**From the eclipse of the body to the dawn of thought**
By Armando B. Ferrari.

Reviewed by Riccardo Lombardi, MD

In analytic work there cannot be just the analyst or the analysand, but both are needed in order to offer the two protagonists a new experience, that is, to enable them to go deep into themselves insofar as they have each been able to do so with the other (Ferrari, 1983, p. 477).

In this statement from 20 years ago, Ferrari conveyed the idea of an intersubjective matrix on which his more recent research would be based, now available in a single volume in English, having previously been published between 1992 and 1998 in three volumes in Italy and Brazil. I start from here because if, one ignored this aspect, Ferrari’s research on the body–mind relationship would run the risk of being misinterpreted, within the present context which is strongly oriented towards a relational direction, as a regression towards a one-person psychology.

In his ‘project’ about the analytical relationship, written in collaboration with the Italian philosopher Emilio Garroni, Ferrari claimed,

> The most heterogeneous material and … the components of the largest variety of models … must be subject to some kind of organisation. Such an organisation would not conform to a model or a rule, but to a constructive principle.

(Ferrari and Garroni, 1979, p. 309).

The constructive dimension, a dimension which would later be made famous in psychoanalysis in particular by the work of Hoffman (1998), explicitly informed this essay which is characterised by a strong philosophical and epistemological orientation. In this article, the authors also suggested, ‘We should be able to presume that the meaning emerging in analytical relationships contains some invariable elements, without which we could not in any way find our bearings’ (Ferrari and Garroni, 1979, p. 286).

The constructivity of individual analytical relationships and the invariability of the elements which characterise them have led Ferrari to formulate his hypothesis of a concrete original object (COO), of its eclipse, and of the dawn of thought.

The COO represents each individual person in its original aspects and not in relation to the world. I feel I can therefore assert that it is not related to the process of introjection and that it is not formed from external contributions that give the psyche its shape while they occupy it. It can rather be described as the original specific nucleus, differentiating since birth each individual person from all other human beings.

It is an Object because it is there, it isn’t made, it isn’t the result of a development (of a process, for instance, of introjection-projection) but it is the child himself, and is bound to last, since the original nucleus will survive all subsequent mental operations.

The object is concrete because its primary quality is physicality. Physicality consists of being a man or a woman, and even more, of being that man or that woman with that specific instinctual cathexis and endowment of a bodily apparatus (p. 48).

I think that the importance of the concept of COO lies in its potential to offer a first status to the body, within the context of psychoanalytical theory (Lombardi, 2002). Indeed, it does not seem to me to be a coincidence that in the mapping which summarises psychoanalytic theories, a mapping recently formulated by the Theoretical Working Party of the European Psychoanalytic Federation (EPF), there is virtually no mention of the body. The hypothesis of the ‘eclipse of the body’ suggests that the first stages of mental functioning coincide with the earliest sensory perceptions. Given this assumption, the focus of clinical work could be considered as a vector starting from the body (Onefold) and subsequently represented on a mental level (Twofold). This would allow for the distancing and containment of the primordial and chaotic overflow of sensations. The passage from Onefold to Twofold is facilitated by the presence of a mother capable of rêverie, but essentially it remains an internal fact of the child. It is important to remember that the relationship between the COO and the mind is conceived.
as an element which not only plays a role in the initial developmental phases of the child, but is also a
fact of central importance throughout the course of one’s life: ‘it seems highly unlikely that the Eclipse
of the COO might reach a full and complete expansion: emotions never really lose their violent, intense,
unpredictable quality and are, all through life, arduous to contain and transform’ (p. 94).

Bria noted in his book review of the Italian edition,
The ‘sensory turmoil’, which Ferrari seems to ascribe primarily to the body, is reminiscent of the first ‘registrations’ or
‘outlines’ of thought, much impregnated of ‘symmetry’—as Matte Blanco would have said—by which a mind that is
still weakly structured ‘grasps’ the body (2000, p. 612).

Ferrari’s chosen areas of clinical comparison concern analysands with thought disorders and, more
generally, analysands regressed to indifferented mental states. For these he proposes such tools as the
contact net and the language registers, designed to help analysts to orient themselves in catalysing
the patient’s first movements of self-consciousness and thought. Ferrari also looks at the problem of identity
and of the oedipal complex, favouring the current perspective of the organisation of internal scenarios
over the perspective of historical reconstructions.

Ferrari describes the internal level concerning the body–mind relationship as vertical relationship,
while he uses the term horizontal relationship to describe the external aspects of the mother–child
relationship. These relationships are parallel and complementary, and each affects the other. The
relationship with the body remains in any case the primary one in the establishment of subjectivity and
thought, while the primary function of the mind is to provide containment to sensations and emotions
which, because of their very nature, can only be experienced.

