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The Healing Word Between Mimesis and Catharsis: The Real and "Its" Representation

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Abstract. The article begins by examining Carlo Diano's interpretation of Aristotle's theory of catharsis. According to Diano, the therapeutic dimension of this Aristotelian concept has deep roots in the thought of Hippocrates, with its influence extending as far as the works of Galen. At the core of the cathartic effect lies the idea of presenting representations that anticipate on stage the misfortunes one might encounter in life. In this sense, the mind itself can be conceived as a stage upon which we project situations, problems, and figures, in order to find words and expressions that allow us to share certain contents on a social level. In the second part, these theories are revisited in light of the contributions of Freud, Lacan, and Zupančič, with particular attention to the relationship between trauma, theatre, and memory.

Keywords. Catharsis, Aristotle, Freud, theatre, mind.

> False concept of mimesis. The figures of art are more real than reality itself; reality is the imitation of the figures of art. […] It is certain that the world must exist as representation: whereas we are merely the represented object.
>
> Fr. Nietzsche, *Posthumous Fragments*

In a text written in 1968, entitled *The Tragic Catharsis*, Carlo Diano claims to have discovered the exact meaning with which Aristotle uses the term *catharsis* in his *Poetics* (Diano [1968a]: 215).

The starting point is one that is all too familiar: in the course of life, we encounter a series of banes and misfortunes. This is a fact that requires no further explanation, as it is immediately comprehensible to all. One might say, with Chateaubriand, that misfortune is a resource we can always count on.

Diano addresses this issue by drawing on quotations from Euripides and Thucydides. When Pericles, for example, speaks of the plague that struck Athens in 430 BC, he states: «we must endure terrible things, realising their inevitability» (*Thuc.* II, 64, 2).

At the same time, this bitter acknowledgment is counterbalanced by an almost instinctive need to resist and oppose these banes. This need is expressed in several fragments by Euripides. In the *Cresiphon*, to mention just one of the examples cited by Diano, Euripides speaks of «pulling us out of sorrows» (fr. 449); and in the *Supplices* (vv. 949-954), he refers to putting an end to travails, overcoming perils and pains.

1. *The occurrence of misfortunes and the reaction of the intellect*

A preliminary question arises – one that also serves to clarify the broader theoretical framework of Diano's interpretation: if banes and misfortunes are sent by necessity or by the gods, how is it possible that Greek individuals could even conceive of putting an end to them? How is it possible to imagine escaping the dominion of necessity or divine will?

According to Diano, the words of Euripides and Thucydides are made possible – indeed, are only thinkable – within the cultural revolution initiated by Anaxagoras, who was also the teacher of Socrates. The genuine turning point represented by Anaxagoras lies in a radical inversion of the traditional Greek worldview: the gods are no longer many; there is only one god, and that god is *Nous*, the intellect. In human beings, the intellect can thus be considered as something divine.

Thanks to the intellect, we are able to infer the invisible from the visible. This thesis (DK 59 B21) – which, according to Diano, Anaxagoras shares with the Hippocratic tradition (Diano [1968b]: 292) – marks, in his view, the beginning of Western scientific thought. Many of the phenomena we observe on the empirical level

become intelligible through the rational forms that the intellect allows us to "see": from what is visible, we move toward what is invisible, and through this movement we gain a better understanding of how visible phenomena are interconnected.

At this stage, the categories of gods and necessity are no longer operative. There is no longer an explicit connection between the rational forms grasped by the intellect and the empirical events themselves; rather, it is the intellect that *conjectures* their possible connection. In this gap between thought and reality, *Týche* – fate – can emerge: a form of fate that is neither good fortune nor misfortune, but simply what happens to us, what "touches" us without any specific reason.

