Book Review and Commentary


We are fortunate to have the pleasure of reading in English, Group by Claudio Neri, originally published in Italian. Neri brings to the English-speaking audience an integration of the French and Italian literature and well-known writings on the application of analysis to understanding human functioning in groups. Into this slim paperback, the author, a teacher of psychoanalysis and a group psychologist, packs volumes of analytic thinking and group therapy experience. This is no uneasy application of dyadic analytic formulations to treat individuals in a group. Instead, Group is an application of analytic sensibility to working with the group as an organism with a conscious and an unconscious life. It demonstrates the interpretation of the group unconscious process for healing. Neri specifically asks the reader to look at the group as an entity, a system with unique characteristics and healing potential. He takes tried and true formulations and infuses them with his own poetic passion and thought. The resulting text is clear, concise, and complex. Neri revisits Bion’s theory of basic assumptions in group life and applies the concept of containment to the functioning of the group process. He refers to Foulkes’ concept of the group mind, Anzieu’s group skin, and Searles on individual learning from group experience. He introduces a new term “commuting” which I found useful for describing oscillation in the group leader’s attention between the individual and the group, but his other original concept “genius loci” in the unconscious of the group I found hard to follow.

In his forward, Malcom Pines writes that this erudite, complex book is crammed with concepts, old and new. I agree with him, and yet one never gets the feeling that the book is in a hurry to fill or overwhelm the reader. In her preface, the late Parthenope Bion comments on the multitude and density of arguments presented and the liveliness of the interaction between the author’s concepts and the older concepts in literature. I agree that the book has density, and yet it is not dense. It has weight, but it does
not feel heavy. The pleasure in reading results from the writing style and from the presentation. For instance, the book includes appendices of the author’s views in a conversational style that is easy to absorb, and attractive supplementary panels in which points from the text are emphasized, expanded, or summarized. Lastly, the book is well produced in an appropriate font with decent margins (too rare in paperbacks). Because of the clever formatting, one can easily dip into the pages of *Group* for a few good ideas, or one can enjoy immersion.

The great strength of this book is the user-friendly elaboration of theoretical approaches to the group. In Neri’s review of the literature and in his own thinking, we are shown the group as a common ground, a shared space for listening and for whatever may emerge, a transpersonal and suprapersonal container for thoughts and feelings. We learn to think of the group as a medium, a matrix, a communication network and a collective mentality. The group is an initial condition for development, a situation of transit to other conditions, and a place of transformation and change. The group is a living organism with moods and atmosphere communicated verbally and non-verbally. It is a protamental system, a functioning multiplicity and a unity, an organized system of mental forms, and a system of synchronicity and interdependence. The group has been variously likened to a star formation or a constellation, a wheel, a field, a pool, and the interior of the mother’s body, each simile referring to an aspect of group life.

A few quotes may demonstrate the applicability of analysis to understanding the group as an organism with a conscious and an unconscious life and also convince the reader of Neri’s commitment to the value of the group for growth through associative thinking when one member takes up what another has been unable to see. “The group is ‘a special space or relational and mental container’ in which emotional transformations and thought operations are carried out” (p. 17) and where “passions, knowledge and relationships are thrown into dynamic collation” (p. 109). The group members assume “an active role and a joint responsibility for all that concerns living, experiencing and thinking about everything that happens in the common field” (p. 16). “The group as a whole is not simply a turn of phrase, it is a living organism, as distinct from the individuals comprising it. It has moods and reactions, a spirit, a feeling and an atmosphere” (p. 21). The “group constitutes a sort of model of ‘functioning multiplicity,’ not only because of the presence of several people, but also of the multifaceted and global aspects of its thought” (p. 147).

Neri’s views immediately make the point that a group is far more than a collection of individual psyches. The group exists in physical space, defined by the arrangement of chairs in a circle for the small group. Within this skin, it develops a group mind that goes its own way. It has a conscious