

Preface

by Paolo Migone¹

About the middle of the 20th century the psychotherapeutic movement went through a period of great ferment and development of new schools. This happened above all in the United States, because Europe was emerging with difficulty from World War II. In addition to destruction and terrible grief, the war had caused the emigration of the most important protagonists on the psychotherapeutic scene, many of whom went, in point of fact, to the New World. And while Europe was engaged in post-war reconstruction, in the United States the economic boom, which was to reach us later, in the 1960s, was already under way. This boom brought with it new demands, needs that were not only material but also psychological.

In the United States it was above all the East Coast and the West Coast, which were perhaps more exposed to the new cultural influences, that were the theater of these developments. At that time in America there were mainly two psychotherapeutic movements, both very influential: psychoanalysis and behaviorism. However, a series of courageous colleagues, blessed with critical, independent thinking, began to feel constricted within these approaches, clearly seeing their flaws, especially with regard to the way these approaches were practiced at the time. The group formed by these colleagues was called the “third force” of the psychotherapeutic movement, after psychoanalysis and behaviorism which historically had appeared on the scene one after the other. Fritz Perls, founder of Gestalt therapy, was one of the greatest exponents of this new movement, which was also called “humanistic” and which left a powerful experiential and phenomenological mark.

Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb, who was trained in the United States with one of the founders of Gestalt therapy, is, so to speak, one of the “mothers” of Gestalt therapy in Italy. In this book she distills knowledge accumulated

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in years of clinical experience and of teaching to make it available, clearly and with abundant clinical examples, to her students at the *Istituto di Gestalt HCC*, founded in the 1970s, and to the whole Italian psychotherapeutic community.

Glancing through the book, its most interesting aspects immediately emerge. First and foremost, we are struck by the title, where the so-called now-for-next in psychotherapy is given prominence, a concept – typically phenomenological – that implies a constant attention and empathy, on the part of the therapist, to the intentionality with which the patient is revealed to her/him in the here and now of the therapeutic session. It is precisely the therapeutic support of this directionality that permits the authentic fulfillment of the patient. This attention to the future, and not only to the past, has been in some respects relativized in classical psychoanalysis, whereas as we know it was present in Jung. In Gestalt therapy, however, the support of the tension towards the future is carried out through procedural channels (neither relating to content nor symbolic), which concern the totality of the patient's experience.

The book also testifies to an effort to link Gestalt therapy to society, to the recent developments of “post-modern society”, as the subtitle also indicates. This operation is not very common today. If we think, for example, of psychoanalysis, whereas formerly the reflection on society was always present, and was felt deeply by Freud too (we may think of his sociological writings or those on applied psychoanalysis, of the greatest interest), today much of the psychoanalytic movement shuns these reflections, withdrawing, as it were closing itself in clinical activity. This phenomenon reduces the potentialities of a discipline that originally had higher ambitions. Well, this book by Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb attempts to update Gestalt therapy, founded more than fifty years ago, to the society of our times.

Another interesting aspect of this book is the fact that it shows very effectively how many and of what kind now are the areas of overlap among various approaches present in the variegated world of psychotherapy. Nor is this all: it also shows how some central concepts of Gestalt therapy anticipated recent developments of psychotherapy. I am alluding, for instance, to certain aspects of contemporary psychoanalysis: we may think of the concepts of emotional self-regulation, of motivation to the interpersonal relationship and to creative growth, of the need for intuitive understanding between child and mother (and patient and therapist, or individual and surrounding world), and so on. It is no mere coincidence that Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb is very close to Daniel Stern, the well-known

psychoanalyst whose studies in the field of infant research revolutionized the theory of motivation and development.

This book shows that there are areas of convergence between recent discoveries by the neurosciences (such as the mirror neurons), certain philosophical conceptions (such as Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception) and certain intuitions of Gestalt therapy. Indeed, it may be said that the clinical intuitions of Gestalt therapy anticipated the conclusions arrived at subsequently by the researchers who discovered the mirror neurons.

