

Leadership in small groups: Syncretic sociality and the *genius loci*

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Abstract

Freud presupposed that the group has one leader and only one. The Freudian view was that for the members of the group the group leader fills the role of the superego ideal. Bion, on the other hand, makes a distinction between 'work-group mentality' and 'primitive mentality'. Each of these two mentalities at work in the group has its own corresponding leader. The head of the work group is an operative leader, a leader of thought. The head of the basic-assumption group embodies and expresses regressive, uncontrollable negative drives. This leader's individuality is peculiarly susceptible to obliteration by the basic-assumption group's leadership requirements.

I have chosen to give the name of *genius loci* to a third figure who fosters the group members' sense of belonging and identity, encourages participation and sharing, and manages to grasp the affective tonality of what is happening in the group. In the small analytic group the *genius loci* refers to a figure analogous to a leader, working with, in opposition to or alongside the work-group leader.

Keywords: *Leadership, syncretic sociality, genius loci, domestication, group identity*

Introduction

The aim of this work is to shed new light on a particular set of functions that tend to evolve within small therapy groups: functions concerning various aspects of affective continuity, such as group identity and the members' sense of belonging. I have chosen to give the name *genius loci* to the figure who fosters this set of functions and takes on the task of encouraging participation and sharing in the group.

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I will discuss these functions in three steps. In the first part, I will consider certain aspects of Bion's theory of the 'work-group mentality' and the 'basic-assumption group mentality', with their respective leaders. Next, I will expand the field of observation of group phenomena, introducing J. Bleger's concept of 'syncretic sociality' – a 'group mentality' differing from those described in Bion's theory. And finally, in the third part, I will discuss the figure of the *genius loci*.

Leadership in the work group and in the basic-assumption group

W. R. Bion (1961) makes a distinction between 'work-group mentality' and 'primitive mentality' (or the 'basic-assumption group mentality'). He defines work-group mentality as a level of intellectual functioning that implies a grasp of reality, tolerance for frustration and emotional control. The capacity to function as a member of a 'work group' is developed through experience. The members of this type of group cooperate in the interest of reaching a common goal.

The primitive mentality, on the other hand, corresponds to involuntary, instinctive mental activity, which conflicts with the 'work group'. In a group dominated by a primitive mentality, each member immediately joins the others in accepting the basic assumptions and acting accordingly. In their role as members of a basic-assumption group, they suffer a loss of individual distinctiveness, finding themselves in something similar to a depersonalized condition. These subjects use language more to transmit sensations and emotions than to communicate specific ideas or general meaning.

According to Bion (1961), each of the two mentalities at work in the group has its own corresponding leader – the work-group leader and the basic-assumption group leader. The head of the work group is an operative leader – a leader of thought. This is an individual capable of facilitating the execution of the task the group has set for itself and of paying attention to the people involved. Usually it is the group therapist who functions as the operative leader.

The head of the basic-assumption group, on the other hand, embodies and expresses regressive, uncontrollable and negative drives. Bion (1961) describes this leader as:

an individual whose personality renders him peculiarly susceptible to the obliteration of individuality by the basic-assumption group's leadership requirements.... Thus, the leader in the flight-flight group, for example, appears to have a distinctive personality because his personality is of a kind that lends itself to exploitation by the group demand for a leader who requires of it only a capacity for fighting or for flight.

(Bion, 1961, p. 177)

I believe that the clear-cut two-fold division proposed by Bion obscures a number of aspects that may not occur in the 'work group' but yet represent more than merely an 'un-evolved' level (that is, primitive mentality). In my opinion, his model does not draw enough attention to the connection between

sensory, emotional and affective experiences and the more evolved aspects of mental life.

Indeed, Bion attributes an almost exclusive importance to thought. I believe, on the other hand, that affective sharing and the experience of belonging are just as important, and that affectivity and thinking should be developed hand in hand.

Syncretic sociality and the group

The concept of syncretic sociality introduced by Bleger can serve to elucidate my vision of a therapeutic group that embraces sensory and affective elements. Here is an example quoted from the author:

A mother sits in a room, reading, watching TV or concentrating on her sewing. In the same room is the child, isolated, concentrating on a game. If we consider the level of interaction, we find no communication between these two people. They do not speak or look at each other; each one acts independently of the other, in isolation, and we can say that there is no interaction and that they are not communicating. Yet this is true only if we limit our observation to the level of interaction.

