

THE SENSE OF ABANDONMENT, CONSOLATION AND TRUST

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Abstract The text analyzes trust through the phenomenology of its absence, of its failure, as it emerges in great Western literature (Beckett, Camus, Steinbeck and Shakespeare), in some texts by great contemporary intellectuals (O. Ranke, Peter Sloterdijk, D. Winnicott), and finally in the Bible and in particular in the book of *Isaiah*. The theme of abandonment and attachment – which have always possessed great significance in pedagogical reflection – is entwined with the sapiential category of consolation, which is always the result of a human process of moving back and forth, of absence and presence, of fear and courage, which enables us to *enter or re-enter into the game*, in life and in faith. In this way, trust is transformed, as in the relationship between mother and child, into the gift of a conquest.

Keywords: Trust, abandonment, consolation, attachment, child, mother, trust

Introduction

I would like to broach the experience of trust through another original experience: the feeling of being abandoned... even by God. I therefore intend to present consolation – that is the response to the sense of abandonment – as an essential aspect of one who trusts and one who is trustworthy. The one comforted trusts; he trusts because he is comforted; the comforter is trustworthy; he is trustworthy because he comforts. However, it is too easy to polarize abandonment and consolation, considering the first as negative and the second as positive, as if they were alternatives: where there is a sense of abandonment there is no consolation and vice versa. In reality, the dynamic is more complex, since - beyond rhetoric - the experience of abandonment is part of the same dynamic of consolation and therefore also of trust granted and trustworthiness demonstrated. But first we must take seriously the sense of abandonment that affects everyone, in one way or another.

Written immediately after World War II, at the start of the Cold War, when atomic destruction was at its height, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was published in 1952. The play stands out among the expressions of the twentieth-century Western soul. It marks the narrowing in the

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twentieth-century hourglass: the spirits of the first half of the twentieth century converge to transmit them to the second as a prophecy fulfilled. Along a country road, in the evening, beside a tree, two poor people, Vladimir and Estragon, are waiting for a certain Godot, from whom they hope to get some mysterious resolution. They have never met him and are not even sure of his name or the place and time of the appointment; perhaps not even of his existence. After an endless wait, a young man named Pozzo arrives and mistreats his servant Lucky, keeping him on a leash. The four converse with each other, indulging in incoherent and indecipherable speeches, in a crystallized space and time that are not measurable. Alone again, the two poor men are joined by a boy, a messenger: Godot will not be coming tonight, but certainly tomorrow. Disappointed, but also reassured by the news (Godot exists and he's on his way!), Vladimir and Estragon continue to wait. So the first act closes. Since the second act is almost identical to the first, it leaves an impression of baffling unchangingness. The scene ends with the two waiting motionless. The work has been the subject of various readings, all plausible, including a Marxist and a Christian. In any case, both Marxist and Christian expectations are as insistent as they are disappointed and therefore absurd. The action is marked by a pervasive sense of abandonment. The audience perceive that they are waiting for someone who will never arrive; he has left the stage, or perhaps he has never even entered it.

If *Waiting for Godot* takes place in an indefinable time and space, as if to characterize every place and time, Albert Camus's *The Plague* has the precision of a chronicle, written by an eyewitness, Dr. Bernard Rieux, and it is set in a definite place: an Algerian city in the 1940s. Rieux's account is clinically, socially and psychologically detailed. The oppressive situation caused by the plague, however delimited in space and time, gradually becomes the emblem of the whole human condition in the doctor's eyes. The terrible disease isolates the city from the rest of the world, the houses from the city, the sick rooms from the rest of the house. The sense of separation, due to distance and death, looms up ever clearer. After "plague", "separation" is the most recurrent word in the novel and characterizes the atmosphere of the whole story. With lucid, deeply involved and moving writing, Camus affirms that the episodic, disconcerting epidemic violently brings to light the habitual, continuous and yet hidden sense of abandonment that marks every soul, the clear sensation of always being alone, both as individuals in relation to the world and as humanity in relation to the gigantic, empty universe. It was moving to reread *The Plague* during the Covid 19 lockdown. At the end of the novel, while the whole city celebrates the end of the plague, Rieux sets the seal on his story by writing that it is only a truce. The plague bacillus never dies or disappears; it waits patiently, until the day of its awakening. As if to say: being abandoned is the normal situation of humanity; sometimes, our stratagems to deny the obvious fail.

