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**A father killed his son**

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*To Louis SASS, humanist*

**Background and facts**

Henri, aged 49, has an untroubled past, free from delinquency, violence and catastrophe: he was brought up by suitable parents in the middle of an ordinary sibling group, completed his school career with a higher education diploma, entered the commercial world without a hitch, and is highly regarded in his company. He married a woman 5 years his junior, from a much higher and wealthier background than his own. This is very important to him, as he aspires to enter "good society". He does this through his participation in various activities and groups (president of a service club). While his social integration is satisfactory, the same cannot be said of his more intimate relationship with his partner and family: Henri is authoritarian, demanding, inflexible and egotistical. For example, he doesn't contribute to household expenses through his salary, which he devotes solely to satisfying his own needs. His wife pays for the rest, including the purchase of his own car. His relationship with his children is poor: the two eldest (aged 18 and 16) no longer want to see him; the relationship with the third is very strained; it is with the youngest (aged 11), Denis, the one he will kill, that the relationship is the least bad. The situation becomes so distressing that Henri leaves the marital home "to take a step back", and the wife, despite her deeply held religious convictions, decides to leave.

It seems that Henri was stunned and suddenly realized that, by the marital separation, he was going to lose his standard of living (so he says). In this catastrophic situation, he is prepared to make every effort, every concession, and engages in couple's therapy, which is quickly aborted as the wife realizes that the relationship is no longer viable. Henri, who has written her a dozen impassioned letters full of repentance and strong feelings, literally feels betrayed in his good faith and efforts. When his wife leaves after the session, announcing her refusal to continue both the therapy and the couple's life together, he goes into a fit of despair and rage: he doesn't want her to leave, he gets agitated, screams, but nothing helps. Madame gets into her car and drives off. He clings to the door and is dragged for several meters before letting go. He talks about the total collapse of his world. He was distraught. Highly distressed, two days later he left work to see his doctor, who prescribed tranquillizers. The next day, he returns to the office and organizes an outing with Denis, because in his distress, he hopes to find some comfort in the company of the only son with whom he believes he has a good relationship and whom he presumes is going through the same suffering as he is. That's why he offers to go away with him for two days, to be together, go to the movies, spend a night in a hotel. He would like to spend some comforting time with Denis. He had no criminal intent and did not premeditate his son's murder. He explains that when his son began to cry about the family situation, he saw in him all the immense suffering that he, Henri, was experiencing, and found it unbearable that his son should feel such pain. He then decided to kill him and himself. The son lies on the bed. The father presses one hand over his mouth and nose, the other over his throat. Denis, after a few gasps, dies quickly. The father fetches the knife from his car and stabs himself through the heart, but without hitting it. He claims to have tried to stab himself again, but forensic examination won't confirm it. Nevertheless, he lost blood and fainted. The rest is unclear; Henri, after regaining consciousness, although in a sort of second state, behaves in a fairly orderly and efficient manner. He carries Denis' corpse in the trunk of his car unnoticed by the hotel staff, wipes away the blood stains in the room, gives his chest wound a cursory treatment and sets off on a wandering tour with no particular goal or plan, stopping now and then during the day to buy water and cookies. In the evening, he returned to his home region and parked his car where the police find him by chance. He makes a half-hearted attempt to conceal the situation, and soon enough tells the police to open the trunk where the boy lies. Without conviction, he tells them they've been the victims of a mugging, before confessing to the crime.

He appears cold, almost indifferent, to the various parties involved, leaving them with a very unfavorable impression. Later on, his attitude towards others will be much less monolithic and negative. He will proclaim his love for his son, who was, he says, an angel, his desire to protect him from suffering and a devastated future, and to die with him. Henri will insist on the incomprehension and rejection he suffered, while doing his utmost to save his marriage. He will explain that throughout this murderous, wandering episode, he was as if absent from himself, driven by automatisms, subjected to a kind of unthinking inner compulsion, emotionally atonic, on the verge of depersonalization and derealization. He expressed feelings of guilt that seemed sincere.

He underwent various medical, psychiatric and psychological examinations, which revealed no pathology. He underwent a first Rorschach test (early November, one month after the events) under conditions that rendered it unusable, then a second (March), almost 5 months later, and it's this one we're going to talk about.