Let us continue with the example. At a certain moment, the mother stops what she was doing and walks out of the room. The child immediately stops playing and runs out to follow her. Thus we realize that although the mother and child were each involved in a different task, without speaking or communicating at the level of interaction, there was nonetheless a deep, pre-verbal bond between them. This type of bond has no need for words and would actually be disturbed if anyone spoke. In other words, although there is no interaction and the two do not look at or speak to each other, there is still a syncretic sociality. While a description of their behavior suggests they are isolated, the two are in fact in a state of fusion and not of separation.

(Bleger, 1966, pp. 68–9)

According to Bleger, syncretic sociality and evolved sociality are interdependent, not opposed. Syncretic sociality is the basis for the development of the functions of evolved sociality; it keeps the ‘unchanging’ aspects of identity alive. These, in turn, are crucial for the expression of those aspects of identity that do in fact change and undergo transformation. Then again, evolved sociality prevents syncretic sociality from going flat.

Applying the notion of ‘syncretic sociality’ to small groups helps to reveal the importance of sensory, proprioceptive and coanaesthetic experiences. These experiences – the sharing of physiological rhythms, a common perception of space and collective control of the general mood – are an essential basis for the experience of belonging. Other factors feed syncretic sociality and confirm the experience of the group as something familiar, stable and reliable: the regularity of the hour and room, the regular physical presence of the other members and the group leader’s behavior in its most repetitive aspects.

Clearly, the syncretic, non-verbal level and the evolved level of the relationship cannot be separated and are, in fact, tightly interdependent.

I would like to illustrate another point about syncretic sociality – its relation to a possible internal revolt. An attack against one or more of the elements that maintain syncretic sociality (the stability of the site, the group’s habits and little rituals, etc.) often results in the emergence of conflict

between subgroups. These inflexibly opposed subgroups – says Bleger – do not actually form because their opinions vary, but rather because they share the same wound in the syncretic identity. Each subgroup senses that a certain image of the group, a certain way of understanding its sociality, has been damaged. Something has changed that had allowed members to identify themselves with the group as a whole. Each subgroup blames the other and handles it (poorly) by initiating an internal struggle.

Bion (1961, pp. 38–9) expresses ideas that complement those I have illustrated. He claims that a schism (the division of a group into opposing subgroups) occurs when stimuli to development are perceived which could imperil the group's primitive mentality. Bion observes that the two opposing groups in a schism cannot be defined as one that supports a 'rational group' and the other a 'primitive group'. Instead, both tend to obstruct any overall change in the group. In other words, overly rapid progress generates conflict to the degree to which it damages syncretic sociality and identity (see Grinberg et al., 1972).

The *genius loci* and group harmony

The idea of the *genius loci* (Neri, 1992, 1995) ties in with what has been said previously about the function of work-group and basic-assumption group leaders, while it also helps to amplify the concept of syncretic sociality.

First of all, to provide a solid core for this idea of the *genius loci*, I would like to review the role occupied by this figure in mythology. The Greeks and Romans associated each particular place with a particular god; every fountain, valley and mountain had its own tutelary deity. The *genius loci* was a local, minor god, who resided in a given city, fountain, hill or countryside, and not on Mount Olympus.

There were various types of *genius loci*. Nymphs lived in fountains, rivers and in the sea; they generally had long lives but were not immortal. Naiads were nymphs of springs and lakes who conferred fertility. Dryads were spirits of trees, woods and forests. According to very ancient myths, each dryad was born with a special tree to watch over and lived in or near it. When the tree fell, the dryad would die and the gods would punish the person responsible.

In each case, the *genius loci* had a special relationship to the harmony of the place and safeguarded the correct rapport between the various elements – water, wind, plants, buildings, etc. They would get angry when the site's specific quality or characteristics were altered by actions contrary to its nature.

To return to the group, the *genius loci* is the person who embodies and inspires the functions aimed at regulating the syncretic sociality and developing the connection between the group's affective life and its rational life.

By stimulating members to get involved in the group's concerns, the *genius loci* acts to maintain the group's identity and harmony, ensuring its affective continuity in moments of transformation and change (for example, when the sessions resume after the summer break or when a longtime member leaves or a new member joins the group).

