

# Pain and beauty: from the psychopathology to the aesthetics of contact<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The concept of beauty in Gestalt therapy is explored, underlining the central importance of the aesthetic criterion for this model. Aesthetic evaluation, which is an essential component in the work of any Gestalt therapist, is a prereflexive and preverbal process, located at the root of the *Gestaltung*, in the dimension in which the subject and the world emerge. An original conception of psychopathology and psychotherapy is discussed: psychopathological suffering is conceived as an absence at the contact boundary. Therapy therefore consists in restoring presence to the encounter, through a process which transforms absence into pain and pain into beauty. The therapeutic engagement in ‘distilling beauty’ from the relational histories and dynamics narrated by the client is considered from an existential perspective, seeking to make sense of human suffering and of our work as therapists. Finally, in this light, we consider the ethical ground of psychotherapy, which permits us to avoid the risks of reductionism which we face at present – namely the risk of reducing the psyche into a biological or intimistic event.

**Key words:** beauty, pain, aesthetics, contact, *Gestaltung*, intrinsic evaluation, psychopathology, ethics, existentialism, reductionism.

Pain is nothing  
but the surprise  
of not meeting each other.

(Alda Merini, *Aforismi e magie*)

Of all of psychology’s sins, the most mortal is the neglect  
of beauty.

(J. Hillman, 1997, p. 56)

François Cheng opens the first of his five meditations on beauty with these words:

In these times of universal suffering, random violence, and natural and ecological disasters, to speak of beauty could seem incongruous, improper, even provocative – almost scandalous. But this is precisely why we can see that beauty, as evil’s opposite, really is situated at the other extreme of the reality we must face. (2009, p. 5)

Is it inappropriate, then, to speak of beauty? Is it superficial, useless, almost an idle diversion from that which really counts, is it important, concrete and urgent? As a tribute to Palermo, home to the third SIPG Congress, I will quote, by way of answer, a passage from the film *I cento passi* (*The Hundred Steps*),<sup>2</sup> which tells the story of Peppino Impastato, a young man from Cinisi (Palermo) who took on The Mafia and was killed in 1978. Peppino, seated with a friend on the mountains overlooking the Punta Raisi airport, looking down on

the ugliness of the illegally constructed houses below, remarks:

It takes nothing to destroy beauty . . . Instead of political struggles, of demonstrations, we should help people to recognise beauty, to defend it. Beauty is important: everything else flows down from it.

Coming from Peppino Impastato, symbol of the civil struggle against The Mafia, this is not the statement of someone concerned with matters that are futile or cosmetic. In a completely different context, James Hillman (1997, p. 56) writes ‘Of all of psychology’s sins, the most mortal is the neglect of beauty’. Beauty, then, may be considered a central concern for psychology and ethics, as François Cheng himself affirms in the continuation of the passage cited above, stating that the consideration of beauty is no idle game but rather ‘our urgent and ongoing task’ (2009, p. 5). Yet in what sense can beauty be so important? And then, to what kind of beauty are we referring?

In the present discussion, I intend to explore the theme of beauty in Gestalt therapy, thus focusing and subsequently seeking to extend on a concept which constitutes one of the cornerstones of our model.

My paper will cover four main points:

1. Beauty: a cornerstone of Gestalt therapy theory.

2. Pain: psychopathological suffering as absence rather than pain.
3. From psychopathology to the aesthetics of contact. Distilling beauty: an existential perspective.
4. Aesthetic ethics: ethos and *polis* as roots and horizons of aesthetics.

## 1 Beauty: a cornerstone of Gestalt therapy theory

Beauty is truth, truth beauty – that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.  
(J. Keats, *Ode on a Grecian Urn*)

As therapists we witness the transformative effects of our work on a daily basis. There are times when a Gestalt intervention proves truly enchanting in the magic which emanates from it and the traces of beauty which it creates and leaves behind itself. Feedback such as the following is frequent in groups after therapy: ‘Now that you’ve worked everything through you’re really beautiful: the lineaments of your face have never been so relaxed and harmonious, you’ve got a new light in your eyes and your body has acquired a new grace’.

### 1.1 Intrinsic or aesthetic evaluation

We start out from the consideration that our founders located beauty at the very heart of the theory of Gestalt therapy and did so identifying an intrinsic criterion for evaluating human health:

There are two kinds of evaluation, the intrinsic and the comparative. Intrinsic evaluation is present in every ongoing act; it is the end directedness of process, the unfinished situation moving towards the finished, the tension to orgasm, etc. The standard of evaluation emerges in the act itself, and is, finally, the act itself as a whole.

In comparative evaluation, the standard is extrinsic to the act, the act is judged against something else. (Perls et al., 1994, pp. 65–66)

This is one of the concepts which makes our approach so revolutionary, even today, sixty years on. It means that the health of a human being may be expressed and recognised through the quality of contact, without any recourse being made to any external criteria of comparison: the strength, grace, rhythm, fluidity and intensity of the organism’s contact with its environment, the process whereby a figure comes to form itself against a ground – the beauty of contact, in sum, is the measure of health. What has been identified, then, is an *aesthetic criterion* for the evaluation of contact, of the encounter underway, of the situation and of health (Joe Lay in Dan Bloom, 2003; Robine, 2006; 2007; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2011).<sup>3</sup> As Gestaltists, we

are all engaged in the pursuit of good form – alchemists seeking out the precious metal which emerges spontaneously from contact, the good form which is its beauty (Zinker, 1978). Laura Perls (1992), indeed, maintains that the fundamental concepts of Gestalt therapy are at once philosophical and aesthetic.

It is at this point that an initial problem arises: comparative evaluation – which we, in a revision of the concept of diagnosis in Gestalt therapy (Francesetti and Gecele, 2009; 2010), referred to as extrinsic – lies on a predominantly reflexive level. Yet is intrinsic evaluation, too, inasmuch as it is nonetheless a form of evaluation and therefore a judgement, also a reflexive phenomenon? It is at this point that the concept of aesthetics proves useful. Intrinsic evaluation is, in fact, ‘aesthetic’ and this is a concept which we must explore in further depth.

In the eighteenth century, the founder of aesthetics as a discipline, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, defined it as the ‘science of sensible cognition’. This is clearly an oxymoron, in which the term ‘cognition’ seems to sit awkwardly with the adjective ‘sensible’, but it refers precisely to a ‘knowing with the senses’ (Desideri, 2011). The Age of Reason saw the emergence of the dignity of knowing through feeling, not just through reason. The word ‘aesthetics’ – ancient in its etymology, modern because created in the 1700s – came into extensive use, indicating a research approach applied in particular, but not exclusively, to the fine arts. This term has come to be applied in two main senses: the first is the reduction and restriction of aesthetics into reflection on art, the second the application of this concept to consumer items and in particular to the human body itself. Both of these tendencies are based on a conception of aesthetics and of beauty applied to an object. I, however, will here steer clear of this meaning, seeking out the sense of beauty in a region which transcends the object and the subject.

