PSYCHOANALYSIS
AND
SEVERE HANDICAP

The Hand in the Cap

ANGELO VILLA
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Thanks to Annarita Tavani for the passion and competence she showed while editing this work. Thanks to all the people—and they are many indeed—who made this book possible with their experience, sensitivity, and intelligence in their daily work with handicapped people. Finally, thanks to my daughter Melania who, between conscious and unconscious, from one ocean to another, saw to this project with love and care.
In an epoch when time is the most scarcely available good, books become the object of very rigorous selection. Faced with the excessive range currently on offer, the first question we all ask ourselves is: “Will this book be worth reading?” The answers will be very different, for we all have our priorities. I am not expecting my own priorities to be valid for everyone, but I will state them here.

I want three things from an essay: first, that it is relevant to my interest for psychological, or more precisely psychoanalytical issues; second, that it is absorbing; and third, that it is educational in the widest meaning of the word, that is, it provides knowledge, competence, new experiences, and previously unexplored horizons.

It is a risky business. But when a book makes it, it is a proper gift and it deserves to be read enthusiastically, for books live on the communicative exchange between the writer and the reader. All of this happens from the very first pages of Angelo Villa’s extraordinary work *Psychoanalysis and Severe Handicap*.

This book was not improvised, because it is the result of a professional adventure that coincides with the author’s life; such is the value of the elements of scientific knowledge, experience, and consideration that pervade this book.
Freud claimed that there are three impossible tasks, that is, educating, healing, and governing; but that they deserve to be strenuously pursued precisely by virtue of their impossibility. Villa accepts this challenge with courage and humility, for he is convinced that the journey is more worthy than the goal, and that one learns as much, or perhaps more, from failures than from accomplishments.

The enigmatic subtitle to the book refers to the etymology of the English word “handicap”, but I will not anticipate anything about it here, because it acquires meaning only after a long, demanding reflection aimed at understanding the human condition we call severe psychic deficiency. That condition is so extreme that it acts as a lens we can use to observe several aspects of our being in the world—magnified, exasperated, sometimes deformed, but always engaging.

Villa knows that his journey of exploration is a hard one and he faces it with the most appropriate tools, finding his way into his own mind and into the minds of other people. Among these: Hegel’s philosophy as it was interpreted by Kojève; Freudian psychoanalysis as it was reconsidered by Lacan; phenomenological psychiatry; and, last but not least, his ability to ask himself questions, to put everything at stake, to get lost, and to find himself again.

This book is also relevant because of the author’s skill in substantiating his theoretical considerations through proper, precise reference to institutional, educational, and therapeutic experiences. Such elements are not offered in a generic, impersonal way, but through snapshots that freeze the sick individual in that moment when they attract our attention through the expression of a symptom. Once interiorised by the interlocutor’s working mind, a seemingly insignificant conduct acquires meaning and value, thus bestowing the dignity of a subject on its performer.

The task of subjectivising those who are unable to do so by themselves, to pull them away from a condition of reifying objectivity by giving them a subjectivity that changes their essential status, is one of the guiding threads of this book. The same task is to be performed in several other cases, among which there is a crucial one: that of the infans, who has no other subjectivity than the one we want and are able to attach to him.

But the ability to mentally elaborate on real-life incidents in order to turn them into experience is not only attributed to “normal” people. Albeit partially, it is also up to the handicapped to perform that task, as
far as the inner Other that limits them does not engulf everything, but rather leaves room for some self-healing process with which it is always possible to form an alliance.

As the vertical asymmetry between normality and abnormality gradually decreases and glances are exchanged, psychic handicap stops being a chapter in psychiatry handbooks and becomes a variable of the human condition, a modality of coexistence—albeit a weak and contradictory one.

At all events, the encounter with the other is not a datum, but a staging that must be constructed by interacting inside and outside oneself, on the intrapsychic and on the interpsychic level at the same time. Only by welcoming the Other within us, that is, the Unconscious, will we be able to accept the Other within the other, that is, the severely psychically disabled person’s handicap.

In particular, in order to interact with people suffering from severe psychic deficiencies, it is necessary to engage in a dialectics of reciprocal acknowledgment that subjectivises both poles of communication, so that we are always “someone” for “someone”.

Whereas positivist psychiatry dealt with sickness and phenomenological psychiatry with the sick, what Villa strongly, convincingly, suggests should be dealt with is the relationship, the rapport that is established between the normal and those who are not normal, both being overshadowed by Otherness.