In this way Ferrari places his emphasis on precisely that experience which Bion had identified with
the central agent in the development of the mind—and, indeed, Ferrari explicitly refers back to the
contribution of Bion, under whom he had studied when he was in Brazil. For Bion, ‘to learn from
experience alpha-function must operate on the awareness of the emotional experience’ (1962, p. 8);
‘failure to eat, drink or breathe properly has disastrous consequences for the life itself. Failure to use the
emotional experience produces a comparable disaster in the development of the personality’ (1962, p.
42).

I maintain that Ferrari develops these ideas from Bion and then makes them more radical, seeing in
the relationship between the mind, the senses and the body an essential and indispensable component of
thought activation. The body is thus seen as a constant presence in dialectic interchange with the
functioning of the mind:

The human mind permanently faces this problem, a problem but not necessarily a conflict, as there might well be a
dialectic relationship between a mind that tries to project a shadow upon the COO to ‘cool it down’ enough so that it is
then able to think it and a COO that is constantly present with its luminousness and warmth (p. 49).

Ferrari’s decision to place the body–mind relationship at the centre of psychoanalytic enquiry
seems to refer back to Freud’s well-known metapsychological assumption which placed the focus of
psychoanalysis ‘on the frontier between the mental and the somatic’, emphasising the ‘demand made
upon the mind for work in consequence of its connection with the body’ (Freud, 1915, p. 122). At the
same time, this choice fulfils a very topical need in psychoanalytic clinical work, which nowadays tends
to widen its scope of clinical interventions to include the problems posed by the so-called serious
pathologies. On the one hand, such cases are characterised by an attitude of radical dissociation from the
body, as can be seen for instance in syndromes of anorexia or in obsessive personalities; on the other
hand, they display the features of the original bodily-sensory marasmus, preceding the mental eclipse, as
occurs in acute psychoses. A similar perspective, furthermore, can prove to be useful in certain forms of
the depressive condition and existential anxieties.

If the Twofold prevails, the analysand may then recognise his needs but will tend to register them rather than trying to
satisfy them; these analysands often say that they get very little satisfaction from life: their perception is correct but
they do not realise that it is their body that is missing the dialogue (p. 88).

Ferrari does not therefore confine the problem of the body–mind relationship to the so-called
‘psychosomatic’ field. Such a problem is indeed an instance of those fundamental issues in mental
functioning which, in different shades, manifest themselves in all areas of psychoanalytic competence,
in particular in those ‘at the border’, where mental functions run the risk of collapse and catastrophic
enactments.
The introduction of certain new elements in psychoanalytic technique (for which I refer the reader to Ferrari’s book itself) is required in order to preserve a certain continuity between Onefold and Twofold, or, on the contrary, when facing the consequences of a dramatic split in the body–mind interaction. This situation also has major consequences in a number of contexts, as occurs, for example, in those clinical situations where life is under threat or where self-consciousness is precariously activated.

The body isn’t concerned, for instance, with the problem of its own ending, simply because it either lives or stops living. Only by thinking of oneself or by feeling oneself—and this can exclusively happen on a mental plan—one can imagine that one exists beyond one’s physical essence, thus achieving self-consciousness (p. 84).

While Sections I and II of the book are mostly concerned with the presentation of various theoretical hypotheses which derive from an approach centred on the body–mind relationship, Section III comprises ‘psychoanalytic notes on adolescence’ selected from the second volume of Ferrari’s trilogy. Adolescence is seen here as the ‘second challenge’ where the body meets the mind: while in childhood ‘the mind presented itself to the body’, during adolescence ‘it is the body which presents itself to the mind, thanks to the inevitable push of biological development. The push is sometimes so extreme that the body becomes a stranger and the adolescent feels panicky that he cannot foresee the transformations. The body of adolescents ‘becomes’ and ‘is’ at the same time: at some point it is an object of knowledge but then undergoes further incessant modifications and becomes again unknown and embarrassing (p. 213).

Adolescence is therefore the period in life when the body–mind conflict manifests itself in the most acute form; this can provoke a process which establishes the foundations either of future adult maturity or, on the contrary, of subsequent internal imbalance.

Ferrari stresses that the phenomenology of adolescence is characterised by its instability and that we must not let ourselves be misled by conventional psychopathological categories: ‘both pre-adolescence and adolescence are characterised by turbulent and disharmonious behaviour not relating to pathology but rather to the process of learning from experience’ (p. 231); ‘our Monday adolescent isn’t the same on Wednesday; analysts need therefore a great mobility in their mental states’ (p. 232); ‘it is necessary to formulate anew, both theoretically and clinically, the notion of acting in adolescence’ (p. 206). For this reason, the author maintains that there is a need for a special sensitivity on the part of the analyst, as well as a particular capacity for containment in the face of provocation and other means of communication characteristic of adolescents.