The term ‘aesthetics’ was coined by Baumgarten himself, who used it for the first time in a 1735 volume entitled *Reflections on Poetry* in which he put forward the idea that, just as there exists a science of intellectual contents, namely logic, so there should exist a science of the sensible data of knowledge, which would be termed *aesthetics* (D’Angelo, 2011, p. 16).

Indeed, the ancient Greek *aisthesis* means *sensation* and aesthetics thus constitutes knowledge through the senses. That which is *An-aesthetic*, instead, is a pharmaceutical product or a procedure which dulls the senses. Hence we can immediately connect the aesthetic phenomenon to the Gestalt conception of awareness – that is to say, with the conception of awareness as the capacity to be awake to one’s own senses, to feel the excitement at the contact boundary. As Margherita

Spagnuolo Lobb (2003a; 2004) reminds us, the English adjective *awake* shares roots with the noun *awareness*.

### 1.2 Aesthetic evaluation at the root of *Gestaltung*: a prereflexive and preverbal emerging process

If aesthetics is not a reflexive process but rather constitutes knowledge through the senses, what is it that we encounter in our senses at the contact boundary? Where can we place the aesthetic evaluation? The natural (as Husserl would call it) empiricist, positivist, scientific stance would tell us that there is an already-constituted organism which, encountering an already-constituted world, gets to know it. The senses of the organism register the objects present in a given world. The phenomenology, together with Gestalt psychology, tell us that this is not the case. Rather, we co-create a world and a subject in our senses, to such a radical extent that one world and one subject only exist in one un-repeatable sensation:

Being strictly, the first, last and only of its species, each sensation is a birth and a death. (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, p. 293)

Perception does not come to us as an event in the world, to which we can apply the category of causality, but rather as a re-creation or a re-construction of the world at every moment. (ibid., p. 283)

Again: 'sensation is literally a communion' (ibid., p. 289). One of the biggest revolutions in phenomenology is the realisation that the apparent stability of 'a myself' and 'a world' is, instead, the fruit of a continuous creation: 'the subject is not a secure possession, but to possess it we need to continuously reconquer it' (von Weizsacker, quoted by Ballerini, 2011, p. 107). We are particularly well aware of this when we live through or encounter a psychotic experience, which reveals this creation grasped in its instability. The obvious stability of the world, usually taken for granted, comes to the fore in psychotic experiences precisely because it is this which is lost. To quote Husserl:

The real world exists, only on the continually delineated presumption that experience will go continually in the same constitutional style. (Husserl, 1969, pp. 251–2)

This does not mean that we should fall into an *absolutus*<sup>4</sup> postmodern relativism, where the individual creates her own reality at her own pleasure. Co-creation is not a self-sufficient form of generation, but rather a process in which the subject herself emerges from the ground, at once generating it and being generated herself.<sup>5</sup> In the senses, then, there is not a 'distinct ego' which encounters 'defined objects'. There is rather the root of the *Gestaltung*: a process of co-creation of experiential phenomena, in which a not yet distinct ego and not yet defined objects are continuously emerging.

With regard to this dramatic perspectival transformation – from that of me/given world to that of the incessant co-creation of the 'me and world' – I will here bring into focus just one point: namely, that this creation comes about without deliberation and is preverbal. That is to say, it is not a result of the ego function: no one gets up in the morning needing to say, 'now I'll create myself' (except in cases of severe depression). It comes about, moreover, at a pre-reflexive moment, in a region of experience in which words have yet to emerge. We should state that it regards *in primis* neither the ego nor the personality function of the self, but is placed exactly in what Goodman refers to as the id of the situation (Robine, 2006; 2011; Wollants, 2008), what Minkowski would term the 'vague and confused' background, the locus of 'perceptive communion' (Merleau-Ponty), of what Desideri astutely terms 'perceptive commerce'.

In the senses, more than encountering each other, organism and environment create each other: they co-emerge.<sup>6</sup>

Aesthetic evaluation, then, occurs at a moment of the formation of experience which precedes reflexive working through. It is an immediate and preverbal knowledge. Aesthetic judgement has its genesis before language: it is rather the precondition thereof, dwelling in the realm of the implicit (Stern, 2004). It is born, therefore, in a *chiaroscuro*, nuanced moment, prior to the separation of subjectivity from objectivity:

Subjectivity itself cannot be thought of as being constituted and formed prior to the emergence of an aesthetic curvature in the perceptive fabric of experience. We might even go so far as to reverse this relationship and see the sphere of subjectivity, with the *sensus sui* which it necessarily implies, as an immanent 'response' to the emergence of an aesthetic attitude . . . We must refer, then, to an aesthetic genesis of subjectivity, rather than to a subjective genesis of the aesthetic. (Desideri, 2011, p. 78)

We are referring, then, to how we immediately feel as events unfold, not to how we judge them *a posteriori* – to how we feel them as we co-create them and give them form. We cannot evaluate aesthetically without being involved in the object's creation. There is no such thing, in this sense, as objects which are beautiful *per se*. There is only the experience of generating beauty in the presence of something which becomes a fount of beauty. This does not mean that beauty is in the eye of the beholder, as Hume asserted, since beauty is a phenomenon which emerges from experience and therefore belongs to a dimension ingeniously brought into focus by our founders, who trod a fine line, falling into neither subjective relativism nor realist objectivism.<sup>7</sup> In beauty, thus understood, we may grasp the

epiphany of the lifeworld, the manifestation of the productive fault which precedes the emergency of the 'me' and the 'world', the only safeguard against losing ourselves in the objectivisation of the other or his relativistic denial.

Aesthetics is thus a knowledge which is already in tune, already emotionally attuned, already *in-tended*:<sup>8</sup> an awareness of what is going on at the contact boundary, in the co-creation of experience, of what is being moved during the encounter and of the extent to which we are moving together, co-moving each other and being emotionally moved together. Emotional co-moving, indeed, consists in being touched by what is happening to the other and thus is a moving-with the other. Resonance is a co-influenced movement.

In his last book, Daniel Stern (2010) identifies as fundamental units of experience what he calls *dynamic forms of vitality*: on these units, or gestalten, the affective intersubjective attunements are based. This line of research seems to support our thesis: vital forms are evaluated in a prereflexive way, are perceived as holistic wholes (gestalten indeed), are emergent properties of the experience itself. Their parameters are: strength, movement, space, time, direction/intentionality, the same that are relevant in the process of good form's intrinsic evaluation.