The *genius loci* is able intuitively to recognize the qualities of the mood shared by the group. Usually, he or she is not fully aware of how significant this discovery is for an understanding of the group's immediate situation, its 'here and now'. Instead, the knowledge stays at a preconscious level, manifesting itself through apparently marginal comments, often referring explicitly to what is happening in the group. For example, he or she could say, 'I went out for dinner last night. The food was absolutely inedible' or 'I feel happy, as if I were expecting something to happen, but I have no idea what it is'.

Two clinical cases

I will now present two examples of patients from my therapeutic groups, both of whom, in their own way, were able to revitalize the other members' participation in the session. Each played the role of the *genius loci*, motivated in part by personal factors. In both cases, the intense involvement in the life of the group that was required by this function had a cost. Nonetheless, each one also benefited from this opportunity to put their own natural talents into action and to receive recognition for the role they played. Being part of a community certainly served as important experience for these two patients. In fact, they were willing to do a job in exchange for this privilege. Another important reason for them was their need to put their *rêverie* into practice, *rêverie* that had been denied them in their early childhood.

Antonia, a woman of about 50, successfully fostered the affective participation of the other group members largely by never pulling back when it came to sharing pain or joy or concern. However, she reacted strongly whenever, in her opinion, someone's words lacked real involvement – when it was just 'talking for the sake of talking'. Typically, Antonia reminded her group mates of their responsibility and the need for commitment to the work they were doing by saying, 'Giovanni (or Maria, Isabella), we have heard all the wrong things your mother did (or your husband, or boss) and the harm she (he) caused you. Now tell us how *you* feel and what *you* want to do.' Her intervention was clearly intended as a call to the others for greater involvement and willingness to share their emotions.

After Antonia had finished therapy, an analogous function was carried out in the same group by Fabiana, who, however, had a completely different style. She played out this role primarily through changes in her clothes, earrings, hairdo or facial expression. For Fabiana, all these aspects represented a little scenario that was subject to change – sometimes after a long period, sometimes one right after another. Regardless, such changes reflected Fabiana's state of mind and her personal transformations over time. Concurrently, they introduced something new into the group, a stimulus capable of provoking an experience of sharing. Against this visual and gestural background, her verbal interventions generally entailed the activation of a very intense relationship of consensus or conflict with another group member. The emotional intensity of the relationship between the two then opened up into a discussion involving all those present.

The *genius loci* and group identity: Boundaries

As I have already said, the *genius loci* also has the specific function of maintaining the group identity, confirming the members' sense of belonging. Identity and a sense of belonging imply a common 'space', which must be

defined by a boundary. Depending on the flexibility of this boundary, the time spent in the small therapy group is experienced by its members as either totally separate and opposed to their daily lives or as distinct but not opposed. The degree of rigidity of the boundary, in turn, depends on the group identity. The more the group has developed an identity that is not based on its opposition to the outside world, the more mobile and permeable the boundary is.

In a small therapy group, the *genius loci* also performs the function of keeping the group's progress connected to its affective base. Specifically, by preserving the group identity, the *genius loci* eliminates the group's need to have recourse to the idea of an enemy or to an inflexible delimitation between internal and external, which may otherwise have been used to keep or confirm its identity. In fact, increasing rigidity of a group's boundary is a sign of the failure (or lack) of this aspect of the *genius loci*'s function. In this case, the group defends its cohesion by falling back on its members' archaic (ethological) capacity to define a territory. Thus, the boundary, which was once a membrane, hardens into a barrier.

Domestication

As we have seen, in classical mythology, every place is associated with a tutelary divinity. This suggests that places can become the home of a spirit, a *genius loci*. In stories and popular beliefs, we find many examples of this relationship between the god, or his representative, and a place. Crows represent the *genius loci* of the Tower of London. According to legend, the fortress will be impregnable as long as the crows continued to live there. Similarly, when Rome was invaded by barbarians from Gaul in 390 AD, the squawking of the geese living there woke the consul Manlius Marcus Capitolinus, who managed to push back the attackers. Places and objects gain a tutelary spirit (a soul) through a process of storage or accumulation of the affect experienced by the many generations who have lived there.

De Martino (1964, 1977) speaks about 'domestication', not of places but of objects. With this term, he refers to a process through which the objects around us become familiar and safe to us. A fork, a chair, a lamp are all objects that raise no questions for us; we do not need to wonder about them. On the contrary, they are part of the dimension of the obvious. We recognize them immediately; we use them easily; they contribute to define our relationship to the world. When we see them, they arouse a feeling of being at home, of being in a familiar place where we know how to operate.

