

A Roman Phobia

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'Homo normalis sum. Nihil humani a me alienum puto.' (Terence)

This is the report of a clinical case — my case, as I experienced it as a patient. Six years ago I sought out a therapist; and I want to describe the psychotherapeutic sessions I have undergone with him.

For many years, I had been victimised by inexplicable panic. I remember as a boy being overwhelmed at night by violent fear. I remember trying to find a safe place under my blanket, and being alone, in the silent darkness of my childhood, racked by the shivering of my tiny body. I withdrew physically into myself, my heart pounding on the roof of my mouth, awaiting the only power that could drag me out of that damned experience: sleep.

The panic would appear out of the blue, inexplicably. There were no particular events, as far as I recall, that triggered the process. I remember, though, that paralleling the panics, at least once a week throughout my pre-school years there would come to me the vision of a strange figure. The figure, by my childish reckoning, is that of a warrior, dressed in leather clothes worn by frequent use, a breast plate inscribed by warfare. I can smell the sweat impregnated in his leather clothes, leather long stained by that same sweat. A red cloak, faded by sun and rain, is draped about his shoulders. His body is strong, slim yet athletic, muscles outlined all over it, his face drawn. He rises above the arid earth, desert dryness touching his

skin. It is night, the sky full of stars, the coldness of the night not harassing but caressing his face, arms resting alongside his body, his right hand holding a sword; he is exhausted, he sleeps.

For years, I cherished the dream of lying on the grass and sleeping out under the sky in the dampness of the night. When I grew up, I bought some land in the country, in the mountains. How wonderful it is to have the night breeze caress your face! Another scene that was with me for decades was of the same soldier, in the same desert region, yet not at night. The hillside on which he stands is of the same arid and rocky soil, full of small caverns — and there he is, inside one. He is lying down now, but most of the time he stands watching, scanning the distance as if waiting for something to come. The moment is full of danger and suspense. He is alone, scanning anxiously, yet full of determination, the sword in his right hand. These two scenes inscribed in my mind's eye had accompanied me for years. Since my youth, even when facing great economic difficulties, I had been determined to seek psychotherapeutic help.

My first attempts were all psychoanalytical; my first therapists were all highly renowned and competent professionals. They helped me in many areas of my personality, but as far as my visions were concerned all of them, as if a brotherhood linked by the same psychoanalytical

dogma, would interpret the sword as the symbol of the phallus, the soldier as part of the Oedipian family project, the cloak as the void of castration, Rome as a Lacanian inversion of love . . . Oedipus and castration invading the void of the couch. Expensive hours of unconscious flight, cultural enrichment and psychoanalytical jargon were acquired; but the phobia was still there. What could this symptom mean? Could it be a kind of rhythmical disorder? Could I be suffering from some sort of cardiovascular deficiency? My neuro-psychiatric saga had just started — my personal history became a collage of medical examinations, searching for an answer. Astute clinicians prescribed Tegretol, Comital, Anafranil, Sulpiride . . . years of pharmacology . . . the phobia persisted. I was medicated and psychoanalysed, the territoriality of my desires scrutinised, the language of my unconscious articulated in the complex world of hunting for meaning. Psycho-analytical translated into analytical-didactic terms: still the phobia persisted.

Taking along my old companion, I sought out a body psychotherapist. I was in Europe for professional reasons and Zürich was half-way to where I was bound: Italy. Being of Italian descent, I felt an urge to reclaim *la bella Italia*, but my fear of entering the country, of crossing the border, grieved me and filled me with anxiety. That was the subject of our first session.

First session: I position myself in front of my therapist, gazing into his eyes. He places his hand on my head. I feel his hand gently resting on my scalp. After a while, I sense his hand pulsing with my cranium, as if they are both slowly and gradually interacting and responding in unison. My

legs quiver and I begin to feel as though I am about to collapse into myself. I sense the depths of my old schizoidism invading and possessing me. The session is one of self-doubt: doubt lodged on the edge of a formidable abyss, or its more profound equivalent: death. As time passes, I feel my legs begin to pulse more and more, muscles expanding from my very core, and an irresistible, illogical desire to leap. Not an unpretentious leap into whatever void, but a leap towards recovering a hidden force in some abandoned part of me. I want to feel my legs. As I grant myself this right to live, I do leap . . . leap towards the heights, with all my strength. Legs, I embrace you. Force, I rip you from my inner being. This redemption from the depths of the ground lasts for centuries. I stretch to the limits. Legs firmly planted, feeling the joy of mastering them again, I look at my therapist from another vantage point. Our hands touch, I feel the strength of my arms, and I fight. I fight a necessary battle, feeling strong as a bull. I compare his strength to mine, I reclaim my noble Italian father. Vanquished by the battle of love, I transcend my fear of being in love with that wise and simple man, my open-hearted, strong and tender father, and am proud to acknowledge him.

Now I am ready to cross the fantasy border to Italy.

Another session: Lying down on a bed, I slowly and gradually make contact with the movements of my body. I can only sense the course of that particular pulsation. I am mounting my organismic horse. Aloof inside me, self-absorbed, the Roman soldier comes again before my mind's eye; yet this time I experience him as being myself. I feel the therapist's hands in mine and with this touch that inspires confi-

dence, pointing the route to follow, feeling the other extended in my touch, I begin to realise that in the space between our hands lies the force to hold the Roman sword, the sword of a centurion.

