

Diletta La Torre

“Online Setting: Turbulence and Transforming Potentiality. A Clinical Case”

V prejšnjem letu sem na naši strani objavil svojo razpravo „*Nekaj misli o seansah preko skypa*“. Zaradi pandemije so se v kasnejših mesecih o seansah preko spleta vrstila srečanja in diskusije med psihoanalitiki IPA iz celega sveta, saj je problem postal pereč, ker je pandemija privedla do zaprtja analitičnih ordinacij domala po vseh celinah. Na spletnem srečanju na to temo, ki ga je priredilo Italijansko psihoanalitično društvo, je kolegica **Diletta La Torre** predstavila klinični primer **“Online Setting: Turbulence and Transforming Potentiality. A clinical case”**, ki se mi je zdel izredno zanimiv. Z zadovoljstvom je privolila, da ga objavimo na naši strani. (*Pavel Fonda*)

“Online Setting: Turbulence and Transforming Potentiality. A Clinical Case”

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During phases of change, there are various ways that the setting loses its value as a frame and as an invariant that guarantees the process. The setting then becomes part of the *process* until it is institutionalized in its new form.

This phase of passage is vibrant and interesting as it reveals the *patient's setting*, as if the setting is mute (when it is ideally maintained) it does not appear (Bleger). I shall give an example of this passage in different phases in the analysis of Anna.

About the setting

Anna² lives outside the city and drives an hour to get to her sessions. During lockdown, we passed online. At first it seems like a positive occasion: she shows me her room for which *I could understand things about her that I couldn't otherwise*; she guides me through a proper exploration of the room and its objects, her untidiness and the mixture of childhood/adolescence and adulthood that she surrounds herself with and which constitute her. But the setting suffers from the outset in that she holds her phone on her legs, forcing me to experience an unstable, shaky image that evokes a discontinuity that pervades her functioning; I get her to keep the phone still even if she has difficulty finding a stable position, and that positioning enters the session as a form of negotiation that emerges

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² A 22-year-old woman who began face-to-face analysis two sessions per week, three years ago with a borderline personality.

regularly. Later, she becomes distracted and elusive; she always connects from different places in the house or while walking in her garden. She treats the session as something *external*. She exhibits a clear state of disregard and superiority, ending the session earlier with various excuses. It doesn't feel like a real session but rather a chat or some boring chore to be done with as quickly as possible.

This period corresponds with her falling in love, which is a frequent state for her and consumed quickly. It coincides with the change in setting, her elusive behavior and this situation of feeling taken by another (who is not me). A lateral transference, I presume, and I carefully try to re-modulate the setting at least in terms of certain elements of constancy and stability, trying to bring it back to an analytic dimension. But I see that Anna is not experiencing the sessions in this sense.

The fact that she cannot come to my office for reasons independent of her will is a convenient alibi for her disinterest, revealing a disinvestment that I can feel clearly in countertransference. I reflect that, for her, **the absence of the physical elements** of the setting, our bodies, the room and objects (including the water bottle that I keep next to me that she often references) is, with respect to other patients, much more fundamental and not able to be remedied (Lemma, 2019³). Furthermore, the pre-session activities that are missing: the journey by car to the waiting room and the presence of a friend who accompanies her (because she doesn't do anything by herself) make a significant difference. It is as if the "real" session involves an unfolding of time, preparation and corresponding internal work. In contrast, the immediate opening of a video connection at the beginning of a session that is not mediated by anything may render everything insignificant. Instead, it paves the way for infantile omnipotence and magical thinking.

During July, an *enactment* leads to an *impasse* in the analysis. This episode modified the field and (paradoxically?) reopened the virtual analytical dimension and the transference space. During a session where usual interferences overlapped with connection difficulties, at a certain point I expressed my irritation caused by the fact that the patient continued to state that the "weak connection" came from my PC and not from her cellphone (she repeatedly stated: I've got 4G, I've got 4G). This irritation led me to my interpretation of the patient's difficulty to accept the online setting and, above all, that she was treating the session with indifference and without importance. Surprisingly, even if I used an altered tone of voice and,

³ The hypothesis that patients with a deficit in early investment of the bodily self on the part of the figure of attachment use the analyst's body and, by extension, the body of the room as a body of hope subjected to a necessary evolutive idealization with which they can identify.

therefore, manifested my opposition (or perhaps thanks to the spontaneity), her response was: “*you’re absolutely right, that’s it*”.

Apart from the immediate answer which, as we know, may not be reliable, this event modified the field and restored the analytic space, which even in the emotional outburst had been manifested. Thus I understand in *après coup* that the *weak connection* that the patient accused me of, perhaps because I had finally decided to deal with it and make her aware of it and make it analytically shareable, might have been the unconscious demand for a “stronger” connection. I hadn’t interpreted her distance up to that moment; I told myself that she needed time to get used to it, that I also needed that time and we, as an analytic couple, needed to re-connect. This is how the weak connection transformed from a technological, contingent element into an elaborative focus of antique and current experiences of abandonment, rupture and misunderstandings. The *weakness of the connection* reflected the investment in a newly-born relationship that had entirely engrossed her, removing energy from the transference investment. This is the first level of investment that I grasped and partially recalled in the interpretation. Extending the observation within the context, I have also identified many factors and levels of *disconnection* and detachment that contributed to distorting the analytic environment, first and foremost **the lack of contact with me in the session, which deprived her of an emotive and sensory experience that was vital for her and not easily replaced in a virtual setting**. I imagined that showing herself in movement, a living body in action, that she wanted to convey that she was struggling against a sense of death and anxiety over loss, and her new infatuation was trying manically to control and overturn this.

