The Relational Unconscious: Commentary on Papers by Michael Eigen and James Grotstein

Adrienne Harris, Ph.D.

This discussion addresses key points of contact and difference in the work of Eigen and Grotstein, each of whom holds unique and highly dramatic and enigmatic views of unconscious life. Their views can be framed as relational. They each cite Bion as an important influence but develop distinct sensibilities. In conceptualizing the unconscious, each author must tangle with difficulties with language and representation. Using a clinical example, I point out four aspects of my work on the unconscious: that unusual links of body and mind are posited; that the unconscious is historical; that the unconscious also contains transhistorical forces and processes; and, finally, that unconscious life handles time in unusual and nonrational ways. Eigen's interest in process and Grotstein's interest in mental structures are contrasted. The ethical implications of work on the unconscious are suggested.

American psychoanalysts in general and relational psychoanalysts in particular are often charged with paying insufficient attention to and with lacking appreciation of the unconscious in its manifold manifestations (Breen, 1993; Green, 1995). Here are two exceptions. Michael Eigen and James Grotstein bring to us rich individual histories, strong interests in the work of Klein and Bion, and perspectives that enhance the conversations with relationalists. Both writers seem unafraid of their beliefs, spirituality, and passions. Both appreciate the uncertainty and maverick strangeness of the psyche.

Also striking and interesting to me is that both writers struggle to conceptualize the unconscious by leading us and themselves into a struggle with language itself. There is a kind of longing to break through the digital parameters of words and sentences to usher us into a different presence, a more unsettled mode of being. But how do we find a language that will illuminate those mysterious, paradoxical aspects of psyche that are termed unconscious and at the same time find a way to break out of the prison of language? Grotstein asks, how do we address the unconscious from within the domain of the unconscious and so keep the very elixir of psychoanalysis alive?

That project—to keep alive the play of unconscious phenomena in ourselves and in our process with patients—is very difficult, perhaps a goal we can only approach but never fully apprehend. We need to be unsettled, to loosen our moorings a little but also to feel that it is safe to respond. I love Eigen's phrase about alpha work, “a nest where birds of meaning might alight.” But he also conjures the site of clashing unconsciouses as a place of murder and storms, of interpersonal hurricanes in which it can be frightening to stand.

While preparing this discussion, I had to make little nests for myself to fight against my impulse toward logic and argument and some of my anxieties about ideas like the play of the transcendent or the ineffable. I played music when I read. I recommend Chet Baker or late Strauss opera. Pick something unexpected, slightly off, but mesmerizing. I believe that the kinds of meditations and reflections that can emerge from an encounter with this work are a crucial and underdeveloped aspect of most analysts' working instrument and working clinical theory.

One paradox, at the level of method, is that we have to approach scholarly exposition on the unconscious through dreaming and alpha work. My solution today is to start with a clinical vignette through which some of Eigen's and Grotstein's ideas might be reflected. I am drawing from work done on or around September 11, our collective and individual terrible encounter with many aspects of unconsciousness, with O.

On that Tuesday, Charlotte, who lives downtown, was awakened by a noise she could not exactly identify but that she imagined was coming from the street. She got up and glanced at her clock. She remembers that it was somewhere around 8:30 or 8:40 in the morning. It seemed early to her, so she closed the window and went back to sleep. She dreamt. In her dream a bus was trying to fly. It sprouted wings and started to rise in the air. She watched but became worried that it would not make it. It was unclear if the bus would crash or get aloft. She slept on until her phone rang, waking her again, now with the frightened voices of friends recounting the events of the morning. I say again to suggest that the first awakening was through primary process and the second through logic and reality(secondary process), though both levels have their sanities and their madnesses.
It was several days before we could meet in my office. To my surprise, Charlotte was worried about the tourists. How would they manage? How would they get home? Would they have enough resources? How upset they must have been. By the third time she mentioned tourists, I asked her about it. In the next minutes, she was weeping and it was obvious to both of us the minute she began to explore this subject that she was the tourist—always in transit, in between, never home.

