be the only technique in some way useful for a child with such a serious deficit. During one of his sessions with the facilitator, Sandro puts into words the umpteenth replacement of his supporting teacher, at school, by writing with the computer: "*Teacher Anna has gone too, as she could no more stand the idiot*".

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During my first session with him, I am struck by the bright expression of Sandro's eyes and by his capacity of keeping in contact. When, after the end of the session, I go back into the room, which has been ravaged by his fury I do, however, feel that a sensation is emerging in me overbearingly: the feeling of a great profundity, a voiceless and imprisoned intelligence, of a "boy who lives in a no man's land", as his mother rightly says of him. This boy, I think, can be helped.

Based on this strong emotion I am able to suggest psychotherapeutic work, which would not be focused on making him able to speak, at least initially, but would try to provide him with a space of containment and meaningfulness, of listening and humanization.

I will discover very soon that containment and listening may be offered to Sandro by my staying so to say "still", using a lively but silent contact with him, while, on the contrary, meaningfulness and humanization must be vehiculated through a personal involvement that will be fruitful only if free and active.

In the following pages, I will try to describe how I put into words my own rêverie, that is, the contents of my internal world regarding Sandro, helping this unlucky child at first to feel his crude and primitive emotions being shared and legitimated, then to know their name and at last, after much work, to become finally able to express “in the first person” everything that had been walled in inside him for so many years.

At the beginning, our once-a-week therapy sessions follow a stereotyped and apparently unchangeable course that makes me feel full of discouragement and doubts. First of all, Sandro greedily devours the snack he brings with him, refusing to share it with the toy animals of his play box who piteously plead for a morsel! He then goes to the bathroom and runs the water until it floods; then he comes back into the room and “chokes me” in his play (although I never really feel in danger): in fact, I am always stuck in situations in which I am a prisoner, in the dark, cushions pressed on my mouth, my neck tightly wound by the blanket, my head wrapped up by his jacket. In our play, *I have to pretend to react to this situation of claustrophobic helplessness connected with my head and mouth by showing quite a murderous fury: Sandro asks me to mime speechless and aggressive actions of rebellion, mutely acted out, and if I try to object or refuse he shouts or furiously strikes me.*

In spite of such moments of rage and discouragement, I feel that Sandro never loses his wish of communicating with me, although mostly by gestures, but also with his hoarse or sharp sounds. When I do not understand, he very quickly resigns himself and gives up, or otherwise he reacts violently by kicking and punching me. When I succeed in grasping what he is saying, he joyfully shouts, kisses and clasps me in his arms!

As time passes, he finally dares to struggle more and more in order to be understandable, as we can see in this interaction: Sandro touches the radiator, it probably reminds him of winter; he says loudly: “Tattò... Ma.... Taté”; he repeats the sentence over and over again, as I do not understand, then he seems to give up, as he usually does. Gloomily I say: “How stupid I am, I’m not able to understand!”, and he starts struggling again: he “draws” a cap on his head and then, finding a red towel in the bathroom, he takes it and acts as if he had a pannier or a bundle on his shoulder. I “light up”: “Father Christmas?” (*that is, in Italian, Babbo Natale, his Tattò Ma Taté!*); “Yes!!” Sandro screams, and gives me lots of kisses.

In this first period, aggressiveness is the thread linking all his games: in every session wild animals of his box cover up and make invisible everything that is under them (very often a child), until they kill him by tearing his body to pieces; the dangerous “Sheary Monster” (as I call our scissors) tears to shreds every animal or character of the family: human beings, above all, are unceasingly dismembered, beheaded, disembowelled and then repeatedly repaired with thick coats of scotch tape, which embalm and

stiffen them; this sort of armour even hides their features and hinders any movement of them!

My attempts of translating by words what Sandro acts (or enacts) in front of me, in terms of phantasies or feelings that belong to him (such as rage, helplessness, having an "out of use head", being gagged, being walled up and so on), always give rise to a withdrawal of Sandro, a loss of contact with him; sometimes, he directly assaults me. I then understand that he is asking me to witness, speechless like him, the concrete performance of what he is not yet otherwise able to express, and that must not be transformed in another alphabet, at least for the present.

For many long months, I therefore silently witness his slaughters and his paralyzing and useless repairs. Then something starts changing. Little by little Sandro starts to perform more symbolically what he wants to express, and his way of playing changes: the "Monster" now cuts off only animals' mouths and heads, and finally it is put aside in order to give room to a new game.

Outside of the protected space of the therapy sessions, a slow but progressive humanization is taking place too: after the first year of therapy his mother tells me that when Sandro tries to speak and people do not understand him, he does not kick any more, nor does he get angry. No more does he give up, while uttering his "nenne...nenne", that is "niente, niente" ("nothing, nothing"): very sadly, now he touches his throat and desperately asks his mother: "mum, checché?", a sorrowful "perché?", "why?".

