Pathologies of liminality: Degradation of Rituality and Loss of Transitionality. In-between Suffering on the Borders of Obsessive Neurosis and Borderline Disorder

Raffaele De Luca Picione[1], Angelo Maria De Fortuna[2] & Enrica Balzani[1]

Abstract

The liminal function of rituals is an expression of the transformative power of collective processes and subjective developments. Rites, transitional activities (playing, dramas, music, literature, arts, etc.) work as vector, catalyzer, mediator and symbolic container of experiences of transformative processes.

In terms of unconscious psychosocial process, liminality becomes particularly evident in all situations in which the human condition goes through crisis of identity and everyday organization of borders is at risk. On several occasions (including clearly in the book "*Civilization and its Discontents*", 1930), Freud proposed that there are pathological states in which the delimitation and borders of the Ego in relation to the external world become uncertain and painful.

Authors take in consideration two specific conditions of sufferance, which although are different yet show an intriguing affinity in their difficult relationship with experience of borders and in living in liminal areas: obsessive neurosis and borderline condition. In the case of obsessive neurosis, the subject, morbidly repeating a specific ceremonial ritual, shuns the border, starting over each time in the anguished search for perfection and rigid division, without ever realizing the transition to a new state. In the case of borderline sufferance, on the contrary, the impulsiveness, the lack of integration of the Self leads the subject to live perpetually on the threshold, always oscillating from one extreme to the other, without being able to move from the margin and find an integration of opposites and polarities. This paper, through contributions ranging from anthropology to psychoanalysis, figures as a seminal work in the introduction of the concept of liminality into psychodynamic theory and clinical practice.

Keywords: *liminality, transitionality, rituality, border, obsessive neurosis, borderline disorder, psychoanalysis, clinical psychology*

[1] Giustino Fortunato University, Benevento, Italy

[2] University of Urbino, Italy

Corresponding author: Angelo Maria De Fortuna, angelomariadefortuna@gmail.com

Introduction

The concept of liminality emerged within the history of anthropology - and particularly in the study of ritual processes -, but the distinctive features of this vast construct have been the subject of multi-perspective studies in different fields of knowledge - e.g., in sociology by Szakolczai (2017). In psychology, the concept of liminality has been approached by several scholars (e.g., Valsiner, 2014; Stenner, 2018; De Luca Picione & Valsiner, 2017) and there are relevant seminal works in psychoanalysis (Stein, 1983, 1998; Hoffman, 2014) -, but a focus on its centrality in the clinical theory and practice has not yet been systematically approached despite its similarities especially with some common notions in psychoanalysis.

The authors will first briefly review some studies on the function of rituals in liminal practices in relation to history and contemporaneity. Then, they will briefly outline the concept of transitionality and its relation with liminality. Finally, they will focus on two clinical conditions in which, on the one hand, the rigidity of border and the repetition of ritual, and, on the other hand, the ineffability of the mediating functions are particularly evident: the Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and the Borderline Disorder.

The importance of rituals in the liminal phases of transition to different forms of individual and collective identities

The term *liminality* was first used by Arnold van Gennep (1981). During his existence, the human being continually passes from one condition to another. The "*Rites of passage*" (this is also the title of his famous book of 1909) are configured as the ceremonial mechanisms that guide, control, and regulate the transformations of individuals and groups by sanctioning the passage from one social or cultural state to another (van Gennep, 1981) and by differentiating the different phases of being with an interlude. Rituals - a set of ceremonies, cultural and ritual practices that can be thought as representations of the order of the cosmos from which they originate (Gluckman, 2017; Verderame, 2014) - are characterized by three main phases:

- *Separation*. It represents the beginning of the rite of passage, in which the individual (or the group) is detached from the previous state: *preliminary* (van Gennep, 1981) or *separation* (Turner, 2001) *rites*.
- *Marginality* or *Liminality*. It represents the climax of the ritual, at this stage the individual (or the group) is in a transitional or "liminal" state (from the Latin *limen*, limit, margin) in which normal social and cultural rules are suspended or modified: *liminal rites* (van Gennep, 1981; Turner, 2001).
- *Aggregation* or *Incorporation*. It represents the final stage in which the symbolically "reborn" individual (or group) is reintegrated into society: *postliminary* (van Gennep, 1981) or *reincorporation* (Turner, 2001) *rites*.

Liminality, therefore, represents a moment and space of suspension and uncertainty where the usual social norms, rules and conventions are suspended or changed, creating a break with the previous state (Thomassen, 2009; Turner, 1972). Through a series of practical and symbolic expedients that are dense

with meaning and pregnant with confusion, insecurity and anxiety, people pass through the state of non-belonging and struggle with the uncertainty of the future. At the same time, however, they also experience a moment of great potential in which new forms of meaning, identity and status can emerge that alter the deepest cores of their being (Szakolczai, 2009; Stenner, 2013, 2018).

The suspension from the norm, the *liminal anti-structure*, therefore, allows a formative confrontation with what it means to be an individual in a *communitas* of human bonds (not the structure, but the relationships that develop) as opposed to the social structure (Turner, 1986). The *communitas* emerges where the structure is not, yet without a *communitas* the social structure becomes inflexible and corrupt. Likewise, the *communitas* without social structure would be chaotic (Stenner, 2013). The liminal stages of a tribal society, in fact, reverse but do not subvert the social structure (Turner, 1986).

In moments of transition, symbolic aspects, and *performances* (Turner, 2001) play a fundamental role: people often use ritual customs and behavior, i.e. symbols representing the process of identity metamorphosis. A violation of canonicity, in fact, undermines the social order and renders visible the latent antagonisms that, in order to be resolved, require a ritual process (Turner, 1986).

