A CONVERSATION WITH

Giuseppe Civitarese¹

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Giuseppe Civitarese, is a psychiatrist and one of the leading psychoanalysts on the Italian and international scene. His frequent and consistent contributions to the development of the theory and practice of post-Bionian analytic Bi-personal Field Theory (BFT) occupy an important place in contemporary psychoanalysis. He has lectured in Italy and abroad and published extensively on several topics. Giuseppe was editor-in-chief of Rivista di Psicoanalisi, the official journal of the Italian Psychoanalytic Society. Some Italian colleagues describe Giuseppe as an affectionate, meticulous and rigorous person, committed to the study of psychoanalysis, whose teaching he is truly passionate. We know he is also passionate by philosophy, visual arts and literature. Reading his work one gets the impression that he carries a deep appreciation for the openness and depth of the psychoanalytic encounter. In this interview Giuseppe kindly talks about different aspects of his thought. Our conversation was led by his generous and sincere way of sharing ideas.

CMA: Dr. Giuseppe Civitarese, you live and practice in Pavia, Italy. We know you were born in the beautiful Italian region of Abruzzo and that you came to Pavia to study. Can you tell us something about this journey, and how did psychoanalysis cross your path?

GC: Psychoanalysis crossed my path for the first time when I was 14 or 13... in Italy it is the stage before high school, between primary school and Liceo Classico, which is high school. So, I had this teacher of science and maths. He was very young, younger than 30 years old and had just graduated from Bologna University. He was enthusiastic about his work and about culture in general. He was very clever and had humble origins, for him culture was the way to affirm himself. So he wanted to transmit this. He was the kind of teacher who is able to start good relationship with students and he liked to talk beyond science and biology, about all important figures in the history and culture. It could be Descartes, Marx, Pascal. It could be this weird guy that could interpret dreams, a certain Freud. And I always loved books. I was very happy when people in the family gave me books as a gift. In my family my father could only do a few years of school and my mother only a few more. So, I was somehow in the same position of this teacher. In the end I bought the Interpretation of Dreams and of course I immediately realized that it was too difficult. But since then I began to pay attention whenever psychoanalysis was mentioned in the newspapers, on TV, etc. Then, step by step, I discovered Freud’s easier books on jokes, on the psychopathology of everyday life, etc. and read them. Over time, this grew more and more. At this time, in Italy a famous figure was that of Franco Basaglia, the one that in Italy closed our mental hospitals, the leader of ‘anti-psychiatry’. This
As a psychiatrist, I worked for six months in my first job in a psychiatric hospital. It was like a lager. The only good thing we could do was to close them down. These were places where insanity was produced. There is no way to cure someone by locking them up and erasing them in a mental hospital. It is completely impossible.

was now high-school, and there was a congeneracy of my political leftist ideas and my interest in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. During my last year at high-school I had also the possibility to meet with Basaglia, as he came to Chieti to give a conference. I was very impressed by his personality. So before going to the university I already had a strong interest for psychoanalysis and for psychiatry. Of course, you can imagine that if I was more interested in Freud than in Blaise Pascal, which I also read, it was because, I don't know, passions are very sex and sex were there somewhere and I already had a certain inclination to introspection... and at that time I had some physical health problems that kept me isolated from some activities at school like sports, a beginning of articular rheumatism that, as you know, can affect the heart. That was completely overcome, but of course for a while it wasn't easy.

