FROM PSYCHOTIC "TRAGEDY" TO HYSTERICAL "DRAMA": ANNA HISTORY

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Summary. - The authors present a multiple personality case. The characteristics of the family system seemed to be typical of psychotic families, but after a rightway look on the case, the therapists focused their attention on several elements which had not come out before. Carefully analysing the case, they were able to find out well played "roles" or "masks", (particularly a "great-seducer father", and a "very depressed mother") a stressed "characterization" of the players and a double level of reality, as if members, although maintaining an inner capacity of self-definition, play a particular "role" on the family "stage", never revealing themselves to the others. These elements are to be considered as primal "clues" of "emerging qualities" of that family. The symptom metaphorically points out a different reality behind the "masks" and with its dramatization, its quick and short rising, its modifications depending on the environment, confirms a different interpretation of the case.

KEY WORDS: psychotherapy, typology, hysteria, psychosis.

Description

Alberta is a twenty years old student and a very nice and charming person: for two years she has been hearing "confused and hissing voices", which would be identified as a suicidal friend voice later on.

Alberta considers herself a "fat and trivial person". On the contrary her father sees her beautiful. Her father is 54 and owns a building society. A month before the beginning of Alberta symptoms, he had been imprisoned for a short period because he was involved in a mortal injury on work.

Alberta’s mother is a housewife; she is 41 and looks very shabby. She considers herself frustrated, and believes in family traditional values.

Olga is Alberta’s younger sister; her father considers her "rational and sharpwitted" above all.
The father asks for therapy because almost startled by the "symptoms" of his daughter. All previous therapeutic attempts failed: from "drug-therapies" based on imprecise neuroleptics, to the help (and the interference) of Alberta's aunt, who is a psychologist. All that caused to Alberta a sense of deep disillusion.

During the therapy sessions we focus different attitudes in Alberta's mother and father. The former is sitting still and silent, observing everything with her hypnotic and sparkling sight, while the latter is moving, wordy and seductive with the therapists. Her younger sister, Olga, seems to be very attentive to the session, even if emotionally aloof.

Alberta's symptoms consist of the hallucinatory "presence" of her "split personality" coming up in difficult situation, through "Anna's voice". Anna is bold and aggressive, she is very self-assertive. Alberta, on the contrary, is not able to manage with her mother and she complains about it. Besides, one of the symptoms described is that Alberta sometimes "cannot hear and see".

Father ascribes to "Anna" an intention of rebellion, that is also alive in his wife's personality. He rates Alberta an "ideal partner" to be with, therefore he prefers to attend social meetings and "public relations" with her, not with his wife.

The situation for Alberta seems to be very difficult, because she often finds herself as supporter of her "mother-rival", versus her father. As a result, she is set in a triangle of "unstable coalition", while her parents do not overtly express their conflicts.

"No definition" seems to be the specific quality of the system: an evasive father, an uncertain mother, a mysterious and cool sister, and, at last, the difficult and only rational self-definition of Alberta, emotionally restrained by her alter ego "Anna".

The therapy is full of dramatic moments, and "stage-tricks", which stress the tension of both the family and the therapists: the revelation of a secret, kept hidden for a long time (a father's extramarital affair and the existence of a natural daughter), the appearance, during a dramatic session, of "Anna's personality", which surprises and also frightens the therapists.

Finally, Alberta's resounding decision of "leaving the scene" and consequently the therapy, giving back to her parents the responsibility of their own situation.

Remarks

When we first analysed the case, family typology seemed almost "representative" of psychotic families: no defined relationships, family secrets, parents conflict never declared, triangulation of the identified patient and her active role in the parental relationship.

When we analysed the case a second time, we picked up elements for a different interpretation.

In fact the dramatization of the symptom, its quick rising, its various shapes, depending on the environment, and, finally, Alberta's behavior in the intercritical period, suggested us the possibility of an hysterical symptomatology, instead of a psychotic one.

In this family, instead of a real lack of definition, we notice a double level of reality, as if members, although maintaining an inner capacity of self-definition, play a particular "role" on the family "stage", never revealing themselves to the others. This family "drama" involves the "great-seducer father", the "very depressed mother" (both able to induce trance, although unaware of it) "the distant attentive watcher" Olga, and "the first lady and leading actress" Alberta.

Alberta, through her symptom, expresses this dychotomy between "the way we look like" (roles) and "the way we are but we have not enough courage to show off".

Therapist's and supervisor's work was based on the hypothesis of "psychotic family", but we believe that we could understand more about that particular family system, about its flexibility and its resources, if we had taken into consideration also the "spurious elements" of diagnosis.

We believe that paying more attention to "differences", "spurious elements", and "omissions" in the process of diagnosis, may help the therapist to better understand the "emerging qualities" of the particular family he is dealing with, in order to reach a deeper sympathy with that specific system and set the ground to a more effective therapeutic approach.

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