

## Book Reviews

Marion M. Oliner, *Psychic Reality in Context.  
Perspectives on Psychoanalysis, Personal History and Trauma.*  
London: Karnac Books, 2012

Reviewed by Anna Schober\*

In her essay *Psychic Reality in context, perspectives on psychoanalysis, personal history, and trauma* Marion Oliner discusses the specific traits of traumatic situations and their treatment. The author stresses the urgent need for defining the very concept of trauma, overcoming theoretical generalities and thus clarifying which treatments are the most advisable for victims of trauma.

Throughout the chapters, Oliner carries out a careful theoretical examination of the concept of trauma highlighting how the Freudian idea of the rupture of the stimulus barrier, although usable for certain kinds of trauma, such as those determined by a single event, seems to be completely useless in the conceptualization of multi-traumatic situations prolonged in time.

In order to understand cumulative traumatic experiences such as those of the victims of Holocaust or of other persecutions characterized by conditions of extreme loss – even of life – and of deprivation, it is necessary to think about the structuring of more complex and organised mechanisms of process and progress. In other words, to think about a progressive traumatic process, characterized by auto-plastic transformations of various kinds aimed at functioning as a stimulus barrier, such as emotional detachment or psychic amnesia.

For the author, psychoanalysis remains the treatment *par excellence* for traumatic cases provided that some key elements are taken into account.

First and foremost, analysability. If the experience has produced damages that are so serious that the defences the traumatized subject has constructed are fundamental to his mental health, an analytical intervention does not appear suitable. In this case another kind of support treatment is advisable.

A second kind of problem arises in the conceptualisation of the characteristics of the analytical treatment of the traumatized subject when it is considered suitable. Is it necessary to hypothesize some changes in the analytical setting? Oliner is convinced that it is not, but that extreme clarity has to be made on the status of the “objective” external reality as opposed to the “subjective” internal reality. The essay is essentially structured around this problem.

The difficulties of psychoanalytical theory, starting from Freud, of giving a status to external reality – despite the Freudian concept of complementary series – are still far from being overcome.

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With variables that range from a complete denial of the concept to its flattening, the risk is to create in clinical practice an arbitrary and harmful dichotomy between traumatic and neurotic patients. On the contrary, the analysis of traumatized patients requires from the psychoanalyst extreme attention and balance as the experiences of these patients are extremely “activating” and the scenario is “obligated and blinding” – says Oliner quoting Ferro.

The risk, while trying to help and repair, is of reducing the analysis to a mere sequence of concrete external events, losing contact with the “phantasmatic” aspects of omnipotence and guilt that safeguard the patient from the intolerable realization of having been a powerless victim; or even of not paying enough attention to the survivor’s feeling of secret omnipotent triumph for the very fact of being still alive.

The essay by Marion Oliner is certainly intense. Yet the most striking part – that leads us to rethink our concepts and tools for treating trauma – is the story of the author herself as a child, the traumatized victim of the savage inhumanity of Nazism during the Holocaust.

During the congress of Berlin in 2007, Marion Oliner presented her autobiographical report that became the prologue of her work. A sober and intensely tragic narrative significantly entitled “Excuse me for having been born: the fate of a German Jew during the second world war”.

Marion Oliner’s words, in their simplicity and pathos, help us to understand how as a child she had to get used to progressive horror, loss after loss, deprivation after deprivation. To the point of feeling proud for having survived another day as she runs away for years, at first with her parents and later alone, to escape the extermination perpetrated by those Nazis who had assassinated all of her family: her parents, her grandparents, uncles and cousins, her world, her affections, her language, home and country.

The author closes with heartfelt words: «Will there always be a hole? Absolutely. How could the experiences I recounted and many more not leave bad wounds and scars? I always expect to lose what I have, be they possessions or people. These were my formative experiences».

And she carries on, moving from singular to plural: «I share them with others. We are not always comfortable people because we are too used to losses to understand other people’s grief fully and we tend to “drop” those who separate from us. We did not cultivate stoicism: it was forced on us and it became our habit, even penetrating our dreams. Scar tissue is more rigid than healthy flesh».

Her words bring to mind another similar autobiographical account: “*Quand vient le souvenir*” by historian Saul Friedlander, also a Jew, also a child, as Marion Oliner, during the Holocaust’s onslaught, also deprived of his name, his family, his land and belonging, also in a desperate escape firstly with his parents then alone.

Maybe Oliner’s plural, like Saul Friedlander’s as he gazes at the shore from the ship that is finally bringing him “home”: «From darkness arose before us the land of Israel» is not only or simply the statement of belonging, be it to a people or to the group of “survivors”.

Perhaps it is also a statement (or so it seems to me) – together with those many who were in the extreme conditions of the onslaught – of a more elevated kind of belonging and involvement, between those who suffered and nevertheless survived, although with holes and scars.