Then I came to Pavia because it's an old university town. It is there since the XIV century, and there are very old college, and it is still the best, or among the best faculties in Medicine. Still, my first choice had been Rome which is the town that I love above all the others, but I couldn't get in the private university that I chose in Rome, the Catholic University, because at the time in public universities there was a lot of chaos. These were difficult times with the Red Brigades, terrorism etc. And I needed to study, I wanted to study. In the end it couldn't be the Catholic University in Rome, that admitted only a very limited number of students. So I came to Pavia. Coming to Pavia it was like landing on another planet because I found people very different from people from the center or south of Italy, which are warm and very welcoming. Here people are a more reserved. Sometimes I think that it is because in winter there is a lot of fog, and there is some fog also in their mind and around them. I'm joking. Another explanation is that I had this kind of illumination one day, while I was going from Pavia to Milan by train: here everything is flat, it is the pianura padana, so for this very pragmatic people it is very easy to go from point A to point B, they don't have to use their imagination. On the contrary, in the center of Italy there are hills and mountains everywhere... in Abruzzo, even if my birthplace is near the sea, you need to use your imagination to go around. These are jokes, in the end it was very good to come here. In fact, I'm still here even if coming away from my region was painful at the time. It's 600 km, the train took ten hours. It never ended.

BBF: Are you talking about the seventies?

CMA: Yes, I was born in 1958 and came here in 1977. It was the worst time of this crazy political-terrorist period. I'm ridiculously attached to Abruzzo, to the center of Italy, to the South, it's my neurosis, you know. I always make jokes about Abruzzi people being smarter...my compatriots are Ovid, Croce, D'Annunzio...nicer and warmer. Every time I meet someone from Abruzzo, Campania or Lazio who is not nice, it is a shock to me because my theory is not confirmed. So... in the end I adapted to Pavia, but it's still a wound, this is very psychoanalytic, I feel this strong bond. Obviously my attachment to the mother must be very strong, I would say. And that involves organizing all the time the transportation of oil, wine, pasta, tomatoes and mozzarella from the South to the North. When I came here, I didn't know what kind of people I would find in psychiatry, and even for a while in my medical studies I considered other kinds of specializations. But in the end, my old interest in psychiatry and psychoanalysis prevailed and that was very good.

At the time, the Pavia school of psychiatry was famous for its psychoanalytic orientation. My teachers were among the best psychoanalysts in Italy and so I grew up in my ideal environment, given my interests. Perhaps that's one of the reasons I'm still here, because all along the way I made strong connections with these people. Another good thing about Pavia, besides the fog, the flatness, the evil cold and the mosquitoes, is that it's close to Milan. It's thirty kilometers, it's the ideal small university, calm and quiet, like Coimbra, Oxford, Salamanca, but in thirty minutes I leave my house and I can be in Piazza Duomo, near La Scala in Milan. There you can find everything you need. Also, my psychoanalytic training was in the Milan Psychoanalysis Center. Now we also have a small one in Pavia. But at that time, everything was in the big city.

CMA: In a certain way it seems the trigger was The Interpretation of Dreams.

GC: Yes. Well, of course this is one of the books that has changed humanity and human culture. We can say today that with Blon, for example, who interestingly enough joins Jung in some ways, because his conception of dreams is very similar to Jung's, we have changed the way we look at dreams. Think also of Melzer. His Dream Life, it's a good book. However, The Interpretation of Dreams is always there. It will always remain there, because Freud is a classic, he is a genius and we will always come back to this book even though our conceptions of dreaming and dreams and our technique for many of us has changed. But this is a huge book. Sometimes people don't realize the epigraph of The Interpretation of Dreams, which is “Acheronta movebo”. In Italy it sounds very Dantesque. Freud says ‘I will be your Virgil and take you on a journey to hell’. When you cross the river Acheron you are in hell. This is a quote from Virgil, it’s really Freud saying, ‘I will be your Virgil, and we will engage in this adventurous journey’. This is beautiful. This is great, although I no longer see Us as hell, rather the opposite. Several others among Freud’s books will remain as unforgettable classics, especially Beyond the Pleasure Principle and Civilization and its Discontent. Anyway, yes, you're right, the beginning was with dreams, and after a lifetime in psychoanalysis working with dreams I still find them amazing, amazing every day, it’s amazing what a dream can accomplish, so yes, it is.
The most valuable thing we have inherited from our ‘maestri’ in the school of psychiatry is a deep human respect for the sick person, even the most regressed. Psychiatry and psychoanalysis are meaningless, and indeed can be easily perverted, if they do not have at their core a strong ethical tension.