Thus, by chance and without reason, banes may affect us; yet we possess the capacity to counteract them precisely by virtue of our faculty of reasoning. It is this capacity that enables us to distinguish among different forms of banes and misfortunes, and to confront them as if engaging in an act of valour – a *virtus* akin to that which, in warfare, allows one to attain glory. Through a series of philological corroborations (see Diano [1968a]: 220), Diano connects this *virtus* to the art that heals the soul from pain (the so-called *téchne álypías*), attributed to Antiphon the Sophist and mentioned in Plutarch's *Lives of the Ten Orators*.

At this point, attention is directed to the meaning of this technique aimed at healing the soul from suffering. Diano links it to the capacity for meditating in advance upon future banes – the so-called *praemeditatio futurorum malorum* – a practice attested in Galen's treatise *On the Doctrine of Hippocrates and Plato*, as well as in Cicero (see *Tuscolanae* III, 29). In particular, Diano cites a fragment from Euripides' *Theseus* (fr. 964 ed. Nauck), in which a wise man is described. He reflects upon every possible event, meditating on all the world's misfortunes, so that if, one day, any of those banes – already familiar to him through repeated mental representation – should befall him, it would not strike entirely unforeseen. In this way, we might say, misfortune proves far less painful than if it were to burst into one's life as something utterly unknown: to some extent, he has learned to recognise it in advance, to become familiar with it.

To this fragment from *Theseus*, Diano adds a passage in which Galen summarises the doctrine of the *Therapeutics* of Chrysippus, where it is recommended to "*proendeméin*" things and to consider them as though they were present, even when they are not yet so. The verb *proendeméin* means "to dwell in things in advance", "to imagine them before they happen", or, perhaps more precisely, "to pre-imagine" them – something very close to Cicero's *praemeditatio futurorum malorum*.

2. *Dwelling in things in advance*

Why must we imagine things before they happen? Why is it necessary to meditate on them before they become real and present? The answer is once again

found in a work by Plutarch, *On the Tranquillity of Mind* (476D–E), which includes a passage from Menander that plays a significant role in Diano's interpretation[1]: «You cannot say, while you are alive: this will not happen to me». Each of us is exposed to banes and misfortunes, and no one can be certain that this or that misfortune will not occur during their lifetime.

At this point, all the essential elements are in place, and it is merely a matter of assembling them: misfortunes inevitably strike us over the course of life, and since they may occur at any moment, the most effective way not to succumb to them is to pre-imagine them – to foresee them in our thoughts – so that they do not arrive as a complete surprise and, as a result, cause greater suffering.

From this idea, one can trace a long tradition: beginning with Socrates' meditation on death (*meditatio mortis*, as the Latins would say), continuing through Cicero's *Tuscolanae*, and extending – at least, as Diano shows – as far as Dante's *Paradiso*: «ché saetta previsa vien più lenta» (*Par*., XVII, 27), that is, «for slower comes an arrow when foreseen».

In this context, however, our focus is on the more concrete meaning of that technique capable of healing the soul from pain. We are concerned with understanding what this technique consists of, and how it functioned in ancient thought.

Already at the outset, an epistemological problem emerges: the effectiveness of this technique is closely tied to the development of a scientific mentality in the West. We must recall that capacity for conjecture that allows us to link visible, empirical, material things to invisible ones – that is, to rational forms or theories, which help us, so to speak, to bring order to the empirical world.

At the same time, we must also recall that death constitutes the individual event *par excellence*. Death captures the uniqueness, the singularity, and the unrepeatable nature of each person's existence. We can say that death is the *infungible* element of human life. I will die at that precise moment, in those specific conditions and circumstances, which will never be exactly those of anyone else. No one can replace me in the moment of my death, nor can I replace another.

And the same, albeit in a more attenuated form, applies to pain. I experience pain here and now, in a specific part of my body, at a particular point in my life, and under certain circumstances. Another person will experience pain for different reasons, at a different time. What we are facing here is the true singularity, the unrepeatability – and therefore the incommunicability – of what happens to us. Death and misfortune are the clearest and most definitive expressions of this: we know nothing of another person's pain or suffering; we understand nothing of their death.