Aesthetic knowledge is emergent (it is born at a given instant), ephemeral (it only lasts as long as a given experience), bodily (it is incarnate in the senses and in the resonance of the body). It is neither objective nor subjective. This last point is central because it suggests a *third* dimension which is neither objective nor subjective, which is rich in its implications:

Between the two poles of absolute subjectivity and objectivity, aesthetic experience occupies a middle ground, that of *intersubjectivity*. (D'Angelo, 2011, p. 116)

What happens in a session, be it with a couple or in group settings, and which we feel to be 'beautiful', is neither objectively beautiful (it is not a quality of the object) nor subjectively beautiful (for me alone, as if it were a question of personal tastes). It is, indeed, present for whoever is present in their senses – who is, therefore, aware and participating, implicated in the situation. It is beautiful for us to be present inasmuch as we are touched by what is happening. We are not, in fact, referring to the beauty of either an object from which we can be detached, nor of something that is 'nice', gracious, comforting and cosmetic.<sup>9</sup> When involved in contemplating beauty, our eyes change, our breath changes: the beauty does not belong to the object or to the subject, but is an emerging contact phenomenon. We are rather concerned with a phenomenon which transforms and seizes us, whose power can have the

emotionally disruptive force of a tidal wave or the subtle, penetrating quality of the air high up in the mountains. Moreover, because it transforms, it leaves behind a trace of itself. It is a power which is always inevitably transformative, and consequently de-structuring: nothing good and new emerges without a reciprocal *ad-gressive*<sup>10</sup> destructuring of those involved in the contact. The link between aesthetics, awareness, the lifeworld and transformation emerges even more clearly if we probe the etymology of the word in further depth, as did the classical philologist Richard Onians:

The Greek verb *aisthanomai* (long form of *aisthomai*: 'to perceive'), from which *aisthesis* derives, is the middle of the Homeric *aisto*, which means 'I gasp', or 'breathe in'. In its affinity with terms indicating the 'breath' of the living, *aisthesis* shares the same root as *aion*, meaning time which regenerates itself and, prior to that, the 'vital force' which flows through bodies. (Desideri, 2011, pp. 74–75)

Beauty, then, transforms and leaves a trace of itself. Another central relationship also emerges here: the link between beauty and presence. This is a link which brings us to the other crossroads of our discussion: pain. And along this path we will encounter the essence of psychopathology.

## 2 Pain: psychopathological suffering as absence rather than pain

When we admire the beauty of the pearl, we must never forget that it originates in the sickness of the shell.

(K. Jaspers)

### 2.1 *Pain* as a criterion for suffering in medicine and *absence* as a criterion for suffering in psychopathology

In medicine, the opposite of life is death. In psychotherapy, which is phenomenologically and existentially oriented, instead, the opposite of life is not death. Death is rather something that plays a constitutional part in life, inasmuch as it determines the uniqueness and preciousness of every moment. It is life's vital companion, precious and necessary.

The opposite of life, which is presence, is, instead, absence. In the tragic words of a client living with what is perhaps the most extreme condition of absence, namely melancholic depression:

Everything is dead in me. There is no life any more. Everything is mechanical. My movement is no longer my own. It is dead. I am dead.

In medicine, the opposite of wellbeing is ill-being, where the suffix 'ill' refers to physical illness and pain. To avoid pain, the surgeon operates by administering an an-aesthetic. Dentists teach us that if a tooth hurts, it

means that something is wrong and needs taking care of. This is also the function of pain in physiology: it is a signal that care is required.

In psychotherapy, which is phenomenologically and existentially oriented, pain is not the opposite of well-being. Pain is an intrinsic and infeasible part of life. The opposite of wellbeing is, once again, absence.

Indeed, the apex of the beauty of an encounter, and therefore of its health, sometimes coincides with the apex of the pain which is unleashed through the contact. During a client's therapy, the unleashing of an acute pain may correspond to the aesthetic apex of the encounter.

Herein lies the anthropological vision of Gestalt therapy: an individual who is healthy and vital must be fully present in his senses, not anaesthetised. If it is painful to be present in one's life, then it is healthy to feel this pain. Indeed, beauty is not always easy, 'nice' or attractive. In the words of a client, at a moment when we had reached a therapeutic breaking point:

... at this point I'm going to pick up a pen and write to you. Beauty takes a bit of energy. As I look at it, I can see that it's made up of tears, saliva, sweat and vomit ... To tell the truth, I'd have thought it would be made of light. Maybe this was my mistake?

Something radical happens when we pass from the domain of medicine to that of psychopathology: with this transition we make a quantum leap which has perhaps yet to be sufficiently discussed. We pass, indeed, from a dimension where we may (often usefully) reason in terms of individuals and objects to one in which it is impossible to abstract the individual from the relational field by which he is constituted. To say that 'he is immersed' therein will not suffice. The relational field is veritably that by which 'he is constituted'.

This is the point which reductionism tends to obscure. At worst, it fails to take into account that as subjects we are not 'abstractable' from the relational situation and abstracts us away from our bodies, reducing us to mere brains. As Alva Noe (2010) asserts, we are no more our brains than the cellulose molecules of banknotes are money.

Anaesthesia is a watershed which draws a line between the two dimensions, the medical domain of the body-object and the psychotherapeutic vision of the living-body (Galimberti, 1987; Borgna, 1988). Anaesthesia may be a component in the wellbeing of a *Körper* (a body in the anatomical sense, such as a dentist sees in her chair), but not of a *Leib* (a living body). How can one love if anaesthetised?

Psychopathology, then, unlike medical pathology, cannot overlook the relational dimension without giving itself over to the objectivisation of the subject

(as we have known at least since Jaspers' work) and to paradox (Jaspers, 1963). If we locate ourselves in a relational dimension, the psychopathological event is not a subjective pain. For example, the pain of a bereavement is healthy and is a sign of health. The absence of pain in the narcissistic impossibility of loving constitutes a psychopathological and existential tragedy.

The psychopathological event constitutes an absence at the contact boundary. This absence manifests itself as something *an-aesthetic* and *a-poetic*. Anaesthesia is not feeling, the a-poetic (*poiesis*, from Greek, *making*) is not being creative. Aesthetics and poetry, in this recess of the lifeworld, are inextricably bound together in their coexistence. Poetry is the specific activity of the psychotherapist: her healing words are *poietic* words, words which have a body, tactile words which touch and transform because they are vehicles infused with beauty right from the moment of their inception. Yet there are also gestures which speak, silences which are pregnant with contact and communication.

## 2.2 Three forms of absence

Let us examine the various kinds of absence and therefore of psychopathology (Francesetti et al., forthcoming). We can identify three fundamental forms.

### 2.2.1 First form

*From our first meeting, her presence in contact with mine immediately created an intense atmosphere of suspense, of tension – a climate in which anything could happen. Tragedy hung like an axe over our heads. There was a sense that the unthinkable, the catastrophic might be upon us at any moment.*

*I breathe . . . I try to bear up against the anxiety and to endure this oppressive, sinister atmosphere, but every now and then I succumb to sudden moments of giddiness. I constantly recall a session with another client, years before, in which I suddenly felt the room (or myself) shake. For a fraction of a second I was disoriented and then, looking at each other, we both realised that there had actually been a small earthquake. Such was the climate in which the session with Maria began:*

T: Good morning.

M: Good morning.

*Silence*

T: How did you get here?

M: My daughter brought me here . . . Yes, I think it was my daughter . . . As far as I know, it was her.

*The way in which she says these words, which are something of a verbal tic of hers, plunges me into a universe in which nothing is stable or consistent. It is*

*a whirlpool of fragile, papier mâché objects which are continuously falling to pieces. Truly and ontologically, there is no certainty.*

T: Your daughter Anna?

M: Yes, my daughter's name is Anna, as far as I know  
...