The big bang was around the early 1960s when Winnicott said that “there is no such thing as a child” unless you consider it with the mother. Bion said the same thing, not ‘as a paediatrician’, but because of his work on groups. In a sense, for Bion the subject is a group, internally it is structured as a group. So, they both said the same thing, but coming from different places. They all quote Winnicott’s phrase, or the way Bion translates it, for example, when he says that an emotion has no meaning outside of the community. Now, if you look at psychoanalysis around the world, the relational paradigm is prevailing in all its different forms, in South and North America, in Europe. There has to be a reason for that.

You see now the direct link between what we said about my biography and the relevance of the relationship in school to what I am interested in? I think the “big bang” was around the early 1960s when Winnicott said that “there is no such thing as a child” unless you consider it with the mother. Bion said the same thing, not ‘as a paediatrician’, but because of his work on groups. In a sense, for Bion the subject is a group, internally it is structured as a group. So, they both said the same thing, but coming from different places. They all quote Winnicott’s phrase, or the way Bion translates it, for example, when he says that an emotion has no meaning outside of the community. Now, if you look at psychoanalysis around the world, the relational paradigm is prevailing in all its different forms, in South and North America, in Europe. There has to be a reason for that.

Ferro was gone when I was an intern in psychiatry. I met him later when I was looking for a supervisor for my second training case. Of course, I knew him by name, but I still remember talking enthusiastically with my analyst about Ferro’s most important book at the time, The Bi-Personal Field Experiences in Child Psychoanalysis. So, it wasn’t that I met Ferro and became committed to the kind of psychoanalysis he was developing because it was simply there. No. In fact, I chose him. I was already passionate about his ideas. Then I did six years of supervision with him. After the first few years I was always surprised that I didn’t understand what he was telling me, ‘How come I still don’t see the point?’ and also, I couldn’t understand how he could love Bion so much. And now that I teach and supervise, when young colleagues after a few times tell me ‘Giuseppe, it’s too hard, I don’t understand’, I go back to my memories. It took me a very long time to get to know Bion’s ideas and BFT. Then after these six years, step by step, we also became friends and shared many things, and still recently we published a new book called Playing and Vitality in Psychoanalysis, which will be available also in English next year from Routledge.

Well, these links, not only Ferro of course, but also other friends of mine, who are psychoanalysts around here, more or less of my age, Fulvio Mazzacane, Maurizio Collovi, Elena Molinari, and many others. So, Pavia is still a great place for psychoanalysis, not so much at the University, as it used to be. But now that we have a psychoanalytic center, somehow around here there is a very good ground for psychoanalysis. The most valuable thing we have inherited from our ‘maestri’ in the school of psychiatry is a deep human respect for the sick person, even the most regressed. Psychiatry and psychoanalysis are meaningless, and indeed can be easily perverted, if they do not have at their core a strong ethical tension.

As human beings we are living paradoxes. As subjects, we have a subjectivity and intersubjectivity dialectically linked to each other.
There is another paradox here. BFT, which is hyper-relational, can also be called anti-relational if we consider that it goes beyond the traditional I/You division. This has significant technical implications, particularly in the way of listening. I can anticipate that for me this aspect is very important, because it helps us to approach an ethical refoundation of psychoanalysis. In fact, I think we need to move beyond the suspicious attitude in the way we listen in analysis.

He was trying to cure the cancer of psychology that Binswanger talks about. That’s why I love reading some of these philosophers because they help us refine our conceptions. And because they too have benefited from the contributions of psychoanalysis—think of Derrida, Ricoeur and others.

I really enjoy intertextual dialogue with other disciplines, but it has to be between equals. It must not be a dominating relationship, which is what is happening today in the relationship between psychoanalysis and neuroscience, which undermines the specific epistemic and clinical contribution of psychoanalysis.