The reader of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* – a novel with a strong biblical inspiration, among the masterpieces of American and world literature of all time – clearly understands that the feeling of

being abandoned can be brutal. Cathy Ames has been beautiful, shrewd and seductive ever since she was a child. A teacher, conquered by her adolescent charm and rejected like a toy that she no longer want to use, commits suicide. Reprimanded by her parents for her indolence, she kills them by setting fire to the house. Running away, she becomes a very young prostitute who bewitches her protector only to ruin him. In an exasperated vengeful outburst, the man beats her up, leaving her almost dead. She is rescued by Adam Trask, Charles's brother. There is a formidable, ancient rivalry between the two brothers. Adam's protective instinct and Cathy's cold calculations lead the two to marriage. Chafing against the bond she herself has chosen, Cathy betrays Adam with Charles and becomes pregnant. After the birth of twins, Cathy rejects them and decides to walk out on her marriage. When Adam tries to restrain her, she shoots him, leaving him half dead. She again enters a brothel, becoming the prostitute most in demand. With her charm, she wins over the crafty brothel-owner, who adopts her as a daughter, leaving her everything in her will. Once Cathy is certain she will inherit all her estate, she kills her benefactor and becomes the owner of the house of ill fame. She also secures her future by blackmailing important and wealthy customers. Capable of anything, with cold intelligence she eliminates all the real or presumed obstacles. Adam, after years of terrible melancholy, seeks out and meets Cathy, treating her gently. Rejecting his benevolence with insults, she reveals to him the true father of the boys. After a long time, aged and sick, Cathy is confronted by her son Caleb, seen for the first time. The young man, intelligent and gifted like her, grasps the reason for his mother's wickedness: "When you were little, did you," he paused to get the thought straight - "did you ever have the feeling like you were missing something? Like as if the others knew something you didn't - like a secret they wouldn't tell you? Did you ever feel that way?" Caleb intuitively feels this early feeling, the cause of his mother's sad wickedness: the clear feeling that, from the beginning, her parents had excluded her. Deeply wounded and suffering, the woman denigrates her son harshly, because he has understood her. He also realizes that, since his mother felt rejected, she was always full of "fear" and acted on it. Shortly after being seen by her other son Aron, Cathy commits suicide, remembering the urge, cultivated since she was a child, to disappear, not to exist, never to have existed. Almost all the drama recounted by Steinbeck is driven by Cathy's lucid wickedness. A ruthless perfidy, however, that was not born of nothingness or caprice, but initiated and fueled by a remote sense of exclusion and abandonment that instills fear. For this reason she defends herself from any kind of tie, perceiving it as dangerous, as a prelude to a new exclusion. Initially, her tactic is to eliminate any kind of constraint; later, the older strategy prevails that has accompanied her since childhood: to disappear, wishing she had never been born, so as not to run the risk of belonging to someone who would abandon her.

While in Cathy the sinister homicidal and suicidal drive provoked by the sense of abandonment is a form of suffering, in others it is a deliberate choice. As in the case of Richard, Duke of Gloucester, the grim protagonist of William Shakespeare's *Richard III* (1591-1592). He seizes the crown of

England, usurping the succession of Edward, the legitimate heir to the throne. By a series of ruthless plots, deceptions and murders (he does not hesitate to slay his brother, grandchildren, wife, friends, and other family members...), he clears his path of all possible rivals. Every detail of his evil strategy is motivated from the beginning by Richard himself, in the opening monologue of the tragedy. Shakespeare's finesse lies in deriving the Duke's infamous cruelty from his deformed appearance. Richard sees the throne as a form of compensation required by one who is in credit with the world. Pushed to the periphery of life by the malformation of his body, the duke demands his own compensation... at any cost. Being unable to be a "lover", he decides "to be a villain". The hypothesis of the English playwright is that behind a delinquent there is an outcast, a person rejected who is legitimized to recover with interest what has been taken from him or what has not been granted to him. The exclusion he experiences is neither imaginary nor recent; rather it is contemporary with his birth: his mother was disgusted by her child's ugliness. Richard's fate is marked: the door to violence is open and it will devastate the lives of others.

In 1924, the psychoanalyst Otto Rank published his masterpiece: *The Trauma of Birth*. Distancing himself from his teacher Freud, he considered anguish as the emotional rebound due to the first and most traumatic separation: that from the mother's body, at the time of birth. Rank condensed the sense of estrangement, disorientation and abandonment, as well as the anguish and fear that derive from it, in a specific event: birth, when we were "cast out". The separation felt accidentally during the plague described by Camus is actually the karstic emergence of the sense of abandonment that constantly flows through the soul since expulsion from the womb.

