

Retrieved from:

The European Journal of Psychoanalysis

May 26, 2024

<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/on-the-beach-4/>

Elvio Fachinelli

## On the Beach

San Lorenzo by the sea. A windy September afternoon, frayed clouds scudding by. From where I sit at the beach's edge, with the village behind me, the sea is a violet ribbon, raveling and unraveling endlessly. I have been here, quite still, for maybe over an hour. In the sheltered spot where I've set up my deck chair, there is only an occasional gust of wind. I've slipped into a languid state. I would rather be lucid, active, productive... pick up my ideas of these past months, dig through my notes, my books, delve into my dissatisfaction. Something's needed to overcome this state of inertia, to stimulate my intellect... I continue to be mesmerized by the ribbon of sea.

From the depths of my languor, as though from a deep sleep—a single thought. After offering an initial glimpse, psychoanalysis has ended up basing itself on one presupposition: the need for self-defense, control, cautiousness, distance... which, of course, is its limit: the idea that man, from birth if not before, must forever defend himself from an inner danger. Harnessed by his armor and, most essentially, armed with well-constructed, adequate weapons—if they are not so from the start, then they must be made so: with psychoanalysis, precisely. Otherwise, an uprooting, or even catastrophe.

If this is true, one must change one's viewpoint, stand on the other side (of the barricade, I almost want to say, although this word restricts me to the ambit of war). Not inhibition, repression, denial, etc.—all tactics belonging to an overall defensive strategy, a prickly maze of self-defenses with no escape—but rather acceptance and intrepid trust in what appears on the horizon.

Nausicaa. Ulysses. Cretan palaces open to the sea, defenseless.

This idea, the necessity, of changing one's viewpoint suddenly aroused me. Now, I am lucid, attentive, ready. But, at the same moment, that previous message—as though from without—from my half sleep is gone. I seek it, but in vain.

A girl dreamed of filthy, copulating cockroaches scurrying all over her feet. By day, obsessed by possible “nests” of cockroaches in her home, she constantly disinfects everything. “Is there an animal-like sexual drive in me?” In short, a strenuous defense, a long struggle against something she can't accept, with her drives, in the end, transformed into cockroaches.

Here, on the beach, something unusual comes to me. I suddenly see the affinity, at least in some cases, between what came to me in a flash—a simple find, a succinct thought coming from somewhere else—and the inventive process, whether scientific or not.

It is the sudden appearance of something organized and coherent out of fragments, and often out of the desperation to succeed in some undertaking. The type of discovery—scientific, artistic or otherwise—is not important, nor is its scope, but rather that clear, clean process (is it always the same?) which orders and shapes, while at the same time filling one with joy and certitude.

Was it the same for Freud's discovery? An acceptance of something which came, in a certain sense, from without, after an exhausting groping? Psychoanalysis's origins should be reread from this point of view rather than just from Freud's relationship with Fliess, which certainly came afterwards.

Later, Freud, and above all his followers (perhaps with the exception of Ferenczi) slip toward a renewed apology of defense, reducing the so-called unconscious—that which wishes to be accepted—to the barriers erected against it.

This idea, the importance of acceptance, came to me in its pure, abstract form at that moment when, in my languorous state, I accepted—I might say almost heard—what came to me from I don't know where. Had I sought, or consciously run after, it, would I have found it? Perhaps, although I doubt it. But in any case, I would not have been seized by this joy of awakening.

Consciousness as a narrow surface, a defined perimeter which tends to impose itself as the measure of the entire psyche, even on those who have measured it, and who are everyday compelled to observe its limits, its constraints—or precisely because of this.

How to put this all down? The wind on my forehead, the roar of the sea, light, languor, the thought of acceptance, joy, grateful joy, toward whom?

The image of a long mountain meadow, seen at sunset from the edge of a wood. I recognize it from my childhood. I recalled it for the first time, days ago, while listening to the "Song of Thanksgiving" from a Beethoven quartet.

An absolute, necessary silence, solitude, like that found in a soundproof room, where one is aware only of one's own breathing and heartbeat.

