Truth and the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis

Giuseppe Civitarese
Truth and the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis

What is the truth of the unconscious? *Truth and the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis* explores the intersection of these two concepts within a Bionian framework. Giuseppe Civitarese maps out the unconscious in psychoanalysis, and focuses on the differences between the Freudian, Kleinian, Bionian and Lacanian schools of thought on this topic, as well as drawing on findings from neuroscience.

The book explores topics including the inaccessibility of the unconscious, dreams, body issues, issues of personality, the influence of field theory and the clinical implications of this theorizing. It contains innovative comparison between Freudian metapsychology and the Bionian theory on thinking, and novel use of Bion’s hallucinosis as an important new technical tool. An internationally recognized author, Civitarese provides fresh ideas throughout on a challenging subject, supported with vivid clinical material.

*Truth and the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis* will be of interest to anyone following the growing post-Bionian movement within contemporary psychoanalysis, enabling them to familiarize themselves with some of the most important current issues in psychoanalytic research. *Truth and the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis* will appeal to psychotherapists, psychologists and psychoanalysts, as well as undergraduate and postgraduate students studying in the field.

**Giuseppe Civitarese** is a training and supervising analyst in the Italian Psychoanalytic Society (SPI), and a member of the American Psychoanalytic Association (APsaA). He lives in Pavia, Italy. He has published several books including the Routledge titles *The Intimate Room* (2010) and *The Violence of Emotions* (2012).
The New Library of Psychoanalysis was launched in 1987 in association with the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London. It took over from the International Psychoanalytical Library which published many of the early translations of the works of Freud and the writings of most of the leading British and Continental psychoanalysts.

The purpose of the New Library of Psychoanalysis is to facilitate a greater and more widespread appreciation of psychoanalysis and to provide a forum for increasing mutual understanding between psychoanalysts and those working in other disciplines such as the social sciences, medicine, philosophy, history, linguistics, literature and the arts. It aims to represent different trends both in British psychoanalysis and in psychoanalysis generally. The New Library of Psychoanalysis is well placed to make available to the English-speaking world psychoanalytic writings from other European countries and to increase the interchange of ideas between British and American psychoanalysts. Through the Teaching Series, the New Library of Psychoanalysis now also publishes books that provide comprehensive, yet accessible, overviews of selected subject areas aimed at those studying psychoanalysis and related fields such as the social sciences, philosophy, literature and the arts.

The Institute, together with the British Psychoanalytical Society, runs a low-fee psychoanalytic clinic, organizes lectures and scientific events concerned with psychoanalysis and publishes the International Journal of Psychoanalysis. It runs a training course in psychoanalysis which leads to membership of the International Psychoanalytical Association – the body which preserves internationally agreed standards of training, of professional entry, and of professional ethics and practice for psychoanalysis as initiated and developed by Sigmund Freud. Distinguished members of the Institute have included Michael Balint, Wilfred Bion, Ronald Fairbairn, Anna Freud, Ernest Jones, Melanie Klein, John Rickman and Donald Winnicott.

Previous general editors have included David Tuckett, who played a very active role in the establishment of the New Library.
He was followed as general editor by Elizabeth Bott Spillius, who was in turn followed by Susan Budd and then by Dana Birksted-Breen.

Current members of the Advisory Board include Giovanna Di Ceglie, Liz Allison, Anne Patterson, Josh Cohen and Daniel Pick.

Previous members of the Advisory Board include Christopher Bollas, Ronald Britton, Catalina Bronstein, Donald Campbell, Rosemary Davies, Sara Flanders, Stephen Grosz, John Keene, Eglé Laufer, Alessandra Lemma, Juliet Mitchell, Michael Parsons, Rosine Jozef Perelberg, Richard Rusbridger, Mary Target and David Taylor.