***PSYCHODIAGNOTIK* (Rorschach)**

Preliminaries

Faced with the act of a father, with no antecedents, who, with his bare hands, suffocates his 11-year-old son, it's hard not to ask a thousand questions (Is he an aggressive man? Is he mentally ill? Is there a recognizable trigger for the murderous sequence? Does Henri feel remorse? Etc.) What can we make of this act which, in its concreteness at least, goes against everything we imagine to be the relationship between a father and his son? How can the sight of this peaceful, weak child, of his vulnerability and innocence, how can the sensations provoked by physical contact with him, with his warm, living body, by his bodily reactions (jolts) to asphyxiation, how, in the father's mind, can the perception of the muscular efforts deployed to suffocate his son, the awareness of the will to kill and the emotion linked to the murderous act - how can these experiences not lead to an inhibition of the act? What compulsion does it impose to go through with it, to the point of death? What structures, dynamics and mechanisms enable this?

Can the Rorschach help us to find snippets of understanding, even if we give up the illusion of being able to explain everything in terms of a unique behavior?

The examination

If, during the Rorschach test, Henri is not very comfortable, which is common in the context of expertise, he will not show the reticence and opposition observed during the first test. Contact is adequate and collaboration satisfactory. The protocol collected is sufficient (dia 2) It contains 22 responses, with a Lambda equal to 1, and contains a few salient elements to be inserted into the general context of the style, around and from which to conduct our analysis work.

Protocol analysis.

We'll deal with the most noteworthy data once we've established the stylistic framework.

1. The avoidant style (dia 3)

Lambda = 1; EA = 4; R > 16

The signs observed point to an avoidant style rather than a "situational" defensive attitude (Lambda = 1; EA = 4; R > 16). Thus, Henri would have a clear tendency to simplify objects of perception, "to ignore their complexity or even to deny the presence of complex or ambiguous elements". In addition to these crucial criteria, there are other elements that point in the same direction of simplifying or reducing the work of perceptual integration. For example, Henri gives no response associating two or more determinants (Blend = 0); he makes no attempt to specify his responses, and gives ten DQv; the intervention of the rational is secondary when the stimulus touches the affective sphere: 2 pure C, 1 TF, 1 VF for a single FV; let's add that the linking of the different elements of the field is poor: Henri perceives only one pair out of 22 responses (EGO = 0.05), gives only one DQ+ and has a very negative Zd = -5.5 (underincorporator).

In addition, Lambda = 1 and EA = 4 have threshold values, suggesting that the profile is fragile (dia 4), as the modification of a single response could tip these values below or above the threshold. This formal fragility undoubtedly reflects a more substantial fragility in psychological functioning, which could be upset by even a benign factor. The onset of this destabilization and its manifestations are unpredictable, often difficult to understand and sometimes extreme (as was the case with John, blindly analyzed at the Geneva Congress in 2022). This risk seems all the more plausible as Henri's thinking is very rigid and tends to remain fixed to his objects (a: p = 1 : 5; PER = 2; PSV = 1; DQv = 10); his lack of plasticity leaves him no possibility of shaping himself to circumstances. This is confirmed by the significantly negative adaptability indices (CDI, ADI and CVI= 5).

1. Passive style (dia 5)

a : p = 1 : 5 ; Fd = 1 ; EB extratensive (1 : 3)

A second important stylistic element is provided by the ratio a : p = 1 : 5 (aggravated by the rare association (7%) with an extratensive EB), which highlights a passive interpersonal style. Henri avoids taking responsibility and initiative. He prefers to defer to others and conform to their expectations. Dependent (Fd =1), he seeks their support and expects them to accept his requests and adapt their behavior to his needs, which predictably exposes him to regular disappointment. The result is resentment towards those people who, in his view, have been oblivious to their "duties" towards him. While he shows himself to be indifferent to others (H=0), indifferent to what they say and do (COP and AG = 0), in fact to everything that doesn't interest him personally. He finds himself socially isolated (isolation index= 0.59), even if he is capable of maintaining superficial, worldly relationships. He avoids emotional involvement and generally shuns emotional stimulation (Afr = 0.38). This may correspond to a passive-dependent personality.