Thus, the notion of field was introduced into psychoanalysis by the Barangers. In the Barangers’ first article, in the early 1960s, they cite neither Bion nor Merleau-Ponty. In this article, I say that this article was republished a few years later and then if you go back to see the two versions you no longer find Kurt Levin, but you do find Merleau-Ponty, and also Bion. At this point you can say that the idea of the field was influenced not only obviously by Klein, but also by Bion and Merleau-Ponty. I think that before going to Argentina, Willy Baranger must have had a philosophical training in Paris.

Now, let’s see what I mean by overcoming the suspicious attitude in psychoanalysis. You know that Ricoeur said that Freud, along with Marx and Nietzsche, belongs to the school of suspicion. And this comes largely from the positivist position in Freud’s attitude, from the fact that very fundamentally Freud’s conception of the unconscious is that it is the wild cauldron of dirty things, of primitive desires and immoral drives, a kind of Dantesque hell. In fact, even in our current institutions, if a colleague makes a slip of the tongue, another can respond with “I caught you,” “I saw,” “now I know what your immoral desire is.” As Kernberg says, this is a kind of phenomenological division. This has significant technical implications, particularly in the way of listening. I can anticipate that for me this aspect is very important, because it helps us to approach an ethical refoundation of psychoanalysis. In fact, I think we need to move beyond the suspicious attitude in the way we listen in analysis.

I think psychoanalysis should be the art of giving hospitality to the Other, and not playing Sherlock Holmes by suspecting that the other is the culprit. Sometimes we say that we ally ourselves with the healthy part of the patient against the sick part. But in the end, with transference interpretation, every time we disconfirm the patient’s perspective and say “OK, I’ll tell you what really happened”. I don’t like this approach anymore; now we have a completely different understanding of what the unconscious is. Here we can only say it brieﬂy with some simplification.

We no longer think of the unconscious as hell but, as Bion says, as the psychoanalytic function of the personality. A ‘device’ that gives us in some way the possibility to make sense of our experience, or better, sense and meaning, implicit and preconceptual meaning. This is why, for example, Merleau-Ponty says that perception is the unconscious, because we already put everything of ourselves into the perceptual process... our hallucinatory activity, that is always there, our memories, our body, everything. With this completely different idea of the unconscious, of course the technique changes as well. To give an example, what is important for us, from a Bionian point of view, is to understand whether or not the emotional climate of the session is conducive to the development of the mind. The focus is whether and how minds come together in the here and now, because we now have a clearer understanding of how minds are born.

For example, in the relationship between mother and child, even when the child does not understand the meaning of words... Infants in Latin means one who does not speak. This is the main issue, how can we promote the growth of the psyche in someone who does not understand words? You see, if we ask ourselves this, we immediately cut out the more cognitive part of our theories. Still we need to be aware that when the mother interacts with an infant, they are already in the symbolic register, because language and symbolic meanings are brought into this realm by the mother, and then inevitably pervade all the
What happens in field theory? The big difference is that as analyst I take responsibility for the disappointment, for the quality of this emotion. It is not yours alone, or mine alone, but it results from our being together...it is ours, therefore, I can only trust in our common effort and in our more or less effective ability to transform raw emotions (beta elements) into meaningful emotions (alpha elements).
Envy is a kind of fever, it signals that someone is missing something that is very important to them. So it should not be seen as a sin, as the Catholic church tells us. If you see it as a sin, as if the patient is bad because of his desire for omnipotence and wants to take advantage of you, you are not understanding the patient. The envious patient is someone who is dying of thirst, because he is in the desert and has no water to drink. You have to give him water, not hit him by saying he is envious and bad or wrong. Like shame, envy is the thermometer of the quality of the relationship.

CMA: In “Attacks on Linking” Bion described how destructive aspects of personality affect links between psychic elements. How do you think about destructive parts of the ego in your psychoanalytic work?

