At the origins of the Italian psychoanalytic movement: Marco Levi Bianchini’s syncretism

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Abstract
Marco Levi Bianchini, an Italian psychiatrist, Freud’s translator and correspondent, is an uncomfortable pioneer of psychoanalysis in Italy. The authors introduce a short overview of his psychoanalytic works, highlighting the peculiar blend of very different theoretical positions - sometimes even irreconcilable - such as Freudian metapsychology and Lombroso’s criminology. The authors report several passages taken from the medical records compiled by Levi Bianchini when he was the Director of a psychiatric hospital, underlining the use of several psychoanalytic categories and their interpretation. This report shows the equivocal quality of Levy Bianchini’s interpretation of metapsychology, radically transformed by a syncretistic attitude.

Key words: Italian Psychoanalysis; Psychiatry; Positivism; Freud; Lombroso.

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Introduction

Marco Levi Bianchini, founder, on 7th June 1925 in Teramo, of the first Italian Psychoanalytic Society, is a controversial figure in the historical panorama of Italian psychoanalysis. Enthusiastic supporter of the Freudian science and method, Freud’s correspondent and first Italian translator, but also fervid admirer of Cesare Lombroso’s Organicism, proud proponent of Jewish culture and tradition, but also, at the beginning, celebrator of the Fascist nationalism (Giacanelli, 2006), he was a reformist of the psychiatric institution which did not disdain the recourse to the electro-shock. His life, work and therapeutic practice seem to be marked by an eclecticism characterized by several nearly paradoxical aspects.

In this article, we will just give an overview of Marco Levi Bianchini’s main psychoanalytic writings and his approach to mental illness in his institutional work. We refer to the medical records consulted in the archive of the Asylum “Vittorio Emanuele II”, in Nocera Inferiore (south of Naples). Levi Bianchini was the Director of that hospital and the author of a large amount of psychiatric articles and other kinds of articles. But, first of all, it is worth giving some information about his life.

Marco Levi Bianchini was born in Rovigo on August 28th 1875, firstborn of Michelangelo Levi, a banker, and Enrichetta Bianchini. His father was responsible for insolvency and he ran away to Romania when Marco was still an adolescent. From that moment onwards, his maternal surname would be added to that of Levi for the couple’s four children.

After studying at the Medical School in Padova, Marco Levi Bianchini enlisted in the Belgian Army as a medical officer and served in Lusambo (Congo); during the African experience he wrote several medical essays and articles which may be defined as “Ethnic Psychology”, which were not free from the racial prejudices of the time (Cfr. Cappelli- Inglese, 2006).

Back to Italy, in 1903, he became Deputy Director of the Mental Hospital in Girifalco (Calabria), starting his long carrier in the psychiatric institution and becoming involved in the reformist atmosphere that – also in the south of Italy - was slowly turning the regime of custodialism of the mental institution of the first half of the 19th century into a family-shaped organization (Foucault 1973-74), that is “a self-sufficient sanitary, social and agricultural colony” (Cappelli- Inglese, 2006, p.105).

Specifically, Levi Bianchini strives for the spread of the ergoterapia (occupational therapy), a very successful neologism coined by Bianchini himself to specify the curative power of the work for the inmates; in this way the work is losing the former attributed disciplinary use to become a therapeutic technique. In 1909 Levi Bianchini arrives in Nocera Inferiore, south of Naples, as an assistant in the Mental Hospital “Vittorio Emanuele II”, where he will remain and become Director until 1938 when, as the racial laws were promulgated, he was removed from his position. There he starts to translate and publish, in a self-financed series, several works by Freud and his disciples: Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Freud, 1905, published in Italian by Levi Bianchini in 1915); The Interpretation of Dreams (Freud 1901, published in 1919); Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality (Freud 1905, published in 1921); The Myth Of The Birth Of The Hero (Rank 1909, published in 1921); Delusion and Dream in Jensen’s Gradiva (Freud 1906, published in 1922).

Also, he writes many articles on psychoanalysis, on Freudian authors and Dissidents, in the review Archivio di neurologia, Psychiatria e Psicoanalisi, founded and edited by Bianchini himself; he intertwines, as a translator, a long correspondence with Freud, who

1 With the exception of the period from 1924 to 1931 where he lived in Teramo, a town in South-Central Italy.
publicly recognizes his competence in the Preface to the Italian translation of the Five Lectures on Psycho-Analysis: “I have known the beautiful country of Italy for a long time … Today, thanks to the work of the translator, I have also acquired the right of citizenship in its scientific literature. The clear intelligence of Professor Marco Levi Bianchini is a guarantee of the scrupulous accuracy to his version; and it is also a possibility which not all authors have” (Freud 1915).

