Bion once said to an analyst who was consulting him on her analytic work, The way I do analysis is of no importance to anybody except myself, but it may give you some idea on how you do analysis, and that is important’. Ferro amply succeeds in this volume in realizing this vision of psychoanalytic teaching and writing.


I have an inbuilt resistance to introductions written by one person to the work of another. However, I think that the emerging work of Antonino Ferro warrants close attention, so I decided to set myself the task of writing something about the aspects of his thinking that I value.

Having been intrigued by my reading of Antonino Ferro’s Seeds of Illness, I emailed the author to request an interview to address questions arising out of my efforts to write something about his work. With what proved later to be characteristic warmth and generosity, he accepted. When we met, he openly shared his thoughts. As he explained his ideas, he drew little cartoons to illustrate them—rather like the pictograms that he regards, in keeping with the work of Rocha Barros (2000), as the earliest detectable elements of emerging thought.

This article is something of a hybrid, taking the form of a review of his latest two books to be published in English, Seeds of Illness, Seeds of Recovery: the Genesis of Suffering and the Role of Psychoanalysis (2005), and Psychoanalysis as Therapy and Storytelling (2006), along with some thoughts of my own in response to his work. I have illustrated both with excerpts from the transcripts of the interviews.

The first chapter of Seeds of Illness, Seeds of Recovery, a chapter entitled ‘Seeds of Illness and the Role of Defenses’, provides a clear, economical and lively exposition and application of the ideas of Wilfred Bion. This was useful to me, as I find Bion’s concepts slip below the surface of my mind very quickly. Ferro illustrates and extends Bion’s ideas in his unique style and according to principles that he gradually fashions into an integrated structure. He shows how his ideas develop through application in his work with patients by sharing clinical vignettes.

In his writing, Ferro draws upon many wide-ranging psychoanalytic and philosophical ideas,
demonstrating the depth and breadth of, his interest in, and extensive study of the human mind through psychoanalysis and literature. During the interview, he explained how this career-long study evolved around a central, pivotal, driving question which has preoccupied him right from the beginning:

AF: When I began my training I was very, very interested in different models because for me it was strange, why one analyst says this, another analyst says this, another analyst in a similar situation makes another interpretation. For me it was a very fascinating and terrible problem, why an analyst does this interpretation, so I felt it a necessity to have many supervisions with many different analysts to understand the similarities and the differences between different models. For me it was an absolute necessity to do this, so I had many supervisions in the late eighties. There were many Italian analysts who did their formation in England and after they returned to Italy I did supervision with Lussana who did his analysis with Esther Bick… After Line Generali Clements many colleagues trained with Hanna Segal, a Kleinian, a post-Kleinian.

I had many supervisions with Meltzer, with Rosenfeld and with Brenman and Brenman Pick, because they came to Milan giving supervision and seminars for many years when I was a candidate or younger associate. More than all, Meltzer and Rosenfeld. And after, for many years I developed my thoughts in Italy, and began to have many contacts with different colleagues in different countries. I was interested in the ways in which the others were thinking, so I am in good relationships with analysts who have very different points of view, for example, a friend of mine Owen Renik, an intersubjectivist; and Tom Ogden, and Ted Jacobs.

Also I was interested in French psychoanalysis, because for me at one stage French psychoanalysis was a mystery, incomprehensible, but then I met a friend, Florence Guignard, who did her formation between France and England, and so after being with Florence Guignard for me it was possible to understand the main point of view of French psychoanalysis and to understand the thought of Andre Green—because before for me it had been impossible to understand French psychoanalysis which is very different from my point of view.

It is interesting always to know other points of view.

Then it was also interesting to understand, to know in depth about, South American psychoanalysis.