A link must be established between object and word for the object to 'become domestic'; it must enter the network of domestic relations and join up with 'latent cultural memories'. This process allows 'domesticated objects' to stay in 'obvious spheres' and confers on them a 'hidden warmth' that makes them alive and uncomplicated. This warmth, in turn, allows the objects to stay in the dimension of 'that which is hardly noticed' – in other words, the dimension of the obvious.

The domestic quality of objects can sometimes be lost, causing them to become strange and meaningless – sometimes even hostile or persecutory, as in certain serious psychopathologies. In these cases, it is precisely the world of the usable, of the ‘familiar’, that is compromised.

The world of ‘domesticated’ objects and the place that man occupies among them are not settled once and for all. It is a world subject to change, which must be periodically rediscovered and reconstructed.

A poem by J. L. Borges¹ communicates the meaning, timing and feeling of this kind of work. Roughly translated via the Italian, it goes as follows:

At the end of my years of exile
I came back to the home of my youth
Yet its space is still foreign to me.
My hands have touched the trees
As if caressing someone
Deeply asleep.
And many times have I followed old paths
As if to recover some long
Forgotten way
....
What masses of sky
The courtyard will hold between its walls
....
and how much the brittle new moon
will suffuse the garden with its tenderness,
before the house finally feels like my very own
and becomes a habit once more.

Little rituals

It is quite common for people to take on the role of the *genius loci* in groups, and even more so in institutions. We can all recall certain people who did not necessarily have a particularly powerful position in the institution but who nonetheless managed to become its affective and vital centre. Novels and stories also offer many examples of such *genius loci*. In Jean Giono’s book *The Horseman on the Roof* (1951), the *genius loci* of the town is a simple nun.

I will say something about Giono’s novel because the story sheds light on two of the *genius loci*’s functions – on ‘domesticate’ objects and on healing the wounds in a community’s social fabric and syncretic sociality.

Jean Giono describes a desolate city, struck by cholera, through the eyes of a young horseman, a hussar. The horseman enters one house after another.

At first, he does not realize that he is witnessing the results of the cholera epidemic.

Hidden in corners or, preferably, in window recesses (the desire to flee), there would be a man or a woman transformed into a dog, groaning, coughing, barking, ready to fawn on the first-comer; one or two children, as inflexible as justice, and eyes like eggs.²

Giono does not only describe the catastrophic changes that are produced by the cholera epidemic; he also portrays transformations in the opposite direction – from cold, numb terror back to an almost normal life. The person who brings about this positive transformation, this new ‘domestication’ – the *genius loci* of the city – is a nun, as I mentioned above. This nun carries out a series of little rituals that have the effect of making the objects used ‘domestic’ again. One very effective ritual was simply grinding coffee.

Often, when the sight was so horrible that goose bumps appeared on the skin, this is what she would do; sit down, put the coffee mill between her thighs, and begin to grind coffee. In a flash, the man or woman stopped being a dog. With the children, however, it was both more tricky and easier, they would be immediately attracted by the nun’s enormous bosom; then, with a very simple gesture, she would push her pectoral cross aside.

Another more complex rite reconstructs social roles, functions and goals.

At other times (but always with exact and unerring science) there would be other solutions than coffee mills. She would enter one of those bourgeois houses where the kitchen is out of sight, where all the furniture is under dustsheets. There were always places where the corpses were extraordinarily pungent. Here, most of the time, the sick people had not had much care lavished on them. Generally no one had had the courage to keep them in bed; they had been left to get up and wander about; the tendency had been to flee from them. The armchairs were overturned as if after a fight, the tables no longer stood directly under the chandelier, the music stand was smashed; people seemed to have been bombarding each other with waltz music. A dead man had streamed in all directions before collapsing over the piano.

Immediately, the nun would pull the table back to its place, pick up the chairs, straighten the armchairs, collect the pages of music. She would open the door into the bedroom and ask: ‘Where are the clean sheets?’

These words were magical, they gave her the most lightning of victories. No sooner spoken than the rattle of a key ring would be heard from among the huddling monkeys. That sound itself had a virtue so powerful that a woman would emerge from the huddle and immediately become both a woman and mistress of the house again. Some of these women, whose faces were more particularly smothered in bedraggled hair, would still totter a bit and even, in their giddiness, hand her the keys. But the nun never took them. ‘Come and open the cupboard yourself,’ she said. After that, they would tidy up the bed. It was only once the bed was made that they would deal with the corpse, and then thoroughly. But already the wheels of the house were turning once again, and already death could strike another diabolical blow in this family without destroying anything essential.³

What is it that makes the nun’s actions so effective? Giono’s narrative suggests some answers.