Through the performance (which stands as the conclusion of a non-static but changeable and generative experience), it becomes possible to reflect critically on certain crystallized aspects of the social, sometimes generating changes at certain levels of society itself. This is why, in Turner's theory, every kind of performance is closely linked to the social in a "reciprocal and reflexive" relationship (Turner, 1993). Performance is not only an external expression, a response to a stimulus, but also a mechanism through which individuals internalize and understand their changed state, bringing a new order to society without ever subverting it. According to Turner (1993, 2001), therefore, if the real events are part of the indicative mode, cultural performances (where everything is staged and performed "as if") declines them into the subjunctive mode (Bruner, 1990).

Liminality is, therefore, the limbo (Szakolczai, 2009) where the decomposition of culture into its constituent elements and their playful recompositing takes place (Turner, 1986). If almost anything is allowed for a time, public liminality is an expression of public subjunctivity in which taboos are lifted, fantasies are enacted, and normative behavior is reversed (Turner, 1993).

Subsequently, Turner's interest in the concept of limen shifts from the rituals of tribal societies to the analysis within modern societies and he introduces the term *'liminoid'* (literally, resembling the 'liminal'). In tribal society the fundamental distinction is based between sacred and profane work; while with the advent of industrialization, the concept of work contrasted with that of free time and leisure. The play becomes the favourite space for experimenting, expressing creativity, using new tools, bringing with it a subversive potential. Traditionally, liminal moments were mainly characterized by the need to restore order within society by creating a sense of community between those who are part of it; in industrial societies, liminoid phenomena instead allow the subversion, the upheaval, the subversion of values and rules. The playfulness that characterizes the liminoid replaces the seriousness typical of the liminal; furthermore, the freedom to participate contrasts with the

obligatory nature of the ritual. Unlike ritual, which is participated and experienced collectively, imposing a controlled use of expressive means, the possibility of expression of liminoid activities allows a great variety of productions and offers free space for individuality. Furthermore, the choice to participate in an activity whether sporting, artistic or recreational is not driven by any ordered superstructure but appears completely personal and autotelic.

We observe a loss of need for a collective union motivated by the need to maintain a social order (the collective power of liminal phenomena), yet liminoid genera do not serve exclusively to make the system bearable and tolerable in its established version, but they continue to offer possibilities of flexibility and potential transformations for the members of society (Turner, 1986).

Some implications of this discourse are relevant. Without the co-presence of the *communitas* and the *societas*, however, the liminality of the anti-structure, which should be a phase, risks collapsing into the de-formations that Bauman (2013) associates with today's *liquid modernity* - as opposed to the easily punctuated and rigidly defined community of the past, which he defines as "solid". By the term "liquid", Bauman (2013) refers to the fluidity of the modern world, the precariousness due to constant change and the lack of solidity of social institutions, human relations and, consequently, identities. Bauman (2013) points out that the transformation of traditional social structures into fluid and unstable entities has strong consequences on everyday life and human relations. Confusing rules, or even their absence, lead to doubts and fears. The sense of bewilderment then leads one to seek certainty in whatever can provide it, defining a social paradox similar to Newtonian liquid (which stiffens enormously as soon as one hits it). The lack of solidity of the structure creates a general cloak of insecurity that is reflected in the crumbling of communities and interpersonal bonds, in the loss of solidarity in favor of an increasing competition between individuals (Bauman, 2013; Kaës, 2013).

There are no stages to pass through to arrive at a new birth, there is no arrival that makes this situation momentary. The liminality that characterizes modernity is beginning to emerge not as a phase but as an ontological condition that Szakolczai (2017) calls *permanent liminality*. Permanent liminality determines important affective responses and so it is senseless to look for a rational response to a liminal crisis (Szakolczai, 2017). Emotionality permeates every experience of change (Stenner, 2013, 2018) and, in some cases, cognitively presents itself as an irrational force to be controlled (Szakolczai, 2017). It is evident, however, that life events cannot be resolved rationally only.

Stenner (2013, 2018) argues that the broad cultural focus suggested by liminality, when carefully combined with the subjective or experiential focus suggested by affectivity, can be useful in better understanding the typical dynamics of transitions that occur between any kind of organized structure.

As long as we live in a world structured by shared norms and rules that help us cope with the liquid situations we experience in our daily lives, our subjectivity is not challenged, but when this structure breaks down, we find ourselves lost and without reference points.

There are few explicit rites of passage left in our society. This means that throughout our existence we continue to experience transitions, but without an adequate structure to accompany them (Szakolczai, 2009).

Structure in solid society (Bauman, 2013) is permitted by a series of meta guarantors (Kaës, 2013) who act as a structuring container, an incubator of meaning and form. The function of guarantors, in ancient times, was incarnated by various figures such as the chieftain or the shaman. The anguish associated with indefiniteness, the "not being", in which ordinary people can lose their *presence[1]*, is reshaped in the magician into the visualized spiritual order (de Martino, 1973). For others it may signal an uncompensated risk, but for the magician it acquires the function of a stimulus and the significance of a problem (de Martino, 1973). The "loss", which for others may be definitive, is transformed for the magician into a moment in the process that leads to "salvation" - a risk that, with internal alchemical practices, is in the religious certainly greater, but necessary. If the distressing upheaval of unmastered psychic realities occurs in an unprepared person, or if the ritual guarantors that circumscribe the presence of the process collapse under the impact of the demonic, chaos advances and swallows everything, bringing the individual back to the absolute terror of annihilation (de Martino, 1973). To cross the liminal phase of the experience of a new form of the self, there is a need to master the functions that limit and give meaning, but with the unfailing help of an adjuvant: the ritual master, the magician - i.e. the meta guarantors (Kaës, 2013). Ritual practices, in short, favor the lability and reformulation of the *presence* (de Martino, 1973)

through concrete existential and spiritual contours, to safeguard one's constancy in transition.

Transitionality in psychoanalytic theories

The properly liminal phase of rituals, the one that expresses the transitory dimension, conveys the experience of anguish and excitement for the indefinite identity.