As this interview progressed, Dr Ferro made it clear that, while he sees Wilfred Bion as having been the most profound influence upon his work, there are two other main foundations to his thinking: field theory (Baranger and Baranger, 1961–62), which means that in his understanding of what is happening in the room he would think in terms not just of the mind of the patient but of the field, which comprises the result of the conjunction of the minds of patient and analyst together. The other main contribution comes from the field of narrative theory, or semiotics, the study of character or signal. In the interview, Dr. Ferro described this to me as:

AF: a way of thinking in respect of the concept of character, the character in the session. When the patient says, “My cat”, about what is he speaking? What is “my cat”, “my dog”? In different models of the mind, of narratology, my cat can be different things, the real cat
or the real dog, a part of the patient, a part of the patient split off and projected on the
analyst or a character in the session, without it being immediately recognisable if it is a
part of the patient or a part of the analyst. So it’s useful that “the cat” stay in the field
without being interpreted for the moment. We know only that there is something that may
scratch, something named ‘cat’ or ‘dog’ inside the session, and afterwards we can develop
with the patient what the ‘cat’ or the ‘dog’ may be … a sort of character who produces
some movement or action or change inside the text. It is not important what this character
thinks, but the function he has inside the text, or, in the more recent way of
conceptualisation about the character, the character is construed by the text and by the
reader at the same time … Every character is different for different readers … and so it is
the same in psychoanalysis.

This in itself is not an idea strange to psychoanalysis, to be sure. But Ferro’s position makes use
of this concept of the field to keep his own eyes focused upon what his patient is telling him
about his own impact on the patient and the evolution of the quality of reverie of the dyad. Dr
Ferro spoke passionately, and very compassionately, about this in the interview. He said:

AF: I think that in this way of thinking, the position of the analyst is different, because I
think that there is not an analyst who knows everything about the patient’s inner world
but an analyst who always needs the contribution of the patient for developing something
together, and I think that in analytic work we have an opportunity to develop the mental
life, not only the mental life of the patient but at the same time the mental life and ability
for thinking of the analyst too. I think that continually the analyst develops his capacity for
thinking, for dreaming, in the work he and the patients do together, and I think that the
signals that the patient gives are always very important for the analyst.

I am not sure that it is possible for me now to quote a short sequence of a patient’s session
today but I can try. A patient today began a session with a dream in which there was a sort
of plane which was dropping bombs on him and in the dream he was very worried but he
was able to protect himself in some way and these bombs were a sort of long teat and after
[telling the dream] he said that yesterday he ate in his mother’s house and after that, he
had a stomach ache because of what his mother cooked for him, and after that, he went to
an African restaurant and what he ate had the same effect, and after that, he told me a
short piece of a film on TV, a series I don’t remember the name of this series—in which
someone received roses, and he cut off the roses and in the vase he put in only the stem
with the thorns … And at this point immediately I thought about that the way I spoke
with the patient yesterday—everything the patient said in some way I criticised—and so
today he described very simply how I was bombing him continuously. In Italian I said,
“Perhaps yesterday I was mordace, (as when a dog is biting) and yesterday I was an African
chef that did not cook well—I am not African, I am Sicilian, no?” So he described my way
of being in the field yesterday … and I think it is very important at this point, the
transformation that the analyst makes in his mind, thinking “Yesterday I cooked too much
food so today we need only …” (indicates a tiny amount). And with this patient I
underlined his ability to survive in a not easy situation. Otherwise you could interpret
attacks, you could interpret envy.

(He indicated at this point that he did not consider that this would have been an accurate
interpretation for this patient at this moment.)

So it evolves through his writings that Ferro’s rigorous self-scrutiny, as revealed by the clinical
work he quotes and his reflections on its after-effects, leaves no space for narcissistic investment in his own idea—even at times when he believes that the interpretation that he has made is closer to the truth than the one which is, at least for the time being, bearable to the patient! For an illustration of this factor at work, I could recommend the story of Giorgio (Ferro, 2006, p. 65).