**TITLES IN THIS SERIES**

*Impasse and Interpretation* Herbert Rosenfeld  
*Psychoanalysis and Discourse* Patrick Mahony  
*The Suppressed Madness of Sane Men* Marion Milner  
*The Riddle of Freud* Estelle Roith  
*Thinking, Feeling, and Being* Ignacio Matte Blanco  
*The Theatre of the Dream* Salomon Resnik  
*Melanie Klein Today: Volume 1, Mainly Theory* Edited by Elizabeth Bott Spillius  
*Melanie Klein Today: Volume 2, Mainly Practice* Edited by Elizabeth Bott Spillius  
*Psychic Equilibrium and Psychic Change: Selected Papers of Betty Joseph* Edited by Michael Feldman and Elizabeth Bott Spillius  
*The Freud–Klein Controversies 1941–45* Edited by Pearl King and Riccardo Steiner  
*Dream, Phantasy and Art* Hanna Segal  
*Psychic Experience and Problems of Technique* Harold Stewart  
*Clinical Lectures on Klein & Bion* Edited by Robin Anderson  
*From Fetus to Child* Alessandra Piontelli  
*The Dream Discourse Today* Edited and introduced by Sara Flanders  
*The Gender Conundrum: Contemporary Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Femininity and Masculinity* Edited and introduced by Dana Birksted-Breen
Psychic Retreats John Steiner
The Taming of Solitude: Separation Anxiety in Psychoanalysis Jean-Michel Quinodoz
Unconscious Logic: An Introduction to Matte-Blanco’s Bi-logic and its Uses Eric Rayner
Understanding Mental Objects Meir Perlow
Life, Sex and Death: Selected Writings of William Gillespie Edited and introduced by Michael Sinason
What Do Psychoanalysts Want?: The Problem of Aims in Psychoanalytic Therapy Joseph Sandler and Anna Ursula Dreher
Michael Balint: Object Relations, Pure and Applied Harold Stewart
Hope: A Shield in the Economy of Borderline States Anna Potamianou
Psychoanalysis, Literature & War: Papers 1972–1995 Hanna Segal
Emotional Vertigo: Between Anxiety and Pleasure Danielle Quinodoz
Early Freud and Late Freud Ilse Grubrich-Simitis
A History of Child Psychoanalysis Claudine and Pierre Geissmann
Belief and Imagination: Explorations in Psychoanalysis Ronald Britton
A Mind of One’s Own: A Psychoanalytic View of Self and Object Robert A. Caper
Psychoanalytic Understanding of Violence and Suicide Edited by Rosine Jozef Perelberg
On Bearing Unbearable States of Mind Ruth Riesenber-Malcolm
Psychoanalysis on the Move: The Work of Joseph Sandler Edited by Peter Fonagy, Arnold M. Cooper and Robert S. Wallerstein
The Dead Mother: The Work of André Green Edited by Gregorio Kohon
The Fabric of Affect in the Psychoanalytic Discourse André Green
The Bi-Personal Field: Experiences of Child Analysis Antonino Ferro
The Dove that Returns, the Dove that Vanishes: Paradox and Creativity in Psychoanalysis Michael Parsons
Ordinary People, Extra-ordinary Protections: A Post Kleinian Approach to the Treatment of Primitive Mental States Judith Mitrani
The Violence of Interpretation: From Pictogram to Statement Piera Aulagnier
The Importance of Fathers: A Psychoanalytic Re-Evaluation Judith Trowell and Alicia Etchegoyen
Dreams That Turn Over a Page: Paradoxical Dreams in Psychoanalysis Jean-Michel Quinodoz
The Couch and the Silver Screen: Psychoanalytic Reflections on European Cinema Andrea Sabbadini
In Pursuit of Psychic Change: The Betty Joseph Workshop Edited by Edith Hargreaves and Arturo Varchevker
The Quiet Revolution in American Psychoanalysis: Selected Papers of Arnold M. Cooper
Arnold M. Cooper. Edited and introduced by Elizabeth L. Auchincloss

Seeds of Illness and Seeds of Recovery: The Genesis of Suffering and the Role of Psychoanalysis
Antonino Ferro

The Work of Psychic Figurability: Mental States Without Representation
César Botella and Sára Botella

Key Ideas for a Contemporary Psychoanalysis: Misrecognition and Recognition of the Unconscious
André Green

The Telescoping of Generations: Listening to the Narcissistic Links Between Generations
Haydée Faimberg

Glacial Times: A Journey through the World of Madness
Salomon Resnik

This Art of Psychoanalysis: Dreaming Undreamt Dreams and Interrupted Cries
Thomas H. Ogden

Psychoanalysis and Religion in the 21st Century: Competitors or Collaborators?
David M. Black

Recovery of the Lost Good Object
Eric Brenman

The Many Voices of Psychoanalysis
Roger Kennedy

Feeling the Words: Neuropsychoanalytic Understanding of Memory and the Unconscious
Mauro Mancia

Constructions and the Analytic Field: History, Scenes and Destiny
Domenico Chianese

Projected Shadows: Psychoanalytic Reflections on the Representation of Loss in European Cinema
Edited by Andrea Sabbadini

Encounters with Melanie Klein: Selected Papers of Elizabeth Spillius
Elizabeth Spillius

Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow
Hanna Segal

Psychoanalysis Comparable and Incomparable: The Evolution of a Method to Describe and Compare Psychoanalytic Approaches
David Tuckett, Roberto Basile, Dana Birksted-Breen, Tomas Böhm, Paul Denis, Antonino Ferro, Helmut Hinz, Arne Jemstedt, Paola Mariotti and Johan Schubert

Time, Space and Phantasy
Rosine Jozef Perelberg

Rediscovering Psychoanalysis: Thinking and Dreaming, Learning and Forgetting
Thomas H. Ogden

Mind Works: Techniques and Creativity in Psychoanalysis
Antonino Ferro

Doubt Conviction and the Analytic Process: Selected Papers of Michael Feldman
Michael Feldman