At the beginning of life, however, there is no subject capable of containing ambivalent thought, but an embryonic subjectivity (Fordham, 1979) that cannot be conceived except in the dual and almost indistinct dimension of the mother-child dyad (Winnicott, 1956, 1971). The child experiences an oceanic feeling (Freud, 1923; Ferenczi, 2018) of full essence within the mother, in the illusion of the full creative power of primary narcissism (Winnicott, 1956, 1971). Daily events, however, will lead to gradual disillusionment (Winnicott, 1956, 1971) as the reality principle (Freud, 1923) creeps in through the experience of continuous processes of loss of the primal Unity (Klein, 1946, 1952). The child, of course, is unable to think, so he defends himself through the primitive mechanisms he has learnt from bodily experience as nourishment, cuddles, and cleaning (Gaddini et al., 2005; Tossici & De Luca Picione, 2024). The child passes from a phase of undifferentiation to one of first differentiation through a liminal

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[1] According to Ernesto De Martino (1973), '*presence*' represents the ability to preserve in consciousness the memories and experiences necessary to adequately deal with a specific historical situation, actively participating through personal initiative and going beyond it through action. Presence therefore implies experiencing as people with meaning, in a context with meaning. The anthropologist therefore believes that the ritual is fundamental and helps man to endure a sort of "crisis

of presence" that he feels in the face of nature, feeling his own life threatened. In general, the stereotyped behaviours of the rites would offer reassuring models to follow, building what is later defined as "tradition". Through these modes of cyclicality, repetition, routine and stereotypy, man in past societies would constitute historically given community forms capable of giving meaning to all the crises and transformations of the life of the individual and of society.

intermediate phase, but he does not do so all at once, nor will he ever do so completely and definitively. The psychic liminality is that space to which Winnicott (1956, 1971) contributed greatly to defining: the *transitional space.*

Winnicott (1956, 1971) emphasizes transitional phenomena by identifying them as the area of experience between the external world and the internal world (the "potential space"). It is the paradoxical space of the transitional phenomena existing between self and object, between inside and outside (Zittoun & Stenner, 2021), where pure emotionality meets the brake of the Aristotelian logic of the real world (Matte Blanco, 2018). The perception of the environment during early childhood can be located on the threshold (the third space) and the mother(caregiver)-environment behavior is part of the individual's personal development (Winnicott, 1971).

A sufficiently good environment - one that has contained and reclaimed intolerable primal projections (Klein, 1946, 1952; Bion, 2018) - creates a safe psychological space in which a child can explore its creativity and develop its self without feeling threatened, allowing these "potential phenomena" to mark the beginning of a process of separation and individuation, through the use of symbolism and the use of play (Mahler, 2018; Winnicott, 1971).

The opportunity for imaginative play will, moreover, be the foundational core of everything that will be part of an individual's adult cultural experience (Winnicott, 1971). This *in-between* area of experience is where the seat of creative life originates, the source from which spheres such as the arts, philosophy and even religion are born and continue to be nourished (Zittoun & Stenner, 2021).

Play, which initially takes the form of an object, is the initial manifestation of any kind of experience that takes place in the potential space between the individual and the environment and forms its foundation (Winnicott, 197). For this reason, the way in which a given individual will use this potential space as an adult will depend on how it is experienced in the early relational play of meaning, identity, and psyche formation (Bion, 2018; Winnicott, 1971). Winnicott (1971), in fact, argues that the child's trust in the caregiver - thus in the possibility of creating himself through that narcissistic and omnipotent relationship with the primary object (Klein, 2013) - depends precisely on how the dyad experiences the paradox of illusion/disillusion in the sharing of the object and the transitional space of play (Winnicott, 1956, 1971).

It is fundamental for the child's development, in fact, that more or less precise routines and rituals (that accompany baby's essential functions) are conducted with the vital mirroring of a normally devoted mother (Winnicott, 1971). The rituals' function is to identify stable transitions that, through daily care functions, convey to the child the feeling of being, of having confidence in the responsive world by introducing the concreteness of space/time scansion into the autistic condition of primary narcissism (Freud, 1916). The normally devoted mother, in some sense, personifies the function of a master of ceremonies who accompanies her child in the discovery of the extra-uterine world. Play, in short, is the expression of the cut that does not reduce original creativity but places it in a symbolic sphere of communicability by means of a primordial interlude of the *reality principle* – which protects and does not devastate – (Freud, 1900).

Authors believe that potential spaces can be considered exquisitely liminal, not

only because of the intermediate areas where they are located – where the third area (Winnicott, 1971) stands at the limit of the Cartesian dichotomy between inside and outside – but also because of the creative force they possess – a concept intrinsic to Turner's notion of liminality (1986, 2001), as well as the profound experiential (Szakolczai, 2009) and affective (Stenner, 2013, 2018) dimensions that distinguish them. Transitional and "playful" objects – echoing the importance of carnivalesque play highlighted by Turner (1986) – are the liminal (transitional) objects par excellence that are necessary for the proper development of personal and collective separation-individuation process (Mahler, 2018) and that, in some sense, can be defined as the first rites of passage of the human way of being in the world.

Turner (1986) discussed the importance of play, as a characteristic manifestation of liminoid phenomena. Play is the privileged "liminoid place" of creativity and expressive form that allows us to explore and challenge cultural and social boundaries and which offers fertile ground for innovation and transformation. Similarly, for Winnicott, cultural experience and play are located in the potential space between the individual and the environment. Cultural experience begins with living creatively, and it first manifests itself in play (Winnicott, 1971).

The play varies according to the age of the child (and obviously of the age of adult throughout their life). The choice of the type of game and the way in which it is performed, the desire and ability to play, the way of approaching a game or an object, the manipulation, and the exploration, are absolutely relevant clues on the psychic and relational world of the subject (allowing us to formulate - from a psychodiagnostic point of view - hypotheses

on possible developmental arrests, fixations, elements of emotional suffering, trauma dimensions, etc.) (Castellazzi, 2006). The way of approaching the game can be extremely varied (e.g. in a safe or insecure way, as creative or stereotyped, as adequate or inconsistent, as constructive or destructive, in absolute isolation or in a cooperative way, in a passive position of submission or in competition, as pure imitation or as a bizarre product, etc.). Erikson (1963) defined play as the royal road to understanding the ego's efforts at synthesis. Winnicott (1958) believed that play takes place along a continuum that goes from the simple and fun dramatization of life and one's internal world to an abnormal dimension, in which the play represents the rejection of the world (in this case the play becomes forced, excited, restless, distressed and acted out).