This sphere goes through the psychic apparatus, alienating it from itself even before it is alienated from others, and requires the acceptance of what Freud calls the “narcissistic wound”, the acknowledgement that the Ego is not the master in its own house.

If normality and abnormality are no longer seen as opposites, if they are rather seen as similar in some respects, where is the difference? If we locate difference in the existence of several degrees of efficiency, we fall into an orthopaedy of behaviour that reduces handicap to a “thing”, eluding the issue of the subject. Through the emancipatory intention of integration and autonomy, Villa sees the risk of reducing the psychically impaired subject to a robotic body, evading the fundamental question that relates to identity: “Who is there?”

At the same time, the author is also critical of those who, though facing the issue, hurriedly shun it through a rhetorical exasperation that eliminates difference. A statement such as: “The other is like you”, may sound highly ethical, but it is not when it saturates the question,
inhibiting the inquiry and presupposing that the journey of reciprocal knowledge has ended when it has not even started.

Villa suggests, instead, keeping open the inquiry about the ego that so engaged Freud and subsequent psychoanalytic studies. He locates the crucial difference between psychic ability and disability exactly in the ego, and identifies the opposition between “me” and “not-me”—which turns those who are different into monsters, thus denying the “monstrosity” within us—with the very origin of identity.

Before such “crime” of the soul, treatment acquires an ethical status, even before acquiring a therapeutic one.

The first essential step is not in treating, but in understanding and accepting margins of ignorance and feelings of impotence and guilt.

Once the other’s request has been welcomed, it is necessary to meet it, even when the only possible answer consists in leaving the question open, overcoming the temptation to deny loss by avoiding the encounter.

The possibility of encountering the other requires being emotionally available, but it becomes essentially tangible in the exchange of symbols, for the subject is the product of language.

If, as the Bible says, to name things is to create them, the effectiveness of communication resides in words, whereas images tend to immobilise thought in a narcissistic mirror-like process. The subject is redefined against the background of the linguistic priority suggested by Lacan, by combining the grammatical “I”, accountable for its utterances, with the passive sphere of the subiectum in the Latin meaning of the term, that is, of someone who is “subjected” to the laws of language. This is a virtuous dependency, for discursive logic safeguards thought from the temptation of almightiness that translates into impotence. Villa here begins a very remarkable disquisition about normativeness, meant not only as a cage, a limit, a barrier, but also as a condition for freedom and creativity. This issue directly involves institutions meant as places and times where the severely psychically disabled person can find an open sphere of existence that neither crushes her under the social diagnosis of retardation, inability, or impossibility, nor confronts her with an injunction of normality (“be like us”) that could immobilise her creative potential in a state of servile acquiescence.

When intelligence is not reduced to efficiency, but refers instead to the literal meaning of intelligere, that is, “reading between the lines”, the
symptom becomes an element to be interpreted first of all as related to the meaning of textual exegesis, and only then psychoanalytically.

However, no interpretation will ever be able to completely disambiguate psychotic utterances; an opaque residue will always be there. It is in such residue that Villa locates the challenge and the limit that keeps the work of the institution alive.

It is frustrating work, always in danger of plunging into habit, boredom, or depression, if it is not constantly revived by the passion of the request. Being able to wait for an answer while keeping the question open, contrasts stereotyped attitudes, rigid organisations, and pre-established methodologies to leave room for the unpredictable, the novelty, and a freedom of speech that is the opposite of “words on the loose”.

In this regard, the book offers the creativity of the Witz, the witticism in which Freud recognises the overcoming of a conflict through an expression that forces, but does not destroy, the normative frame to which it refers.

Without any margin of freedom, both the disabled person and the worker who takes care of him enter a process of increasing chronicity; but if there is no explicit reference to shared rules, everything falls into fortuitousness and insignificance.

As you will see, Villa’s argumentation proceeds through aporias that are not always soluble. His aim is to trace a map that might orientate us in the search for a treasure—the reciprocal knowledge of ourselves and of the other—that will never be found once and for all, but that, at all events, constitutes the prime mover of psychic life, the interface between the outside and the inside that resists being reduced to only one aspect.

What I have outlined here is just one of the possible reading routes that this extraordinarily rich and complex book offers to its readers.

Another route concerns the training of the workers who are active in psycho-educational institutions; another equally relevant reading route concerns the path open to all those people who are willing to ponder upon human relationships that are both inescapable and impossible.