1. Egocentricity index, self-esteem, empathy

EGO = 0.05

The EGO index = 0.05, which is close to zero, would classically mean that Henri avoids taking an interest in himself because of his low self-esteem, his low self-worth and his tendency to compare himself unfavorably with others, "that his sense of self-worth is very negative" (p. 391). This interpretation corresponds in part to what we know about Henri: he is very concerned with his image, social promotion, status, standing; he is eager for recognition and hypersensitive to humiliation; the social downgrading he anticipates as a fallout from his separation from his wife, frightens him. One might think that these ambitious preoccupations are compensatory and combat deep-seated feelings of inadequacy denounced by the very low value of EGO. At the same time, however, he's authoritarian, imposing his will, his whims, granting himself exorbitant privileges and behaving in a way that doesn't correspond to the image of a man overwhelmed by massive feelings of personal worthlessness.

In this case, and although there is no reflection response associated with very low EGO, we could clinically hypothesize a serious conflict concerning self-image and self-worth. In the absence of the reflection responses that would allow this interpretation, this hypothesis could be supported by Henri's numerous comments on symmetry, which could be seen as antecedents of the paired and reflexive responses. It's as if Henri lacks the psychic means of elaboration that would enable him to integrate these raw elements (perception of symmetry) with more constructed mental realities (pairs and reflections) involving the ego, its image and its relationships. We might therefore think that the conflictual problem of the self-image and its narcissistic investment is in the making, but remains latent. The material - the symmetry - is there, but it's only perceived, it's the subject of descriptive comments, of "symmetry remarks", without being worked on in such a way as to take on meaning and form (pairs and reflections) in terms of self-relationship.

Beyond the classic interpretation of the EGO Index, largely justified by statistical studies and little by psychological considerations, we might wonder how giving pair responses on the Rorschach has anything to do with self-image and self-esteem. The link is not obvious.

However, perceiving the symmetrical elements of the spots not as parts of a whole, but as similar but independent objects, is perhaps an introduction to the notion of otherness. Perceiving the objects around us (the not-me) gives us the phenomenological conviction of their reality. We thus have knowledge of the existence of others, but a knowledge limited to what we perceive of them, and which, in a direct line, tells us nothing about ourselves. All we do is carry out a routine activity of perceptually grasping the world. In the Rorschach, we perceive a woman on plate I (D4) or a man on plate IV (W), just as we would in the street. This apprehension of the world takes place from the central position we occupy in this circumstance, which does not imply that we accord ourselves a particular value according to this central position, nor that we engage in a centripetal process of self-reference. It's simply a topological notation that corresponds strictly to Piaget's definition of egocentrism. Egocentrism denotes the location of the self, not its value. And what we're talking about here is the ego and the non-ego, not otherness. The notion of otherness is not simply the perception of the not-me (the objects of the world), it is the awareness that some of these objects, human beings, are not only not-me, they are my fellow men. [In my dictionaries, the French word (*mon semblable*) has no exact equivalent in English (fellow man) or Italian (*mon semblable= il mio prossimo; tes semblables= i tuoi pari; ses semblables= i propri simili*). It's not me I see in them, it's multiple variations of our common humanity that are revealed in every encounter with a fellow being who exists independently of me. The perception of symmetry as a pair of similar and different objects (which ceases to be the case in the *reflection* response) seems to be understandable as a manifestation of the perception of the other in his or her independence and own identity. Such perception is the condition for the recognition of otherness, for the knowledge I have of my fellow human being, and the ignorance I have of him in his individual personality. It is from this assumed ignorance, cultivated as a principle, that empathy can be born, this interest in the psychic life of the other, about whom I know nothing that he has not made known to me, an interest coupled with the ability to understand the emotional significance of what he has revealed to me (which does not imply sharing his emotions).

From this point of view, a low EGO translates the absence of empathy, which is very enlightening in the analysis of Henri's murder of his youngest son. Without empathy, Henri can't know anything about what his son feels, lives, desires or thinks; he only knows what he, the father, thinks and feels, which he can't imagine Denis doesn't share. What he perceives of the son, his crying, his distress, is interpreted as proof that Denis is suffering from the marital separation just as he, Henri, is, a suffering that is unbearable for the father and hence for his son. The child must be radically spared this suffering: death is the only possible and effective protection against pain. Henri is convinced that he is acting out of love for his son by taking his life. And he intends to do the same to himself. It seems that, in Henri's moment of intense distress, a form of fusion occurs between him and his son, rather than a form of identification. A fusion made possible by the intensity of the emotion and the absence of empathy. It's no longer Denis, his son, this other who is different from him in every way, but a painful part of himself, Henri, that he sees in front of him and that he must eliminate without being held back by the obstacles raised by the perception of a young boy, vulnerable, saddened, docile. As soon as the child suffocates to death, Henri stabs himself, without touching the heart. This is difficult to interpret, as it happens quite often in such situations, as if the homicidal impulse has been drained of energy after the murder, and there's not enough left to commit the murder of oneself. We cannot, however, rule out the possibility of a utilitarian maneuver designed to mitigate the horror of the infanticide gesture. Note that the value of the suicidal constellation is 6.