Later in the interview, Dr Ferro spoke about the evolution in his own thinking about the centrality of truth in psychoanalysis. After using a detailed and colourful example from his own experience, he asked me:

AF: What is it that we do to our patients if we insist that it is the truth that is the important thing? Do we sometimes hand them something like a dish that is too scalding to hold in their hands, or something that may even endanger their lives? Of course, each day I hope that my patient can bear to hear just a little more of the truth.

Ferro’s warmth and generosity impressed me, and the deep compassion he demonstrates for his patients. There is a disarming sense of simplicity in his unique take on what are very complex, post-Bionian ideas about the development of the human mind. Exceptions to the sense of simplicity are the first chapters of each book, which are denser than the later ones and less punctuated with clinical examples, and these are a little more daunting, as he walks us back through Bion only briefly before showing us how he extends the ideas.

In Chapter 1 of Seeds of Illness (2005), Ferro elegantly restates Bion’s work, showing how ‘Every mind, at birth, needs another mind in order to develop’, and leads the reader confidently through Bion’s ‘A Theory of Thinking’ (1984). He accentuates the point that it is not only alpha elements but also the alpha function that is imparted to the infant.

Ferro then moves on to make use of the understanding of Rocha Barros (2000) that the alpha element makes its first appearance as a visual pictogram. (‘For instance, the first pictographic reflection of a primal experience of rage and revenge might be a blood-filled swimming pool’) (Ferro, 2005, p. 1). Bion’s waking dream thought then becomes the sequence of alpha elements or pictograms, joined together as though in a film, then undergoing further changes to become what Ferro describes as narrative derivatives of waking dream thoughts that transport them into a field in which they can be knowable.

In this way Ferro articulates a frame of reference on which he displays his understanding of mental phenomena and of how they can be assisted towards competent, autonomous functioning.

Clinical illustrations from actual sessions with his patients illuminate Dr Ferro’s commentary. This both enlivened and concerned me, as I had decided some time ago that writing about sessions with my own patients was something that I did not want to do, because of the potential for such writings to intrude on the thinking space. Yet I could not deny the value of Ferro’s vignettes in explicating the points that he was making, and I do not see how these points could have been made without the clinical illustrations. Is it really safe to practice in a profession where we cannot share detail of what we actually do behind closed doors? I found myself wondering this again, returning to the opinion I had held on the matter some years ago. However I resolve this, through his openness, Ferro has contributed to my understanding of the deepest struggles of the other, and I find his presence encouraging and provocative.
Because the topic of clinical writing was so contentious for me, in the interview I asked Dr Ferro what he thought about the problems presented by writing about his patients’ material. He addressed the topic with generosity, energy, and deep concern. He described the considerable lengths to which he goes to minimise its impact upon the patient and the reflective space. However, it was clear that he can see no effective alternative way of conveying his thoughts.

AF: Otherwise, what am I supposed to say? “I transform to the patients’ beta elements in alpha elements?” What does this mean? How?

In these two books, Dr. Ferro thoughtfully outlines his singular thinking structure within which he responds to the utterances of his patients, a structure which is clearly based upon his understanding of how the human mind develops. It is clear that his position evolves further during and between the writing of the two volumes.

The image of Ferro, the fellow traveller, comes to represent for me not only his relationship to the reader but also the focus of his relationship to his patient. In discussion with some of my colleagues, what appears to be an almost democratic position in the consulting room seemed at first to cause some concern, leading them to question whether he may have abandoned the position of analyst, or whether his approach could be seen as seductive or disingenuous?

Gentleness on the part of the therapist has always seemed to me to be very important, and I have taken seriously the wisdom of the prime non nocere injunction in the Hippocratic Oath—the exhortation to do no harm. But Bion referred to psychoanalysis as a very rough game and the impact of what I say to my patients, sometimes at the very moment when I say something that may later emerge as having been important to them, maybe experienced as anything but gentle.