Sandro's improved capability of symbolization gives him the new possibility of enacting by playing the rage and rejection that were once concretely displayed by his kicks, punches and spits. In the new game replacing that of "killing snips", for instance, Sandro builds a "den" made up of furniture and cushions just over the couch, and takes shelter in it: he is a wild, aggressive and scared dog who growls and claws in order to avoid a contact that frightens him to death. After some weeks, the mastiff will turn into a defenseless puppy, and will start relying on a girl, a friend who keeps him waiting a lot but, after all, every night brings him some food and water. He will then start getting cautiously out of his "den" and discovering the world, although only together with his little friend!

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Are we getting to a turning point, after nearly 1 year of therapy? Will I finally put into words what Sandro until now has enacted for me? Will I be able to put him in touch with what is part of his internal world, which he showed me in such a peculiar way?

I will, but in a very singular language: I will have to tell him "my" dreams.

It is Sandro, of course, who introduces this new game, in a bright and tepid late spring session. After starting with his usual stereotypes, in fact,

something suddenly changes, and Sandro wants me to sit down close to him, at the small table of the little ones, as if we were sitting at the same desk at school. I am the teacher and a girl too (so he explains to me with his firm and clever gestures, which I have now learnt to decode), and he is one of my schoolmates. Now motionless and quiet, Sandro wants the teacher to question her students; "About what?", I ask, and he represents with his hands a bubble getting out of his head, saying "Tic tic tic...". Of course I do not understand at once, but only after many attempts: "Stories? Thoughts? Dreams! Children must tell their dreams!". "Yes!", Sandro shouts. "Nice or bad ones?", I ask him. "Fear dreams", he makes me understand by miming something threateningly impending.

Obviously I am the only one who can be questioned, who can answer.

As Antoni Schlesinger asserts (2006): "I think I found myself living that very moment described by Bion (1977) as the basic point of every hypothetical 'session of tomorrow': 'It is no use looking in books dealing with psychoanalysis—there is no time'. Only the analyst can decide. Decide whether to stay steadily sitting on his chair without moving from well known territories and consolidated safeties, or to shift towards the 'unknown', accepting anxiety arising from the analyst's looking, together with his patient, from a different point of view" (p. 52).

And so I find myself improvising and telling him an ordinary, even a bit banal dream, in which nevertheless I try to embody his own phantasies and experiences: in my dream I am all alone, I am stuck and I cannot ask for help; my voice does not get out, I call "Mum! Dad!" but I utter no sound at all, and Sandro does it with me; then we shout the same things at the top of our voice. Sandro is terribly involved and concentrated, and kisses me over and over again.

In the following session he asks me for another dream, which I invent for him: at first I am again in a dangerous situation and I have no voice which I can ask for help with, I am alone and scared; then I concretely bring into my dream the box material he more often uses: I am choked by the fence, poisoned by the red roof, threatened by the truck (the very objects he used against me at the beginning, when he "attacked" me). Sandro shouts for joy.

In all the following sessions, he rushes into the room and sits at the small table waiting for my dreams. I become more and more active and I choose to represent the difficulties and anxieties of a "myself" who speaks in a foreign language: I dream that wherever I go I am not able to make myself understood, nor to understand; I invent *nonsensical* words, I get desperate and anxious, I find nobody to speak with, nobody who understands me... Each time Sandro pays great attention, laughs, takes part, is driven to despair with me, pretends to strive together with me.

In the first session after summer holidays, he immediately requires that I invent my dreams. I invent and he listens; sometimes, he hugs me or kisses me. I tell him a long dream in which, as a little girl, I get lost in the woods and I feel hungry, thirsty, sleepy; I meet very strange creatures, old characters of his first stories like dwarfs and giants, green worms and Martians, and I desperately try to make myself understood with all of them. Sandro, skilled as he is, helps me by suggesting how to express myself with gestures and mimicry. I try to explain what my needs are, but nobody understands me. Sandro cries.

In the following session, he starts trying to tell me something that I do not understand at once; Sandro immediately asks me for a new dream, but I try to talk to him, I try again to understand. He bursts into tears, screams, turns his back to me, goes out of the room, becomes angry and desperate. He urgently asks me for a dream ("Tic tic tic...") but for the first time in such moments I succeed in seizing his attention: "Listen, Sandro, now it doesn't matter what you wanted to tell me, but what I want to tell you: don't feel betrayed, don't escape flying in our dreams if I don't understand you at once. Try again, give me time, don't lose hope: you get very disappointed if I don't understand, but me too, and we must not surrender beforehand in order to suffer less!". Sandro listens, nods in assent, he does not repeat what he tried to tell me, but he succeeds in calming down.