After having outlined the essential features and theoretical references that animated their reflections, we illustrate in the following paragraphs how transitional and ritual phenomena can transform in two main "pathological" conditions, one characterized by the stiffening of borders and repetition (in the obsessive-compulsive positions), the other one characterized by the difficult to deal with limits and borders between relations (in the borderline positions).

The ritualization of experience in Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and loss of transitionality

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD) is a mental condition included in the anxiety disorders categorized according to DSM V (APA, 2013); however, it has a much older history. It was once considered a form of "madness": Pinel (1810) characterized it as

reasoning madness, Esquirol as partial delirium and single-point centered madness, with preservation of reasoning and mental faculties (Pewzner & Monti, 2004). It became part of the classification of neuroses with Janet - *psicasthenia* - (Pewzner & Monti, 2004) and Freud (1909) who, in his famous case of "*The Rat Man*", outlined a psychopathological picture where strong ambivalence, the constant struggle against "forbidden impulses", and that mechanism he would later call *compulsion to repeat* (Freud, 1925) dominate.

Obsessive neurosis is characterized by the presence of obsessive or compulsive symptoms, usually multiple and expansive. The obsessions intrude into the subject who, aware of their morbid character, engages in an anxious struggle against them (Pewzner & Monti, 2004). *Psychoasthenic personality* (Pewzner & Monti, 2004) is traceable to some peculiar characteristics. For example, Freud noted how some obsessive people he treated were pushed into bowel control prematurely or harshly or in an atmosphere of excessive parental involvement (McWilliams, 2011). Potty training, for instance, implies one of the first situation in which the child must give up what is natural in favor of what is acceptable outlining the scenario of an early, potential, anal fixation that could play a role in the future emergence of obsessive neurosis (Freud, 1905). Indeed, a peculiar anal trait of obsessive neurotics is precisely the passive aggressiveness of the acts with which they mortify themselves (McWiliams, 2011).

Obsessive neurosis presents the co-occurrence of three interrelated and interacting symptomatic conditions: a) episodes of doubt and rumination; b) ceremonial behaviours; c) the emergence of horrifying and self-destructive temptations (Arieti, 1969).

The obsessive subject feels the need to carry out acts of an urgent nature (from which he cannot escape), acts of a repetitive nature, without a concrete functional utility of which the subject is aware (the subject is moved by an anguishing need to check the perfect execution, which is followed every time by the doubt of his actions which turns into anguish) (Arieti, 1969).

This need for ritualization produces a significant impact on a person's daily life, requiring a great deal of time, interfering with daily activities and influencing personal and work relationships (Maccauro & De Luca Picione, 2022)

The ritualization of some behaviours or specific sequences of acts can be very varied. There can be both a ritualized execution of behaviours linked to the daily routine and executions of invented forms deriving from the psychological history of the subject. Ritualized acts can have both positive value (i.e. directed towards the execution of an action) and negative value (i.e. taboo-forming, prohibiting a behaviour) (Di Nola, 2015). Di Nola (2015) emphasizes the lack of practical usefulness: the subject is aware of that, yet at the same time the obsessive subject feels the urgent and unavoidable need to implement them. The ritual is staged and repeated in order to silence an otherwise unbearable anguished tension (the failure to carry out the ceremonial act creates the explosion of this anguish, making it impossible to live without completing it). Furthermore, an amount of anguish is added during the execution, as the ritual must be prepared with care, detail and precision, and implemented perfectly for its validity and effectiveness (Di Nola, 2015). Returning to the studies on Freud's Rat Man, Benvenuto (2005) underlines that doubt leads

the obsessive to live as if continually paralyzed in the limbo of indeterminacy. A fundamental element of obsessions makes them very similar to rituals: what matters is not the *meaning*, but the *letter* (Benvenuto, 2005).

The typical symptoms of obsessive neurosis are obsessions, compulsions, and rituals (Pewzner & Monti, 2004). Obsession is the intrusion of an idea into the subject's thinking (from the Latin *obsidere*, meaning to besiege). Compulsion corresponds to the idea of an act to be performed immediately (usually absurd, ridiculous, or unpleasant). Ritual, on the other hand, is the expression of magical thinking: the subject devises an organized defense against siege that involves the performance of magical formulas and rituals (even highly articulated and disabling the flow of daily actions) (Fachinelli, 1979). The ritualization of existence seems to become the goal of obsessive activity in which internal compulsion is replaced by the compulsion of tyrannical and intrusive rituals (Pewzner & Monti, 2004).

Subjective ritualized obsessions and religious rituals

Benvenuto (1994) points out some fundamental similarities between obsessions and rituals. Freud (1907) identified the relationship between obsessiveness and ceremonial rituals defining obsessive neurosis as the individual's private religion. Religion, on the contrary, can be considered a universal obsessive neurosis. Freud (1907) believed that rituals, in both cases, serve as protection.

By observing the ritual repetition of the obsessive subjects (although aware of the uselessness of his acts, they are forced to act according to certain obligatory patterns), Freud (1907) compares obsessive rituals to religious ritual practices, noting how the former seem real caricatures of religious ceremonies (Di Nola, 2015).

However, while the neurotic protects himself from impermissible sexual impulses, the pious person protects himself from selfish and antisocial impulses. In both cases, in effect, interpreting events as signs of fate helps to appease a fundamental need for control over the uncertainty of the future (Benvenuto, 1994).