1 On the relationship between Menander and Hippocratic rationalism see Simone (2007): 151.

3. *The pain of the individual and the universality of science*

We now return to the epistemological problem previously mentioned: how effective can science truly be in this context? Science relies on universal concepts through which it brings order to the empirical realm. It understands particular phenomena by interpreting them in light of general categories. Yet in this case, we are not dealing with particulars that can be subsumed under universals. Rather, we are confronted with radically singular, unique elements: death, misfortune, and the deeply personal manner in which each individual encounters and responds to such misfortunes.

Aristotle, followed by the scholastic tradition, had already observed that "*de individuis non datur scientia*": there is no science of the individual. How, then, can science grasp the absolute singularity of pain and death?

In response, Diano again turns to a verse from Menander: «doctor to man is speech when he feels sick inside. The word alone has the power to control the soul and heal it» (fr. 782 K). Similar formulations can be found in Aeschylus – «words are a physician to the ill soul» (*Prom.*, v. 378) – and in Euripides: «for mortals there is no medicine in sadness worth the animating word of a man worthy of esteem and friendship» (fr. 1079). All these passages, along with others from the *Iliad* and from Gorgias' *Helen*, are discussed by Diano in the central pages of his essay (see Diano [1968a]: 252-253).

In particular, by quoting Gorgias, Diano draws attention to a key passage from § 8 of *Helen*: «The word has the power to make fear (*phóbos*) cease, to remove sadness (*lýpen*), to engender gladness, to increase pity (*éleon*)» (see Diano [1968a]: 254).

This could hardly offer a more precise description of the *téchne álypías*, the technique that cures the soul's pain, specifically by dispelling fear and enhancing pity. The description is not metaphorical, but technical and exact. The word – through mechanisms we do not yet fully understand, and which demand further investigation – acts by extinguishing fear and effectively removing sadness.

This overcoming of pain and grief – this sort of "pleasure" produced by the word – operates precisely by intensifying pity. Pity, here, signifies the capacity to experience the banes and misfortunes of others, as witnessed on stage, as though they were one's own. We might translate this concept with another Greek term: *sympathy* – the ability to "suffer together" (*sym-pathein*) with others. If we now turn to Aristotle's *Poetics*, this framework becomes clearer. In the central passage, we read:

> Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions. (Arist. 1449 b 25-29)

In other words, *mimesis* allows us to witness the suffering of others on stage. At the theatre, I observe the lives of others, distanced from myself – indeed, "theatre" and "theory" share the same etymological root. Confronted with this suffering, I initially feel fear at what I see unfold, and then pity for the protagonist of the tragedy: I suffer with him, I *sympathise*.

Yet all of this depends upon a specific use of language – an "embellished language". Through poetic language, tragedy transforms singular, individual suffering into something universal, something intelligible to all.

This "ability" of the word – of language – to universalise individual experience and make it shareable with others is precisely what transforms fear into a form of pleasure. It is what enables the purgation of emotions. Here, then, lies the true meaning of "catharsis": a purification achieved through the shared experience of bane, pain, and misfortune. We suffer and mourn together with others, and this collective experience allows us, in some way, to anticipate misfortune, to "dwell in things in advance": it is a form of meditation that prepares us for the banes that may come – or that are yet to come.

4. *Giving words to pain*

One of the fundamental operations made possible by language is the transformation of pain from a strictly individual experience into a shared and, to some extent, collectively recognisable one. In this sense, the well-known proverb "a problem shared is a problem halved" captures, in simplified form, an intuition that classical thought – and especially tragic literature – has long explored. Tragedy offers not only representations of suffering, but interpretive frameworks and cognitive models through which pain can be understood, anticipated, and, therefore, to some extent, mitigated. In particular, by narrating paradigmatic cases – those of Oedipus, Prometheus, Antigone – tragedy articulates forms of knowledge that allow the individual to recognise in advance the outlines of misfortune, and to find in those words, in those stories, a kind of protection when suffering arrives. The ability to name pain, to give it a form within language, is already a gesture of care: it is, in itself, a way of softening its impact.