GC: We can think of destructiveness or aggression in different ways. Aggression is either primitive, animality, wild crowd, as Freud would say, needing a police force to contain it; or a result of frustration. It’s a big division in psychoanalytic thought. Of course, pathological aggression is not the healthy capacity for self-assertion. Maybe I’m too optimistic, I don’t know, but for me, aggression always comes from frustration. By the way, there’s something wrong when Freud seems to be sort of idealizing, for example, ‘animal’ sexuality, where he says that somehow civilization is based on the repression of sexuality. I think he’s confusing reproductive behavior in animals with human sexuality. Animals don’t have sexuality. So, in the same way that we repress sexuality, we also liberate (human) sexuality. The same with violence. Our violence is not animal violence. We liberate our specific ways of exercising violence. Foucault and Giraud address this same criticism to Freud. When we look at the animal as a model it is very easy to forget our specificity, which is given by language and self-consciousness. As some neuroscientists do, you cannot study animal perception, for example mirror neurons, and say that this explains human perception. No, because human perception, as Merleau-Ponty writes, is the unconscious; that is, it is also linguistic, cultural, social, political, etc. A short circuit is triggered every time we reason in this way.

BF: And what about the place of sexuality inside the analytic room. How do you deal with it?

GC: Well, I think I have already answered that question, you see. Of course, sexuality is very important in psychoanalysis, we know the whole story. But perhaps we have to ask why sexuality is so important in people’s lives. What would you say?

BF: From a relational point of view, maybe it is because it has to do with pleasure in bonds and intimacy between people.

GC: Yes, that’s right, but it is still too general. Why is it so dangerous?

BF: Absolutely. Envy for Melanie Klein is linked to death drive. And also, up to a certain time, for Bion, and for Bion is difficult to understand. Why? Because you have to listen the four Bions: you have the Bion of groups, the Bion of the Kleinian essays, the Bion of the four big books and seminars, and you have the Bion of A Memoir of the Future. If you re-read “Attacks on Linking”, all the time Bion tells the patient that the patient doesn’t want to accept the good things he has giving him. This is because of envy, this is because of death drive and there is this kind of internal explosion of the invisible visual hallucinations – precisely, the attack on linking. He never considers the possibility that he might be the one who is attacking the patient with his disorganizing interpretations. So, this is very Kleinian... And nonetheless it is a brilliant essay, not only from the Kleinian perspective, but also for all the things that can be glimpsed that prepare for future developments in the dream of the session. Immediately ‘masochism’ becomes a character in the field that hypothetically is expressing what is the quality of the emotional linking in the here and now.

GC: So you view phenomena like masochism and envy through very different lenses than the traditional ones?

GC: Yes, of course, I would say that intimacy (L) never comes without the fear of betrayal and abandonment (H). The point is that every time you feel gratified because you have gained more intimacy, your fears of being betrayed and abandoned, destroyed by this relationship, also grow. That’s why sexuality is important in people’s lives. But from a BFT perspective, it is the ‘sexuality’ in the analytic room that matters, not the sexuality that you can talk about elsewhere. In the analytic session, I don’t see why a certain narrative content, for example sexual, should be privileged over another. At the theater everything is theatrical, that is ‘fictional’.

GC: Of course, the dream of the session. Immediately ‘masochism’ becomes a character in the field that hypothetically is expressing what is the quality of the emotional linking in the here and now.

GC: I could give you another little example. A patient tells you that she suffered a real trauma in the past. She was abused at ten years old. You understand that, react humanly, keep in mind all theories about what trauma can do, etc. But the last lick that you should use, which is the most meaningful to me, is the Why this, why now? Who is ‘abusing’ who here? Are we both being preoccupying on each other?

GC: ‘Abuse mode’ in the session could be a lack of emotional availability... could be many subtle things that are narrated through recollections about traumas and so on. Is it a matter of overlooking the past or the reality of the trauma? Not at all. It depends on what you main goal is.

GC: If it is to develop the capacity for thinking and for symbolizing, then the lens that gives me a picture of what is happening of a higher possible level of resolution is the meanings of the mind. If I use the electronic microscopic, it’s not that I neglect the optical microscope. Is that in that moment I choose this tool and not another tool. This could be seen as too radical but is very coherent and it’s very logical. If the unconscious is always speaking, then it is speaking also when the patient is telling you about the highway that was closed or the trauma that he suffered in the past. And again, the basic postulate is that, no matter what is the narrative, we are going to look at it as a shared and as a clue about the quality of the emotional linking.