Freud (1920) theorized that an irresistible tendency to repeat emerges strongly in one's psychic life. In this view, ritualism manifests itself as symbolic behavior that underlies distressing unconscious charges. Ritual, in this sense, exorcises deadly anguish by freeing the individual and the collective from a tense situation by bringing it back to stillness.

In his book of 1919 "Rituals: Psychoanalytic studies" (Reik, 1946), Theodor Reik states that the symptoms of obsessive neurosis show the characteristics of religion in an exaggerated and pathologically crude form. He compares the origin of the religious ceremony with the function of repression (in order to support his theses, he gives four examples: the practice of *couvade*, the puberty rites among savages, the singing of *Kol Nidre* and the use of the *Shofar* in festivals Jewish). This argument represents a coherent elaboration and extension of Freudian thought. Magical and omnipotent thinking in obsessive neurosis (as well as in religious belief) is at the same time characterized by a profound ambivalence between different contradictory feelings of hostility and tenderness, protest and devotion, repulsion and desire. This opposition is resolved through *ritualization* (supported by a taboo that prohibits certain behaviours) and involves the *repression of the forbidden impulse* and *its*

reversal into the opposite (for example the reversal of hostility into tenderness).

In obsessive neurosis, therefore, a situation of radical psychic conflict emerges in which, on the one hand, the individual tries to free himself (albeit in a fictitious way) from the anxious charge through ritual, and on the other hand, the ritual itself, through repetition, calls for the return of the identical by heightening the anxious death drive.

In the codification of the religious ritual (like the obsessive one), we find the prevalence of the letter over the meaning: in fact, it is not faith that gives meaning to the ritual, but, vice versa, it is the letter that certifies the truth (for example, think of the precise formula of a prayer) (Benvenuto, 2005).

In the fulfilment of the ritual, whether religious or obsessive, one can therefore find a form of superstition which Freud called 'omnipotence of thought' and which Benvenuto defines as the 'omnipotence of signs' (Benvenuto, 2005): interpreting events as if they were signs of destiny helps to appease a fundamental need of human beings, namely to reduce uncertainty about the future (Benvenuto, 2005).

In this context, the themes of mistrust, lies and deception are fundamental, since, when a ritual is implemented, one is never certain that it will be effective. Each ritual marks a transition from one state to another, but there is also another meaning. Ritual marks membership in the community as a reaffirmation of the bond (Benvenuto, 1994). Ritual essentially has a double face, which the Greeks had expressed in the complementarity and opposition, at the same time, of Hermes and Hestia: a face of change, and a face of intact persistence (Benvenuto, 2001). It is a hermetic ceremony that marks a change and, at the same

time, reaffirms the continuity and permanence of the Community (Benvenuto, 1994).

Obsessive neurotic ritual and cultural ritual

From a Freudian perspective on neurotic ceremonials, Di Nola (2015) underlines how Freud had already hypothesized that in everyone's psychic life, the irresistible tendency to repeat and reproduce forcefully emerges, a need that does not take into account the pleasure principle and indeed dominates it (Di Nola, 2015). From this perspective, ritualism as the fulfilment of obligatory acts manifests itself as a symbolic behaviour that underlies distressing and unconscious charges, and in its practice has a precise 'economic' function, freeing the individual from a situation of conflict. In the ritual, the repetition of a prototypical act is like the evocation of the death drive that emerges in every condition of anguish (Di Nola, 2015).

In the obsessive subject, a "radical situation of psychic conflict" emerges (Di Nola, 2015): on the one hand the individual tries to free himself, albeit in a fictitious way, from the anguished charge through the ritual; on the other the ritual itself (through repetition) recalls the return of the identical, making explicit the re-emergence of the anguished death drive.

By relating neurotic ceremonialism and religious-magical ritualism, Di Nola (2015) underlines how anguish is anthropologically linked to the rite itself, as every culture brings with it an amount of anguish generally generated by the conflict between the hope of obtaining a certain asset and the risk of failure that this action entails; once completed, the anxious charge ends. These economic anguishes arise repeatedly and inexorably;

therefore on a cultural level the ritual acquires the function of solving them. In the event of a failure or a crisis, the entire specific cultural universe is undermined in its foundations so in this case the ritual can have a 'redeeming' value, that is, it can repair the situation (at least fictitiously), bringing the social group back in a condition of waiting and hope (Di Nola, 2015).

By breaking up the anxiety-inducing charge into multiple spatio-temporal moments, at both a collective and individual level, the ceremony takes the form of the dilution in time and space of an unliveable anguishing charge (Di Nola, 2015).

Every ritual, both cultural and neurotic, is an attempt to bring order and bring a reassuring normality to chaos and uncertainty through sequential and determined behaviours (compulsory and precisely).

Although both subjective and cultural rites are created "in the specific dynamics of the magical mentality, according to which the organized and intentional act can operate on reality" (Di Nola, 2015), Di Nola identifies a fundamental differences between neurotic rituality and the cultural one. In fact, on a cultural level, rituals are pre-established and consolidated acts handed down by tradition; in the case of the obsessive, however, it is the subject who creates their personal ceremonial sequence, in relation to their experience and their anamnesis. If culturally the ritual is passively received, in the neurotic subject it is instead a real invention and for this reason even the communication code is indecipherable (except in relation to his anamnestic history), therefore varying completely from individual to individual (Di Nola, 2015).

A further important difference that we can find between obsessive and cultural ritual concerns exactly liminal 'passage' function characteristic of the rites. Benvenuto (2005) argues that if the social ritual is an attempt to face a change by overcoming mistrust and anguish, the obsessive ritual is a way of not overcoming them, continuing to dream of change and passage, without ever realizing them.

Starting from the assumption that every rite implies and allows a passage, in the obsessive ritual this permissive function fails, as the ritual, although aiming at a change of state, never manages to complete it, preventing evolution and blocking the individual in a stalemate in the previous state

In continuing to perpetrate one's own ceremonials to allow a passage, the obsessive never passes (Benvenuto, 2005).

