

## On the things with feathers

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This year the organizers of the EPFF have dedicated a sizeable amount of time grappling with the theme of *hope* and have extended the challenge and the pleasure to the audience – in presence and remote- in addressing what is, strictly speaking, not a psychoanalytic concept, as Anne Patterson adroitly points out in her introductory essay. Hope is not inscribed in psychoanalytic metapsychology, or in a theory of the drives and psychic work. Yet - as Patterson argues- hope is interwoven in the warp and weft of our inner life- and indeed of life itself- hence it can be conceptualized as the intermittent emotional punctuation of psychic work and its pleasure.

In the tradition initiated by Freud, when psychoanalysis is at a loss for an apposite discourse to articulate segments of psychic life, it turns to the arts, to the poets, and I will follow suit. Famously, Emily Dickinson writes:

‘Hope is the thing with feathers  
That perches in the soul -  
And sings the tune without the words -  
And never stops - at all —’

The quality of thing-ness gestures to materiality, concreteness, but hope is not material or concrete. The essential thingness Dickinson calls our attention to, might then refer to its inarticulateness, its adherence to life, which leaves scarce possibility to capture it with definitions, and words fail. The thing (*Das Ding*) is also what Freud calls the primordial object; Lacan reprises this concept, but he names it *object a*, and elects it as the phantasmatic locality of longing, fantasy, nostalgia, and desire.

If elusive to language, hope could be perceived and conceived like a humming accompaniment, a quality of aliveness, present - or absent as the case might be - defying definitions, certainly the psychoanalytic ones, while it also conveys the sense of a primordial object whose destiny is to be relinquished and leave in the psyche a basic disposition of trust in the world. However, the intertwining of hope with the trace of the archaic object-indeed, with life itself- should not eclipse its darkness, its shadowy side, which surfaces when the rough and tumble of existence ineludibly ruffles our feathers.

For instance, such darkness takes centre stage in the title of Max Porter's original piece of writing that defies literary genre definitions, *Grief is the thing with feathers*. It narrates the vicissitudes of a father and his two boys traversing the ordeal of grieving for the death of the wife and mother. The title gestures to Dickinson's *Hope*, which Porter alludes to by juxtaposing hope and grief, both being things with feathers. Hope and grief articulate the universally human, in their dialectical transformations and oscillations, but when the latter is stultified, blocked, frozen or impossible, the former crystallizes into its antagonistic despair, a state of mind sensed as timeless and unchangeable.

'[Grief] is everything. It is the fabric of selfhood and beautifully chaotic. It shares mathematical characteristics with many natural forms' (Porter, 2015, p. 104). The same can be said about hope, and indeed about life, whose humming 'never stops-at all'. Its movement and thingness are undefinable, ineffable almost, hence they are best entrusted to and conveyed by the imagistic plume metaphor: the feather is light, delicate, moves freely of its own accord in space and time, in intimate and almost imperceptible contact with the air, the breeze, or its more violent variations of blustery winds and storms, which blow it about like a helpless prey.

In more ordinary circumstances, the feather moves along, intermittent, you cannot direct or capture it, you need to simply follow its movements with your gaze - as we do with hope and grief - as indeed with all emotions, which have idiosyncratic temporal contours and intensity that cannot be hastened or dampened, unless we defensively and anxiously eject and deny them.

But can the feather metaphor not be attributed to the analytic process as well? Another thing of feather, the process develops in the therapeutic space, it breathes its own air, it moves at its own pace and the analytic couple at work follow it with their sensibility, pay attention to its movements, get hold of its emergences, epiphanies, but cannot determine it, hasten it, move it forward or back. Winnicott used a somewhat analogous description when referring to child development, which he calls *the third* and postulates that it follows its own trajectory: the good enough parents notice and accompany their children's growth, at development's own pace, without attempting to accelerate, control or block it, if not at great peril.

In Porter's novel the chorus of solicitous friends and relatives urge the bereaved family to move forward, turn the page, start a new life, in an apparent ode to hope, which however, on

close scrutiny, reveals a reduction to its unidimensional future temporality under the imperative to ‘think positive’. But, just like the feather that moves in all directions, our emotional life is inscribed in a plurality of psychic temporalities, constantly rearranged within a continuous flux that the subject can momentarily pause, so as to punctuate or highlight any of its segments, to then resume and propose a more nuanced narration.

Thus, the apparent brightness and lightness of the incitement to look forward often reveals its problematic side of fear of overwhelmingly intense pain, rage, sadness and loss: the beautifully - or not so beautifully- chaotic stuff of our selfhood.