Finally, it is with great gratitude that I take my leave from a reading that teaches and also educates, for it takes us higher and further away from our starting place.
Come to me with your cap in your hands

Jamieson Webster

*A parable in the word “handicap”*

There is a story of misunderstanding and misappropriation in the etymological history of the term handicap that is uncanny. Lore has it that handicap comes from the idea of having your cap in your hand, that is, being a beggar, which is one reason the term has been much maligned in the contemporary world of cultural sensitivity and political correctness. However, the link between handicap and mendicancy is not in fact the origin of the word which actually comes from a seventeenth-century (perhaps earlier) game called “hand in the cap”, or “hand-i-cap” for short, where three players play at agreeing or disagreeing to a barter set up by a third player. One’s willingness to assent to a particular deal when others may not (the spoils of easily recognisable advantages or disadvantages go to the umpire) is in essence what is rewarded in this game of chance and interpersonal exchange. Because part of the game involved establishing the value of a particular barter in order to determine how to equalise the playing field, the word hand-i-cap became used more generally in sport for penalties applied in order to square the odds. This was true, for example, in horse races where weight added to the superior horse was called a handicap. It is in this regard that
handicap was transmuted into a name for those who suffered a range of human disabilities; though it seems important to note a change from an imposed disability on the dominant subject to an inborn or acquired one which defines the person who is deficient.

Inherent in the etymology of the word is an ethics that necessitates a third party judgment in the determination of odds, a tense and terse game of human interchange, that seems to me particularly apt with respect to the question of the handicapped. But what then do we make of the reversal of the words hand and cap that transforms the understanding of the history of the word, along with the recent moral outrage at defining disability in terms of a figure who is dependant and in need. Something is being covered over. Aren’t the handicapped dependant and in need precisely in the way defined by this little game where someone must judge the stakes and the parties must consent to these terms? And finally, does not the other possible meaning of “cap-in-hand” unite with “hand-in-cap” around a definitional suggestion of humility, of humbly asking someone more powerful for aid, of that more powerful person allowing themselves to be weighed down in accepting the other? Is this not ultimately what is elided in this historical unfolding of the word?

The history of the word seems to have bearing on the history of the treatment of the handicapped, immersed by the human phantasms that crowd in when situations of identity and difference, exchange, debt, and loss, or autonomy and dependency, are at play. The institutions that work with the handicapped are particularly vulnerable to these imaginings. The unique difficulties that we face in the face of human handicap, allegorised in this mytho-etymological parable, will become clear to you as you read this extraordinary work by Angelo Villa, an author whose name, let me remind you, means the messenger or angel of the house.

My cap in my hands

No other author of late has held me rooted in place, with my cap in my hands, asking him how? Who are you that was able to do this work? And with what grace did you find the perseverance not only to do it, but to write about it as well? This book left me questioning how far I have pushed what I have learned as a psychoanalyst, no less; how far I would be willing to push what I know; how much uncertainty I
can tolerate. That I have neither the will nor the courage to answer the call of severe disability, to combine with force the two most unlikely of categories—psychoanalysis and the handicapped—in a work that clearly spans a lifetime, leaves me remarkably humbled. And yet this last adjective, used to describe my experience of reading this book, belongs more to Villa than it does to myself. The humility that he evokes when showing us what working psychoanalytically with severe handicap entails—and the institutions that house handicapped people and their families—is unparalleled. The impotence and helplessness when all known categories are put in jeopardy, along with all-too-human expectations for inter-subjective relations, is perhaps only matched in the long-term treatment of psychosis and severe trauma. I feel as if I had not known the meaning of care before reading this book.

Villa seems to me to return to something immanent in the original use of the word handicap, namely, that the more advantaged player must assume an added weight, must assume a handicap, and that to do so is the only way to enter into the game. This is intrinsic to his work as a clinician where psychical elaboration is absolutely necessary in order not to disavow the inevitable rage, lassitude, and horror in the confrontation with disability. Only in allowing oneself to get to know this range of debilitating feelings—it’ll never turn out better than ok, they’ll never be able to, I wish I could wash my hands of them, they are monstrous and inhuman—can one even find a foot to stand on in this work, no less its ethical edge. It has a great deal to do with finding a place in which to experience surprise and innovation despite the most insistent repetition.