Anguish is inescapably linked to moments of indefiniteness and passage, to moments of crisis and transition (Stenner & De Luca Picione, 2023): it is the tension related to the need to symbolize the object as present or absent (Klein, 2013). However, it can shows different outcomes. Religious rituality is a system of practices tending to the implementation of the very plan of religion: union with the divine, restoring human contingency to the original divine dimension - in Daoist religion: *de Dao*, return to Dao (Di Ieso, 2023). Ceremonial gestures, thus, if they did not have their precise structure, function, and divine inspiration, would be just gestures, no matter how perfectly executed they may turn out to be. In the more precisely obsessive condition, on the other hand, a supra-human dimension is lacking because of the person's clear need to "heal himself"-taking up the function of symptoms as described by Freud (1910). The subject, in fact, embodies the ritual outside its historical, anthropological, social, and especially religious function in the specific dynamic of the magical mentality, according to which the organized and intentional act can

operate on reality (Giberti & Rossi, 1996). It is the perennial resurgence of the narcissistic need for self-baptism, that is, the need to access a falsely blissful dimension of severity (which is, instead, the condition of incommunicable human suffering). The obsessive neurotic subject experiences the desperate need to control aggressiveness (directed against the internal hated objects) that is to be "washed away," to be exorcised with long walks, to be kept tidy with an impeccable arrangement of furnishings, and so on.

Highlighting the connection between obsessive neurosis and the concept of liminality, we consider that obsessive neurosis itself shows a paradoxical nature: on the one hand, the obsessive position is blocked in the repetition of rituality, on the other hand, it cannot escape from such a liminal zone. In fact, the obsessive state, in its being a state of mind of constant transition (or better an effort to repeat the transformation), can be seen as a kind of liminal state of mind. It could be said that obsessive thoughts (and ritualized compulsive actions) serve to cope the state of uncertainty and anxiety in the gray zone of the mind. If ritual dimensions thus have an intrinsic finality in religious contexts, this is lacking in the obsessive experience, which, on the contrary, renders liminality ontological (Szakolczai, 2017).

To try to access the postliminal position, the individual enacts specific rituals with the aim of managing anxiety and restoring a sense of order and security to the internal chaos. The obsessive subject constructs solid and stable borders at support and defense of their experience (i.e. rigid classifications and permanent categorizations, elimination of impurities and cleansing of pure identities, etc.). However, this effort always remains incomplete and unattainable. Life shows itself in its constant becoming and change. The doubt that follows the completion of the ritual action, however, puts the subject back into a loop, rendering them as paralyzed in a liminal condition from which they cannot get out, finding themselves forced to repeat the ritual enough to achieve a sort of 'temporary' stability. The obsessive neurotic subject, not experiencing full trust in the success of the final result (i.e. there is not an internalized object that works as guarantor), cannot finalize the action and to consider it as a past experience. This perennial mechanism is a source of guilt, loss of temporal dimension (a link between past and future), and a rigid anchoring to the present of the pure ritualization. Here we see the paradox of the return of the identical and of paranoid otherness: what should be reassuring because it is identical and repetitive is instead experienced as unreliable, bad and persecutory. The person, therefore, lives in limbo punctuated by the expiatory rituals that nullify their transformative value, blocking them instead of making them access a new, more mature and vital form of self.

Think of the famous reel game analyzed by Freud (1920): the *Fort-Da* game have two times. The child internally processes his mother's distancing, and the game-ritual serves him as a symbolic expedient designed to override his uncertain condition of being liminal and to integrate the constancy of the primary object (Klein, 2013; Winnicott, 1971). This is a very particular condition of liminality that, by means of ritual, is overcome to access a subsequent condition. In case of an obsessive ritual, on the other hand, the game would lose its symbolic value by becoming an acting out, i.e., a defense against the pain of separation that, however, collapses and does not allow any elaboration: the sign that

emerges is not a symbolic game, but the ritual reiteration of an acted out emotionality (Carli & Paniccia, 2003).

Dealing with Borderline position: the critical experience of liminality

In the DSM-V, the American Psychiatric Association (2013) describes the *Borderline Personality Disorder* (BPD) as a psychiatric condition characterized by a persistent pattern of instability in interpersonal relationships, self-image and feelings, and marked impulsivity.

However, an abundance of literature has been produced attempting to "explain" this personality disorder. In line with the paper's perspective, we will provide some hints from the psychoanalytic domain.

As mentioned above, at the beginning of life, the infant cannot be considered apart from the person who performs the maternal function. If the dynamic cohesion of the dyad fails, several potentially pathogenic conditions may arise.

In the English psychoanalytic perspective of object relations, infant development is thought of as a progressive organization and individuation from a state of fusionality. As previously outlined, the infant evolves from a normal phase of non-integration, termed the *schizoparanoid position*, to one of greater organization, termed the *depressive position* (Klein, 1978). The use of the term "position" is particularly useful because it allows us to overcome the Freudian staged conception (despite their ontogenetic order - i.e., *the depressive position* cannot anticipate the *schizoparanoid position*) and introduces a dynamic view of oscillation between the two positions (Klein, 1978; Steiner, 2003). The goal of a

sane developmental process is the achievement of object constancy (in the *depressive position*) in which good and bad representations of self and others tend to unify into integrated concepts - resulting in a realistic view of the self (as potentially motivated by both love and hate impulses) and of others as complete objects (no longer idealized or persecutory) (Mucci, 2018). The integration of split object representations also results in the modulation of the associated affects, which lose their extreme and primitive character and become more easily controllable (Mucci, 2018). The level of constancy, however, is not achieved in a stable manner by the borderline subject, because, in the *rapprochement phase* (Mahler, 2018), the child is terrified of depressive anguish (Mucci, 2018; Kernberg 1985).