Dr. Ferro’s particular focus is his deliberate attentiveness to the patient’s experience of his interventions. It becomes clear upon a close reading of the work that his ‘patient-experience-focused’ approach springs not from any kind of wish to be nice, but from shrewd observation of those factors that he has found enable his patients to remain available and accessible to what he sees as the core of the analytic process. It is a position he occupies because he believes it is the one most likely to free up blockages as they emerge in the field, so as to safeguard its viability as a medium in which to untangle impediments in the deepest layers of the mind—not just the mind of the patient but of the therapist or analyst as well, and of the dyadic mind within the room.

What Ferro seems consider to be the most helpful way of being with the patient reminds me of times in sessions with my own patients when I have reproached myself for wandering away from an analytic stance. These were the times when I found myself joining in with the patient’s imagery and playing more liberally around the edges of an experience or an idea.

Ferro always wants to know how the patient has experienced an intervention. It is connected closely with his belief about what makes up the cure, what it is that will enable a patient to leave an analysis and go on with the work by himself for the rest of his life, what it is that will develop a state of mind in the patient that can sustain ongoing mental health and psychological survival.
Ferro values accuracy in interpreting the transference, so much so that, to bring *Seeds of Illness, Seeds of Recovery* to an end, he offers a clinical example involving a classical transference interpretation (pages 107–108). Nevertheless, he sees the need for a style of working together with the patient, in which patient and analyst together weave a creative narrative which explicates, holds and contains the patient’s feelings, as well as the unfolding understanding of the dilemma—the dilemma of the dyad, rather than just that of the patient. The co-narration contains and expresses the transformations in the field. These creative co-narrations reveal a sensitive and sophisticated understanding of the forces at work at each given moment. His emphasis on the importance of immediacy is expressed in his moment-by-moment translation of the experience with his patient. When he speaks these translations, if they are to be spoken, they are spoken in the language of the imagery that patient and analysts have elaborated together.

Between these two books, Ferro takes a further step in this direction, leading him to state categorically:

> I have shown elsewhere that an analysis can end when the patient introjects the capacity to weave every kind of experience one has with oneself, one’s body, other people and life into a fabric of emotions and thoughts. This corresponds to the finding of “solutions” in the strictest sense of the word—that is, to the breaking down of the invisible drama into possible narrations (2005, p. 84).

It took me several readings to realise that Ferro is writing of ‘solutions’ such as those that one might find in a test tube in a science laboratory, solutions or a medium that will dissolve and hold a compound, making it fluid and available for further changes. He is saying, I believe, that the narrative flow is what is needed to keep the processing of experience going, to prevent or dissolve blockages, such as those resulting from trauma, where whole slabs of experience seem to go solid, so that they cannot be metabolised, reached by other aspects of the mind, modulated—we have so many words for this. I reminded myself that patients come to us because there are parts of their minds where their process, their waking dream, their ‘solutions’, have become or have always been frozen or blocked, and there has been no ‘solution’. I thought further of what Dr. Ferro reminded us at the very beginning, that the patient has come to us because ‘Every mind, at birth, needs another mind in order to develop’, and what is required is the discovery or invention or introduction of a new ‘solution’, a dyadic mind that can provide a medium in which to hold experience which it has not previously been held.

Understanding the aim of psychoanalysis in this light, it becomes clearer why Ferro begins his fourth book from an even more radical position in relation to interpretation:

> By narration I mean a way of being in the session whereby the analyst shares with the patient in the construction of a meaning on a strongly dialogic basis, without particular interpretative caesuras. It is as if analyst and patient were together constructing a drama within which the various plots increase in complexity, intersect and develop, sometimes even in ways that are unpredictable and unthinkable for the two co-narrators, neither of whom is a “strong” holder of a preconstituted truth. Within this mode of proceeding, co-narrative transformation or indeed transformational co-narration takes the place of interpretation.