GC: If you go back to Beyond the pleasure principle, you will see in that incredibly beautiful book, Freud says that dream-work tries to take us from Sløvek, which can be traumatic, to Angst, ‘just’ anxiety or fear. I love this essay very much because Freud shows already a beautiful understanding of the transformative function of dreams which is very much in agreement with Bion’s and post-Bionian’s view. In that paper, he aligns traumatic dreams, masochism and the beautiful pages about Ernst playing with cotton reel game. Why does Freud line them up? Because he is telling that they have something in common. What? Precisely, this transformative quality. When Ernst draws away the toy (the object, the mother), and then he keeps it back, what is going on there? Is he masochist because he draws away the mother? No, he is transforming the absence of the concrete mother into a symbol in his mind. He’s learning to symbolize. This my take on masochism in the patient, not something destructive by nature.

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GC: However, we must remember that this may be your point of view but not necessarily that of the patient. Consider that in the example of the blocked highway that event is real, but in the session, we can feel it as a dream. But this is not the patient’s perspective. So, because it’s always a special event, we have to consider the formal aspect of what it means to tell another person a dream or to talk about intimate things. By the way, in my perspective, the analytic dream is not the dream that the patient had at night, but the telling of the dream in the here and now, which, again, is a shared event. The same applies to sexuality.
Another key point is that even if this is our theoretical perspective, and if these are the tools, we use to be receptive to the discourse of the unconscious, we should not pay too much attention to interpreting. The whole thing would become a kind of perverse decoding of the conversation. Absolutely not. In this way, we would not understand what Bion means when he says that we must listen without memory, desire, and understanding. This basically means that you have to do your homework, understand the principles, the basic postulates, be able to tell someone the differences between models and concepts, explain why you choose to do this instead of that, and at the same time give yourself the space and time in the analytic situation to be surprised by the moment when this concept or perspective spontaneously comes back to you. This is the only way to allow the ‘selected fact’, as Bion's jargon, to pop up. An event, something, a feeling, an image that gives you the idea that perhaps you are sensing something true about what is going on in the session. As Walter Benjamin says of artistic creativity, this is the art of shocking. But it is a “happy” shock. It's a shock that is immediately contained by the fact that it gives meaning to the experience. So, for me, it's important to immerse yourself in the dialogue for a while, one session, two or three sessions, whatever, even staying in the naively realistic way of seeing things. The important thing is that sooner or later you wake up from this dream/illusion of reality and ask yourself, “Um, what did we say or do here?”

BBF: I often hear in your speech a group dimension in the use of the word “we”, in the questioning of what “we are doing together”, when you refer to the analytic encounter. Perhaps what you are telling us that the concept of transference and countertransference still belongs to the division between self and other present in the relational model? If so, is your proposal that we should add another vertex of analysis regarding analytic phenomena, beyond what transference and countertransference allow us to access? Is that the case?

GC: This is a good question. First of all, I'd like to answer something that perhaps Bruno asked when he said that there are different ways of understanding the field. People tend to believe that the field model is the one proposed by the Barangers. Well, yes and no. Because the Barangers were saying that the ‘basion’, the bulwark is something that is constituted by the participation of the analyst and the patient. So, it is something that would not exist if patient or analyst weren’t not both there. But to me, their approach seems very similar to the concept of enactment. The fate of the bulwark is to be eliminated. In this way I could say that in Baranger’s description of the concept the field is limited to the negative of the analytic field. On the contrary, what I mean is a much broader notion of the field as the metaphor that helps, despite its positive or negative valence, to attune to the unconscious life of the analytic couple. Nowadays that field theories are having much success everywhere, we have this proliferation of the concept of field. It’s like parsley, which you can put everywhere. Okay, you can do that, but field theory comes from Lewin, from quantum physics. It means precisely that there is a system whose emergent properties cannot be explained by any of the properties of the parts of the system if we look at them in isolation. So when I see people using this metaphor and then there is not this field that works like this in what they are showing, I ask, why bother with the effort and struggle to use the concept of a field? It’s just that what you’re describing is not the concept of field, despite the use of the word. In any case. Can we be eclectic? Use different models? In different patients or with the same patient at different times? I’m a little skeptical about that. Why? For example, people always ask me, Giuseppe, but how can you say that this reverie you have is not a countertransference phenomenon?