Summer holidays come. I learned later that the patient sought to destroy our connection during this time. At the end of August, I receive a message from her asking “*how I am*” and adding that *she can’t wait to start up again*. Later we will return to this time when the patient destroyed and then saved the analysis and our connection.

Since September, Anna has always come regularly for sessions or “connected” via video call, thus establishing a *setting* that, inside of me, I call *alternate*. I was becoming convinced that the patient tended to assume different attitudes between in-person sessions (the *real* session) and video calls; she reserved analytic communication on dreams to the in-person sessions, and other types of communication, information, questions, various urgent matters and current events for the *online* sessions. For example, she would explicitly say “*I had a really strange dream but I’ll tell you about it when I come the next time.*” I didn’t want to modify this strange situation where Anna was basically deciding *how* to come into the

session. Instead, I preferred to observe her and not impede any form of communication through the *setting*, which might have helped us understand its functioning better. Her words from the first online session came back to me as comfort; I let myself be convinced, in this way, that she could have made me understand aspects of her Self that were unknown to that point. Also, perhaps we wouldn't have had made contact otherwise (as dissociated areas or less compatible states of the self with in-person work, movements toward or away from me, related elements to the conflict of dependency, etc.).

In some way, I **observed the *patient's setting taking form*** (J.Bleger), which I did not feel was in contrast to the analytical work. However, it did represent a degree of omnipotence expressed with acting out and an impulsive, promiscuous, confusing and even dangerous lifestyle. These behaviors had noticeably lessened, even if Anna sought to downplay these changes by attributing them to the pandemic that kept her from "picking up" guys like before and seducing adult friends of her mother (enjoying the fact that her mother suspected nothing while she *was doing it under her nose*). A form of splitting/dissociation allowed her to maintain an outward appearance as the perfect daughter and model student and to define herself a "serial seductress".

In a recent dream there is *a necropolis underneath a church, but the gate is closed; you can't enter. Regardless, she climbs over the fence but doesn't go further...* Association with the necropolis: *they're the foundations of later constructions and settlements, all cities are built over a necropolis*. No mention of death or the dead, but the evidence of a structure built on "a necropolis" in itself is telling; her psyche is built on a place of death, I think. Through this dream she shows me that she is moving closer to but still cannot visit the internal places of abandonments and ancient, mysterious graves. *The gate is closed*, she says with a mischievous tone; *but you climb over it*, I respond. *That's where the dream ends*, she answers. Our exchanges often take on an allusive form. It's a kind of play through which "we agree" on how much is possible for me to convey through the analytic word and how much she can assimilate and elaborate. This takes place in an alternation of *opening and closing*, which expresses the amount of freedom that the analytic couple has to access ancient contents that are buried but still active.

It is *her place*. You can study it, it has a story, like an archeological site, but it takes time and care. It is a place of death but not a cemetery, evoking transgenerational deposits (legacies). This dream gives me an uncanny feeling, a sense of fascination while at the same time an invitation not to investigate further.

We proceed and I understand that the splitting between *real* sessions and superficial sessions is reduced. She calls me online at the right time and always from her room, wearing house clothes or a robe, no makeup, and not dressed up like she used to. Maybe she has less need for masks? She respects our appointment times and the image no longer shakes and moves. These are references to the external features of the frame, but something transformative also happens on a deeper level.

A symbolizing internalization of the *online setting* occurs through a series of dreams one after another. There are only voices: two people in dialog, only voices, nothing happens and without a scenario.

She mentions that she had a doubt during the dream itself: *I had a dream, but was it a dream? I dreamt my voice and another voice, that's it, a dialog, nothing else happened, just voices.*

Two people who speak in a dream, I tell myself.

But is it a dream? She asks herself.

I interpret that she has dreamt the analysis.

This dream recurs several times in basically the same form; later, there is a small addition: a landscape appears in the background of the voices, a tree-lined street of a large city at twilight. It doesn't remind her of anything in particular, but she recognizes it as *her* place. All cities have a green area, a place of physical, mental, and spiritual intimacy where she can gather herself.

She went from the confusing overflow of the first online sessions to senso-perceptive emptiness and finally to the later landscape background, recomposing the three-dimension aspect of the room-mind and reconstructing a scenario in which dialog takes place.

A transformation has evidently occurred, which is made up of a series of small transformations where sensory components are removed and then added into an oneiric dimension; this transformation indicates the **potential of the virtual space as an activator of symbolization**—an alternation of the work of the negative. The subtraction of sensory elements shows the negative hallucination of the work, a precondition for constructing a framing structure (A. Green) where positive hallucination and desire can be re-born and represented.

As emerged in discussion with colleagues, within this new frame, reported events retrospectively acquire meaning and light. In particular, we understand how the patient passed through the chaos of abandonment and absence of containment (caused by the change of setting and the summer break) and then reorganizes

herself through a non-linear path that is, nonetheless, punctuated by significant events on an analytic level.

The creative synthesis is a dream within a dream, representing the setting, just as the patient recreated it, giving life to a new space. **A transitional dimension that acquires the meaning of a new appropriation of analysis.**

I say that she is building an internal environment in which to relocate the analysis, as if she had reconstructed the studio inside her dream and then summoned me to this place, *her* place that she recognizes and shares with me.

I point out that it is an entirely different dream from the usual ones: dreams filled with people where all sorts of things can happen, dreams/thrillers or noirs, with plot twists and changes in character, time, spaces, confused and confusing, swirling and tumultuous. Rather than opening doors and guiding us toward the unconscious, those dreams replicate and multiply emotions that are excessive and uncontained... perhaps because of this difference (and others), this “new” dream excites and moves me?