As I listened to her describe the experience of the fallen buildings and all the devastating sights, I realized that I was remembering an experience of the previous night when a patient brought her three-year-old to talk over a harrowing escape they had had. Echoing in my head was a sentence the three-year-old kept repeating while putting toy people in and out of a toy ambulance: “Now the twin towers fell. But they weren't really twins.”

It was the first inkling I had that there might be a psychic animation of the two towers, including their twoness, although these unconscious fantasies would be built very differently in each patient's case. In the ensuing weeks, as many clinicians can attest, the towers appeared as broken bodies, as gone or incinerated life. Patients inhabited the planes, the structure of the buildings as if they were bodies, even the minds and bodies of the terrorists. There was internal theater, broken thought, rogue subjectivities, the paradox of making while destroying, the processes that Eigen and Grotstein have been describing to us. In Charlotte's life, a family devastation really did leave nothing standing and made her a kind of permanent tourist.

It is also relevant, I think, that my mental association was a communication from a child to a child part of Charlotte, for it was at her next session, the following day, that she mapped out the double awakening and the dream of that Tuesday morning. As we worked on the dream, she described the winged bus as a kind of cartoon drawing, a yellow bus with sweet, fat little wings. I told her that one of my images of the bus was from the children's story *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, a book whose cover I seem to remember has such a cartoonlike flying bus. Charlotte laughed. It is a book she read and loved as a child, and, she noted ruefully, also is a book she very much connected to the time of family breakdown.

Let us keep this clinical material in mind as I reflect on Eigen's and Grotstein's two papers. I want to make four general points.

First, both writers are attempting to get us away from the hierarchy (from Descartes) body to emotion to thought in ascending order. Thought can be destructive and alienating as well as mutative and structure building. Representations can shatter the mind. Feelings can heal or destroy. Murderous experiences coexist with and depend on healing transactions. Madness can arise in sin and in attempts at healing. Both authors reconfigure primary and secondary process. Conscious and unconscious processes are parallel, complementary, integratable systems. Minds are not collections of higher functions hanging on the edge of some boiling cauldron. I think of Damasio's (1994, 1999) work on emotion as the glue of cognition. Unconscious phenomena are a necessary elixir, the glow of psychoanalysis, its vitality, its dread, its affective storms. Charlotte's dream links past and present traumas before consciousness; she dreams of the moment before catastrophe, but a before where the after is already foretold.

Second, unconscious states and processes are historical. Here is where we have a relational unconscious. The unconscious holds the residue of ruined containers. It carries the effect of trauma on our psychic and cognitive functioning. In Grotstein's concept of rogue subjectivities we find a persona, a self-state constructed from interactions and relationships. The unconscious holds subjects not objects. The dramas and narratives of the unconscious are made in relational matrices, carved by history, often outside our control and our awareness. In a wonderfully evocative account (and more extensively in his book) [Grotstein, 2000], he describes the unconscious as an internal world—its theatrical spaces, its haunting dramaturge, the eternal geometry, and the hosts of demons, ghosts, and phantoms that are not internalized objects but damaged (inadequately contained) aspects of self in a unique and dynamic landscape.

So Charlotte is the bus, with its sweet little, not quite adequate, wings, trying so hard to fly. The towers, too, are part of her rogue subjectivities. The unconscious, as a state and as a function, contains the capacities of any subject to bear the products of its interactions, particularly its damaged and ruptured ones. Seeing the remnants and representations of Charlotte's project of self-cure made in the wake of destruction, we know that that there will have to be breakdown and creation if Charlotte is to “rejoin her destiny.” The contents of the unconscious register rupture in time and in potential. Charlotte is a kind of “girl, interrupted,” poised to fly and to crash. Eigen notes that the alpha functions sometimes evacuates and sometimes modifies feelings; and so here, in the sweet frailty of the dream image, the horror is modulated and defended against both outside her window and in her memory.
Third. I am positing a historical unconscious, yes. And yet there is something outside, more than, in excess of this socially and relationally circumscribed space. Bion's (1962) O is a concept for which each of us must find our translation. The very ciphered nature of O opens it for our individual understandings. For Grotstein, O carries enormous potential and weight. His terms, “truth instinct,” a potential “destiny,” “entelechy,” conjure up an aspect of the unconscious that is timeless, universal, an essence, an agenda beyond the individual. For Eigen, O arises in the state of being incommunicado, the moment he characterizes as standing at the gate, silenced, in wonder, and having too much to say.