*M. does not pass via her body in seeking out these answers. It is as if nothing has settled in the certainty of memory, of experience, of feeling. Everything is concretely possible, so nothing is acquired, and her answers spring from deductions which are not rooted in anything which we can, in a shared way, call body or reality.*

The first kind of absence therefore consists in not being constituted as subjects. This is what happens in psychotic experiences (Spagnuolo Lobb, 2003; Spagnuolo Lobb and Francesetti, forthcoming). Paradoxically, in this absence there lies a unique and extremely powerful form of presence. When we encounter it – if we do not withdraw from the contact boundary – it immediately seizes, infects, overcomes or overwhelms us. Therein lies the non-constitution of the subject but also a powerful atmospheric presence, since the subject is potentially there, the urge to constitute it is incredibly strong but the path leading to its constitution, at least in this relational field, is materially lacking. If we look into the eyes of an individual in a state of psychotic anguish, we see something beyond, an abyss. We, in turn, feel naked, as if we have been bypassed. The psychotic's glance is deconstructive, because it immerses us in a dimension in which subjectivities have not been constituted. There, it is impossible to co-create ourselves in any definite way, but the work of co-creation may be powerfully active, although impeded from attaining to the definition of subjects. We are immersed in a continuous and continuously futile endeavour to constitute a world with clear and connected boundaries, in a crucible of white heat in which every possibility is created and dissolves. This is a land of lunatics, forsaken by constituted subjects and objects, since this world precedes the constitution of the definite. Yet it is this special quality of absence and potent presence which at times permits us to be artists, poets, extraordinarily creative. And, following Heidegger, this is the secret truth which is the exclusive preserve of lunatics, poets and children (Blankenburg, 1971; Salonia, 2001; Borgna, 2011): it is a testimony to the miracle with which we throb in the dimension of the between (Buber, 1996; Francesetti, 2008), of the interest (note the Latin root, *inter-esse*, 'to be in the between') which denudes and disarranges the arrogance of individuality. Before being defined subjects we are a field-emerging phenomena, pulsing with life.

### 2.2.2 Second form

*A man in his fifties says to me: 'I don't have any problems in particular, just life's usual little worries. But it seems to me that I am not living. I'm fifty-years-old and my life has no flavour. I'm always dissatisfied. Recently I've felt a kind of happiness welling up in my throat momentarily, but it stopped there. My body stiffened up, went cold and I couldn't feel anything any more.'*

*'And how do you feel now, as you tell me about it?'  
'Nothing . . . I'm ok . . . normal, I guess.'*

The second way in which we may be absent is when we constitute ourselves as subjects but are absent to our own senses, anaesthetised. This is the absence which we experience during our neurotic experiences.<sup>11</sup> Here it is difficult to define ourselves through a process of co-creation and therefore the potentialities of the field are only partially embraced. The field is weak because it is anaesthetised.

Both in the first and in the second kinds of absence, protective modalities geared towards making this unbearable suffering bearable intervene, rendering this absence unknowing. Absence disappears into the oblivion of itself.

It is at the contact boundary that the therapist encounters these absences, and he encounters them aesthetically – with his senses.

The therapist – present to his senses, fully engaged in the co-creation of contact, enmeshed in the weaving together of the fabric of the relationship – feels these absences. This sensation is already a therapeutic act, since it causes the forgotten absence to emerge once more as a figure in the relational field. It does not matter if this is not yet the case in the client's mind. An absence recalled is already a presence. It is worth bearing in mind that the Latin verb *ricordor* from which the modern Italian *ricordare* derives actually means to 'bring back into the heart'. The very fact of relocating the absence between us performs the miracle of transforming it into a presence. *Aisthesis* here becomes *poiesis*, feeling becomes creation.

### 2.2.3 Third form

*P. is a thirty-five-year-old man, very tense in his posture, the smile on his lips strangely discordant with the hardness of his stare. If I allow myself to feel, I feel afraid. I can feel his sarcasm<sup>12</sup> clawing at my flesh. P. has been sent to me after abusing his girlfriend.*

*He tells me with a sardonic coldness: 'When I go with a woman, I don't feel anything except my own pleasure. What I'm interested in is my own pleasure. At the beginning there aren't any problems. Then at a certain point she always contradicts me, and I can't*

stand that. There's no reason for it, so I get angry. Then she wants to go. Doesn't she understand that she has to stay there? And if she can't understand it the easy way, perhaps she can understand it the hard way.'

'And you say that this always happens at a certain point in your relationships?'

'Yeah . . . But you should know that I basically treat women like prostitutes, because they're all whores. They don't realise it, because I'm smart, but I take advantage of them. And in the end when they realise it, it's already too late. I've already taken advantage of them . . .'

This third form of absence often occupies a very marginal place in psychotherapy because those involved are far less likely to ask for help and their treatment is very difficult. This is the experience of an absence that has no sense of the suffering of the other. It is the sense of those who, having no sense of suffering, inflict it. Severe narcissistic and sociopathic conditions fall into this category, as do antisocial behaviours. This is the tragedy of those who do not feel the other's suffering and therefore inflict it. The pain of those who do not feel pain becomes a suffering provoked, a pain which emerges in the other. Those who torture express their own absence in inflicting pain on the tortured. It is a transformation of *suffering-absence* into *suffering-inflicted* and of this into *suffering-pain*. This condition – the experience of which is deprived of any possibility of feeling the other's pain – should be fully acknowledged in psychopathology. As a student once said during a seminar: 'And where are we going to put the bad people? They exist, too!' In these experiences there may be the anaesthesia of the pain of the other or alternatively even an experience of enjoyment in inflicting pain on other.

### 3 From psychopathology to the aesthetics of contact. Distilling beauty: an existential perspective

I don't know how a poem  
takes form.  
I take the mud  
of my life  
and feel  
like a great sculptor.

(Alda Merini)

#### 3.1 Emerging and objectual beauty

The beauty to which we are referring emerges from presence at the contact boundary. It is neither pre-existent nor subsistent. It is ephemeral, transient, non-objectual. It is like a melody in the air which is irreducible to the vibrations of strings and drums:

even though it is dependent on these, it breaks free into intersubjective space-time and consumes itself. It does not, then, persist. To what end, then, do we seek it out and create it? Because, as we have said, it transforms us and leaves behind a trace of itself. With the fullness of the encounter, which we feel as beautiful, we generate relational goods (Cavaleri, 2003; 2007). These are produced through an experience which may involve pain or pleasure – which does not matter – but which is always aesthetic: felt and real.

Being emergent, it does not belong to the individuals who encounter each other, but rather generates itself as a realisation of the potentiality at the contact boundary. It belongs neither to me nor to you. It is a breath which is generated between us. *Breath* in Greek is *Psyche*, i.e. psyche, soul. Psyche (in Apuleius' story) is the most beautiful figure in the whole of classical mythology (Hillman, 2002, p. 12). We are animated by this event which vibrates between us at the culmination of our encounter, nourished as much by our limitations as by our potentialities. The soul of our touching each other is this event which exists but does not persist. As therapists, we are creators of beauty. In this sense, we are soul-makers. What relationship can be identified between the beauty which emerges and the beauty of the object?