Watching some of the films on the EPFF programme, such as *The Father*, *Oleg* or *Vitalina Varela*, the spectator might resonate with the urge to go forward, to come to some resolution or reestablish a predictably shaped life, so intense is the entanglement of onerous emotions that could hurt our sensibilities. But we remain in our seats, reassured by the temporal contour of the filmic story.

Returning to the feather metaphor, moving forward and back, with apparent randomness closely describes the dynamic of internal life. The wish to forget or repress pain is not reciprocated by pain itself, which is never amnesic; on the contrary, it is capable of all sorts of disguises, which elude time and intersect relationships, experiences and temporalities. The disguises can be baffling: for instance, someone or something which was ideally invested with univocally positive feelings, can turn out to be a monstrous phantom or a vacuous idea, if disjointed by the confusing ambivalence pertaining to loss and frustration.

Virginia Woolf avowed that she experienced great relief when she read Freud’s text on the ubiquity of ambivalent feelings in human affairs, particularly evidenced in moments of grief. She lost her mother when she was only thirteen and in her later autobiographical reminiscences, she recalls how the children were not permitted to voice their bewilderment and pain by their vociferous and demanding father. Therefore,

‘[W]e had but a dull sense of gloom which could not honestly be referred to the dead; unfortunately, it did not *quicken our feeling* for the living; but hideous as it was, obscured both living and dead; and for long did unpardonable mischief by substituting for the shape of a true and most vivid mother, nothing better than unlovable phantom.’ (Woolf, 1985, p.45, my emphasis)

When she secured a room of her own, rooted in her desire to write, Woolf re-created female characters whose rich, if somewhat effaced internal world, conveyed the intersecting and fractured temporalities which gained her fame as a modernist writer. The present tense of the writing project, like the present tense of hope, open windows into the future, whilst permitting the past to in-surge, fragment the narrative, institute a new framework, and recount the interjecting ripples of reminiscences.

In a sense, then, hope is not and cannot be a psychoanalytic concept because it perfectly coincides with the disposition of the person who enters a consulting room asking for therapy or analysis. Deceptively only a window onto the future, in actuality, hope straddles across temporalities: from a *now* perspective, it reorganizes temporally contoured states of mind, similarly to the *après coup*, which is the elective temporality of psychoanalysis, and develops within the analytic frame. The psychoanalytic process traces the unfolding of this condensed and syncretic temporality following that unique form of speech that is free association, which is also a thing of feather and is refractory to any hetero-direction.

When one contrasts this mode of being in time, space and thought with the contemporary modality that has become so familiar and adaptive that it is arduous to keep a reflective focus on it, the striking feature is the sense of urgency of the technologically inflected ‘regime of presentism’ (Hartog, 2022) that encompasses our principal temporal dimension. The young - and often the not so young - might feel disorientated when invited to lie on the couch and give themselves the time and space to speak freely, pay attention to their dreams, fantasies, slips of the tongues, symptomatically languaged narratives, that is, those phenomena that emerge as subjective epiphanies from their internal world. To become and move like a thing with feathers is the necessary condition, however, to experience those ‘moments of being’ that arrive, unprompted, as they resist the regime of presentism: the word regime gestures to the essential ambiguity of a stronghold that demands subjection to a form of domination that does not tolerate or permit variations and creates the ambience of authoritarianism, internally and externally. These suffering subjects speak the operational language of problem solution, on/off, (omni)potence/powerlessness, unaware of having entered a regime of pressure, anxiety, and a veritable impoverishment of psychic life.

Consequently, when they enter the analytic room, they formulate their need for therapeutic help with the peremptory demand to ‘fix’ their problem, they want counsel on how to do it,

because they cannot manage by themselves, simply and easily. They demand a magical and omnipotent repair through a ‘double click’ (Latour, 2022); only when they are spurred by curiosity about themselves, return to the office and give themselves the time of ‘the things with feathers’ can they begin to experience and reflect on the difference between inside and outside, self and other, being and doing: saying it with Winnicott, they begin to learn to live creatively.

Returning to films, the word cinema also means movement: the moving images move us and our internal world, so much so that the philosopher Deleuze stated that cinema is the analytic couch of the poor man (and woman). Can this be read as an ironical jab at those who prefer the dark room and the solitude in the company of strangers in a movie theatre, rather than the familiar/stranger analysts and the couch? Still, movement, hope, the things with feathers carry us along with aliveness, desire and, hopefully, with pleasure.

## References

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