Fourth, to approach the unconscious, we must inhabit multiple and often contradictory experiences of time. There is the timelessness of the unconscious. There are the healing rhythms of birth and destruction. There is the experience of trauma as an event about to be, an event in the near future. So Charlotte sleeps to move away from what is about to happen but dreams of an event that has happened, relations that were ruptured, planes that did crash in the past and in the present. And she awakens as the flying bus hovers, uncertain; she awakens to the new reality. This is the rhythmic movement Eigen is describing. It is also the movement of the dreamer in Freud's (1900) Father Can't You See I'm Dreaming text. From Eigen we can see the effect of ruptures on the microprocess and rhythm of building and destroying. From Grotstein, the rupture occurs in the more macrotime flow, the mangling of potential and destiny—entelechy.

Very different in style and ways of thinking, Eigen and Grotstein do share a common bond through Bion. He is the fascinating, perhaps paradoxical, figure in the background here: mystic and plain talker, trickster and magus, the antidote to the hyperrationality of many psychoanalytic texts.

At the risk of oversimplification, I think that one distinction between these writers, even if only in emphasis, is that Eigen is tracing the unconscious as a process, a disturbance in the operation of thought/soma/affect. He is interested in describing or taking the measure of the unalienable experience of “incommunicado.” Eigen conceives of two impulses in human functioning, toward connection and toward solitude. Clinical work is healing when there is respect for the rhythms and timing of these two experiences.

Grotstein, in this article, stresses the contents of unconscious life. He is designing a landscape, and I feel the power of multiplicities of self in his way of thinking. The unconscious is “space,” theater, an inhabited, haunted world mediating between consciousness and something else. It is this other, this beyond, this O that compels Grotstein's work and inquiry, but it is the aspect of his thought that I have the most visceral and emotional trouble with. When I hear terms like truth instinct and destiny, I can feel my anxiety rise and my heels dig in. Whatever demons lurk in my unconscious, my associations to the word destiny are to feel like an Indian who looks up as the American cavalry ride across the horizon. My best translation of O draws on Irwin Hoffman (1998), who speaks of the transpersonal, transhistorical truth of death and of the fact that all psychic life is conducted in the presence or denial or distortion or evasion of that “truth.” And the best I can do with destiny and truth is to draw on the domain of chaos theory to understand pattern without a blueprint, potential without predictability.

Now I want to make a final point. Questions of the unconscious interestingly raise questions of ethics, questions of human freedom and human responsibility. Ethics comes up in the conviction, of both authors, that the analyst's work must draw on and be open to processes and functions that may be unreliably inside or outside a moral order. When Grotstein says there are no bad objects, only good actors in the bad roles of villains, I think he is noticing the way morality has snuck through his thoughts about madness and psychopathy, the long-standing threading of ideas of psychosis in Freud's model of mind and the presence of madness in omnipotence and pseudorationality. I have always liked the way Žižek (1989) speaks of this ethical problem: you are not responsible for what happened to you, but you are responsible for the story (or multiple stories) you tell about it.

Relational ideas about deauthorizing the analyst open up questions of ethics and responsibility. There is a less flagrant tendency for the analyst's voice to connect to the mad superego Eigen is describing or the seductive superego that urges betrayal and self-betrayal. Authority and tyranny, of course, can have a soft voice. But lifting the command to know (from the analyst) and the command to be known (from the patient) offers the hope, the potential of alpha function in a less distorting, less sadomasochistic world than we know now. This potential in our clinical work is a truth to be strived for, a truth that is destroyed and damaged if we think we are in full command of our minds and others'.

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