In 1925 he founds, in Teramo, the Italian Psychoanalytic Society (S.P.I.) which will be then transferred to Rome and deeply reformed by Edoardo Weiss, the only Italian psychoanalyst who undertook his training in Vienna, within the Freudian entourage.

Levi Bianchini will remain Honorary President of the Society and will continue supporting psychoanalysis with his typical enthusiasm until his death, which took place on August 21st 1961 in Nocera Inferiore.

**Between Metapsychology and Neurobiology: The Psychoanalytic Writings of Levi Bianchini**

Like Freud, the first psychoanalytic works by Marco Levi Bianchini are dedicated to the theory and clinics of hysteria: the monograph L’isterismo dalle antiche alle moderne dottrine (Hysteria from the Ancient to the Modern Doctrines) was published in 1913; two chapters would be then extracted and proposed again in the review Il Manicomio - Archivio di psichiatria e scienze affini, precursor of the already mentioned Archivio di Neurologia, Psichiatria e Psicoanalisi. The first extract consists of a presentation of the etiological theory of hysteria theorized by Freud and Breuer; an accurate and detailed description that, however, refuses the most meaningful element of the epistemological break realized by Freud with the medical-psychiatric paradigm, that is the infantile sexuality devoid of its biological purposes.

Indeed, the second extract is entitled *Una teoria biologica dell’isterismo* (A Biological Theory of Hysteria), where Levi Bianchini comes back to the field of neurological organism considering hysteria as a degenerative phenomenon of the nervous system, by trying a bizarre synthesis between the language of neurology and that of psychoanalysis, through the use - which became constant in his writings - of many neologisms, such as *psichioschi*, *psichioni*, *psiconeuroni*, in order to indicate the elements of the nervous system and the psychic system, in a supposed non-problematic overlapping.

This overlapping will be reaffirmed in the following psychoanalytical article, *Negativismo mnesico e negativismo fasico. Contributo allo studio psicoanalitico della “conversione” nelle demenze endogene* (1920), a work about the so-called post-traumatic amnesia in which Levi Bianchini states that “in Psychoanalysis […] behind the most risky fantasies of Pansexualism, there are several fundamental and fruitful ideas which reconnect to the most classic and accepted tendencies both by psychology and contemporary psychiatry” (Levi Bianchini, 1920, in Corsa 2015, p.761); undoubtedly a defense of Psychoanalysis, supported, however, by the certainty that it would be possible to lead the Freudian science back to the academic psychology and the institutional psychiatry, and thus removing – through the recourse to consolidated knowledge – the accuse of “pansexualism” that Levi Bianchini himself criticized to some aspects of psychoanalytic theory.

The same conviction was the core of another neologism by Levi Bianchini, the *biolibido*, which replaced the Freudian libido, conceived by Levi Bianchini as an expression of a “biological hedonism”, that is “a biological need, originally not psychological… and never totally subdued to censorship”, or rather to the conscience (Levi Bianchini 1923-24: pp.44-45). That opinion was reaffirmed in 1926 when he stated that the energetic aspect of the

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libido – the libidinal drive – cannot be separated from its realization, which consists of “biological pleasure” (Levi Bianchini 1926, p.96).

The concept of biolibido represents, to some extent, an assumption in contradiction to the Freudian concept of the drive, since Levi Bianchini defines the biolibido as “an instinct which represents the biological projection of the psychological concept of pleasure” (Levi Bianchini 1923-24 p.44), whereas Freud stated that the drive was the result of the work requested to the psyche by virtue of its bonds with the body (Freud 1915), in a movement that goes from the body to the psyche, in the opposite direction to the one described by Levi Bianchini.

The abundance of neologisms in the psychoanalytic writings of Levi Bianchini determines a bizarre style, sometimes difficult to understand, which cannot exclusively be accounted for by the tendency – deriving from the nineteenth-century medical tradition – to use lexical innovations in order to explain the “etiopathological difficulties and classifications of complex disorders such as the neurological and psychological ones” (Quarchioni, Di Leonardo, 2006, p.209). According to Ferro (1995, 2006) that shows the traces of the influences - even unaware - of the Italian phenomenon of the Futurist language, which proves the momentous crisis of the subjectivity spread all around Europe, giving birth to heterogeneous cultural movements which, nonetheless, shared an audacious linguistic and representative experimentation (for instance, Cubism, Surrealism, Modernism and so on). From this point of view, Ferro states that “(…) the language of Levi Bianchini is futurist in its neologisms …completely imbued with a distortion of the signifiers which directly alludes to the experience of psychosis” (Ferro, 2006).

