Unwanted: Deadened Aliveness

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As in all my work, my desire is not to 'solve' anything, but to open fields of experiencing.
- Michael Eigen, Conversations

Making contact with the unwanted can be a paralyzing task. A task perhaps akin to approaching Medusa, victim turned monster, whose deadly gaze turns onlookers to stone, a petrifying and isolating power. Approach calls for caution and careful maneuver.

Freud, as was his genius, found unique vantage points from which to approach many difficult, and some horrifying, themes. One way he explored the unwanted was through the idea of unwanted parents. He wrote in “Family Romances” of the necessary fictions that children construct to cope with the realistic disillusionment with their once cherished and idealized parents that comes along with growth. A fantasy of having been adopted and eventually being rescued by one’s real, royal and prestigious parents, the family romance, is a defense against disappointing family reality and also a defense against incestuous and murderous wishes towards parents and siblings. Freud does not delve into the real nightmares of some family life in his short paper, a concern he also and reluctantly put aside along with the seduction theory, yet, in the background of the Oedipus myth, so central to Freudian theory, or mythology, and so often left unnoted, is an initial act of infanticide. Oedipus was an unwanted child.

Ferenczi, Freud’s great pupil, tackled the unwanted straight on. In his 1929 paper “The Unwelcome Child and his Death-Instinct” he lays stress on the reality of the emotional environment, and in the cases of the “unwelcome guests of the family,” the consequential lack of a warm reception. Ferenczi writes:

I only wish to point to the probability that children who are received in a harsh and disagreeable way die easily and willingly. Either they use one of the many proffered organic possibilities for a quick exit, or if they escape this fate, they keep a streak of pessimism and of aversion to life.
(Ferenczi, 1929, 127)

As Ferenczi understood it, without the mediation or call of love, the death-drive can easily pull the infant back into a state of non-being. René Spitz’s research into Hospitalism, a condition in which institutionalized infants died for lack of contact, Is an extreme and tragic example of deprivation at work.
Ferenczi’s paper is a short communication, but one with deep meaning. In these individual cases of early trauma, the death instinct, the “aversion to life,” develops a disproportionate hold. This differs from Freud’s notion of the homeostasis between Eros and Thanatos. The will to live, to thrive, is impeded, if not broken.

Ferenczi also makes an important distinction between those children maltreated from the start and those initially received with enthusiasm, “even passionate love,” and then dropped. There are many nuances to the sense of being unwanted and of how they, and the deadened sense of aliveness, the aversion to life, show up in our clinical encounters. Given the tendency, or compulsion, toward repetition, those dropped, for example, may have the inclination to quickly, harshly, drop lovers, friends and therapists.

Groddeck, who influenced Ferenczi and from whom Freud borrowed and reworked the term “the Id,” turned his gaze on unwanted pregnancies. Groddeck was a pioneer of psychosomatic medicine, a psychoanalytic outsider, and quoting Eigen, a “medium of incessant contact with unconscious streaming” (Eigen, 2006, 845). He observed, through their physical manifestations, unconscious forces of a negative kind, namely hatred of the unborn child, even in those women most empathically in want of babies. He theorized that the necessary mixture of love and hate between mother and child is fostered during, if not prior, to pregnancy. His understanding of the unconscious was broader or looser than Freud’s; he was interested in somatic, symbolic eruptions. “We are lived by the It,” he writes. He saw a mother’s hate of her child, a wish to be rid of it, in morning sickness, tooth loss, accidents, and the like. Fathers are also on his radar, their hate, or aversion to new life, manifest in the unconscious inability to impregnate. Unlike the oceanic womb of Ferenczi’s imagination, for Groddeck, as later with Klein and Bion, the struggle of life and death begins therein. Pre-shadowing Winnicott, he writes of the hatred that is necessary to separate mother and child – to push out, to get away. The alternative is entombment, petrification; the German word Groddeck uses is “Versteint” literally meaning turned to stone. An uncanny reminder of Medusa’s plight.

Abortions are a way that patients look at, or bring into session, deadened self-aspects. “My boyfriend and I had an abortion together,” says a patient with sadness that an early alcohol ravaged relationship ended this way. Further into therapy it comes up again: “I should have been an abortion,” she says, “I never felt wanted. It was like having a piece of my soul ripped out of me.” Trauma permeated her beginnings and created blank spots impossible to metabolize. A physical death-act bares a wordless, wounded history. Another patient brings in a drawing made after her first abortion, a scratched over bloody fetus she leaves lying on the floor in the silence between us. When words fail, images can be a starting point.
Bion, a go to guy, so to speak, for deadened states, writes in *Memoir of the Future*: “Most people experience mental death if they live long enough. You don’t have to live long [though] to have that experience—all you have to do is to be mentally alive” (Bion, 1991, 178). He writes of his own death during the carnage he was part of in World War I. He was immersed in death and fear and discovered the many ways to blank out, to go dead, and most disastrously, to deaden the capacity to take in the too-muchness of reality. The mind destroys its ability to perceive. Bion is most helpful in working with deadness, an unwelcome guest, at times, to many therapists. In his well-known paper, “Without Memory and Desire,” Bion commands presence: being present to the experience happening between two scared people in a session, to the experience of the emotional truth of that session. “[C]ommunication,” he writes, “depends for its efficacy on the capacity for receptiveness…” (Bion, 1991, 271). How does one go on receiving and surviving the full blast of deadliness?