For me it is an open question whether a sense-saturating interpretation may be useful at a certain point. My analytic superego or ego ideal often says yes, while taste and respect for
creativity suggest a negative answer, because this decoding of a “true truth” reminds me of the kind of interpretation given by certain critics who claim to reveal the true meaning of a work of art (2006, pp. 1–2).

Ferro by this stage is seeing the task of analyst and patient as being that of the creation of this solution, using words and images. This understanding of Ferro’s brought to mind Winnicott’s squiggle game (1985). In that joint activity of patient and analyst, the line may have worked its magic on the unconscious life in much the same way as Ferro’s co-narration, where both parties use words, images and stories to develop a new, joint container for what has previously not been containable. Ferro shows through his many clinical examples, that the patient’s utterances give access to information about the dyad and how it is functioning from second to second and from session to session, telling him what the patient needs him to provide so that the current ‘solution’ that mediates the two can be corrected for its holding properties. The analyst’s role then is to understand what needs to be provided so that the narrative ‘solution’ can continue to flow.

By the time of writing Psychoanalysis as Therapy and Storytelling, Dr. Ferro ventures to argue that contributions by the analyst in the classical form of interpretation may actually do damage to the flow of the waking dream thought which he believes is what should be the focus of the work. Dr. Ferro expresses the concern that classical interpretations, when spoken by the analyst, may place a demand upon the patient to engage the more cognitive levels of the mind, and to translate his experience into the language of the analyst, thus distracting the patient and drawing him away from the place of reverie that is in need of repair.

In the interview, Dr. Ferro used vivid imagery to illustrate and underline the primary importance of the analyst’s modulating his utterances according to the patient’s need, without interrupting the patient’s narrative flow with interpretation:

AF: Bion developed the concept of waking thought dream that seems to me very important: a waking thought dream that we are constantly producing from beta elements, from stimuli, from the sensing of reality. The idea that we are constantly transforming these by dreaming in a sort of waking dream thought is an extraordinary point of view. In this view what is important is not the content but the way we develop our ability for these transformations.

In Italy we have the pasa pomodoro’ [sieve] in every Italian kitchen, in which we put tomatoes so as to produce the salsa, and so these beta elements, these tomatoes, no? (He is drawing pictures on a sheet of paper between us as he speaks). They are not a bad thing, they are the tomatoes, they are the beginning, they can be worked on by the pasa pomodoro, the alpha function, to produce the salsa, and after with the salsa it is possible to produce the images, the alpha elements. So it is very important to have the opportunity to develop this, the goal of the analysis is to develop this [pasa pomodoro] bigger and bigger and bigger and to develop the container in which it is possible to have the salsa. To develop this [pasa pomodoro] and this [container] is more important than the content…And I think that the tool for developing this is the mind of the analyst, very importantly at unison, at one with that of the patient along the main emotive lines, and after, we have the classical way of making classical interpretations. The patient can speak
about his childhood or what she looked at on TV or in my office, the genre of the narrative is not important, what is important is to develop the capacity for thinking or containing emotions and thoughts.

I don’t know if you have the possibility of reading The Italian Seminars of Bion… and The Tavistock Seminars, both very interesting, because in The Italian Seminars he underlines that the patient always knows what happens inside the mental life of the analyst, and that the patient is the best colleague of the analyst. The best colleague is not other colleagues, is not psychoanalytic theories, but the best colleague is the patient. Who knows about the patient more than the patient? And he is always able to help the analyst in finding where the patient is…

And after, I developed another point of view, all the session as a sort of dream. And inside the session when I give an interpretation, what the patient says immediately after is a sort of little dream, on [the subject of] this interpretation. So after Interpretation 1, and the dream of the patient on the interpretation, I think Interpretation 2 should be able to be transformed in the analyst’s mind, thinking what the patient has dreamed about Interpretation 1, and I think of the mind of the analyst [as being] in two parts, a kitchen part in which the analyst cooks the answer of the patient and the other part a restaurant in which the analyst presents or serves—but in the kitchen always the analyst should cook the answer to the interpretations, and put more salt, less salt, always working in the kitchen, without interpreting always necessarily.