Referring back to the psychoanalytic contributions, Levi Bianchini seems more orthodox regarding the technique of psychoanalysis: in his article Freud and the psychoanalysis (Freud e la psicoanalisi), written on the occasion of Freud’s 70th birthday, he reports the basic assumptions of the free association method consistently with the Freudian teachings, confirming the patient’s need to be an “attentive and impartial observer of himself”, always able to read “only and simply on the surface of his conscience” without “leaving out anything from communication, not even the most insignificant detail: keeping in mind that he has to stick to these rules also if the communications may stir up sensations of sorrow, pain and shame, even if these seem to be meaningless, unimportant and irrelevant to his purposes” (Levi Bianchini 1926 in Arnone, Salomone, 2006, p. 184).

A statement of “full psychoanalytic activism” (Giacenti, 2006, p.49) which will be reaffirmed after the war, in a work bearing the title Libertà e psicoanalisi (Freedom and Psychoanalysis, 1951), where Levi Bianchini argues about Jung revision of Freud’s theory and, above all, argues with the German psychiatry, guilty of having embezzled Freud’s discoveries and passing them off as products of German origin. The tragic events of the Second World War seem to have demanded for psychoanalysis as a path to free oneself “from any interior tyranny” (Levi Bianchini 1951, in Giacanelli 2006 p. 50) thus revealing its nature of “moral and practical philosophy of life and behavior” (ib.). However, the passionate defense of Freudian science fits in Lombroso’s hypothesis of criminology which would have even supplied the existence of the unconscious with an anatomic proof, nearly localizable, according to Levi Bianchini, “in the mesencephalon-diencephalon area: in other words, in the most primitive anatomic region of the human and animal brain” (ivi, p.51).

The daring lexical suggestions by Levi Bianchini also affect the psychoanalytic nosography system: in a writing of 1951 he introduces the category of nevrosi anagapica (from Greek agàpe, which indicates the Christian disinterested love, combining the concept of love as a gift and adding the negative particle an) to indicate a psychopathology condition that can be observed both in children and adults and deriving from childhood emotional shortcomings; a condition that is
opposed to *iperagapia* – which is determined by an excessive anxiety in parents’ care.

Levi Bianchini writes many articles on both *anagapia* and *iperagapia*, including a pathography on Baudelaire and Dostoevskij, which traces back the origins of the respective *neurosi anagapica* to the childhood experiences of the two famous writers. Despite a certain naïvety in the etiopathogenetic construction, Levi Bianchini shows, in his writings on anagapia, interesting psycho-pedagogic stances, supporting a kind of pedagogy led by psychanalytic assumptions: those who were in charge of educating the children in a family, as in a social and scholastic life, should have known the “theoretical and practical principles of the analytic psychopathology created by Sigmund Freud and developed in an almost definitive way, after his death, by his daughter Anna Freud together with her colleagues” (Levi Bianchini, 1951, in Guarnieri, 2006, p.137).

In addition, as far as pedagogy is concerned, Guarnieri stresses Bianchini’s awareness – daring for his age – about women’s rights, supporting the legalization of abortion and the legitimacy of children born out of wedlock (ivi, p.133).

The *neurosi anagapica* is not the only diagnostic category proposed by Levi Bianchini. In addition to it there are also the *neurosi anafallica* and the *neurosi antifallica* and together they all form, according to the author, the triad of psycho-traumatic neurosis. Also in this case, two daring neologisms that seem to relate to those ones which Freud had called *actual neurosis* (Freud 1894), since the *neurosi anafallica* would indicate the psychic pain caused by woman’s sexual dissatisfaction, while the *neurosi antifallica* is about man’s sexual deprivation, which happens – for example – in the bachelor imposed to priest from the Catholic Church (Levi Bianchini 1956). The sexual origins of the neurosis - although recognized by Levi Bianchini – is limited to the consideration of adult sexuality, leaving out the crucial reference to infantile sexuality and to the phantasmatic dimension.

This brief overview necessarily neglects the variety of Marco Levi Bianchini’s subjects of interest which ranges from those inherent to his profession: medicine, psychiatry and psychoanalysis up to anthropology, literature, history of religions but it can give the idea of the eccentric and bravely experimental position of the Italian scientist within both psychoanalysis and the neuropsychiatric discipline.