At the heart of this process lies the therapeutic potential of narration and conceptual abstraction. The universalising function of language – its capacity to detach from the singular empirical case and trace general patterns – represents a fundamental condition not only for the development of scientific knowledge, but also for any technique of healing or treatment. It is precisely through abstraction that the singular experience of suffering can be translated into a form that others, too, may understand and, in part, share. While it is true that in the process of generalisation something is lost – namely, the unrepeatable uniqueness of each person's suffering

– it is also true that something is gained: the possibility of common understanding, of shared tools of resistance, and of a collective elaboration of pain.

In this sense, the word appears as the most powerful and irreplaceable means for transforming the otherwise mute experience of suffering into a communicable one. Where pain remains unspoken, it risks becoming incommunicable and thus unelaborated – confined to the private sphere of the unsaid. By contrast, when suffering is given form through language, it becomes a constituent part of culture and of the symbolic resources upon which individuals and communities rely. The word, therefore, plays a dual role: it creates the distance necessary for conceptual reflection, and at the same time opens a space of shared recognition. It allows individuals not only to express their pain but to locate themselves within a broader symbolic order that gives that pain meaning.

This dual function – at once analytical and relational – explains why language is not simply a means of communication, but an instrument of healing. The act of naming suffering does not merely externalise it: it integrates it into a structure of sense, making it available for reflection, narration, and – ultimately – transformation. In this way, the language of tragedy does not console by denying misfortune, but by offering models through which misfortune can be confronted. The word, as we have seen, "acts as a doctor to men" precisely because it enables a form of prefiguration, a mental rehearsal of what may come, thereby diminishing the surprise and the violence of unexpected events.

Thus, we return to the central insight already encountered in earlier reflections: the capacity to foresee suffering – by meditating on it, by imagining its forms in advance – is not a mere exercise in stoicism, but a deeply cultural and symbolic process, dependent on the availability of shared narratives. It is within this symbolic space that the therapeutic dimension of representation takes root: a space in which individuals learn not only to know misfortune, but to know that others have known it before them.

From this point of view, the word becomes the condition of possibility for any communal response to suffering. It is through language that the individual experience of pain ceases to be isolated, becoming instead a thread in the wider fabric of shared human experience. This passage – from singularity to narration, from isolation to community – opens the way to a reflection on how representation, and in particular theatrical representation, can act as a form of therapy. It is to this question that we now turn.

5. *Lucretius and psychoanalysis*

As we have seen, and as common experience confirms, knowing that one is not alone in suffering from a certain affliction can bring relief. On the

other hand, it is also a common clinical observation that the ill person often asserts their uniqueness and separation from others who share the same clinical diagnosis, thereby generating a tension between the singularity and universality of suffering. The same tension can be observed when we look closely at contemporary medicine: evidence-based medicine is grounded in randomized clinical trials, where patients are treated as members of a well-defined population with homogeneous characteristics, whereas precision medicine aims to develop personalized therapeutic approaches that emphasize individual differences.

Since personalized medicine is still in its infancy, contemporary clinical practice remains largely oriented toward generalization, and the clinical interview is structured with the aim of highlighting what the patient has in common with others, rather than what distinguishes them, even within the same diagnostic category. It is therefore not surprising that certain disorders – otherwise inexplicable when considered solely from a biological perspective – become more understandable if we interpret them as a reaction of subjects to the universal and reductionist knowledge of medical science, in the name of their own individuality and complexity (see Centonze and Stampanoni Bassi [2020]).

Lucretius's answer to the question of where the relief comes from when we witness the turmoil of others is well known: it stems from the awareness that such turmoil does not concern us.