An objectual work of art – Monet's *Water Lilies*; Gaudi's *Sagrada Familia*; Michelangelo's *Pietà*, or the poem by Merini cited at this convention – may be understood in terms of the miraculous capacity of the form of the material to serve as a vehicle for this momentary nub of vibration in the soul, carrying it through space and time. Yet it always requires a co-creator – who is never a mere receiver in the field – i.e. she who, savouring the work, vibrates in its form. This individual acts as a re-creator who generates the work anew (and it is literally new, an unheard-of novelty) in the present of the situation, since in savouring the work she resuscitates, once more, the breath contained therein. She nourishes the work. A work of art, without anyone who falls in love with it for just a moment, remains a mere possibility, its breath mortified, awaiting resurrection. Living art reveals itself in contact. To pass it by without embracing its beauty is to mortify it. When a work's beauty is embraced, it is revived. And, as Denham-Vaughan writes (2009), the contact with beauty can support us in our darkest hours.

#### 3.2 Distilling beauty

If we draw nourishment from contact with beauty – that we always co-create – and this is the end to which contact and intentionality teleologically spurs us, we are also moved by another equally strong impulse, namely, the urge to enshrine the degree of beauty and of absence encountered in our moments of contact. In this sense,

we are living works of art, since we act as vehicles through space and time for the ephemeral breath produced by our encounters.<sup>13</sup> I have written ‘the degree of beauty and absence’ because it is in our nature to conserve both. Indeed, not only is beauty never lost, but neither is absence (which, as we have seen, constitutes psychopathological suffering). This latter remains as a form of living suffering which is carried forward into subsequent moments of contact, seeking out the right moment to be seen and transformed into the beauty of an encounter. As therapists, we are co-creators of such propitious occasions, of such *kairòs*.<sup>14</sup> To carry interrupted intentionalities through to their conclusions is to bring about their transformation into beauty. This may perhaps transcend the limits of individual existences and also make sense when the intentionality is launched by one party and followed through by another. This concept might explain some transgenerational loyalties, how some individuals seek to conclude tasks begun by their ancestors, or to undertake new ventures of which they will never themselves see the fruits. A few months ago a client of mine told me about one example of this which I found particularly beautiful. Last summer an old man arrived on foot at a farmhouse in the Cuneo province and asked to be put up in the barn for one night. He told his hosts that he had come from France, travelling on foot for what was now over a month in order to become a *Pèlerin Fou* – a mad pilgrim. The mission which he had undertaken was the following: eight centuries ago, a group of pilgrims set off from France for the Holy Land. They crossed France and Italy on foot then set sail from Puglia. Unfortunately, they suffered a shipwreck in which many died. The survivors were taken as slaves and none ever reached their destination. This ‘mad pilgrim’, then, had set off for Jerusalem in order to retrace and, finally, to complete their journey. Is such an undertaking really foolish or does it rather display a loyalty to the fabric of life as it unfurls across history? Is the pilgrim a fool or does he stand as witness to the possibility that our interrupted journeys may also come to be followed through after us by others than ourselves?<sup>15</sup>

During a seminar on bereavement, I treated the grieving process in relational rather than individualistic terms (Francesetti, 2011) and I presented the idea that this process consisted in giving to life the relational goods which have built up with the deceased. I underlined, moreover, the fact that this is a powerful impulse which we experience in various different ways, feeling, for example, the need to introduce the gestures, objects and teachings of the person who has left us into our own lives. A participant had an insight: she said that her grandfather died before she was born, but in the family nobody talked about him and she was secretly curious about everything regarding him. She collected all the

information regarding her grandfather and all his belongings in a hidden place: ‘it was a secret obsession for me!’. She abandoned this ‘obsession’ when she was seventeen-years-old, for no apparent reason. Only many years afterwards did she find out that her father went into therapy when she was seventeen in order to work through his father’s death. During the seminar she realised that when she was seventeen her father took care of the memory of his father and in the family field she was relieved from the task of keeping his memories.

As Cavaleri (2007) states, we cherish our relational goods. But these also include the suffering of the relationships we have lived through: we carry both the good and the bad with us, as radiant potentialities of our own presence. Our radiance springs from the beauty encountered (and always co-created). However, it is also the potential radiance which springs forth in exact proportion to the suffering which we cherish. The suffering which we have been through is the potentiality for an explosion of light.

As Alda Merini writes, the weight of one is precisely the weight of the other: beauty is nothing other than the unveiling of a fallen shadow and the light which has been released from it. Ultimately, we all carry with us traces of suffering from the fields which we have crossed, seeking out the right moment to transform them from pain into beauty. This process consists in distilling pain from absence, beauty from pain, and can be considered to represent the essence of our work in psychotherapy. In therapy, two people meet in a room. Starting from the fabrics of their lives, they take up their wounded and interrupted intentionalities so as to revive the naked fibres of the portion of life given to them, weaving new threads. They perform their distilling function so attentively that, as one of my clients puts it, ‘sometimes you can hear the grass growing’. They distil pain as if this were ‘their sole possible mission’.

This is why we are ineluctably involved in working on the grief process. This is the period over which pain is distilled into new life, over which two distinct loyalties are elaborated: to life which continues to flow forward to the beat of our hearts, and to the relationship through which we have lived, which must continue to flow through our arteries (Vázquez Bandín, 2009; Francesetti, 2011).

Pain is presence, while psychopathological suffering is absence. Paradoxically, the more suffering, and therefore the more absence and numbness, the more potentiality there is for pain, and therefore for presence. The more psychopathological suffering is present, the more pain has been carried forward, ready to fertilise the shared ground. Suffering becomes a living pain and a new breath where there is the relational support necessary for this to unfold. It proves harmful, instead, where this support is lacking. That those who distil pain into



presence cannot do so alone would seem to be a general rule in life. As Paul Valéry writes, we do not arrive at our destination alone – a position which stands in marked contrast to the narcissistic refrain, ‘We are born and die alone’.

### 3.3 A difficult challenge: what relational meaning in inflicting pain?

Yet what can be said of the pain of those who inflict pain on others? Of those who torture, abuse, rape and kill? What relational meaning can we discern in such cases? In a radically relational vision we can come to grasp the vital intentionality of this act: the pain which cannot be felt by oneself is made to be felt by another creature. This other creature has the possibility to transform it. Such behaviour obviously arouses a sense of repulsion in us, since we react to the intrinsic perversion of the process: an innocent party is made to suffer violence and pain so as to transform the pain of another. The following words by Simone Weil are enlightening on this point:

The innocent victim who suffers knows the truth about his executioner. The executioner does not know it. The evil which the innocent victim feels in himself is in his executioner, but he [the executioner] cannot feel it. The innocent victim can only know the evil in the shape of suffering. That which is not felt by the criminal is his own crime . . . It is the innocent victim who can feel hell . . . All crime is a transference of the evil in him who acts to him who undergoes the result of the action. (Weil, 1952, pp. 122; 124)

On the transformation of absence into pain and beauty, Weil writes:

The false God changes suffering into violence. The true God changes violence into suffering . . . Patience consists in not transforming suffering into crime. That in itself is enough to transform crime into suffering . . . Purity is absolutely invulnerable as purity, in the sense that no violence can make it less pure. It is, however, highly vulnerable in the sense that every attack of evil makes it suffer, that every sin which touches it turns in it to suffering . . . Evil is carried out by those who have no knowledge of this real presence. In that sense it is true that no one is wicked voluntarily . . . That which gives more reality to beings and things is good, that which takes it from them is evil. (ibid., p. 122ff.)

