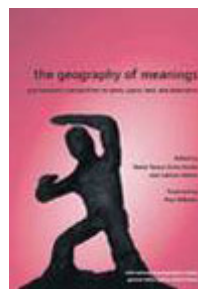


FLASHBACK

by *Valentina Nesci*

THE GEOGRAPHY OF MEANINGS – PSYCHOANALYTIC PERSPECTIVES ON PLACE, SPACE, LAND, AND DISLOCATION.



INTERVIEW WITH DR. MARIA TERESA HOOKE

Maria Teresa Hooke was one of the brave psychoanalysts who chose to embrace a multiplicity of points of view in order to grasp the complexity of the human mind. In order to do so, she decided to leave her homeland, Italy, and move to London, where she completed her training. Dr. Hooke's desire for exploration also brought her to Sydney, where she now holds the post of President of the Australian Psychoanalytic Society. Thanks to Dr. Thomas Wilmot it was possible to meet her, last January. On this occasion, FLASHBACK had the pleasure of inquiring about her most recent book: *"The Geography of Meanings"*. Her work will soon be published in Italian, so as to widen the scope of our understanding.

Interview with Dr. Maria Teresa Hooke

The International Psychoanalysis Library very recently published an interdisciplinary collection of essays whose title is as intriguing as complex: *The Geography of Meanings – psychoanalytic perspectives on place, space, land, and dislocation...* In your double role of Editor of the volume (together with Salman Akhtar) and President of The Australian Psychoanalytical Society, could you please tell our Italian Readers how the very idea of this book was conceived and later developed into its actual final format?

When I became Scientific Secretary of the Australian Society in 1998, I opened our annual conferences: our aim was to raise the public profile of psychoanalysis with the public at large and to foster relationships with mental health professionals and with the humanities. We also wanted to address socio-cultural themes within a psychoanalytic perspective. It took a while for us to build up a public but the Open Days have become very successful and are now an occasion for reflection on our history, on the traumatic events of the past, and on relevant current social phenomena. In the year 2000, in occasion of the Centenary celebrations of the Federation of Australia, we decided to have our conference in Uluru (Ayers Rock) in Central Australia, a sacred place of profound symbolic significance for our indigenous people. For us, it was an attempt to re-connect with our past and heritage, a sort of spiritual pilgrimage, a way “to remember” our history and counteract what the historian Henry Reynolds calls the Australian “cult of forgetfulness”. The theme of the conference was evocative “This whispering in our hearts: Intuition at the service of psychoanalytic work in the Australian milieu”, the whispering alluding to the inner distress about the indigenous-settler relationship. The papers presented at the conference raised the interest of an Italian colleague, Emma Piccioli who was then Chair of the IPA Publication Committee. She suggested that I submit some of the papers to the Committee. From these exchanges, the idea of a book developed. Salman Akhtar, psychoanalyst and poet, was the

obvious choice as co-editor because of his work on immigration, identity and culture. As we worked in putting together the book, Salman and I worked via email, we met only in Berlin, in occasion of the IPA International Congress in July 2007, where the book was launched. During the preparation of the book, other papers were added, some from Australia, some from the States. From Australia, we added one of the papers presented to the 2006 Open Day: "Unsettling the Settlers."

Reading the volume one is inevitably moved by the contribution of Kate Grenville, the well known author of *The Secret River*, a dramatic historical fiction on the first encounters/fights between the British settlers and the Australian Aborigines. Since you were the organizer of a meeting with Kate Grenville, on "Unsettling the Settlers," in the Sydney Institute for Psychoanalysis, could you please tell us something more on her contributions?

In the Open Day: "Unsettling the Settlers" we wanted to explore the unsettling of Australians' sense of themselves under the impact of different cultures. Recent riots between Australian and Muslim Lebanese youths on the beaches - a sort of territorial dispute - was the catalyst for the theme of this Conference. The settlers, themselves banned from their motherland as convicts over two centuries ago and sent to "the most foreign place on earth" (Grenville) were now banning the Lebanese youths from the Australian beaches: history was repeated rather than remembered or worked through. The theme of Grenville's book *The Secret River* was close to what we wished to explore: how the writer's identity and sense of self became profoundly unsettled through the encounter with another culture, in this case the indigenous culture. Grenville, through the exploration of the history of her ancestors - the early settlers - lifts the veil on the silence and forgetfulness about the history of crime, violence and dispossession perpetrated by the early settlers towards the indigenous people. Such exploration becomes a transformational experience for the writer as she has to confront her own denial and her own turning a blind eye to history. Kate gave us the most interesting and moving talk: the account of her own journey in writing the book (a story within the story) and how

the research into the book became a process of self-discovery, a story that became true inside her before being written. This is what I called her “creative illness” in my introduction. David Tuckett who was our guest speaker at the conference, in his “psychoanalytic” commentary to Grenville’s paper, talked about the courage of the writer in going into the land of her mind, something of the same courage that Freud had in pursuing his personal analysis from which psychoanalysis had its origin. Freud was curious, had a real interest in knowing about himself and about life. Grenville is also curious, and in her personal history of discovery, she describes what the inhibitions of curiosity does both to individuals and to nations. In my epilogue to the book, I note that - although the authors come from different backgrounds and schools - there are some touchstone concepts which are so often employed as to become part of a collective thinking. One of these is Freud’s idea that experiences that are forgotten, silenced and not remembered, tend to be repeated and (we now add) passed on from one generation to the next. Interestingly, these concepts are used in the book both, by the psychoanalysts and the historian, and are intuitively known by the writer too.

In the last two chapters, written respectively by Salman Akhtar and James Telfer, clinical vignettes of psychoanalytic sessions with patients who suffered from traumatic dislocation are described. From these clinical experiences, it is clear that both psychoanalysts pay much attention to the immediate physical environment of the consulting room which are considered inanimate but not irrelevant elements in the paramount process of constructing the analytic setting. Could you please comment on this technical issue?

Both authors start with the recognition of a deficit in their patients and ask themselves the question of how this can be addressed in the analytic work. In both Akhtar and Telfer there is a profound empathy toward the patients’ sense of geographical dislocation, an acknowledgement and recognition that loss of physical environment (one’s country, home, familiar landscapes) does matter. Without this basic recognition any technical provision would not work. Another aspect is that

we are not only talking about work with a traumatised patient, work with which we are familiar enough in psychoanalysis. We are talking about work with displaced patients who are also traumatised, but in a different way. So the physical environment of the consulting room, the setting, becomes extremely important for its holding and containing functions. The analysts believe that lacerations and ruptures created in the geophysical dislocation have to be repaired through “environmental provisions” and that only then analysis - in its traditional sense - can begin. This is a point of view, something to think about, especially in view of the increasing number of refugees, exiles, and migrants that we see today; it certainly does sensitize us to these issues. The debate in analytic circles of containment versus interpretation is certainly alive and well. What Akhtar and Telfer suggest is a variation on the theme, but it also has an added dimension.