Rank describes the prenatal "pleasurable condition" as a state of total fullness. In the womb the baby experiences various necessities – oxygenation, nutrition, hydration, adequate temperature – but does not feel needs, because before even feeling the lack of what is essential, the mother's body gives it to the child in advance. There is no distance, delay or mediation between the child's body and how vital it is. Having everything without asking, the fetus is saturated with life. Separation from the mother marks the violent end of the state of fullness and the entry into the world of limits, boundaries, distances and needs. Hence the original sense of estrangement, exile, abandonment. The feeling of being orphaned takes the place of total protection. The sense of abandonment therefore coincides with the very event of separation at birth. Each subsequent experience of severance – from Cathy's sense of exclusion, to Richard III's marginalization, to isolation from the plague – recalls the first separation, reopening the ancient wound. However, the individual never renounces the prenatal fullness, feeling a constant nostalgia for this "lost paradise". Therefore, according to Rank, the loss of this state of completeness and the continuous attempts to find it mark the whole development of every human being. Every form of pleasure, every human intention and practice – from the most affective to the most rational – are the attempt to rebuild the "lost paradise", regressing to the state before separation. Ideologies, religious phenomena, great stories,

the economy, as well as technology, which promises to anticipate and solve every problem, are sublimated renewals of the “lost paradise”. This idea has recently been taken up and developed in the trilogy by the contemporary philosopher Peter Sloterdijk.

After birth, the feeling of fullness, guaranteed by the womb, is prolonged by the mother’s alert, protective and enveloping figure. The word “mamma”, “mummy” comes from the Latin word *māmma* which means “breast”. Breastfeeding is in strict continuity with intrauterine feeding, a prolongation of pregnancy and the bond between the baby and the womb, until it becomes its substitute. It replaces the prenatal “pleasurable condition”, partly reproducing its total envelopment. Breastfeeding is not limited to satisfying a physiological need, since it activates a complete emotional environment that kindles the initial sparks of mutual recognition between mother and child, fostering the newborn’s self-awareness, thanks to the first exchange of glances and smiles, and the first vocal echoes. Without these original gestures, it is almost impossible for the child to say “I”. It is an experience of such involvement and satisfaction that the mother’s milk, and even its smell alone, are able to reassure the baby when it cries from hunger, pain or loneliness. However, breastfeeding is also marked by a growing experience of separation between the baby and the mother. The baby cannot always be at the breast, but in alternation between feeding and abstinence, until it reaches weaning, complete detachment from the breast. The delicacy and complexity of weaning is proportioned to the unspeakable intensity of the attachment experienced in the womb and the breast. The baby cries and wails, filled with anguish on perceiving even the momentary distance of its mother. It feels this separation as mortifying; so unbearable that it cries out in despair. The screams and cries of a newborn baby touch the deepest chords of the soul when it wakes up in the night. Perhaps the mother is already nearby, in the next room; probably she is already coming quickly, but the little one experiences that moment of absence as an eternity, a definitive separation that throws it into despair. The child is not in the least abandoned; in fact it is even the recipient of continuous nightly care, but the violence of its reaction expresses exactly the opposite perception.

Significantly, the consolation addressed by God to Jerusalem, which feels abandoned, repeats the maternal and filial experience of breastfeeding. The image closes the book of the prophet Isaiah:

Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her.
Be joyful as you rejoice with her, all you who mourned over her,
so that you may suck fully and be satisfied from her consoling breast,
as you drink deeply with delight at her abundant bosom.
For thus says the Lord: I will make prosperity flow over her like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like a turbulent overflowing stream.
You will be nursed and carried in her arms and fondled in her lap.
As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you;
in Jerusalem you will find your comfort.

When you behold this, your heart will rejoice, and your bodies will flourish like the grass in spring.”
(Is 66,10 -14)

God invites the Israelites, worn out with sorrow, to approach the breast of Jerusalem, overflowing with milk, to enjoy caresses and lullabies. There is milk for all; it is ridiculous to push each other aside, afraid of being excluded. All children, brothers and sisters will be fed to fullness. The comfort of those who feel abandoned comes in the full and effective form of breastfeeding, the first consolation received after the laceration of birth. The audacity of prophecy reaches its climax when God speaks directly, promising that he himself will console, as only a mother can and knows how to console, that is, by breastfeeding, caressing, cradling, guaranteeing a redundant fullness. However, divine consolation does not promise any return to the “lost paradise.” In fact, being breastfeeding, it acts in the alternation of feeding and abstinence, close contact and detachment. Breastfeeding does not saturate, but slowly prepares for the separation typical of weaning. There is a paradox in divine consolation: at the precise moment of its effectiveness, while trying to win over an abandoned heart, it initiates a procedure of separation.