1. A few questions

Following the interviews, several questions arise concerning Henri's indifference, aggressiveness and guilt. (Dia 6)

A. Does Henri, who has often appeared cold and even indifferent, have the capacity to experience intense emotions? If so, how does he manage them? Can they have a disorganizing effect? We've seen that Henri (avoidant style) avoids emotionally stimulating situations (Afr = 0.38) and emotionally involved relationships (H = 0; isolation index = 0.59; FC = 0). On the other hand, he may experience very crude, poorly integrated emotions, which he chooses to let express themselves without control (C = 2), which is compatible with his marked egocentricity (EGO = 0.05). His adaptive resources are limited (EA = 4; eb = 8; D and AdjD = -1; ADI and CVI = 5), so he can be destabilized by relatively benign factors (low stress tolerance), get into trouble and react impulsively. Henri therefore experiences emotions, and has difficulty managing them, sometimes through avoidance and repression, sometimes through uncontrolled, impulsive expression.

B. Does Henri have an aggressive potential that would have been actualized in the difficult circumstances preceding the murder? The absence of AG and S responses suggests an insignificant aggressive potential. It is, therefore, implausible that, under the effect of the strong emotion that invaded him without meeting with much resistance, Henri would have impulsively expressed an aggressiveness that is usually contained.

C. Does Henri feel guilty?

In view of VF = 1 and FV = 1, feelings of guilt, remorse or regret about unwanted behavior or personal characteristics are present and distressing. This lends credence to Henri's words, whose sincerity was questioned by those who met him after the murder. Given his lack of inclination to self-examination (FD = 0), these feelings of guilt can logically be considered secondary to the crime he committed, and chronic sources of stress, rather than expressing a habitual disposition to self-criticism.

1. Others data (dia 7)

The weight of his concerns is all the greater because, in general, Henri finds it difficult to rid himself of his worries; he remains entangled in them due to his lack of flexibility and open-mindedness; his thinking is rigid; it cannot move smoothly from one object to another and is resistant to any reconsideration, even if new elements justify it (a : p = 1 : 5 ; PER = 2; PSV = 1 ; DQv = 10). The pejorative effect of this rigidity is all the greater as the thoughts on which Henri fixates and ruminates may be distorted; they are the fruit of approximate perceptions (X-% = 0.23; X+% = 0.41; Xu% = 0.24%; DQv=10), elaborated without care and without much logic (WSum=12), with all that this entails in terms of risk of error in comprehension, interpretation and, subsequently, evaluation and decisions. His intellectual level does not make him immune to such errors.

Henri is insensitive to his own contradictions, inconsistencies and irrationality of thought. Emotions accentuate cognitive disorder: "Lack of logic and coherence in my actions and thoughts", he will say of his behavior throughout the criminal episode. He adds: "I didn't think about the consequences". In addition, emotions give rise to emphatic verbal and non-verbal displays, the excess of which is all the more inappropriate in that it coexists with cold pragmatism and incomprehensible indifference. His wife would say of him: "Henri's general indifference to other people's problems is regularly revealed". At the same time, he wrote her passionate letters that contrasted with his lack of consideration for her.

**Comments and summary**

The Rorschach doesn't look for things we already know, it allows independent analysis of material from sources other than the clinic and the anamnesis. The results of this analysis, whether or not they agree with the other sources, must be taken into account. If they are inconsistent, an attempt should be made to understand the meaning of the inconsistency, and to judge its validity and significance before integrating the data into the overall picture. If they agree, then we have confirmation that the external observations have an internal basis. Rorschach analysis does not, of course, replace clinical observation; rather, it illuminates it by revealing the underlying elements that determine it.