First of all, the term reverie is getting a little confusing. That's kind of what happens to the concept of countertransference. Because it seems that people have forgotten that countertransference is an unconscious phenomenon, but instead we see an indiscriminate use, as if everything the analyst feels is countertransference. So today it also seems that everything can be a reverie, but a reverie is like a dream while we are awake and by definition is something we experience in a state of passivity other than associative thinking. When a reverie emerges, it appears as a cut and has no clear connection to what is happening or being said. Furthermore, the capacity for reverie is more akin to Winnicott’s primary maternal concern than to mere reverie. So, people ask me, how do you say that this is not a countertransference phenomenon?

And then I have to say that we should start having clear notions of epistemology. If my initial postulate is different, if my initial postulate says that what happens is co-created and shared, then that is no longer the appropriate question. Because, by definition, if my hypothesis pushes me to see everything as shared, there is no logical space for a phenomenon to be conceptualized as countertransference. That conception of the same phenomenon corresponds to another postulate. But now, why do I say that we have to have a clear sense of epistemology. Because we cannot prove a postulate. Not even in mathematics or geometry. How do we know if one postulate is better than another? From what and the ‘normal’ “domain of discourse”? Therefore, we cannot simply transfer a concept into another theoretical framework. Because even if it has the same name, a concept only exists in a network of concepts that gives it its meaning.

So, my answer is that yes, a reverie can be seen as a countertransference phenomenon, absolutely. But in another epistemic framework, where the postulates are different, by definition, it cannot, not in BFT. The issue is that you have to accept that either you see the profiles or the vase.

BBF: I would like to ask you what are the continuities and discontinuities between your concept of the sublime and that of the aesthetic conflict of Donald Meltzer?

GC: In my second book that in English is titled The Violence of the Emotions (Civitarese, 2012) there is a long chapter on aesthetic conflict. I have always been very fond of Meltzer who is the author of this concept, even if he very honestly admits having found it in Bion. Indeed, at the beginning of my chapter I remind the reader of this fact. I also had the good fortune to know...
Melzer personally, because he used to come to Italy to supervise cases when I was a student trainee in psychiatry. He was the first to really comment on Bion’s contributions and expand on Bion’s ideas in a very original way. I think Melzer has been somewhat sidelined lately. I don’t know why, but he is a very, very interesting thinker.

So, what is essential about the birth of the psyche, when there is only the preverbal experience of breast and non-breast, of thing and no-thing (as opposed to the nothingness, that means pure terror)? It is the rhythm, as in little Ernest’s fort-da game; the being and the non-being, the trace of the gratifying experience of contact with the breast, which then becomes a symbol or word that allows one to tolerate absence; but then also, of course, being able to experience gratification in presence again, because otherwise a person would fall into the abyss of non-sense.

Aesthetic conflict is the same thing. One has to tolerate the fact that we don’t know what is beyond the realm of our conscious experience. We cannot know what is in the mind of the other, or in the mind of the mother, even if she is beautiful and smiling. In our analytic work, it is always the patient’s question, ‘Do you love me because I love you and accept me or because you pay me?’ But it’s reciprocal, notice, it’s a field even the analyst might ask: ‘Is the patient grateful to me, sincerely grateful because I helped him or not? So, does he love me or was it just an instrumental relationship?’