Now I invent for him a dream concerning splitting/integration: there is a six-headed Martian, and some of his heads are furious, and others are smiling. I draw it for him, saying that more than one thought, more than one feeling can exist at the same time, even opposite ones, connected with me... Sandro laughs, calms down completely and is now able to make understandable the mysterious words he previously said.

In another session I dream to end up in the giants' land. I finally get into one of them, in order to see his body from the inside, but I get trapped in him; I will succeed in going out with great efforts... only to be eaten by a giant cow, or fish, ending up, entrapped again, inside another giant! In this way I try to convey that claustrophobic anxiety, that feeling locked, blocked up of him, a prisoner, as he has performed so many times in his enactments concerning suffocation and strangling. Sandro seems to enjoy it enormously, he is overwhelmed at any vicissitude of mine and rejoices every time I get temporarily free! When I end up in a river I am about to be eaten by a...: Sandro stops me and, with incredible effort, succeeds in saying "Crocodile!". Touched, I celebrate him, and I follow his verbal suggestion.

When I am informed that he is going to face his first house removal, I promptly "dream" a house removal of mine, a loss of mine: I speak of anxiety, rage, refusal, regret and nostalgia, but also of curiosity and

expectation, trying to take into account all the feelings that could be in him. Sandro kisses me, exults, implores me to go on, not to stop.

At the end of the second year of our therapy, the interactions between us are more and more rich, and so I decide I will “dream” something that actually is a story to be performed together with him. I am his schoolmate, the girl sitting next to him at desk, and I feel like talking to him, as I am a chatterbox! Over and over again, I am scolded and frightened by our very, very severe teacher, who does not want to hear a single word and sends us straight to the director’s office, as soon as he hears us whispering! The teacher (I am performing him) is strict and unfair, and little by little Sandro takes part too: he speaks as he can and he gets scolded (“Shut up!”, he shouts to himself while also performing as the teacher), he defends and helps me! He plays what became “our dream” with fun and passion: for the first time, someone does not implore him to speak but, on the contrary, orders him to shut up!

This will be our last “dream”: from now on, when he will ask me for a dream, he will be satisfied with me answering him that the dream I would invent for him would just be the very narration of what me and him are doing in that moment!

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I have wondered a lot, during the “dreams” period, about what I was really doing in my sessions with Sandro. In the story that we were creating together, in fact, I was without doubt introducing something that was completely mine, not only drawing away from that neutrality my training had taught me but also “grafting” in therapy some fragments of thoughts and phantasies belonging to my own internal world—or better, to the “relational field” arisen between us—which I could only arbitrarily ascribe to Sandro (Ferro, 1996).

It was also true that he had neither words nor symbols to tell his nightmares and his dreams, and that in my “dreamy” narrations I always tried to orientate myself according to the infallible compass of his direct and immediate reactions, of his indifferent or enthusiastic answers.

Like a strange tool that gives mutes a voice, like the mask that allows Darth Vader to speak (the *Star Wars* character so much loved by Sandro), the dreams that I invented for him each time had the meaning of an inter-subjective word-action, of a bridge between the repeated acting out of his apparently incomprehensible symptoms and the possibility of symbolizing and representing in intelligible, human shape what until then had not been expressible for him. As Frankel states (1998), “the action symbols typical of children’s play (...), being both highly evocative (...) and ambiguous (...), may be the bridge by which we begin to approach, express, and accept disowned aspects of ourselves”. (p.159).

Although his serious articulation deficit persisted, Sandro's speech amazingly started to improve when he was about 10 years old, so he could undertake that speech therapy that seemed useless when he was younger. The new words that he could finally articulate with immense effort helped him to ask his mother heart-rending questions such as: "Is it possible to transplant a brain, or a voice, or vocal chords?", or to say to his schoolmates: "When I said "Titta" to you I meant "Scusa", that is excuse myself to you for my being like this".

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Sandro is today attending quite successfully the second year of an Artistic High School, even though he must still follow an individualized program. He does not have many friends, but all his schoolmates respect him, seeing how much he strives in order to overcome his own limits. Nobody is doubtful any more about his deep sensitiveness and intelligence and, for many years, nobody has teased him if he speaks or writes incorrectly, which he still does. He now knows how to restrain his moments of fury and despair within his family environment, and he uses his sessions for speaking with me, still with great effort and passion, about the events of reality and, mostly, about the emotional implications those events arouse in him. Sometimes, he takes a glance at our old drawings and, when he finds the "Martian" or the "giant" ones, he smiles and asks me: "Do you remember? *Tic tic tic...* How nice our dreams were!".

The "idiot" has gone, replaced neither by a "monster" nor by a "mastiff", but by a boy, who at last is able to speak of his own difficulties.

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