As Rita Corsa states, Levi Bianchini could be considered a precursor of neuro-psychoanalysis: “In the light of recent neuropsychological integrated models the audacious studies on multifactorial etiopathogenesis of mental disorders carried out by Levi Bianchini acquire an undisputed dignity in the history of the science of the psyche” (Corsa 2015 p.777).

**The influence of psychoanalysis on the institutional clinic work of Levi Bianchini**

We referred to a previous research on the institutional clinical work of Marco Levi Bianchini (Galiani, Cotrufo, 2007) as an evidence of his peculiar use of psychoanalysis, a research based on the examination of 247 medical records preserved in the archives of the mental hospital “Vittorio Emanuele II” in Nocera Inferiore and in its suburban detached section “Mater Domini”.

Several substantial differences arise from the comparison between the medical records written only by Bianchini and those written by other psychiatrists of the mental hospital regarding the diagnostic and descriptive categories employed.

In order to explain the mental functioning of his patients, Levi Bianchini turns to a classic triadic representation of mental faculties: volition, knowledge, affectivity.

The integration and coordination of the three faculties reflect a healthy functioning whereas the pathologic functioning would be highlighted by the dissociation among the three systems; a dissociation called – as we have already seen – *psicoschisi*, a recurrent term in the diagnosis we have analyzed in our research.
The pathogenic effect of the psicoschisi would consist in determining the subconscious condition of the faculty which, after having dissociated itself from the others, has made itself independent and has exerted its control: as it is the case, for example, of affectivity in hysteria and of knowledge in paranoia.

Here below are Levi Bianchini’s writes the medical records of a patient affected by “mutism and psychogenic dysphonia”:

Medical Record n. 1 (1919). Man, 23 years. Diagnosis: mutism and psychogenic dysphonia.

The drives’ language of the subject does not show any intrinsic alteration of the central and peripheral nervous mechanism [...] The only morbid symptom is the aphonia, or rather the dysphonia, and even the latter seems originally psychogenic because when the patient speaks easily changes the timbre of his voice. [...] Based on what have been said, it is undoubted that this is a case of mutism and hysterical, psychogenic dysphonia [...]. The patient does not perform any acts to make it look like he is sick; if it is true that he is self-aware and lucid, it is also a fact that there is a general slowdown in the highest power of his critical conscience [...] There is a clear – albeit slight - cortical psicoschisi of hysterical nature.

Therefore Levi Bianchini intends the hysterical conversion, in other words the somatic symptom “of psychogenic origin”, as the result of a “cortical psicoschisi”, an expression referring to both the psychic and the organic substrate, without calling into question the etiological role of the conflict between psychic representations subtended, on the contrary, by the concept of Freudian repression.

Indeed, although many etiopathogenesis are rooted by Levi Bianchini in a psychological traumatism or psychotraumatism, the latter is not investigated in its symbolic nature but it is interpreted exclusively on a factual level, even when it is described in the context of the associations to a dream, as in the following case:

Medical Record n. 2 (1924). Woman, 32 years old. Diagnosis: psychotic and depressive episode after a psychic trauma.

I am 32 years ... I am here because I was sent here ... I had several violent behaviors ... tonight I had a nightmare ... some people bursted down my door, opened my chest of drawers and stole all the underwear inside ... I would love to come back home ... my husband is not there anymore, He broke up with me three years ago ... He now lives in X with a woman called P., he abandoned us – my daughter and I, whose name is also P. .... My husband really humiliated me, he said that I was not a good housewife ... I worked as a worker in a garage ...

The presence itself, in a medical record, of a description of a dream, proves the difference of Levi Bianchini’s approach to the mental disease compared to the approach usually employed in the psychiatric institution. However, the material of the dream is interpreted in its symbolic value in relation with the “psychic trauma” only through the association between the “theft” represented in the manifest content and the “theft” of her husband. Moreover, the reference to the sexuality, evoked by the object stolen, the “underwear”, is overlooked.

As stated above, Levi Bianchini prefers to make an use of the theory of libido which highlights the physiological aspect to the detriment of the psychic one, leading back some complex psychic manifestations to an etiology comparable to the one speculated by Freud about the actual neurosis:

Medical Record n. 3 (1921). Woman, 27 years. Diagnosis: depression phase in a psychologically fragile patient (oligophrenia).