The nun’s actions are simple and few. Above all, she does not carry out operative functions – for example, she does not take over the role of the mistress of the house – but only actions with a symbolic value. The nun knows that there is a sequence of events that must be respected: one gesture follows another; one action cannot be carried out before another has made it possible and effective.

***Genius loci* and the operative leader: Conflict and collaboration**

Having explained some of the characteristics and functions of the *genius loci*, it should be pointed out that the role of the *genius loci* and that of the work-group leader are generally played by two different people. The work-group leader is an ‘operative director’: he or she has some relationship with truth and knowledge and has the task of orienting the group as it carries out its task. The *genius loci*, on the other hand, is a figure with whom there is an affective relationship. This person has the function of inventing the ways of being together: ways that succeed in activating the ‘group spirit’. This implies making a choice – depending on the precise moment and suitability – between silent attention, happiness and pain.

As I mentioned before, the *genius loci* is not generally the group therapist, although in some situations he or she can fulfil this function. However, to operate effectively, the *genius loci* must be a figure who is recognized by the group members more or less as a peer, while this is not the group therapist’s position. On the contrary, he or she is the recipient of intense projections and expectations, being a figure who is in some ways idealized or who at the very least is one who represents an aspect idealized by the group: that is, psychoanalysis (see Ferruta, 1992).

The *genius loci* is committed to the group and to the community, and yet is not part of the hierarchy. He or she acknowledges the existence of the authority but does not follow that rationale. Usually the *genius loci* works side by side with the group therapist, who is the person actually invested with responsibility. In some unusual cases, however, the *genius loci* may come into serious conflict with the group therapist, when his or her authority is perceived as being used unfairly and insensitively. This type of opposition between the affective leader and the hierarchical leader of the group can be illustrated by a well-known literary reference.

The conflict between Antigone and Creon has its origin in an earlier event. Eteocles and Polyneices, Antigone’s two brothers – children of the ill-fated Oedipus – died fighting each other outside the walls of Thebes. Eteocles fell defending the city while Polyneices was attacking it. Creon, the king who had succeeded Oedipus, had decreed that Eteocles should be buried with all the requisite honors. Polyneices, on the contrary, was denied burial and his body left to be eaten by dogs and birds of prey.

The two brothers were different in the eyes of Creon. Antigone, however, saw them as equals. Creon followed the logic of the state, Antigone, the logic of the heart. Creon remained adamant towards Antigone, who had buried Polyneices against the king’s orders. Creon thought that the young woman had challenged his power – a power he had only recently assumed. What’s more, however, he suspected that she wanted to establish a counterpower.

Actually, Antigone was moved by her feelings of love and not by political ambition. Yet Creon’s error is understandable. Feelings, in fact, exercise and attract their own special power.

(Gediman, 2000)

It is quite unusual for the *genius loci* and the person responsible for the group to find themselves in conflict, as I said earlier. It is, in fact, much more common for them to collaborate.

One of the areas in which this cooperation takes place is in the development of the group's thought. In this process, the *genius loci* performs a function that is comparable in some ways to what Pichon-Rivière attributes to the spokesperson.

According to Pichon-Rivière (1977), the spokesperson is one who, in a given moment, has insight into the fantasies, fears and needs that are permeating the group. The spokesperson steps in and says something during the session. When speaking, he or she usually believes that the comments concern only him- or herself and is not conscious of bringing to the surface something meaningful to the group and all its members.

The *genius loci* and the spokesperson each have the ability to grasp the qualities of the group's mood, often at an unconscious level. They both give voice to issues that have not yet been worked through but are nonetheless present and common to all the members.

The spokesperson does not illustrate what is happening in the group in a clear or direct way, but rather by providing some 'sign' of what had been a latent, implicit issue. It is up to the therapist to grasp this 'sign', endowing it with meaning and developing it further.

As mentioned above, the *genius loci* is also capable of grasping the qualities of the group's mood before the other members. However, since the *genius loci* expresses him or herself by means of associations, images and metaphor, which sometimes seem far from the group's immediate concerns, these interventions can easily slip by unnoticed and not be exploited. Thus it is the therapist who must pick up on them, though without calling too much attention to the person who has played the role of the *genius loci*. This type of recognition could actually hinder instead of encouraging the person to continue in the role. In other words, the activity of the *genius loci* should not be subjected to interpretation by the group therapist but must simply be understood and followed through.