As mentioned above, the archaic defensive mechanisms with which the infant defends itself against incomprehensible and unlivable sensations are splitting, projection and introjection (Klein, 1946, 1978, 2013; Steiner, 2003). However, these mechanisms do not merely figure as a means of psychic economy, but represent the relational vehicles that, in the case of a sufficiently good relationship (Winnicott, 1958) and, therefore, access to the depressive position (Klein, 1946, 1978, 2013; Mahler, 2018), allow the origin of thought (Bion, 1957, 2018; Gaddini et al., 2005): the access to the symbolic function of play (Bion, 1957; Winnicott, 1958, 1971). The human psyche, however, must never be thought of as an architectural edifice that builds new organizations on top of the remains of its previous functioning. Freud (1932) already indicated that the psychic mechanisms of normality and pathology cannot be cleanly separated. Psychotic functioning and non-psychotic functioning, in fact, converge and intermingle, of-

ten in indistinguishable and totally unexpected ways (Bion, 1957). Splitting, projection, and introjection, thus, are the mechanisms by which the individual structures the world in any condition, whether of health or illness (Bion, 1957, 2018; Kernberg, 1985; Schwartz-Salant, 1989). The borderline condition, in fact, beyond a diagnostic framework, is expressed for Kernberg (1985) as a real personological structure that, developing around these intra-interpsychic events, is synthetically characterized by: a) *diffused identity* (object constancy has not been achieved and one is still in a phase of split and non-integrated object relations), b) massive use of *archaic defence mechanisms*, and c) preserved but *distorted examination of reality*. All this leads to a significant weakness of the *Ego* and an overpowering *Superego* (Kernberg, 1985; Dell'Amico & De Luca Picione, 2023).

The subject runs the risk that the continuous splitting processes, which - always involve the fragmentation of parts of the *Ego* - will lead to a state of stable disintegration, of varying intensity - such as borderline personality disorder (Pewzner & Monti, 2004; Steiner, 2003).

The borderline subject is afraid of abandonment and may experience rapid mood swings, impulsive behaviours, self-injury, and instability in relationships that betray the manifest "hyperadaptation" (Pewzner & Monti, 2004). The borderline subject, similarly to a *False Self* (Winnicott, 1958) - i.e. a non-authentic Self, but born from the reiteration of rigid defense systems - is overwhelmed by aggressive impulses and the intense suffering of abandonment experiences that develop around a chronic feeling of emptiness, of the hollowness of one's own person (Pewzner & Monti, 2004). It is interesting, here, the recall to the notion of *crisis of presence* (de Martino,

1973). The borderline subject finds himself in the continuous alternation between the tendency to be adhesive (in the inability to maintain the bond) and the tendency to violently attack his own person and those around him (Mucci, 2018).

The term "border" originally indicated a condition that appeared to lie on the boundary between neurosis and psychosis (Pewzner & Monti, 2004). Although this theorization is now obsolete, it remains interesting as it sheds light on the relationship that those suffering from borderline disorder have with the "border". Steiner (2003), echoing Klein (1978), states that the pervasive reiteration of archaic movements is at the basis of what he understands as the *borderline position*, a further position in between Kleinian positions: it is the "place" where these kinds of regressions occur or where these non-purely integrated personality organizations are located. The borderline position is a condition that can be thought of as the tertiary space/time defined by the collapse of transitionality (Steiner, 2003; Winnicott, 1971; Correale et al, 2023; Terminio, 2024) - the liminal space between the inside and the outside. Racalbuto (2016) believes that these pathological states correspond to the condition of the loss of functionality of the limit (i.e. the border) that makes trespassing excessive and disturbing. According to Schwartz-Salant (1989), the borderline subject is unable to deviate from the border, remaining stuck on the threshold "*in a dimension in which the potential is never in place and in which a quantum of raw affection is released which, if left to itself, does not undergo elaboration and renewal*" (Lingiardi, 2001, p. 82, *our translation*).

Racalbuto (2016) suggests that, from an intrapsychic perspective, it is necessary to think of limits between the different instances

as distinct but not independently separate entities. These limits, inherent to the psychic structure itself, are to be understood as "psychic processing zones" that serve as transitions between different psychic levels and between the subject and the object (Racalbuto, 2016). In borderline psychic functioning, the border can only function if it is solidly maintained with marked differences between the parts (Racalbuto, 2016). If this function is not present, the only solution to overcome the resulting disorientation is an acted-out emotional response of a dissociative type, due to a lack of connection between personal experience and external reality. Such externality basically stems from a grouping of projections re-introjected in an absolute and distorting way (Steiner, 2003) that define hypertrophied blocks of experience (Bion, 1966; Racalbuto, 2016; Dell'Amico & De Luca Picione, 2023; De Luca Picione et al, 2022).

The borderline subject chooses among the various facts of life and various experiences the mental objects that evoke extreme anxiety, profound disorganization, excruciating depression and boundless anger (Bollas, 2021). The chaotic experience of the Self manifests the absence of self-regulatory behaviours. The borderline subject does not pay attention to time, does not know what is happening in the present and does not plan for the future. Bollas (2021) tells us that the practical things of life are cast aside as if they have no meaning.

The territory of the border is thus a borderland in the experience of it. This liminality is evident in the clinical dynamics of transference and countertransference that manifest themselves in poorly differentiated physical and psychic states - sometimes chaotic and

disturbing but also with strong creative and regenerative potential (Racalbuto, 2016; Schwartz-Salant, 1989).

From a clinical perspective, it is useful to introduce the concept of *psychic retreats* (Steiner, 2003). The analyst observes *psychic retreats* as psychic states in which the subject is blocked, cut off and impossible to reach, and can deduce that these states originate in the action of a powerful defense system (Steiner, 2003). The pathological subject lives in an elsewhere (as much marked by a borderline condition as by recurrent obsessive rumination). It is relevant to conceptualize this as a grouping of object relations, defenses and fantasies that constitutes the above-described *borderline position* (Steiner, 2003). The relief provided by the psychic retreats is obtained at the price of isolation, developmental stagnation, and withdrawal. Some subjects find this situation distressing and complain about it, while others accept it with resignation, relief, and sometimes with an attitude of challenge (Steiner, 2003). It is crucial to remember that this state of withdrawal, although originating from autistic defenses, is not necessarily associated with a psychotic condition, but is, on the contrary, common in neurotic or healthy subjects (Steiner, 2003). What determines pathogenicity or sanity is the severity with which the defense is used and the dynamism with which the subject emerges from it (Steiner, 2003).