Apropos the relationship between Gestalt and the mirror neurons, I should like to take this opportunity to recall that Eagle and Wakefield (2007)² recently showed that the principle of "interpersonal isomorphism", formulated by the Gestalt psychologists Köhler and Koffka in the years 1920-40, was decidedly in advance of the discovery of the mirror neurons³. Certainly, Gestalt *psychology* is not at all the same thing as Gestalt *therapy*, which may be defined as a "post-analytic" therapy that subsequently took its own paths. However – as Margherita Spagnuolo Lobb herself recalled in a concise, very clear presentation of Gestalt therapy (Spagnuolo Lobb 2007, p. 901) – Fritz Perls had had direct experience with Gestalt psychology as he had worked in Kurt Goldstein's laboratory, and his wife (Laura Posner Perls) had studied at the Berlin school in a study group, with Max Wertheimer, Kurt Koffka and Wolfgang Köhler, which in those same years had also attracted Kurt Lewin (the founder of the theory of the field) and Goldstein himself.

² This work by Eagle and Wakefield (2007) appeared in the journal *Gestalt Theory*, which in the following issue also hosted a debate on the subject. Morris Eagle is the author of contributions of great interest, e.g. in a 1984 book (*Recent Developments in Psychoanalysis*) he offers a critical examination of the internal consistency of the main psychoanalytic theories, and in a recent book (*From Classical to Contemporary Psychoanalysis. A Critique and Integration*, 2011) he compares the main aspects of Freudian theory with those of the leading schools of contemporary psychoanalysis.

³ It was I, years ago, who told Morris Eagle of the discovery of the mirror neurons, which had been made in the Department of Neurosciences of the University of my own city (Parma). As soon as I spoke of mirror neurons and their possible implications, he immediately grasped their importance and said that, even more than fifty years earlier, the Gestalt psychologists had anticipated these concepts. Morris Eagle later studied this subject in depth with the greatest interest, so that I wanted to involve him in work on the implications of mirror neurons for psychoanalysis together with Vittorio Gallese, who was one of the team of researchers that has made the discovery of the mirror neurons (our work was published in n. 3/2006 of *Psicoterapia e Scienze Umane* [Gallese, Migone and Eagle, 2006], and a version in English was published in the *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* [Gallese, Eagle and Migone, 2007] where it sparked off a debate [Vivona, 2009a, 2009b; Olds, 2009; Eagle, Gallese and Migone, 2009]).

This is just one example of the interconnections between various schools and fields of knowledge, at times even very remote from one another, which in this book are demonstrated. Let me mention another important area of interconnection among various psychotherapeutic schools: the concept of the Self as “relational product”, which is collocated in a “midway position” between the organism and the environment, for in a field perspective the individual concentrates on the “contact boundary”. Listening to these theorizations of Gestalt therapy, how can we fail to think of the developments of relational psychoanalysis, for example by someone like Mitchell, or of the intersubjective perspective (explicitly phenomenological and “holistic”) of Stolorow and others? There is an evident close similarity, but with the difference that certain positions had been taken by the Gestalt therapists several decades previously.

There are so many aspects of this book that would merit comment, relating them to other psychotherapeutic theorizations, that it is impossible to examine them all. I was struck, for instance, by the reevaluation of the concept of aggressiveness in terms of growth and self-affirmation, by Gestalt diagnosis, by the reflections on love in psychotherapy (a very important topic, central for the psychotherapist) and by the passage from a dyadic to a triadic view, by the clinical declensions of the approach in work with couples, with families and with experiential groups, and so on.

But the merits of this book are not limited to showing the interconnections among schools, or to updating Gestalt therapy to contemporary society, studying the technique in depth in various clinical contexts. For me this book has yet another merit: it leads the reader on an adventure that is not only intellectual but also engrossing from the emotional point of view. And this is a central characteristic of Gestalt therapy that has always fascinated me.