> Suave, mari magno turbantibus aequora ventis
> E terra magnum alterius spectare laborem;
> non quia vexari quemquam est iucunda voluptas,
> sed quibus ipse malis careas quia cernere suavest.
> Suave etiam belli certamina magna tueri
> Per campos instructa tua sine parte pericli.[2]

But what do neurophysiology and, above all, psychoanalysis teach us about humanity's capacity to "put oneself in another's shoes" and to feel their pain, perhaps to gain a certain relief from one's own? As is well known, the function of mirror neurons offers a particularly powerful model of the human ability to resonate with the mental and emotional state of another: in the brain of the observer, the same neurons are activated as in the brain of the person performing the observed action, thereby generating a shared neuronal substrate between agent and observer, a stable connection between the two, and a common feeling. While this

2 «It is sweet, when on the vast sea the winds stir the waters, to behold from land the great toil of another – not because it is a joy that someone suffers, but because it is sweet to see what evils yourself are free from. It is sweet also to observe great battles of war across the plains, so long as you take no part in the danger» (Lucr. *De Rerum Natura*, II, vv. 1-6).

model accounts for mechanisms of identification with the tragic hero that come into play in theater, it does not explain why the feeling of compassion (literally, "suffering with") might reverse itself into the kind of relief from suffering we are attempting to analyze in this essay.

6. *The real, reality and negation*

Watching someone undergo traumatic events may cause us to feel their same pain, and knowing that such events have already happened or might in the future happen to us does little to diminish its intensity. Nor can we be helped here by the fundamental considerations Paolo Virno makes in his essay on negation: language, far from prolonging and perfecting the empathy and mutual understanding enabled by mirror neurons (a hypothesis that seems plausible, given that these neurons are located in primates in the brain areas that in humans will develop into language regions), instead allows – precisely through the operation of negation – a crucial disarming of mirror neurons, thereby liberating humans from the neurophysiological determinism to which animals are fully subjected.

In a particularly striking example, Virno proposes in his essay that the monstrosities of which humans are capable toward their fellow beings are made possible precisely by negation: thinking "this is not a human being", the concentration camp guard deactivates in his cerebral cortex those mirror neurons that would otherwise naturally lead him to feel pain and pity toward the prisoners he torments. In other words, while mirror neurons can explain the audience's participation in the tragedy of the hero and linguistic negation can account for possible indifference to it, we are still left without an explanation for the feeling of relief, which is perhaps the most specific and deepest motivation behind tragedy.

To this end, Lacanian psychoanalysis and its concept of the Real – anguishing and without meaning – may offer insight. To explain how the subject can experience the Real more intensely in fiction than in reality, Lacan offers a particularly original commentary on a dream found in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*:

> A father had kept watch day and night beside the bed of his sick child. After the child's death, he went to rest in a nearby room, leaving the door open so he could glance into the room where the child lay in his coffin, surrounded by large candles. An old man has been assigned to keep vigil and sat beside the body, murmuring prayers. After a few hours of sleep, the father dreamed that the child was beside his bed, took him by the arm, and whispered reproachfully: "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" He awoke to see a bright light coming from the mortuary room, ran in, and found the old man asleep, and the veils and one arm of the beloved corpse scorched by a candle that had fallen on them. (Freud [1913]: 403)

As noted by Alenka Zupančič in her recent essay on disavowal, the key question in interpreting this dream is: where do we locate the traumatic Real that wakes the subject – within reality or within the dream? Freud leans toward the former, positing that the light from the room where the child lay awakened the father momentarily, who then fell back asleep, incorporating that light into a dream that allowed him to continue resting. Lacan, however, observes that it is another kind of fire that wakes the father: the son's words of reproach, like a "live coal", touch a point of the Real that strikes deeply. The father wakes in order to escape the senseless Real of death and guilt, taking refuge in the comfort of waking life and its reassuring routines. That is, as Lacan puts it, some dreams can bring forth a Real more real and traumatic than anything encountered in waking life, such that we wake up in order to go on dreaming. In this sense, we might say that the difference between a dream and a nightmare lies not in their content, but in the fact that from the latter, we cannot wake up to flee into reality.