Observation, interviews, anamnesis, investigations, descriptions by others and Henri's own words paint a fairly clear picture, albeit perhaps exaggeratedly negative in view of the crime committed: Henri is adapted to the professional world, concerned with appearances and social status but rather insecure in relationships, sensitive to humiliation and greedy for recognition; he is authoritarian and egotistical in couple and family. Alongside these obvious aspects, the cognitivo-perceptual aspects are less obvious: the approximate and careless nature of perceptions and interpretations, the simplifying processing of information, the laxity of logic are not obvious, but can be discovered by paying attention.

Less apparent is Henri's passivity in the Rorschach, whereas in everyday life, on the contrary, he gave the impression of being in charge. His daughter says that he liked to be served, that he was the master of his house, dominating his wife and children like a dictator. Based on the Rorschach, we discover another character, whose dependence and the demands that accompany it can be perceived. Seen in this light, it's easy to understand, for example, why Henri expects his wife to cover all household expenses, while he uses his own resources for his own benefit. Generally speaking, he demands that others do for him what he expects them to do, and is indignant when his expectations are disappointed, as when his wife rejects his attempts to resolve the marital problem: he is then desperate, ready to make any effort, dejected that his wife won't listen. Completely overwhelmed by emotion, his analysis of the situation is irrational and incoherent, pushing him towards radically simplistic solutions. In a haphazard fashion, he tries to get closer to the only child with whom he mistakenly believes he has a good relationship, with the intention of running away with him. Henri, then, naively tries to create and carry away a capsule of illusory happiness in which the father generously devotes himself to the well-being of his then-fulfilled son. Denis, instead of showing happiness and gratitude, expresses the deep pain caused by the family break-up. Henri, faced with a cruel disillusionment, is overcome by an emotion so powerful that it dissolves his identity and unity, as can happen in a crowd bath or an orgasm, causing two suffering beings to merge into a single emotional protoplasm that must be reduced to nothing. Henri gives in to his emotions and impulses. At the same time, his capacity for mentalization (ideation) is overwhelmed. He can scarcely deal with real problems on a representational level, nor can he draw on his imagination. He thus finds himself alienated, as if driven by automatisms that dispossess him of himself and leave him with the impression of emotionally dull depersonalization he describes. “I was devastated and wanted to escape my pain and humiliation. At the time, I felt very close to Denis. I felt he was suffering just as much as I was, and I wanted to spare him from it. I was at my wits' end, I had lost all logic. There was no coherence in my actions and thoughts," he says.

In this state, his son is no more than the embodiment of his unhappiness, the unhappiness that must be eradicated: Henri goes for the simplest, crudest, least nuanced solution, the removal of the painful object, Denis. Henri's avoidant style spares him the internal conflicts that a lucid apprehension of the situation in all its complexity would normally engender.

We see this rigid personality break down, disunite and then, says Henri, "it's the black hole", he is simultaneously given over to impulses and automatisms that also escape clear awareness, critical thinking and control, while providing an unthinking programming of acts, some without precedent or pattern (the murderous acts), others ordinary and prosaic. Gestures follow one after the other, according to necessity and his inclination to passivity. Thus, after the murder, he abandons himself passively to his wanderings, and continues to present contrasting aspects of pragmatic adequacy and disorganized thought. The synthetic function of the ego is suspended.

After the event, he'll spill out his regrets and self-accusations, never ceasing to recall how he himself has been mistreated, humiliated and rejected, how he too has been a victim, emphasizing what he has suffered and showing, by the same token, his passivity.

This picture is the manifestation of a great imbalance provoked by extreme circumstances, but it can be found in lighter features when, in more common conditions, Henri knows what is expected of him and what is possible, when the demands are moderate and the threats low, as was the case in his life. The hypothesis of a rigid structure that is relatively adapted in ordinary times, and which has decompensated under the effect of enormous stress, is therefore a hypothesis that helps to understand this infanticidal act, which is in itself insane.

The Rorschach analysis enabled us to objectify various constituents of Henri's personality, and to articulate them in such a way as to best account for the psychological functioning underlying his way of being and behaving, both in everyday life and in the exceptional circumstances that led to the infanticide.

We could end with Henri's response to plate IV, the only almost human response, which is certainly not a premonition of his crime, but which could be a pathetic expression of how he sees himself: "A clown who bends over, spreads his legs and looks", a character without identity, without face, without value, without dignity, dependent on the appreciation of the people to whom he exhibits himself and whose reactions he anxiously watches for. From comedy to tragedy, it's said, there's only one step, and Henri has dramatically taken it.