The work of the French psychoanalyst André Green (1990) develops the importance of the border by focusing on the notion of limit. It is a fundamental element for the functioning of the psychic apparatus. Border as limit does not just represent a line of demarcation, rather it becomes a psychic formation in which the possibilities of para-excitation and modulation, mediation, transition and

transformation are possible (De Luca Picione et al, 2022; De Luca Picione, 2021a, 2021b). The process of a *double limit* is necessary and it operates on the one hand, between the inside and the outside, and on the other side, between the two separate parts that divide the inside (limit of the Conscious-Preconscious and Unconscious systems) (Green, 1990). In the pathologies of borderline cases, there is a functional inability to create derivatives of the potential space, generating real symptoms in place of transitional spaces. The transitional spaces are no longer zones of compromise, nor fields of confluence of the internal and external worlds. In this state of serious impairment, the development of the capacity for symbolization and the *'as if'* is hindered up to the point of making it almost impossible. When there are archaic splits with a defensive value between the Ego and reality, it is no longer possible, due to lack of elaboration, to structure flexible internal borders and the relationship between internal reality and external reality remains unmediated. The result is that all the psychic processes of thinking, symbolizing, judging reality and choosing are destroyed and annihilated.

Green (1990), in this regard, distinguishes between '*having a limit*' (which functions as a border of symbolic elaboration and psychic processing) and '*being a limit*' (i.e. being a borderline patient, i.e. with a pathology centered precisely on the boundary of the self).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have dwelt on some insights arising from the study of liminality and our desire to consider in a new perspective some clinical situations that are usually considered as very different.

The study of obsessive-compulsive stance has shown the centrality of the liminal phenomenon of ritual. In it, the subjects entrap themselves with the attempt to exorcise the indecision, the doubt and uncanny elements with the illusion of the new birth - i.e., freeing themselves from anguish. In this condition, however, the ritual loses its function as a vehicle of transformation and collapses into its coercive function. Rites are not anymore processes of transformation, namely way to accompany and trigger liminal experience. Rather, rites become deadly emptying mechanisms in the search for rigid and stable border of experience. The transformative potential is stuck in the two-dimensional space imposed by the natural desire to soothe distress without the ability to contain it and progress to the post-liminal dimension. The time is blocked in a stereotyped and ritualized repetition. The rigidity of the obsessive character is in a certain sense a psychic form of *rigor mortis* - it basically expresses this lack of transition to the flexibility and movement of life (Benvenuto, 2005).

The study of borderline stance, on the other hand, show the experience of liminality treats everything that embodies limits and borders as both disturbing and potential. Borderline emotionality is by definition "limitless", namely it is a position of destruction of limits. Borderline position works by nullifying the borders between inside/outside, subject/otherness, and possibility/necessity. There is a deep affinity between borderline position and the liminality of transitional space, yet the former is characterized by a chaotic oscillation of polarities, while liminality of transitional space can offer experience of suspension, merging and creativity. Borderline position is only chaotic, liminality is potentially innovative.

Considering the enormous complexity that we experience in contemporary world (Bauman, 2013) and the new forms of individual and collective malaise (Kaës, 2013; Hag, 2020), we consider that liminality and transitionality can be very useful notions of referring in order to read some psychic and collective processes. There is also a vast literature that recalls the loss, disappearance and lack of rituals in contemporary societies (Han, 2020). However, our reflection pushes us to avoid the simple regret of traditional societies strongly regulated by rites and ceremonies (Benvenuto, 2001). Rites continue to be the ordering and transforming forms of psychic and collective life (Widmann, 2007). However, we have considered different forms of destructuring liminality and the value of the ritual.

The innovative potential of liminal experience for the psychic and social development can be resulted blocked by several strategies. On the one hand, the obsessive and compulsive ritualization determines an effect of block, closure (without ever reaching an end), homologation of behaviors and actions; on the other hand, the borderline position is characterized by an unlimited drive to overcoming limits and borders, producing a feeling of isolation, not belonging and loss of future perspective.

In each case, we observe the destruction of the temporal perspective and the loss of link between past and future. In the obsessive-compulsive stance, there is only the present of the ritualized repetition, while in the borderline stance there is only a chaotic present where all limits and borders are destroyed.

Kaës (2013) defines the pathology of the transitionality as a typical form of malaise of contemporary society. Transitionality represents a third space of experience, an *in-between* limits and border. It is at same time a very fragile and necessary process for the subjective and cultural development, yet it can be eroded and hindered by conditions of deep anguish, bewilderment and disorientation. In the circumstances of crisis of presence and loss of meaning, we assist two complementary and antithetical movements: the stiffening of borders in the excess of ritualized repetition, and the pulverization of borders in the borderline experience (De Luca Picione & Freda, 2016). The potentiality and uncanny vitality of liminality is lost, and a deadly effect is in both cases the result. It is worth to note that each form of processuality is negated: in the case of the obsessive-compulsive repetition, the rite loses its symbolic and shared value and becomes a rigid mechanic form; in the case of borderline position, there is no rite that is able to order the life and the experience.

Furthermore, in both situations any form of relationality with otherness is denied. The compulsive stereotypy of repetition does not require the encounter with the otherness; on the contrary, the exceptionality and singularity of the otherness becomes forms of disturbance for the standardization and protocolization of the ritual. On the other hand, the borderline experience produces a constant idealization and devaluation of the other, a search for fusion in the fear of loss and an effort at detachment in the fear of annihilating absorption. The experience of sharing communitas during the transition phase of liminality becomes impossible and the potential creativity of the transitional space is irremediably lost.

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