Political correctness demands one see that “the other is like me”, an inscription that is written at the entrance of one of the facilities where Villa works. This covers over an irreducible Otherness in all human relations, one all the more extreme in the case of handicaps. Villa calls this the encounter with the “sick Other”. We are all Other to ourselves, but a sick Other adds something to this. Villa refuses any act of erasing Otherness, while also asking what is necessary in order to mediate this gap and care for the handicapped. This ethical position is one the author takes up but does not force on his readers—and god knows he could, or even has a right to, given all he has been through. Miraculously, what Villa does in his tone and his style is invite you, even permit you, to assume the burden with the same ease that he has. *Come to me with your cap in your hands* …
So the book is undoubtedly a good book. Good in all the ways implied in the use we might make of the term: it tastes good, I feel good, he’s a good man, he’s good at what he does, it’s good for you, that was good of you. There are, funnily enough, opposite poles with respect to the idea of the good in psychoanalysis between the two contemporary thinkers who figure most prominently for Villa. If the good is a massive source of suspicion for Jacques Lacan, coming at a cost to a desire that has too much specificity for the commerce of goods that always borders on the super-egoic, it is equally the source of moral reparation, the sense of gratitude, and any feeling of inner possibility for Melanie Klein, along with being at the origin of all symbolisation. I would say that the book contains both meanings. It is good, but it also goes beyond the good. It is unimpeachably ethical, and in this it has something to teach us, not only about our most foundational concepts but also what it means to be a psychoanalyst.

Who answers the call?

It is important to situate Villa’s work and training for an English speaking audience. Lacanian psychoanalysis in its clinical practice is a mystery to much of the Anglo-American world by virtue of some historical circumstances, the most important being Lacan’s “excommunication”, as he liked to call it, from the International Psychoanalytic Association. I think even more mysterious still are those who have worked in a certain tradition following some of Lacan’s earliest disciples who ultimately sought to work within institutions, especially those that dealt with children and families. Lacan did not work with children, though he was very interested in the research of his colleagues which often made its appearance in many of his seminars. Through applying the concepts that Lacan was beginning to develop in their institutions, they invented psychoanalytic work anew, along with defining the place that psychoanalysts might occupy within such settings in order to intervene. Sadly, much of this writing remains untranslated into English.

Françoise Dolto, for example, who left the Société Psychoanalytique de Paris with Lacan, is a figure with the same public presence in France as Winnicott in England: she worked at the Trousseau hospital, spoke on the radio to parents, opened nurseries known as Maisons Vertes which now exist across Europe, wrote parenting handbooks and children’s storybooks that dealt with difficult topics, created a method for intervening with pre- and post-partum parents in order to prevent
future problems, as well as writing countless books and articles for clinicians working with children in the neurotic and psychotic spectrum. In a personal reminiscence, she recalls that Lacan used to say to her often: “You don’t need to understand what I say because without theorizing about it you say the same thing” (in Roudinesco, 1999, p. 241). Only one of her books, *The Case of Dominique*, is translated into English as of yet. Such, we might imagine, is the imaginary power of group dynamics.

Some of the other more central figures in French psychoanalysis of importance with respect to Angelo Villa’s work include Jenny Aubry, who worked at the Necker hospital for sick children and consulted with Bowlby, Spitz, Winnicott, Anna Freud, and the Tavistock more generally; and Rosine Lefort, who worked with Aubry and wrote up the extended treatments of two psychotic children she treated in her book, *The Birth of the Other*. Also, Maud Mannoni worked at the experimental school in Bonneuil and wrote two very important books, translated into English, about working with children and families: *The Child, His Illness, and the Others* and *The Backward Child and his Mother*. The latter is a book that functions as something of a prelude to Villa’s *Psychoanalysis and Severe Handicap*, as it is about working with the families of children with handicap or, as it was called at the time, mental retardation. While Villa is critical of Mannoni collapsing too readily the categories of psychosis and intellectual disability, he agrees with her concerning the risk that someone with a handicap can be pushed into psychosis when his environment fails to recognize his position as a subject with his own desire, however complicated understanding those desires or communicating with them may be. He calls this retrograde situation becoming chronic, where stereopathy and depression win in the struggle to create room for desire.

Mannoni, like Villa, was taught to carefully listen to the place the child is granted in the parent’s discourse, as that will indicate something about the difficulty the child might have in situating herself in relation to her parent’s desires. Is this space foreclosed? Does it coerce certain identifications? Is the child conceived as separate and with desires of his own or is he treated as an inert object? Is the discourse melancholic and suffused with frustration and aggression? What history is having an impact on the parents’ imagination of their child? Who was their fantasy child before this one came into being to contradict or fulfill those wishes? This set of questions is no less valid in working with the handicapped and their families.