7. *What happens when we are at the theatre?*

How can these considerations help us understand the relief the spectator might feel in the theater? Once again, it is Zupančič who points us in the right direction. In another essay entitled *Comedy and the Uncanny*, Zupančič starts from Octave Mannoni's study of theater and theatrical illusion, in which the notion of a "thought experiment" is introduced as central to understanding its effects. Mannoni proposes the following scheme to explain the emotional participation of the spectator in the theater: the subject, although knowing that what they are witnessing is not real, delegates this belief – in a kind of thought experiment – to a hypothetical Other with whom they identify. That is, in some way, they step into the shoes of an imagined spectator who does not know that what they are witnessing is fiction and who therefore suffers alongside the protagonist on stage. Drawing on mirror neuron theory, we might say that in Mannoni's hypothesis, the real-life spectator synchronizes their mirror neurons with those of the tragic hero by proxy – that is, through a second spectator presumed unaware of the truth.

Once again, however, while this hypothesis is suggestive – and indeed helps explain certain comic effects produced in the theater – it still does not account for the relief the spectator may feel when witnessing a tragic performance. Zupančič's alternative configuration proposes that the subject does not delegate to the Other the belief that what they are witnessing is real; rather, they delegate the very awareness that it is fiction. This delegation would then allow the subject to fully immerse themselves in the representation and believe in what they see, suffering or rejoicing with the protagonists. In this different and more intrigu-

ing configuration, the spectator's relief would thus derive from the ever-present possibility of "escaping into reality" – that is, of always being able to exit the painful Real staged before our eyes and return to the familiar and domesticated reality of everyday life.

Drawing a parallel between the fiction of dreams and that of theater, we might therefore say that just as, in the father's dream, it is the possibility of returning to reality that manages to distance the traumatic Real and calm the anxiety, so in the theater it is the solid awareness that the performance will end that brings relief. The fiction of the theater and that of the dream are more real than reality itself.

8. *The suffering of others*

Let us now try to imagine how witnessing the suffering of others might help us heal our own, by turning to the neurobiology of forgetting processes. These processes are essential for overcoming trauma that we are unable to forget and that continues to cause us pain.

In Freud's theory on the origin of neuroses, real or imagined traumatic experiences permanently alter the functioning of the psychic apparatus. Therefore, some memories can be pathogenic. As Freud wrote in *The neuro-psychoses of defence* (1894): «I only know that such "oblivion" was not reached by the patients I analysed, but that instead it led to various pathological reactions» (Freud [1962]: 47). And in other essay he adds:

> Now hystericals and all neurotics behave like these two unpractical Londoners, not only in that they remember the painful experiences of the distant past, but because they are still strongly affected by them. They cannot escape from the past and neglect present reality in its favor. This fixation of mental life on pathogenic traumata is an essential, and practically a most significant characteristic of the neurosis. (Freud [1910]: 184)

How, then, can theatre be therapeutic if, instead of distracting us from our suffering, it actually brings it back and forces us to remember and relive it?

Over the past two decades, remarkable progress has been made toward understanding the process of forgetfulness, and the emerging scenario is particularly interesting because it is increasingly clear that forgetting does not simply result from the passive degradation of the plasticity associated with memory acquisition, but rather consists of a very complex process that actively counters the maintenance of memories.

Specifically, the so-called *inhibition of memory reconsolidation* refers to the ability to remove even old and stably stored memories, provided they are reactivated.

In fact, memory retrieval makes those memories fragile, and these discoveries have substantially contributed to revising the idea that long-term memories are irreversibly stored in the brain's wiring. Rather, this process indicates that memories can be continually updated, modified, and even erased – but for this to happen, it is crucial that they can be recalled and re-elaborated (Centonze *et al*., [2005a]). So, if the original memory traces become susceptible to change each time the memory is retrieved – and this is also true for those traumatic memories that cause us suffering – being able to recall and process them in the context of theatre has a therapeutic effect.