Beauty is necessity which, while remaining in conformity with its own law and with that alone, is obedient to the good (ibid., p. 204).

Pain is transferred until it is transformed: as Jean Paul Sartre reminds us, it matters not so much what has been done to us as what we ourselves do with it.

Considering psychopathology as absence permits us to distinguish it from existential pain, and therefore to distinguish our clinical operations from the accom-

paniment of individuals experiencing existential suffering. From this perspective, nonetheless, the symptom is a crystallised individual expression of an absence which, once deconstructed in therapy, takes us back to existential and relational events. A panic attack, for example, is an incomprehensible individual clinical symptom, but once it is deconstructed it leads us back to an unknowing and unbearable relational solitude (Francesetti, 2007). In their psychopathological suffering, clients carry their suffering relational fields with them into the therapeutic clinic with a request for care that comes, through them, from the very fabric of life itself (Francesetti, 2011).

Those who suffer from depression make a figure of the pain caused by the absence of the other. They thus bring this suffering from the relational field into the open, helping us to recognise and cure it. This healing process touches the relational field in general and thus the very ground of the world itself. Every such healing process has the potential to protect all human beings. Clients suffering from depression (although to a certain extent the same could be said for all human suffering) bear a burden on their individual shoulders which far transcends them. They are afflicted with a pain which belongs to the whole world and which has been transferred to them in their relational interactions. Every time they manage to transform this suffering into awareness, resourcefulness, a new creative adjustment or love, to whatever extent, they cure the suffering of the whole world. They break the chain whereby suffering is transferred across relationships and generations, through a marked accomplishment which is fundamentally ethical in its character.

### 3.4 An existential perspective: beauty as a driving force of evolution

This clinical vision of suffering and the quest for beauty is in tune with a historical perspective of a teleological character – of a perspective, in other words, which involves the concept of evolution and evolutionary criteria. We might liken this perspective to Alfred Whitehead’s conception (1979) according to which the teleology of the universe is directed towards the production of beauty. This is a Darwinian conception of evolution with a different criterion: the winner is not the fittest but the one most able to transform pain into new life. Modern biology has stressed that other criteria should be considered as influencing driving evolution – the criteria of cooperation above all, whose importance grows with the degree of evolutionary complexity (Keltner, 2009; Nowak and Highfield, 2012). In this perspective, he who survives is not the strongest, but the one most capable of creating cooperation, of forging bonds. Yet let us now try to push this idea even further, proposing a new criterion of evolution: beauty. As the

anthropologist Francesco Remotti (2011) reminds us, Darwin himself was ultimately struck by the quantity of energy expended by animals and above all by mankind in the production of beauty. Darwin, however, left the question of the evolutionary meaning of this incessant endeavour, which also cost lives, unanswered. From the perspective which I am here presenting, we could affirm that our lives are made for distilling and creating beauty. This is what survives us. It is stronger than our lives because it at once belongs and does not belong to us. It is created with the other and the other will carry it forward, together with us, as it has become the flesh and blood with which he is animated. It will be fertile at every subsequent moment of contact. It will guarantee our presence even in our absence: that which is *consigned* (signed – i.e. marked – together) transcends us forever. The passage from pain to beauty is, indeed, also a passage from an individual to a relationship: while pain is of the individual, beauty is co-created.

Why should we not consider the generation of beauty as the driving force of evolution? And, following Whitehead, see evolution as a creative distillation of pain into beauty, in which we are all involved?

One client, who had been severely abused as a child, one day said to me, in extreme anger: ‘What can you do? What do you *think* you can do? In the face of all the evils of the world you can’t do a thing! What you do is irrelevant in the face of all this horror!’ At that moment she was right. Yet it was that very client who, some years later, defined therapy in the terms of distillation to which I have referred above: as a process of distilling pain from absence and then life from pain. That we might witness life’s miracles every day and as our ‘sole and possible mission’ is a notion which sends a further and fundamental meaning to our everyday therapeutic activities. In my client’s own words: ‘Distilling: it’s an ancient and mysterious art. Yet that’s our real and possible mission. We distil pain in order to savour the fragrance of joy.’

This outlook also recalls a fundamental existential question with which our founders were much concerned (Laura Perls, 1992; Goodman, 1968a; 1968b): the crucial question of theodicy:<sup>16</sup> ‘*unde malum?*’. This is the question raised by Job, the innocent and righteous man from whom God took everything: wealth, children and health (Poma, 2005). If God is good and omnipotent, why, then, should the good suffer? This is a question which belongs to all of us when we find ourselves in a state of suffering.

One possible and radical answer is that without evil there could not exist the fruits of that transformation which comes to ‘distil’ suffering into beauty, absence into presence. Through this process, a special and unique quality of love is created which can only be born in limited beings such as our human selves. No

God, precisely because of his omnipotence, could produce this love. Indeed, if a God exists he needs us to produce it for him. The creation of love from impotent pain is only possible for a limited creature, which is constitutionally immersed in, and therefore has the possibility to distil, such suffering. This vision reveals an endeavour to which all humankind contributes: the production of a unique love which we alone are able to create. And, inasmuch as we are inclined to pursue beauty, we are inevitably creative. In the words of the *Bhagavad Gita* (4:11): ‘Wherever they may be, men follow in my footsteps’.

The following passages from the letters of Emmanuel Mounier (1995), whose seven-month-old daughter was left in a vegetative state after contracting encephalitis, seems to me to provide a magnificent expression of an encounter with pain and its transformative power. As he is experiencing what is one of the greatest forms of existential suffering, Mounier writes:

11 April 1940: Like you I feel a great weariness and a great calm, mixed together. I feel as if the real and the positive are given to us by the calm of the love of our daughter, which is sweetly transformed into an offering, into a transcendent tenderness, which is part of her, which comes back to her and transforms us with her. It seems to me that weariness belongs only to the body, which is so fragile in the face of this light and due to the fact that everything that was habitual, *possessive* for us with our daughter is now being consummated in a more beautiful kind of love. (p.62)

28 August 1940: I felt a sadness which touched me deeply, but it was lighter and as if it had been transfigured. And I cannot describe my response thereto as anything other than adoration. (p.66)

#### 4 Aesthetical ethics: ethos and *polis* as roots and horizons of aesthetics

Beauty is necessity which, while remaining in conformity with its own law and with that alone, is obedient to the good. (S. Weil)

We have discussed how beauty lies at the heart of Gestalt psychotherapy, and the relationship between aesthetics, psychopathology and therapeutic praxis. We have also outlined some bases for the inclusion of the aesthetic criterion as a guide to therapeutic intentionality (Bloom, 2010; 2011). Let us now consider what kind of relationship can be traced between these concepts and the ethical dimension of psychotherapy. Right from its origins, our model has been the incarnation of a vision which is, amongst other things, social, ethical and political. What relationship can be traced in Gestalt therapy between aesthetics and ethics, ethics being that which guides all our actions, including the therapeutic?

