

Commentary on Franco Fornari's article:
***The delivery-birth and the unconscious feeling of guilt
as pure culture of death drive***

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ABSTRACT. – The theme of the death drive, much discussed in psychoanalysis, is addressed by Fornari starting from the myth of the Garden of Eden, with the aim of identifying primary realities that reposition this concept within a natural truth linked to the difficult process through which the human evolution of our species has taken place.

Key words: death drive, Super-Ego, myth, delivery-birth, obstetric dilemma.

When Franco Fornari died suddenly in May 1985, he left behind an ambitious unfinished project: to write a treatise on psychoanalysis that, in his intentions, would start with Freud and produce a profound revision of psychoanalytic assumptions based on innovative and, at that time, much-discussed reflections. Very little was known about this treatise until about two years ago, when his grandson delivered a long typescript to *Minotauro* the publishers, comprising the first part of a work still to be completed and revised, consisting of 15 chapters. Years earlier, in 2005, two chapters of this treatise – the sixth and seventh – had been revised so that they could be published in the January-March issue (volume LI, no. 1) of *Rivista di Psicoanalisi*. Recently, we edited the publication of the fifteenth chapter, titled *Il sogno di Irma e il destino della psicoanalisi* (Irma's Dream and the Fate of Psychoanalysis) (2024), which comprised over one hundred pages.

What we are publishing here is the eighth chapter of the treatise, called *Delivery-birth and the unconscious feeling of guilt as pure culture of the death drive*, which is a continuation of the chapters published in 2005, and left the reader with a sense of incompleteness.

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The core of this chapter is particularly important because it addresses a topic, the death drive, which has been at the center of very complex reflections in the field of psychoanalytic thought and the history of philosophy. Rossella Valdrè has recently revisited and brought back to the attention of scholars and clinicians the vicissitudes of this concept in two fundamental works¹ for all those interested in the theoretical and clinical developments of this view.

For Fornari, the death drive was always a central issue, but in a negative sense, so to speak. In other words, it was *an obstacle to be overcome* or, at least, to be considered in a different context. We could even say that it was actually the issue linked to the theorization of the death drive as the ultimate and defining element of Freud's philosophical journey (the so-called 'Freudian pessimism') that Fornari wanted to distance himself from in order to propose a cultural project based on the rediscovery of hope.²

In this sense, the idea that stems from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, but which was already present in embryo in the 1895 *Project*, according to which the entire existence of living beings in this world is dominated by a driving force towards non-life, and that this element manifests itself in man as an irreducible tension towards the senseless repetition of unpleasant experiences, could not easily fit in with the theoretical and clinical construct that Fornari was aiming for, especially considering that Fornari's Kleinian foundations led him to link the death drive (instinct) to the presence, already in the early months of a child's life, of an archaic and ruthless Super-Ego. The vision of a Super-Ego as pure culture of the death drive (which Freud attributed to depression) ended up translating the death drive itself into a form of hetero-directed aggression that would lead to considering evil and war as inalienable factors in human destiny. These were the bitter conclusions that Freud expressed in his famous debate with Einstein (1933). It should be added, however, that Freud considered aggression an epiphenomenon of the death drive, which instead manifests itself as a sort of magnet capable of attracting towards the abyss of senselessly repetitive annihilation.

Indeed, Fornari's first real encounter with the death drive and the idea that a destructive and violent force inhabits the human soul is already clearly evident in the novel he published in 1969, *Angelo a capofitto*. The protagonist is Michele, a young Partisan who, after an attack on Nazi

¹ Cfr. Valdrè 2016, 2025.

² All those who have followed Fornari over the years often heard him say that, in his view, "Freud is like the pig: nothing should be discarded." The fact remains, however, that most of Fornari's psychoanalytic thinking differs greatly, if not wholly, from that of his Viennese mentor, and that the question of how much consideration should be given to the death drive was decisive in this sense.

forces, learns that his father and mother have been killed by the Germans in retaliation. Michele cannot help but think that he is the real culprit, the cause of his parents' death. He embarks on a difficult journey into the abyss of madness and delirium until Mario (his friend and psychiatrist) kills him with an insulin treatment that was in use at the time.³ In an interview given during those years, Fornari admitted that Michele and Mario were two sides of his own personality (Favero, 1968) and that it was necessary to kill Michele in order to become Fornari. At one point in the novel, at the onset of his delusion, Michele hears a voice that reveals a terrible truth: "You were a bomb in your mother's womb, Michele, and your mother died (...) But what do you think? Don't you know that Hitler was also convinced that monsters wanted to kill his mother? (...) That's why it's good to tell everyone that Hitler is in them" (Fornari, 1969, p. 54).