The people strolling on the beach—whether nearby or far, or whether pleasant or interesting—annoy me. They introduce abruptly another logic, of desire, of contact. I narrow my gaze, I distance the living, and I feel more alive.

Now the sea is alternating shafts of light. The truth of Ferenczi's words: the sea is not the symbol of the mother, but the mother of the sea.

Neither meditation nor concentration, but acceptance.

Through my half-closed eyes, the sea is thin, rippling sheets of silver. Streaks of varying brightness. This gaze beyond the conspicuous can be shifted. First the sea, the violet ribbon; then shafts, and later streaks of light. Through closed eyes, will o' the wisps. To recognize the necessity, and not just the existence, of these various visions.

Simultaneously, I am the gaze which learns not landscapes, but the selfscape. Sea-gaze. Acceptation of the body's position, weight, every single joint. A slight settling, creakings like in a boat's wood, takes place.

It seems impossible to live for long like this, probably not even desirable, yet necessary to learn how to have it at one's disposition.

Now, the desire to continue my notes, coupled with an impatience to stop, to run away. As if I'd already had enough, as if I'd strayed too far from the world. Time stretched out. Not still but as though fluctuating in stillness.

Let me resume. Defense, pushed to the point of true cancellation, is related to a certain state of vigilance, a sense of danger. That privilege due or accorded vigilance confers a generally sovereign privilege to defense.

A question of limits of tolerance, beyond which the defense mechanism snaps, like a trap, into action.

A trap which cuts into the flesh. Birds and hares captured on mountain plains, when as a child I followed my relatives hunting. Other images of cutting, tearing, ripping.

Less vigilance, a loosened defense, through dreams, reveries, inventions, drug use—in short, through that human phantastica where, now and then, an unexpected message arrives.

The dream is generally more daring than the awakened dreamer. From whence derives Freud's idea of treating neurotics by transferring this "going beyond" to the awakened consciousness. The dream testifies to what one wants to be—and thus, to what one can be.

But receptiveness and defense are not symmetrical—they have different workings, another logic. The aphasic's speech (Freud worked on this) does not behave like intact speech although, if recovered, it might seem the same, or almost indistinguishable, from intact speech. But it will never be the same.

Thus, is there no such thing as "normal" defense? There exist other ways of existing and creating, that bear only a superficial resemblance to defense.

An analysis based on the systematic dismantling of defenses encounters at each step that danger for which the defense was erected, whence comes a renewed drive to defend oneself from it. Like a continual demolition and reconstruction of dams and barriers. Analysis thus takes on a sense of deconditioning ad infinitum. Interminableness, and so on.

Nor is it even a question of leaping barriers, whether unexpectedly or shrewdly. So the barriers are, once again, the horizon of one's action. Better to pour in and flow out, to immerse oneself, to swim with the current. Perhaps, in the end, the fences of defense will drift away.

To make conscious can thus mean only to delineate, both beforehand and afterwards, the position of the vigilance-defense system, without trying to pass through this system what does not belong to it. A childish goal: to empty the sea with a bucket, or sift through every grain of sand. Freud's goal too—to drain the unconscious, just as civilization drained the Zuydersee—is childish.

The insistence on defenses is always, implicitly, an insistence on a capacity for offense. If the vigilance-defense system is linked to a strongly assertive virile position, is receptiveness then feminine?

Thus, the feminine would lie at the very core of many and varied experiences. Including my own. It is said that at the moment they become shamans, men change sex. Thus stressing the profoundness of the necessary transformation. The feminine as an attitude of receptiveness does not however cancel the masculine, but rather proposes a parallel transformation.

The masculine thus looms as a patient, laborious, at times nearly blind operation which precedes and follows the creative act. Choosing, setting out materials, inspecting, scanning, digging. Sowing. And later, gathering, developing, transforming. Rhythmic alternation of the masculine and feminine.

In this light, defense and offense are distortions or perversions of the masculine—at times necessary, always secondary.

In some cases, a delirium of defense. Against the threat of a danger from within, the construction of barriers, counter-barriers, and other barriers, according to formulae and numbers that amount to magic. Maximal vigilance, maximal inhibition. Within her seven-walled castle, the princess has no space to move.