And what is the relationship between therapeutic actions and the community?

We have seen that to embrace beauty at the contact boundary is already to orient oneself towards action. In fact, it is already an action in itself. Here, diagnosis and therapy coincide. Just as we can identify an extrinsic and an intrinsic diagnostic process (Francesetti and Gecele, 2009; 2010), so we can also refer to an extrinsic and an intrinsic ethics. The former guides our therapeutic behaviour on the basis of the guidelines set out by the professional community in rules and codes of practice. The second emerges as an orientation directly from the contact (Bloom, forthcoming). Aesthetic evaluation is already an orientation to therapeutic action: we have no need of any external reference to know what to do in the encounter. For this reason, as Sichera (2001) notes, citing Aristotle, our therapeutic work is *phronesis*. It is neither *episteme* (i.e. it does not descend from general principles on the basis of which we decide what to do at a given moment, as might a mathematician), nor is it *techné* (we do not reproduce a proven technique, as might an artisan). A therapeutic action is *phronesis* – the ability to act in the right way on the basis of the new orientation which emerges from every new situation. Any action, with its correct therapeutic conduct, its *ethos*, its goodness, springs from aesthetic evaluation at the contact boundary. For this reason, when we are involved in a pursuit whose beauty touches us we immediately feel that what is happening is good and true. In our experience of beauty thus understood – i.e. not as objectual but rather as emergent and relational – the beautiful coincides with the good and the true. From the Greeks onwards in our culture, and in the languages of many others, such as Chinese (Cheng, 2009) and Hebrew,<sup>17</sup> beauty, goodness and truth do not only correlate but are also indissolubly implicated in each other to the extent that they coincide. The Italian word *bello* derives from the Latin as a diminutive of *bonus* – i.e. good. And it is perhaps no idle chance that in Gestalt psychotherapy we refer to ‘good form’.

As Laura Perls observes, good form springs from a commitment: from our commitment to make contact, a commitment of our own creation energy and aggressiveness – our willingness to deconstruct and to allow ourselves to be deconstructed, to accept the limits and constraints of the situation, to assume them so as to transform them creatively. All of this makes Gestalt therapy experiential, experimental and existential (Laura Perls, 1992; Bloom, forthcoming).

The right action which emerges from the aesthetics of the moment is born neither by chance nor in isolation from the rest of the world: the background, too, is implicated. The more the ground is rich in the sediment of the therapist’s own experience, of her theoretical approach, of her relationship with her own professional

community, etc., the more she will be able to nourish her presence. All of this functions as a necessary *third party*, which nourishes and stabilises the therapist, that she does not lose herself, either in a narcissistically savage form of therapy or in a confluent *folie à deux* with the client. Intrinsic ethics is born the twin of intrinsic evaluation. In this sense, in Gestalt therapy we can lay claim to an aesthetic ethics, in which feeling is doing, *aisthesis* is *poiesis*. Both spring from the generation of experience, where subjects form themselves and generate their own unique and unrepeatable contact. Ethics is intrinsically incarnate in the situation. Ours is a *situated ethics* (Bloom, forthcoming).

In considering the therapeutic situation as being constituted – always and inevitably – by the third party present as the ground, we come, finally, to its relationship with politics, since the *polis* represents the third party *par excellence*. And it is this which saves psychotherapy from two risks present in our time: the reduction of the psyche to either a biological or to an intimist phenomenon.

#### 4.1 First form of reductionism: psyche as an individual biological event

The former kind of reductionism is biased towards one or another of the various scientific forms – pharmacotherapeutic, statistic, diagnostic or correlative to biological data. These include the recent ‘*neuro-mania*’ as it has been called by Legrenzi and Umiltà (2009), two neuroscientists who warn against recent attempts to explain all human phenomena and behaviours by reducing them to neuronal circuits. As Luciano Mecacci, another neuroscientist who studied under the Nobel prize winner, Luria, has acutely noticed, the majority of neuroscientific research adds nothing to our knowledge of psychology. It rather only describes the biological correlates for processes which psychology has already described.<sup>18</sup> The fact that neuroscientists themselves have been the ones to reveal the abuses being made of their disciplines in the *psi*-field clearly bears witness to the existence of a temptation to biological reductionism. Too often neuroscientific findings are dragged in to explain things we already know as if they were something new, or unnecessarily to introduce experimental data on a different level. With this criticism, I do not mean to cast any doubt on neuroscientific research – which is in fact doing much to corroborate Gestalt theory – *per se*. I would rather advise caution against the aspects of epistemological slipperiness by which it is at times accompanied. For example, there is a tendency to consider a phenomenon ‘true’ if it has a measurable biological correlate, as if only that which is detectable from a third person perspective is true, first person experience being insufficient to grasp experiential phenomena (Skonick Weisberg et al., 2008; Galla-

gher and Zahavi, 2009; Spagnuolo Lobb and Francesetti, 2010a; 2010b). As Monti and Motterlini write:

Behind the appeal of *neuro-babble* lies nothing other than the age-old trap of reductionism. The neuroscience of neuro-images seduces us with the illusion of being able to trace (and therefore to explain) a psychological macro-phenomenon back to its neural micro-components, a behavioural phenomenon back to its concrete and tangible basis. It offers, therefore, not so much any understanding as the illusion thereof, which is produced by confusing the level of description – i.e. of the image – with that of explanation . . . Indeed, as we gaze in fascination at results in the form of colourful images of the brain, it is important that we do not forget to keep our own brains switched on. (2012, p. 29)

If we forget that ‘we are not our brains’ – i.e. that we cannot have the experiences which we have without a body and a world – this seeking out of neuronal correlates for our experiences comes to represent an undue reduction of life to electro-chemical circuits. The presence of the third party – the world always present in the ground, implicated and implicit in each of our moments of contact – helps us to avoid falling into this kind of reductionism.

#### 4.2 Second form of reductionism: psyche as an intimist event

The other kind of reductionism, which is perhaps more dangerous because it is less evident, being intrinsic in the very birth of psychotherapy, reduces the psyche of the individual and our encounter with it to whatever happens in the therapy room. Our psychic life – our soul, we might say (in an etymological sense, indicating that which renders us animate, alive) – instead comes into being as an emergent phenomenon in the relationship. Yet to consider the psyche as a phenomenon emerging from a dyadic relationship is still reductive. The dyadic relationship, in turn, draws its consistency and boundaries from being rooted in a third party ground, made up of the many: of the *polis* with its myriad and, at times, significant variations. The experiences of individuals become manifest in the single person, but they feed on the whole world.