My whole being is seized by that force, body and soul melt together, generating a power that courses through me and bursts impulsively and strongly from within. For the first time in my life, I stand face to face with this vision that has accompanied me from childhood. The centurion, shedding his age-old inertia, moves, inhales, pulsates, breathes. He is all power and strength! In his, I find my own warring soul. The sensation of power is tremendous.

As the centurion, but still within my old self, I feel both strong and tormented. Images come fast, colourful, impregnated with odour, transcendently real. I learn that I have killed Christians, though not in the name of pleasure. I have had duties, carried out the task of maintaining social order, preventing threats to the establishment, my country, my fellow citizens. I have spent my life as a strict, rigid, self-righteous official. Alongside soldiers like myself I have fought by the laws to which we have all sworn allegiance. To my country the Christians are a menacing mob, striving for power, gaining ground even within the limits of Rome. I will do anything I can to prevent their progress. A new army, they possess the most powerful weapon I have ever faced: faith!

Swept along by these images that unfold before my eyes, feeling the power of emotion swelling within me, I find astounding phrases emerging from my mouth: 'Why has Saul abandoned us? Why has Saul abandoned us?' The long-familiar panic invades me, the words

Saul/Paul echo meaningfully inside me. From within my panic, I think: I must be going mad, going to pieces, split, a centurion to my very soul, I want to put an end to this voyage I'm undergoing. I'd give everything I own if I could just faint. I want to, wish I could escape from myself, but I can't. Somehow, self-awareness prevents flight; I am not just a witness: in my guts, in my whole body I experience the full sensations of this fantastic story. I feel flesh being slashed by the blade, blood splattering, I am a loyal warrior; the centurion at my command abides by my law, we kill without pleasure, fighting our bloody battles out of duty. My body incarnates the sword; ready for action, it extends itself, a pointer to my story. A light comes that floods my eyes, a resplendent light englobing an image I can't see. I fall to my knees before it. The bloody sword becomes brilliant steel, the light is pierced by the steel.

Weariness now invades my soul, my whole being cries out for peace. The sharp blade represents a balanced edge. I desert the army and run away, guided by this fine edge, the frontier between life and soul, arbitrator between animal and spiritual. Sword in hand, I take another path, enclose myself in open space, and the heavens embrace me. I go towards the rust-coloured desert, the sky of my childhood returns, the cool air so pleasant on my face. Weary, searching for something beyond flesh and blood, I follow my new path, no longer trying to escape. I am trying out a new destiny. My men won't understand. Their law, the law that once was mine, I comprehend. I will await my punishment, with no hate. My heart, assured as never before, urges me onwards.

Alone in the mountains, protected by

the heavens and inner peace, I wait. From the mountain-top, I see a small centurion group approaching. I recognise from afar the troop of my peers, each and every horse, their particular way of trotting, old friends coming after me. They gallop rapidly in my direction. I begin to descend the hill towards them, sword in hand. I stand face to face with them as they dismount. We eye one another, remembering in every weary look the campaigns we've shared together. Soiled, with dignity and respect, in silence, we spontaneously gather together in a small circle. Men of war, army exiles, commander and commanded. I know they won't try to take the sword from me, won't strip off my centurion uniform. Calmly, I wait for the moment of decision.

The youngest of them, behind me, slashes through my back, my kidney, my intestines. I feel his blade cutting through meat as mine has done before. With heavy eyes he watches as I drop to my knees, my chest slowly meeting with the hard desert soil. I don't cry out; the group encircles me, all respect. I see myself dying, my body outstretched, gripping the sword. The vision fades; from a distance, I watch myself die. The group takes my body, digs a small, shallow grave and buries me, marking the spot with the sword, thrust into the harsh soil. From afar, I begin to lose sight . . . radiating peace.

Never again, after that experience, did I feel panic.

Another session: lying down, surrounded by another group, I start working. Our hands touch and my left arm hurts. My right hand that once held the sword is now free and reaches out for

the left side of my body in an attempt to relieve the pain and protect my heart. Fingering my left arm, I find a shield tied to it; my heart is protected. The old familiar smell of sweat and leather comes again. Battered shield, impregnated with sweat and blood, inscribed with dark brown spots, fusing with my arm. I embrace the ancestral memory inscribed in the way my muscles melt. On the front of the shield I see an inscription; I read the letters, but they don't make sense: 'SPQR'. I repeat these letters several times; they allude to something I know but cannot recall.

The focus of the session is my struggle to loosen the old shield. Slowly it frees itself, releasing my arm, slipping through my fingers. I feel it with the palms of my hands; it falls at my side, useless. Heart free from the shielding shield. It lies beside me, remembered in the present, eternal past giving way to another memory, the memory of the future. Relieved, I sit back with my eyes closed, an enormous radiance penetrating my body from the left collarbone. I feel the therapist's touch, my whole body vibrating in response to the moment. I am whole again, within my history. Fear and rage dissected by a new spiritual scalpel. Wise blade, that guards with its edge the narrow path to body transcendence. I feel it in my back — no longer lacerating flesh, but as the vertex, the axis of my spine. The energy goes up along this axis towards another energy, a cosmic energy that embraces me. Peace and life comfort me. *Senatus Populusque Romanus*: SPQR.

The eagle rises above the power of the flesh, aligns itself with the spiritual blade, unites with itself.