The patient still presents feeble interpretative ideas about her marriage with a Mr. T. .
Strictly speaking, these ideas cannot be considered as authentic delirious ideas, especially since they refer to the wedding, which is certainly not a pathological event, and can represent the somatic-affective equivalent of the physiological libido and it is correlated to the sexual maturity of the patient who is 27 years old ...

Considering the patient’s erotomania only in terms of psychic equivalent, or rather “somatic-affective”, of a libidinal drive subtracted from its physiological use, Levi Bianchini reduces the signifier value of the delirious fantasies, avoiding – also in this case – the possibility of recovering in a psychic conflict.

The libidinal economy, coherently with the conception expressed from the term “biolibido” coined by Levi Bianchini, is interpreted in its biological function, attributable to the expression of a “sexual maturity” of organic nature, determined by the biographical data: the patient is 27 years old.

In the medical records, as well as in his theoretical writings, Levi Bianchini often makes use of the term “cerebrazione” (cerebration), derived from the psychiatry of XIX century, in order to indicate the psychic activity as a whole, including both the “conscious” and “subconscious” dimensions; also here, the choice testifies the author’s necessity to anchor the psyche to the organic substratum – the brain – identifying, as in the following examples, the possibility of a “fixation” of the brain activity (psychic) on a representative crux:

Medical Record n. 4 (1919). Man, 20 years. Diagnosis: paranoid psychosis.
The patient often suffers from hallucinations; patiently interviewed the patient shows a delirious orientation, not very organized yet, but already fixed in the cerebration ... he says that his mother has never called him “my son”, and she always scolded him for being a coward.

Medical Record n. 5 (1922). Woman, 24 years. Diagnosis: hypomaniac phase with phrenastenia.
The patient says that, thanks to the prefect’s intervention, she is organizing her wedding with the mayor’s son who she hasn’t married yet because the mayor, together with a maid who wanted to marry his brother, persecuted her […]. Except for this important, faint persecutory crux - which was already fixed and systematized in her cerebrative organization – the patient has a puerile, calm and docile behavior ...

Levi Bianchini employs the term fixation in a different way from the one implied by the Freudian metapsychology where there is a reference to the organization of drives’; the term refers to a phenomenal perspective of the structuring – more or less severe- of the delusional idea and of its role in the psychic activity in general.

In another example, Bianchini employs the concept of regression in order to describe a phenomenon which should be defined as “transference”:

Medical Record n. 6 (1923). Woman, 70 years. Diagnosis: senile dementia.
The patient has been very upset since the day before yesterday ... she calls her doctor “dad” and the nun “mum”, an interesting example of instinctive regression ...

Levi Bianchini draws on the genetic and evolutionary point of view of the Freudian metapsychology, but he chooses to use the adjective instinctive. In fact, it is not surprising that - even in his translations of Freud’s works - Levi Bianchini chooses to translate the German Trieb as instinct rather than using drive, implicitly distancing himself from the

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5 The term “libido” never appears in the numerous medical records we have examined; the only place where the term libido appears is in the example mentioned.
properly Freudian conception of human sexuality as fundamentally perverse and polymorphic – therefore infantile – diverted from its instinctive goal, adult and physiological.

Conclusions

Wavering between innovation and tradition, different knowledge and disciplines – sometimes irreconcilable – the cultural position of Levi Bianchini is that of a psychiatrist moving to a new conception of mental disease, whose effects are already partially evident from the listening and interrogation of the symptom, in particular of the psychotic symptom, as it is made explicit in the examples previously described.

However, the mainly progressive elements of his practice prove to be partially restrained, in terms of the theoretical consequences, owing to his adherence to the Positivism, which also prevents Levi Bianchini from a full recourse to the categories of Freudian metapsychology, despite his declared enthusiasm for psychoanalysis. In particular, as we have seen, it is the concept of sexuality – intended as an element, which exceeds the biological organization of the instincts – to be misrepresented in Levi Bianchini’s interpretation.

That interpretation, which appears to be a strategy developed by Levi Bianchini, in order to avoid what caused the scandal in psychoanalysis, namely, the infantile sexuality, could be relying either on the influence of a milieu, as that of the Italian Psychiatry of that period, hostile towards the psychoanalytic knowledge, or on a sort of “timeless” diffident attitude, present now as well as at that time, towards the nucleus which is the most difficult to assimilate in the psychoanalytic theory. In that sense, Levi Bianchini could have even anticipated a very common tendency in our Discipline, in Italy and elsewhere, namely, an apparent adherence to the Freudian thesis, which deeply distorts its nature, by hiding its uncanny foundations under a “polished” form.

References


