

Book Reviews

Anna Massi
a.massi@performat.it



Cornell W. F., (2015) *Somatic experience in psychoanalysis and psychotherapy: in the expressive language of the living*. New York: Routledge.

Working with the body in psychotherapy is not a simple matter and writing on the significance the body assumes in the therapeutic process can turn out to be a yet more arduous task. Reich only has hitherto studied those elements of the body linked to an individual's personality. It is indeed in a Reichian school that Cornell starts his education in psychotherapy. However, his dissatisfaction with that cathartic model according to which the therapist plays the active role in the patient's change and the patient is a passive subject who must be healed leads him - as detailed in this book - to approach alternative methods. Continuously he seeks a therapeutic model which can contain always more and which is able to assemble both the psychological and physical dimensions of the patient. Through his encounter with Transactional Analysis he develops the concept of third-degree level script, to which Berne refers as "tissue script" and that of script protocol. During his clinical experience he progressively focuses his attention upon non-

verbal forms of communication by patients, on their gestures, their posture and their gaze. With certain patients, particularly those who have experienced some childhood trauma in their relationship with caregivers, Cornell understands that even the tools acquired during training at Transactional Analysis school do not suffice in revealing the profound meaning of the body's deep-seated wounds. His passion for psychotherapy and psychoanalysis prompts him to seek out supervisors from different approaches, among whom Bollas and Stan Perelman, who enable him via the application of transference and countertransference to get in contact with the unconscious emotional states. Besides, the writings of Winnicott, McLaughlin and Bucci provide him with a valid theoretical aid towards facilitating an understanding of the non-verbal language of patients.

The body thus becomes for Cornell that place of pre-linguistic organization of all that is known but not thought about, a place where the conscious and the unconscious organize the experience of individuals and pilot their script decisions.

Bollas defines Cornell's work as "a one off" owing to the originality of the topic it concerns and to the author's broad-mindedness in passionately describing his own structured educational and personal pathway. Cornell's roles as patient, psychotherapist, supervisor and supervisee are all interwoven and overlap, so generating a continuous and authentic integration between his own mind and body as well as the mind and the body of his patients. The several vignettes of clinical cases included in Cornell's book assist the reader in understanding the method he adopts with a view to approaching the profound wounds in the bodily experience of his patients - a method that foresees a bodily contact at once conscious and strategic. The therapist's body too steps into the therapeutic setting, used here to overcome deep impasses where verbal healing remains inaccessible.

The therapist seeks to feel perceived patient sensations in his own body. Instead of thinking solely of the patient's body, both therapist and patient think with, and through, their body. It is a somatic enactment

of sorts. Such body contact of the kind which, since birth, allows us to discover ourselves through others in our vitality and vulnerability is considered by Cornell to be a form of communication and thought, a genuine ability linked to emotional memory. When working in therapy at the somatic level we approach a subsymbolic level, as defined by Wilma Bucci. It is a means by which people process information and create internal representations. The subsymbolic level operates within adaptive, sensory, somatic, and motorial mental processes which cannot be experienced through verbal communication. The numerous clinical cases described by the author in his book reveal the concept of subsymbolic organization as well as the means of facing somatic aspects of script protocol in treatment. It is a courageous and innovative work whose author is not afraid to explore uncharted territories considered risky by a broad fringe of analysts and psychotherapists. An author who dares to traverse any prejudice and limit, Cornell urges his colleagues to pay more attention to the somatic aspects of their patients. Certainly his work will contribute to developing and elevating an operative progression within Transactional Analysis towards non-verbal, archaic and subsymbolic levels which have remained largely unexplored and in need of significant in-depth analysis.