Notably, from the very beginning of his theorization, Freud recognized that memory reactivation and re-elaboration could be beneficial. In *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* (1914), he wrote: «We have learnt that the patient repeats instead of remembering […] From the repetitive reactions which are exhibited in the transference we are led along the familiar paths to the awakening of the memories, which appear without difficulty, as it were, after the resistance has been overcome» (Freud [1914]: 151-155).

In other words, the pathogenic effects of traumatic, conscious or unconscious memories that are responsible for our suffering can be overcome through a process of memory trace retrieval and re-elaboration – one that occurs not only during a psychoanalytic session but also in the theatre.

9. *Conclusion*

Let us return for a moment to the Nietzsche passage quoted at the very beginning: «False Concept of mimesis. The figures of art are more real than reality itself; reality is the imitation all the figures of art […] It is certain that the world must exist as a representation: whereas we are merely the represented object» (Nietzsche [1999]: 323). So far, we have almost taken for granted the presence of a "fundamental identity" as a solid foundation around which individuality is constructed – an individuality that then perhaps passes through various representations, anticipations and cathartic effects.

The passage we are now dealing with concerns precisely this capacity to represent, to anticipate the future, to meditate on impending evils: such representations can no longer be understood as something added on, something that somehow clings to a preexisting individual foundation, perhaps even with the ability to modify or slightly alter it. On the contrary, these representations, these anticipatory faculties over abilities to empathize with the fate of others, are constitutive moments of the subject itself: this subject is structured and literally takes shape around the words that heal him.

This theoretical framework entails a significant reconfiguration of the functions traditionally ascribed to art, language and catharsis. As the analysis has

shown, the tragic world does not merely operate as a mimetic device, passively reflective empirical reality or reproducing the contingencies of lived experience. Rather, it constitutes a discursive space wherein the irreducibly singular experience of suffering is rendered translatable into a form that is symbolically intelligible and intersubjectively shareable. In this process suffering is not simply represented but subjected to a hermeneutic and symbolic elaboration that metabolizes, abstracts, and rearticulates it within a broader cultural and semiotic horizon.

The act of symbolic transformation is structurally constitutive of subjectivity. In this view, the subjectivity does not precede its own representation as a fixed or pre-discursive identity. Rather, it emerges precisely through those representational operations – such as anticipation, projection, identification and narrative construction – by which primal effect and contingent experience are rendered symbolically legible. In this sense, representation is not a derivative act imposed upon a sort of "pre-given self", but the very medium through which the subject is configured and brought into presence.

As clearly illustrated in the writings of Carlo Diano, watching a tragedy unfold is not merely an act of learning about misfortune, but a form of ethical and psychological training. It enabled us to confront suffering, to recognize it, and to live with its looming possibility. Tragedy becomes a space for active rehearsal rather than passive observation – a way of preparing yourself for the inevitable shocks of existence. And it is again Diano who points out that catharsis should not be reduced to a simple emotional release. Rather, it is a reconfiguration of experience that allows the subject to internalize pain without being shattered by it.

Psychoanalysis and neuroscience also show that the therapeutic power of tragedy lies in the reactivation and reworking of traumatic memories, much like in analytic therapy. Theatre quite literally allows us to "bring pain onto the stage", simultaneously exposing its devastating effects and prompting the spectator's awareness of it. As Lacan and Zupančič explain, this makes it possible to redefine the relationship between fiction and reality, since the Real is understood as that which, in a certain sense, resists every attempt at symbolization precisely because it is always already framed within a fiction.

Theater emerged – both from a historical chronological perspective and on a conceptual level – as a tool through which the deeply personal and therefore incommunicable experience of pain is literally transfigured, in the sense that it is given form, translated into symbols, and thus made shareable at the level of collective meaning. In particular, the word gives pain a kind of form and figure, allowing us to inhabit misfortune without being annihilated by it, and instead initiating the reciprocal constitution of subjectivity and community.

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