The unwanted child is faced with the too-muchness of absence, the absence of receptiveness, and following Ferenczi and Bion, the too-muchness of the ensuing inner destructiveness. This emptiness is captured poignantly in a leading chapter quote in Georg Eliot’s *Middlemarch, A Study of Provincial Life*, a novel that is full of the forsaken, it reads as follows:

A child forsaken, waking suddenly,  
Whose gaze afeard on all things round doth rove,  
And seeth only that it cannot see  
The meeting eyes of love. (Eliot, 1872, 106)

The lives within the novel center around a handful of young adults who are all in some way parentless and all uniquely confused, idealizing love and finding it almost impossible to connect their capacities with the wider world. Absence is writ large and love goes awry.

As an aside, Bion often makes reference to the importance of literary characters. For example, Falstaff is for him “…more ‘real’ in Shakespeare’s verbal formulation than countless millions of people … we are called on to believe in” (Bion, 1991, 4). Bion indicates, through a sometimes cryptic writing style, quite strongly, that literature is equal to science in the quest for truth and thus underscoring the importance of a Shakespeare, a Milton, to which I add an Eliot. George Eliot. In *Middlemarch*, and elsewhere, she breathes life into the “insignificant,” those who “lived faithfully, a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.” An oft-quoted passage is quite relevant here, in a pastoral way, to the discussion of the too-muchness of being, she writes:

If we had a keen vision and feeling for all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heartbeat, and we should die
of that roar which lies on the other side of silence. As it is, the quickest of us walks about well wadded with stupidity. (Eliot, 1872, 261)

“...we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.”

Turning to another very “real” fictional being, silent entombment is captured in a very powerful image in the opening sequence of Charlotte Brontë’s classic orphan tale Jane Eyre. The reader is introduced to the ten-year old orphaned Jane, sitting separated from the natural world by a glass window. False accusations by a mean spirited cousin result in the punishment of being locked, alone, into her uncle’s death chamber with her terror and misery. Brontë describes Jane’s startled experience of catching sight of herself in the looking glass:

All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, ... coming out of lone, ferny dells in moors, and appearing before the eyes of belated travellers. (Bronte, 1848, 6)

The reader, as the analyst with analysand, is indeed belated to the scene of a death, or soul murder, or with Winnicott in mind, a breakdown that has already happened. This mirror image, Jane Eyre seeing her estranged ghost self, is packed with importance. The recognition and acceptance of one’s own deadened state, although horrifying, can be a starting point for mourning, for co-habitation, for growth.

Learning too early that one is unwanted is a catastrophic event. A patient remembers her child self: “I was a very obedient, quiet child. Thinking about that now makes me very sad.” This brings up the idea of deadness protecting life, deadening aliveness as a defense. A striking example of this is found in popular culture, and what paper on the “unwanted: dead or alive” would be complete without reference to the violent, thought-provoking, cult-status series “The Walking Dead.” To survive, characters often disguise themselves, and their smell of aliveness, by smearing dead, gooey, gross stuff onto their clothes and bodies, in order to walk undetected among the flesh hungry dead, the “Walkers.” All characters are one bite away from being turned to mindless flesh-eaters themselves. We are killers, zombies, Medusas in the making. The series brings up, provocatively, the question of how far does one go to survive.

Eigen writes extensively about destructive forces. He draws on the work of Klein, Winnicott, Bion, amongst others, like a scholarly jazz musician. With Eigen one learns about building capacity, the capacity to work with unwanted patients and unwanted deadened states. For Eigen, dying out and re-birth is an on-going
lifelong process. His empathy for wounded hearts seems boundless. He elaborates:

It is difficult for many therapists to recognize that they may be too much or not enough for their patients and that turning oneself on-off is an important parameter. An individual who chronically numbs or deadens herself in order to survive lacks experience and resources to deal with the full range of emotional aliveness. (Eigen, 1996, 156)

Aliveness is fraught with danger.

Appreciating the deep magnitude of unwanted aliveness through these varied thinkers, sometimes wild and stray thoughts and images, is meant to encourage further sounding. An ending question: Is it possible, beyond the mourning of deadened childhood selves, to revive aliveness, to bear a sense of want? Approach calls for caution.
REFERENCES

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