Consciousness itself is wholly a part of the fortification system. It is one of its strongest bastions. Yet at times in this bastion, an insensible, opaque zone forms, while others become extraordinarily clear and vibrant. Like certain ladies-in-waiting in ancient Japanese courts, more interested in the night frost than in

life itself, as it is commonly understood; but that attention to the frost is life, of a prodigious intensity.

Animals living in darkness become progressively blind, although in that darkness develop other senses. Who can establish what is or is not essential or important? Who can swear: this is the center, and this is the periphery?

I feel that time is standing still. Expanding and feverish at once. Centerless, vibrant time. Accept whom? A guest—from within. Accept him before inspecting him closely and possibly turning him away. Intrepidity is an infinitely richer attitude and perhaps, in the end, more effective than the prudence of he who builds walls.

Once again: Knossus, Phestus, powers open to the sea's horizon. And even here, the importance of the feminine: the snake goddess with naked breasts; the dove goddess. The ecstatic dances of spring, the return of the youthful Kore, the vegetation goddess.

How narrow and stifling, at this point, is the Freudian metaphor of the drawing room separated from the waiting room. As sad as his home in Berggasse, with the window of his study looking out onto a concrete wall. Yet even facing this treeless courtyard, Freud knew there was the sea.

At first, the concept of defense defined the difficulties and impasses of altered behavior; it quickly established norms and even laws and standards for non-altered behavior, all because of an implicit, presupposed continuity between the one and the other. Except for some quantitative difference, abnormal became normal.

Here, then, is the perennial Freudian fix in front of what might be called the hypernormal—that infrequent, sometimes rare, and at times even exceptional behavior which nevertheless fills and enriches that which is average, statistical.

The incurable shortcoming of the theory of sublimation which attempts to explain that which, if it is sublime, is so from the beginning. Psychoanalysis states: here we have a clearly neurotic man of letters; an obsessional philosopher; a nearly psychotic mathematician, an autistic musician... But the firewood alone does not explain the raging fire.

And beyond lays the terrain of mysticism. Not institutionalized religion, but mysticism as an irreducible zone, inassimilable and recalcitrant to religion itself. Apex mentis. Mysticism that is at the same time a perceptive relationship, which is possible for some, or perhaps even common to all. Are there many mysticisms? to elude the codes that have always invariably rejected or confiscated these types of experiences.

Things coming from elsewhere: like an unexpected accent that transforms and shifts the entire pattern. From this point of view, the very clear limitations of psychoanalysis, and of the anthropology based on it. The roar of the sea is now a calm, deep breath. I close my eyes. There is no need for vigilance. The sounds, disconnected from their visual link, have more space; they become single voices, each with its own timbre and texture. In the face of each one, neither expectation nor fear. Only wonder.

*Translated from the Italian by Claudia Vaughn*

First pubblicazione in Journal of European Psychoanalysis, 1995.

December 1, 2016

**Bio:**

**Elvio Fachinelli** (Luserna, Trento, 1928 – Milan 1989) was an M.D. and psychoanalyst in Milan where, in the 1970's, he established the journal 'L'erba voglio'. He published his witty 'psycho-political' articles there and in the popular weekly 'L'Espresso', establishing a strong connection between psychoanalysis and the emancipatory and radical movements at that time. Although he remained a member of the official Italian Psychoanalytic Society (SPI), member of IPA, in 1969 he led a public protest against the Italian psychoanalytic establishment, which he criticized for its conservative sclerosis. He authored the books: *L'erba voglio*, with Luisa Muraro and Giuseppe Sartori (Turin: Einaudi, 1971); *Il bambino dalle uova d'oro* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1974); *La freccia ferma* (Milan: L'Erba Voglio, 1979); *Claustrofilia* (Milan: Adelphi, 1983); *La mente estatica* (Milan: Adelphi, 1989); *Freud* (Milan: Adelphi 2012). 'On Time on Psychoanalysis', EJP, 12–13, 'The Psychoanalyst's Money', EJP, 18, 'On the Beach', EJP, 24.

## **Publication Date:**

January 2, 2018