There are some differences between the *genius loci* and the spokesperson. For example, the spokesperson described by Pichon-Rivière corresponds to a function that can conceivably be taken up by a group member for a single session, whereas the *genius loci* carries out the function with greater continuity and over a longer period of time.

Collaboration between the *genius loci* and the therapist is essential to activate group thought in a therapeutic situation. In a small therapy group, in fact, a rational structure (work group) is not sufficient; the group needs a relational structure as well. To activate the group thought, the members need common points of reference (rational structure); for example, the shared issue. More important than the issue, however, is the establishment of a relationship with the other members through the emotional and affective situation already existing within the group (relational structure).

The interventions of the *genius loci* and the therapist, as I have stressed above, encourage a recognition of the nature of the shared mood – a mood in which the group had hitherto been immersed and unaware. Furthermore, these interventions facilitate the process by which participants become attuned to the core of fantasies active in the session. This realization is a

'key', producing a 'click' that can lead to the clarification of problems, drawing explicit and implicit aspects of the group members' contributions closer together and fostering a greater inclination towards authenticity.

Localization

Foulkes refers to an operation similar to the one described immediately above using the term 'localization'. The most familiar definition concerns 'localization of the disorder'; that is, the fact that 'a patient's problems represent only one aspect of a more complex group (or family) problem' (Foulkes, 1948). He also used this notion of localization, however, in a discussion of the therapist's work in the group. He writes:

The task of the leader is not simply to perceive the meaning, but also to fit it into the appropriate dynamic structure. I have called this process 'localization'... Localization presupposes an awareness by the leader of the configuration of observable phenomena, which allows him to identify the key... in which the group is speaking at that moment.

(Foulkes, 1975)

The most important difference between what Foulkes wrote and what I have tried to describe is that Foulkes attributes the task of identifying the current configuration exclusively to the group therapist. I, on the other hand, maintain that this function is usually carried out through synergy between the *genius loci* and the leader.

Summary

The article highlights the figure of the *genius loci* as analogous to that of a leader and discusses his or her ability to grasp the affective tonality of what is happening in the group. Furthermore, the *genius loci* performs the function of stimulating members to participate, thereby fostering the sharing of thoughts and emotions.

Other functions performed by the *genius loci* include maintaining group identity and encouraging the members' sense of belonging. Of particular importance in this regard is the *genius loci*'s capacity for making places and objects familiar ('domestication').

Finally, the *genius loci* ensures the affective continuity of the group in moments of transformation and crisis and keeps harmony between the various elements in the life of the group.

Notes

- [1] J. L. Borges (1923, pp. 50–1) 'La vuelta': 'Al cabo de los años del destierro/volví a la casa de mi infancia/y todavía me es ajeno su ámbito./ Mis manos han tocado los árboles/como quien acaricia a alguien que duerme/y he repetido antiguos caminos/como si recobrara un verso olvidado/y vi al desparramarse la tarde/la frágil luna nueva/que se arrió al amparo sombrío/del la palmera de hojas altas,/como a su nido el pájaro./Qué caterva de cielos/ambarcará en la hondura de la calle/y

cuánta quebrazidada luna nueva/infundirá al jardín su ternura,/antes que vuelva a reconocerme la casa/y de nuevo sea un hábito!

- [2] ‘Il y avait, cachés dans des coins ou, de préférence dans des encoignures de fenêtres (le désir de fuite), un homme ou une femme changés en chien, en train de gémir, de tousser, d’abooyer, prêts à flatter le premier venu; un ou deux enfants, raides comme la justice, les yeux comme des œufs’ (p. 194). In Italian: ‘Negli angoli oppure, di preferenza, nelle inquadrature delle finestre (il desiderio di fuga), stavano nascosti un uomo o una donna tramutati in cani, gementi, tossicchianti, abbaianti, pronti a strisciare davanti al primo venuto; uno o due bambini, duri come la giustizia, con gli occhi come uova.’
- [3] ‘Souvent, quand le spectacle était comme cela horrible à râper la peau, voilà ce qu’elle faisait: elle s’assoit, plaçait le moulin à café entre ses cuisses et commençait à moudre le café. Instantanément, l’homme ou la femme cessait d’être le chien. Pour les enfants, c’était à la fois plus délicat et plus facile: ils étaient tout de suite attirés par l’énorme poitrine de la nonne; elle avait alors un geste très simple pour pousser sa croix pectorale de côté.