Yesterday I had to console, calm down a young patient of mine in analysis who was abruptly abandoned by his patient. He was in a critical emotional state. So, it is always mutual, intimacy always brings the fear of betrayal and abandonment. Thus, the concept of aesthetic conflict, redefined by Meltzer, helps us as a tool to understand the various related issues of the emergence of meaning, in clinical work, theory, and art criticism. So, yes, my interest in the sublime is a way to continue my inquiry into aesthetic conflict.

CMA: The SFP will celebrate its 40th anniversary. What would you like to convey to young psychoanalysts in our Society?

GC: I could say, as you can clearly see that after almost half a century of being interested in psychoanalysis in one way or another, my enthusiasm has grown with time. I feel that this is an absolutely vital, beautiful discipline, and it is worth devoting my life to it, but we need a theoretical and ethical re-foundation of our theories along the lines we have been saying. Then, we need to reform our institutions. At the recent Congress of the Mexican Society, I was asked to say something about the future of psychoanalysis. I said that we only have a few centuries left, but that we need to reread the Kernberg essays, which are beautiful, about how we are so capable of destroying the creativity of candidates and we are so capable of functioning as a church, not as a scientific institution.

The last one is called ‘How to Avoid the Suicide in Psychoanalytic Institutions’). If a former president of the IPA, and a creative and intelligent theorist, says it, we must take it seriously. We need more transparency, more democracy, to accept the normal rules for the evaluation of scientific work (the h-index), without appealing to the defense of local traditions, which is just a way to avoid confrontation. Nowadays, if a cardiologist or a psychiatrist said, ‘This is our tradition and we do as we like’, we would laugh at them. We need to reform our institutions, if a former president of the IPA, and a creative and intelligent theorist, says it, we must take it seriously. We need more transparency, more democracy to accept the normal rules for the evaluation of scientific work (the h-index), without appealing to the defense of local traditions, which is just a way to avoid confrontation. Nowadays, if a cardiologist or a psychiatrist said, ‘This is our tradition and we do as we like’, we would laugh at them. We need to reform our institutions, if a former president of the IPA, and a creative and intelligent theorist, says it, we must take it seriously. We need more transparency, more democracy.

We need to put our young colleagues in a position to develop careers and become creative in psychoanalysis, not infantilize them anymore and say that at forty-five years old they’re still kids. And we seem to have a peculiar biology.

CMA E BRF: Can you tell us something about your notion of embodied sublimation?

BRF: Does it anticipate the emerging process of abstraction from concrete reality in which subjectification consists of?

CMA: Absolutely, and it’s always intersubjective, it’s always social. This is another very important aspect. Sometimes they ask me ‘Yes, Giuseppe, but if you say that everything is co-created and co-generated, where does the subject go?’ Actually, the subject does not go anywhere, because the subject is there, the point is that the subject, the empirical self, as an isolated entity that moves, that takes initiative, is what is visible, is the conscious subject. Psychoanalysis is about the invisible, it is about expanding the invisible fabric of our intersubjective flesh. If subjectivity and intersubjectivity are the two sides of the same coin, this means that if our intersubjectivity expands, then it is also our subjectivity that is strengthened. There is no opposition between intersubjectivity and subjectivity. Intersubjectivity, as an expansion of one’s internal sociability, is what allows for multiple points of view on a topic or subject, which is by definition being psychologically mature. Conversely, blending in with the crowd means that you have less connection to the infinity of others and language, and that you must dogmatically attach yourself to one perspective. It is in this condition, or moment, that our intersubjectivity is limited. Therefore, expanding intersubjectivity means at the same time expanding subjectivity in the subject, because they are dialectically related. This is also why it is important to develop the concept of intersubjectivity. To better understand this dialectical game and not get stuck in a naive and dichotomous view of the subject and intersubjectivity. What’s more, this is precisely a wonderful model of what happens when psychological distress arrives. It comes, as Bion and Winnicott have wonderfully shown, when the child faced with an object that is not available, must somehow develop a false self, obey a cruel superego and live in a world of tyranny, not in a democratic world, and he must stick to a single vision that is dictated by the object. This is not the realm of freedom.