In our therapeutic practice, we support and distil beauty, but returning to the objection of my client, cited above, this can only be meaningful if we do not forget what is going on outside. If the therapist agrees to take care of the psyche in his own room without asking himself of the meaning of this activity in a broader, global context, he lacks awareness of his social role and might even end up maintaining the status quo, becoming an accomplice in keeping the psychic life isolated and cut off from the world, building it a golden cage in the therapeutic practice. He will thus betray a failure to live up to the political commitment of psychotherapy,

which Laura Perls (quoted by Kitzler in Spagnuolo Lobb and Amendt-Lyon, 2003, p. 105) summed up, saying that ‘real psychotherapy is always somewhat subversive of the existing order’. Psychoanalysis has been considered by some as the necessary manifestation of a nineteenth-century culture which needed a space for those aspects of the psychic life which could not be expressed in society and provoked unease. Psychoanalysis can thus be seen as a social tool for adapting society to bourgeois civility. Aside from the various matters which this reading overlooks, it is nonetheless true that if psychotherapy loses its conscious connection to the third party, if it is unaware of its social position, it risks nowadays becoming the accomplice of a consumerist society which is once again shutting authentic vitality off from the world, protecting it by constructing a *buen retiro*, while the world instead needs its creativity. How can Gestalt therapy reconnect to the political impulse which marked its birth? Perhaps the answer is to insist on a greater communication between the therapist’s practice and the world: to bring psychotherapy out of the closed space of the two-way relationship in the room and the world within the therapy. In addition to being aware of the political role we are playing (Robine, 2012), another concrete solution might be to start doing group work again, from small groups to those Life Focus Groups to which Erving Polster (2007) makes reference. At this time of social disconnection, self-improvement groups are again proving relevant, as they did in the 1970s. There is, however, the fundamental difference that, in the 1970s, these groups were responding to the impulse towards the expression of subjective experiences and of freedom. Nowadays, the impulse is radically different: there is a need to experience connections, networks of belonging and constraints and, through these, to discover new paths to follow and the strength and the right to act in the world. Another approach might be to work in public institutions, such as schools. Why should we limit ourselves to treating one teenager with panic attacks when, after a long series of vicissitudes, he finally makes it to our private practice, rather than going directly into schools to teach pupils that, in order to cope with their fear as they go out into the world, they need only take care of their own networks of belonging (Francesetti, 2007)? And even before this, it is necessary to teach children to recognise and value their own sensations, experiences and roles and to use this awareness in their being with others. We might also take Gestalt praxis to organisations and into the world of work. Gestalt therapy is a wider and broader field than Gestalt psychotherapy. Finally, on another level, it is important to find ways to make psychotherapy accessible to more people. It is paradoxical in a market society that although there is a widespread need for support and therapy there is also,

at the same time, a growing number of psychotherapists who are struggling to find work. In consumer terms, we need to bring together supply and demand. In other words, to adopt Paul Goodman's political angle, we need to bring psychotherapy to the people, on to the streets, into the squares, to invent an *agorà-therapy* for our times.

#### 4.3 'Beauty is important: everything else flows down from it'<sup>19</sup>

After thirty years, the house of The Mafia boss who ordered the killing of Peppino Impastato is now part of a foundation that welcomes young people coming from all over the world to learn how to protect civil rights with non-violent methods. To reach this transformation, of course, there has been a lot of pain and struggle. Against this ground, we can rediscover the political relevance of aesthetics, that to which Peppino Impastato referred and lived to the end. An an-aesthetised, inanimate individual may be an efficient producer and consumer (a consumer who uses aesthetic objects to stay an-aesthetised), but not a citizen. How can one be a citizen, if one does not resound with the social field in which one lives, does not feel passion, indignation, does not feel the necessity and the beauty of belonging, of shared soul-making?

'Beauty will save the world', wrote Dostoevsky. I have here sought to define what kind of beauty may save us. Now, to conclude, I would stress that beauty works through us, through the aesthetics of our commitment (Laura Perls, 1992). The world can only be saved through our incessant, passionate, shared seeking out and nurturing of beauty, which is the sensible form of our relational heritage.

As Gestalt therapy teaches us, this is exactly what human beings are made for.

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## Notes

1. Opening keynote lecture at the third Conference of the SIPG (Società Italiana Psicoterapia Gestalt – Italian Gestalt Psychotherapy Society), Palermo, 9 December 2011. To be published in Italian in: Francesetti, G., Ammirata, M., Riccamboni, S., Sgadari, N. and Spagnuolo Lobb, M. (Eds.), *Il dolore e la bellezza. Dalla psicopatologia all'estetica del contatto*, F. Angeli, Milano, 2013.
2. *I cento passi (The Hundred Steps)*, 2000, directed by M.T. Giordana.
3. See also the *International Gestalt Journal* specific Issue on Aesthetics, Vol. 30, No.1, 2007.
4. Etymologically, *absolved of every constraint, of every limit*.

5. This concept seems to me to avoid falling into the contemporary revival of the *new-realism* (Ferraris, 2012) which reaffirms a dichotomy between events and their interpretation in favour of the former, in contrast to the Nietzschean assertion that 'there are no facts, only interpretations', one of the slogans of post-modernism. Both of these positions seem to propose a dichotomous and simplistic logic in drawing a distinction between facts and interpretations which can be overcome through a logic of co-creation whereby subjective interpretation and objective events are co-created, thus being neither factually given nor interpretatively free.
6. Our phenomenological understanding seems consistent with the concept of *proto-self* introduced by Damasio (2010).
7. I am referring here to the concept of a self that emerges in the situation (see Spagnuolo Lobb, 2001; Wollants, 2008; and Philippson, 2009).
8. Note the Italian verb *intendere*, from the Latin *in-tendere*: tuning an instrument, making its strings resonant with the heart.
9. This distinction is also relevant in the aesthetic evaluation of a work of art, as the trial of Pygmalion teaches us: we can enjoy the beauty of something which would be monstrous if it became real, like a painting of a devil or a sculpture of a dragon.
10. Aggression comes from the Latin *ad-graedior* – to move towards.
11. These absences, which Gestalt therapy refers to as contact interruptions, are *felt aesthetically* in contact as absences in the co-creation of experience which is, as we have seen, occurring incessantly.
12. From the Greek, *sarkaizein*, i.e. to lacerate the flesh (Cortellazzo and Zolli, 1983).
13. 'A novel, poem, picture, a musical work are all individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact, being radiated with no change of their temporal or spatial situation. It is in this sense that our body is comparable to a work of art' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 175, quoted in Dastur, 2007, p. 36).
14. *Kairòs*, from the Greek, means 'the right moment'.
15. The word history comes from the Greek *histor*, meaning witness (Cortellazzo, Zolli, 1983).
16. The term theodicy, coined by Leibniz, refers to a branch of theology. Its etymological meaning derives from the Greek *théos* (god) and *dike* (justice). In other words, it treats of the 'doctrine of the justice of God'. Leibniz uses the term *theodicy* to refer to the doctrine of the justification of God for the evil present in creation.
17. I thank Nurith Levi for having focused the Hebrew word '*Yoffi*', meaning both *beauty* and *good*.
18. Paper given at the Expert Meeting of the FIAP (Federazione Italiana delle Associazioni di Psicoterapia – Italian Federation of Psychotherapy Associations), Rome, 6 May 2011.
19. Peppino Impastato. See note 2.

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