It is different from Betty Joseph, “Transference: the Total Situation”, because it is not only what happened inside the mind of the analyst, it is not passed from the patient to the analyst, but both are inside the field and there is the mental life of the patient and the mental life of the analyst.

By the time of writing Psychoanalysis as Therapy and Storytelling, Ferro explicitly states that classical interpretation belongs most often in the kitchen!

All these developing thoughts pertain to something Ferro regards as a central problem, that of why one analyst says this, and another analyst says that, why in a similar situation different analysts interpret differently. In Ferro’s opinion expressed at the time of the interview, he thinks of the contribution of the states of mind of the patient and the therapist as each contributing equally to what evolves in the consulting room. Ferro’s gentle approach conveys the humility of such a stance and his openness in the face of the encounter with the troubled other, is demonstrated in his writing:

Of course, we all constantly deploy every single defence mechanism, but these defences become pathological only when they become “established” in the place of flexible mental functioning (2005, p. 3).

He then goes on to spend several pages on what he calls, with characteristic humour, his ‘eulogy of defence’, in which he attempts ‘to understand the profound reasons for its existence’ (p. 5).
So he arrives at the point where he tells us the following story:

There is a well-known Jewish anecdote about a boy from a poor family who is sent to school by his parents at great financial sacrifice. After a few days, he categorically proclaims that he does not wish to continue. Questioned about this decision by his astonished father, he eventually replies: “Because at school they teach me things I don’t know.” This in my view illustrates the problem, which not only can be avoided by recourse to a co-narration, but also must be avoided because in analysis there is no one holder of preconstituted truths about the patient (if there were, we should be in -K and Column 2), but instead a sense that can be developed only by con-sensus (development of container-contained, of container, and of contained) (2006, p. 2).

One way of thinking about the boy’s reaction is to say that the shock of the new has produced a closing down of his availability for learning which we might indeed think of as arrogance (in the Latin sense of ab rogare, to turn away from asking). Ferro’s way of understanding this calls to mind Joan Symington’s in her article, The Survival Function of Primitive Omnipotence’ (1985). By picking up this aspect of the dilemma presented by the boy’s position, Ferro indicates to us what can be done, a ‘solution’ to be found which may eventually enable the boy’s defenses to dissolve away, rather than have them solidify in response to an interpretative challenge in a way which could potentially block all access to future analysis.

This approach recommends Ferro’s writing as a good starting point for people learning about psychoanalysis, as a potential antidote to the danger for the beginner—and by this I mean the beginner in all of us—to throw the baby out with the bath water in our fits of interpretative zeal.

Real creative thought often has the effect of releasing creative thought in others, and I notice that many recent psychoanalytical articles make reference to Ferro’s ideas, each idea quoted being quite disparate from all the others. When a writer has galvanised our intense interest as he has done for many people interested in psychoanalytic ideas, of course quotes appear everywhere. Yet to have so many and varied facets and sparks of ideas quoted in so many places by so many different writers is an impressive testimony to the way in which Ferro uses gift for writing, alongside his clinical experience, in the service of enhancing our understanding of the human coil.

Ferro’s is therefore a very deceptive simplicity. Sometimes I find his ideas are so sensible that they are instantly absorbed, and it is easy for me then to forget where they came from. I am reminded that I owe to him the structure of the Introductory Course of the Victorian Association of Psychoanalytic Psychotherapists and its explanatory notes, which suddenly seemed so obvious to me (having read Chapter 1 of the Seeds of Illness!) that I almost forgot where it had come from, and only remembered and confessed its origin when our teachers and students alike kept remarking, as I had done after reading that chapter, ‘Oh, that is so simple! And it makes so much sense!’

References

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