The writing in Section III is freely associative and communicates with immediacy a familiarity with young analysands, which Ferrari acquired through his long experience of working with them. This section will probably become a classic in the psychoanalytic literature on adolescence. Stylistically it differs from the other two: these abound in theoretical abstraction expressed in a language which is complex and highly condensed, though often broken up by frequent clinical references. Ferrari complements his tendency towards theoretical abstraction by engaging in a dialogue with the philosophy of science and with medicine, a characteristic which makes this volume a model of interdisciplinary studies. This choice at times risks having an intimidating effect on readers who have a specific interest in clinical matters, something which occurs for instance in the densely philosophical writing of the first chapter. I might suggest to these readers not to approach the text in a rigidly orderly way or else read it ‘back to front’—as occurs in some of Bach’s canons. Such readers may want to start from the fascinating case of AI, placed at the end of the volume, where we are invited to witness the dissection of the first encounter of an 11-year-old boy with psychoanalysis, illustrating the exciting possibilities of insight made available through such a psychoanalytic approach.

From this perspective, however, it will be hard at first for the average reader not to be thrown, due to the shift of parameters away from the current psychoanalytic culture, which tends to be centred on object relations and to be strongly attracted to interpersonal models. Mauro Mancia, in his review of Ferrari’s first book, had already pointed out that a perspective which gives the ego/body relationship greater importance than the more frequently explored ego/external object relationship seems so atypical that it could be said to be provocative, ‘because it forces us to see things from unusual perspectives’ (1994, p. 1286). We could add that this opening up to unusual perspectives is in line with Bion’s suggestion that ‘to spend time on what has been discovered is to concentrate on an irrelevance. What matters is the unknown and on this the psycho-analyst must focus his attention’ (1970, p. 69). In this regard, one could feel disturbed by Ferrari’s proposal because—to paraphrase the famous title of the
Festschrift dedicated to Bion—it ‘dares to disturb the universe’ of our conventional psychoanalytic concepts.

Ferrari’s ability to use his experience of several decades to formulate hypotheses and build theoretical-technical models which can be pragmatically compared in the clinical setting is in stark contrast with a certain post-modern relativism common in contemporary psychoanalysis. This tendency risks misinterpreting the metapsychological orientation as ideological and authoritarian, as well as underestimating the relevance of the analysand’s contribution and the originality of each analytical relationship. Furthermore, this author’s writings tend to play down the importance of the analyst’s subjectivity, while recognising its relevance, and tend not to dwell on the working through of the countertransference. This is an ‘objectivist’ position that seems to share Bion’s preoccupation with the potential for abuse which would arise if the analyst acted like the surgeon who ‘operated on the strength of counter-transference and not on the strength of the anatomical and physiological findings’ (Bion, 1990, p. 191).

Ferrari’s ability to use his experience of several decades to formulate hypotheses and build theoretical-technical models which can be pragmatically compared in the clinical setting is nearly paradoxically not so far from certain post-modern relativism common in contemporary psychoanalysis. He highlights the relevance of the analysand’s contribution and the originality of each analytical relationship although he tends not to dwell specifically on the working through of the countertransference, sharing Bion’s preoccupation with the potential for abuse which would arise if the analyst acted like the surgeon who ‘operated on the strength of counter-transference and not on the strength of the anatomical and physiological findings’ (Bion, 1990, p. 191).

Bion’s influence permeates Ferrari’s research on a conceptual level no less than on a stylistic one. Derived from this influence is an understanding of the psychoanalytic text as an object which ultimately reflects a personal journey, a likely consequence of which is Ferrari’s choice not to dwell on other theoretical models and not to engage with the research of other contemporary authors. His orientation and his peculiar expressive style may perhaps rouse the curiosity of many readers, in particular those concerned about the consequences of constraints imposed on the freedom of scientific expression by the peer-review policy used by the main international psychoanalytic journals.

Describing a journey in which bodily sensations appear to take on a ‘mystical’ role (Bion) in the general context of mental functioning, Ferrari almost risks presenting himself as a kind of ‘mystic’. His interlocutors—apart from Freud, Klein and Bion—are mostly authors from other disciplines, such as philosophy, anthropology and medicine. This peculiarity in Ferrari’s writing would appear to illustrate what Bion (1970) had described as the conflict between the mystic and the group: a conflict which has presumably manifested itself also on the side of the group, in so far as mainstream Italian psychoanalysts, during the 12 years that followed the publication of his first book, almost entirely ignored his suggestions through what could be described as a collective ‘negative hallucination’.

This book, nonetheless, amounts to one of the most original developments of Bion’s ideas, at a time like our own when originality is not the central characteristic of psychoanalytic research. This development appears to be even more stimulating due to its potential application to otherwise almost untreatable psychoanalytic patients. Psychoanalysis unquestionably emerges from these pages as a lively and creative discipline, deeply rooted in clinical work and branching out towards new horizons.

References


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