‘D’autres fois (mais toujours de science exacte et sans jamais se tromper), il ne s’agissait pas de moulin à café. Elle entrait dans une de ces maisons bourgeoises où la cuisine est cachée, où tous les meubles sont sous des housses. C’étaient toujours des endroits où les cadavres avaient un extraordinaire mordant. Là, d’ordinaire, on n’avait pas entouré les malades de beaucoup de soins. Généralement, on n’avait pas eu le courage de les contenir dans des lits; on les avait laissés se lever et divaguer; on avait plutôt fui devant eux. Les fauteuils étaient renversés comme après une bagarre, les tables n’étaient plus sous l’aplomb de la suspension, le pupitre à musique était cassé; on s’était comme jeté les partitions de valses à la tête; le mort avait ruisselé de tous les côtés avant de s’abattre sur le piano’ (p. 194). ‘Tout de suite, la nonne tirait la table à son aplomb, relevait les chaises, plaçait les fauteuils, ramassait les morceaux de musique. Elle ouvrait une porte qui donnait sur la chambre. Elle demandait: “Où sont les draps neufs?” Ces mots étaient magiques. Ils lui donnaient la plus fulgurante des victoires. Pas plus tôt prononcés, on entendait dans le tas des singes glacés le bruit d’un trousseau de clés. Ce bruit lui-même avait une vertu si puissante qu’on voyait sortir du tas une femme qui redevenait tout de suite femme et tout de suite patronne. Quelques-unes parmi celles dont le visage était plus particulièrement recouvert de cheveux éplorés, titubaient encore un peu et allaient, dans leur ivresse, jusqu’à tendre le trousseau de clefs. Mais la nonne ne le prenait jamais. “Venez ouvrir l’armoire vous-même”, disait-elle. Après, on faisait le lit bien carré. Ce n’est qu’une fois le lit bien fait qu’on s’occupait du cadavre et alors en plein. Mais déjà les rouages de la maison s’étaient remis en marche et déjà la mort pouvait frapper de nouveau un coup diabolique dans cette famille sans rien détruire

d'essentiel' (p. 195). In Italian: 'Spesso, quando lo spettacolo era così orribile da sentirsi accapponare la pelle, ecco che cosa faceva: si sedeva, si metteva il macinino tra le gambe, e cominciava a macinare il caffè. Istantaneamente, l'uomo o la donna cessavano d'esser cani... Entrava in una di quelle case borghesi in cui la cucina è nascosta, in cui tutti i mobili sono coperti da fodere. In quei posti i cadaveri avevano sempre un mordente straordinario. Là, di solito, i malati non erano stati circondati di molte cure. Generalmente, nessuno aveva avuto il coraggio di trattenerli a letto; avevano lasciato che s'alzassero e vagassero; piuttosto, i familiari erano scappati da loro. Le poltrone erano rovesciate come dopo un tafferuglio, i tavoli non stavano più sotto il lampadario, il leggio da musica era spaccato; pareva si fossero gettati in faccia gli spartiti dei valzer; il morto era schizzato da ogni parte prima di stramazzone sul pianoforte.' 'Subito la monaca tirava in centro il tavolo, rialzava le sedie, rimetteva a posto le poltrone, raccoglieva i pezzi degli spartiti. Apriva una porta che dava in camera da letto. Domandava: "Dove sono le lenzuola nuove?" Queste parole erano magiche... Non appena pronunciate, s'udiva nel mucchio delle scimmie gelate il tintinnio di un mazzo di chiavi. Questo rumore aveva in se stesso tale virtù, che si vedeva uscire dal mucchio una donna che ridiventava subito donna, e subito padrona. Alcune di quelle che avevano il viso più particolarmente coperto di capelli dolenti titubavano ancora un poco, e arrivavano, nel loro stordimento, a tendere il mazzo di chiavi. Ma la suora non lo prendeva mai. "Venga ad aprire l'armadio" diceva. Poi facevano il letto, ben teso. Solo quando il letto era fatto a puntino, ci si occupava dei cadaveri, e allora in pieno. Ma già l'ingranaggio della casa s'era rimesso in moto, e già la morte poteva picchiare sulla famiglia una nuova mazzata diabolica senza distruggere niente di essenziale.'

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