According to many, at best, Christian consolation is useless, or even false, because it tends to be analgesic, incorporeal and evanescent, with the claim to saturate every sense of loss and abandonment in the name of God. I wonder: which God are we talking about? Which God do such critics understand from the Christian proclamation that came to their ears? Certainly not the God of the Sacred Scriptures, who consoles like a mother, suckling a child (Is 66,10 -14), beginning a process of separation in the very act of consoling; as if detachment were not only the reason for comfort, but also its condition and fulfillment. This dynamic is present in the Gospels in such an insistent way that failure to observe it is surprising.

It is already vibrantly present in the first proclamation of Christ about the operative presence of God in the world: “Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Mt 4,17). The good news is that God does not forsake, but is “nearby”. This closeness does not indicate first of all a near future (“God is coming into the world”); rather it manifests the mode of his current presence; namely that “God is *nearby*”. Exactly like a mother who does not always stay with her baby, but by putting it down after feeding it, she slowly accustoms it to being alone, preparing it for weaning. She still stays *nearby* (in the kitchen? in another room?), ready for the call of the child; however, the child perceives its mother as absent and considers the brief moment between screaming, tears and the arrival of its mother as interminable. Screaming and wailing, the child complains at being abandoned, but when it is “encouraged” that its mother is *nearby* it will be “heartened”, being able to stay alone. In consoling, God does not behave like an anxious parent that the child manages to keep at its side, as a guarantor of continuous, total fullness. In fact, like a mother who is sure of

her own love, God remains *nearby*; he does not saturate the sense of absence, if anything he kindles it and enables the child to live in it.

Considering the image of God who comforts by breastfeeding (Is 66,10 -14) and the “coming and going” of the Kingdom, a question arises: why would separation, distance and lack – the causes of the sense of abandonment – be part of the process of consolation? The answer is favored by Donald Winnicott’s extraordinary insight, in the light of the complex, decisive experience of weaning. As already mentioned, the mother must encourage the gradual detachment of the child from the false self-image, deriving from full satisfaction, typical of breast-feeding. The child gradually experiences the discontinuous presence of its mother. She is there and she is not there; she comes and goes; she shows herself and then disappears. The child’s first reaction is a resentful repudiation of its mother, since she no longer conforms to its expectations of completeness. However, if from the beginning the woman has given her child sufficient proof of trustworthiness, it will begin to cope with her absences. In this it is helped by its mother herself who, “in a state of coming and going”, presents herself alternately, adapting to the child’s current ability to find her and allowing herself to be sought as she *really* is, that is, not fully corresponding to the child’s expectations. This dynamic is impossible without the child experiencing separation, distance and the lack of its mother. If this works, the child will feel that the mother is trustworthy, despite not being always present as it would like. In this way it learns to be alone, beginning a new phase of life, characterized by the ability to play, that is, to create, to invent the world, by *engaging in play*. Little by little, the child begins to *play* with real things and real people, thanks to inventiveness and the respect for the rules typical of every game. If the mother were a saturating presence, the child would not open up to the creativity of games. Without absence and a sense of abandonment, there would be no play.

Consolation therefore appears to be a process of comings and goings, absence and return, abandonment and presence, making it possible *to enter or re-enter into the game*, in life, in faith. It is not a readymade gift, but *the gift of a conquest*.

The dynamic of consolation begins on one condition: the hope of the comforter. The gesture of the mother who begins to leave the child alone is motivated by the hope that the child *can* be alone. Without hope in the *power* of the child, the woman would not leave it for a moment. In this sense, the spark of consolation is the recognition of strength, hope in a power. The mother consoles because she encourages, not first of all by imposing a task (“You must!”), but by declaring “You can!” Looking at her newborn baby, still with eyes closed or gaze lost, she is saying: “You can return my gaze!” Sooner or later, her little one will look into her eyes. Smiling at him, despite the fact that the baby’s face is almost expressionless, she is saying: “You can smile!” Sooner or later the baby will do it. By repeating the first words (“mum”, “dad”, “baby”...), she confirms: “You can talk and

answer!” The child will talk sooner or later. By leaving the child alone, she tells it: “You can play, inhabiting reality, listening to its ‘Yes!’ and its ‘No!’” The good mother is the initiator and guardian of “You can!” Therefore, where others accuse, she sees possibilities, where others report falls and failures, she seizes the ability to get up again. In her child she sees not only victories or only defeats, but she intuitively, in any case, possibilities.

Here, the dynamic between a sense of abandonment and consolation favors the non-rhetorical interpretation of trust, of confidence and trustworthiness. Their light and warmth are not those of a sun visible 24 hours a day, since even the sun needs the nighttime.