Violence, inherent in each of us, is therefore structured as the form of the death drive in the way Fornari understands it. From then on, Fornari's (and Michele's) ethical question will be expressed in an attempt to culturally and concretely overcome the theoretical and clinical obstacle to which this concept refers. Only a revision of the concept of the death drive, only its reinterpretation, can alleviate Michele's anguish and allow Fornari to formulate a theory of hope to counter Freud's cultural cynicism.⁴

It is in this logic that we proceed with the reading of the myth of the expulsion from the Garden of Eden, which Fornari explored in this contribution. The mythical narrative is seen as a delusion (similar, that is, to Michele's delusions) but one that conceals a profound truth: the myth of the Garden of Eden represents both the bliss of the intrauterine situation before birth, and the traumatic violence of delivery-birth when the expulsion takes place. Here, says the biblical text, there is an *original sin*, a fault of our human species that condemns us to suffering and pain. But where does this guilt originate, giving rise to the archaic Super-Ego that then grips us? Fornari identifies a specific historical reality that can be seen as the basis for the mythical origin of guilt. It consists of the acquisition of the upright position by the human species and the obstetric dilemma that

³ The so-called *Sakel sleep therapy*: a treatment that uses insulin to induce a coma in patients with schizophrenia. The technique was abandoned due to its dramatic side effects.

⁴ In a letter to the theologian Pfister dated February 7, 1930, Freud writes: "The death drive is by no means a need stemming from the heart, for me; it seems only an inescapable hypothesis for biological and psychological reasons. The rest follows from this. My pessimism therefore seems to me to be a result, while the optimism of my opponents seems to be a premise. I could even say that I have entered into a 'marriage of convenience' with my gloomy theories, while others live with theirs in a 'marriage of love'. I hope they are happier than I am."

derives from it. The mother's pelvis, in fact, is limited by its skeletal structure and the need to support the weight of the body; on the other hand, the newborn's skull is large in relation to the size of the mother's pelvis, which makes childbirth more difficult and dangerous.⁵ In particular, according to Fornari (1981), destructive and violent experiences develop within the mother's body because the mother fears killing her child with her contractions, or being torn apart by them. But the violence associated with this drama is resolved through a process of externalizing guilt onto the father figure, who becomes the first enemy, the prototypical figure of all wars. This dynamic is called *primary paranoia*, but for Fornari, it does not represent the end of the process because this same fierce sense of guilt takes on a function similar to that of anxiety, it becomes a warning signal: "While guilt implies the elaboration of self-destructive representations, it does not elaborate them for the purpose of self-destruction, but as warning signals in the face of the possible risk of self-destruction. (...) I therefore propose to conceive the structures of the Super-Ego as functional to survival (...), as supportive of generation, represented by sexual impulses" (Fornari, 1983, p. 206). The traumatic nature of childbirth, linked to the violence of an archaic Super-Ego, therefore, is not connected to an original desire for self-destruction (the Freudian death drive) but has its origin in a mechanism of symbolization that expresses itself as an alarm signal functional to survival.

However, there is something else to add that concerns the myth of paradise on earth, as the loss of original unity and nostalgia. Elaborating on the meaning of the myth, Fornari ends up placing the soul in a very different place from the one where Christianity or Platonic metempsychosis place it.⁶

We actually have real experience of the soul in intrauterine life, before coming into the world, in that protected and warm place that harbors us before birth. The search for the soul then appears as an absolute desire to retrieve the lost object, to feel once again the warm embrace of the maternal body. This reference to the intrauterine phase as the foundation of human experience manifests itself, in Fornari, as a driving force for life, an original reservoir of hope that we can draw on throughout our lives and which opens us up to the future. Something, in a sense, that is the very opposite of what underlies the concept of the death drive.

However, this very propulsive mechanism implies another mechanism with an opposing sign, that also runs through Fornari's thinking and occupies Michele's anxieties, and seems to manifest itself in the ultimate

⁵ It follows that human babies are born with a kind of neoteny, whereby their development is very slow and uncertain, requiring maternal care for survival.

⁶ Although, in a certain sense, Platonic mythology represents an important key to understanding.

meaning of Freud's Irma dream (cf. Fornari, 2024). The nostalgic desire to retrieve the impossible object that was lost generates the myth of a return to the origins and presents itself as a regressive movement directed not toward the future but toward the past. Many ideologies are part of this phantasmal construct, ranging from the concept of *Heimat* as re-processed by Nazism, to the Islamic *Umma* of fundamentalists as the site of a caliphate lost forever (cf. Piotti, 2020). The tension to return to the origins can then generate something very violent. "The life of the soul seems to truly depend on the desire to return to the mother's womb because a mysterious impulse drives us to return to the place of total satisfaction of our needs. (...) Unfortunately, however, it may happen that this feeling of immediate truth, impervious to any attempt at criticism, deriving from the memory of the other world, constitutes the essence of delusion" (Fornari, 2005, p. 183). These comments by Fornari echo Grunberger's (1976) reflections on Narcissus and Anubis, where the Egyptian god of death acts as a violent counterpoint to the bliss of primary narcissism, which Grunberger also rediscovers in the myth of paradise on earth.

As if that mysterious drive toward regression were taking us back to that dramatic Freudian concept, now found not in its aggressive aspects but in the tendency, inaccessible to any form of criticism, to leave, and to wish that our life would return to where it came from.

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