Melanie Klein in Berlin: Her First Psychoanalyses of Children
Claudia Frank

The Psychotic Wavelength: A Psychoanalytic Perspective for Psychiatry
Richard Lucas
Betweenity: A Discussion of the Concept of Borderline Judy Gammelgaard
The Intimate Room: Theory and Technique of the Analytic Field Giuseppe Civitarese
Bion Today Edited by Chris Mawson
Secret Passages: The Theory and Technique of Interpsychic Relations Stefano Bolognini
Intersubjective Processes and the Unconscious: An Integration of Freudian, Kleinian and Bionian Perspectives Lawrence J. Brown
Seeing and Being Seen: Emerging from a Psychic Retreat John Steiner
Avoiding Emotions, Living Emotions Antonino Ferro
Projective Identification: The Fate of a Concept Edited by Elizabeth Spillius and Edna O'Shaughnessy
Creative Readings: Essays on Seminal Analytic Works Thomas Ogden
The Maternal Lineage Edited by Paola Mariotti
Donald Winnicott Today Edited by Jan Abram
Symbiosis and Ambiguity: A Psychoanalytic Study Edited by John Churcher, José Bleger and Leopoldo Bleger
Psychotic Temptation Liliane Abensour
Supervision in Psychoanalysis: The Sao Paulo Seminars Antonino Ferro
Transference and Countertransference Today Robert Oelsner
Living Psychoanalysis: From Theory to Experience Michael Parsons
Imaginary Existences: A Psychoanalytic Exploration of Phantasy, Fiction, Dreams and Daydreams Ignês Sodré. Edited and with an Introduction by Priscilla Roth
The Pioneers of Psychoanalysis in South America: An Essential Guide Edited by Nydia Lisman-Pieczanski and Alberto Pieczanski
Minding the Body: The Body in Psychoanalysis and Beyond Alessandra Lemma
Inquiries in Psychoanalysis: The collected papers of Edna O'Shaughnessy Edna O'Shaughnessy and edited by Richard Rusbridge
Torments of the Soul: Psychoanalytic Transformations in Dreaming and Narration Antonino Ferro
Frances Tustin Today Edited by Judith Mitrani and Theodore Mitrani
Formless Infinity: Clinical Explorations of Matte Blanco and Bion Riccardo Lombardo
Murdered Father, Dead Father: Revisiting the Oedipus Complex Rosine Jozef Perelberg
The Work of Psychoanalysis: Sexuality, Time and the Psychoanalytic Mind Dana Birksted-Breen
Truth and the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis Giuseppe Civitarese
Psychoanalytic Education at the Crossroads Otto Kernberg
TITLES IN THE NEW LIBRARY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS TEACHING SERIES

Reading Freud: A Chronological Exploration of Freud’s Writings Jean-Michel Quinodoz
Listening to Hanna Segal: Her Contribution to Psychoanalysis Jean-Michel Quinodoz
Reading French Psychoanalysis Edited by Dana Birksted-Breen, Sara Flanders and Alain Gibeault
Reading Winnicott Lesley Caldwell and Angela Joyce
Initiating Psychoanalysis: Perspectives Bernard Reith, Sven Lagerlöf, Penelope Crick, Mette Møller and Elisabeth Skale
Infant Observation Frances Salo
Reading Anna Freud Nick Midgley
Reading Italian Psychoanalysis Edited by Franco Borgogno, Alberto Luchetti and Luisa Marino Coe

TITLES IN THE NEW LIBRARY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS ‘BEYOND THE COUCH’ SERIES

Under the Skin: A Psychoanalytic Study of Body Modification Alessandra Lemma
Engaging with Climate Change: Psychoanalytic and Interdisciplinary Perspectives Edited by Sally Weintrobe
Research on the Couch: Single Case Studies, Subjectivity, and Psychoanalytic Knowledge R.D. Hinshelwood
Psychoanalysis in the Technoculture Era Edited by Alessandra Lemma and Luigi Caparrotta
Moving Images: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Film Andrea Sabbadini
Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience: Psychoanalysis and the Uncanny Gregorio Kohon
Truth and the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis

Giuseppe Civitarese
For my parents
Contents

Acknowledgements xv
Introduction 1

1 The inaccessible unconscious and reverie as a path of figurability 7
2 Poetry of dream and de-personalization 25
3 Embodied field and somatic reverie 40
4 Transformations in hallucinosis and the receptivity of the analyst 53
5 The un/conscious as a psychoanalytic function of personality 84
6 Beneath, behind or inside? The un/conscious in clinical work 111
7 Giving body to the mind: a comparison between Freud’s and Bion’s metapsychologies 121
8 The Grid and the truth drive 148
9 Intermediarity as an epistemological paradigm in psychoanalysis 174
### Contents

10 Bion’s *Evidence* and his theoretical style 192

Postscript 208

Notes 218

Bibliography 232

Index 244
Acknowledgements


Chapter 4 is based on ‘Transformations in hallucinosis and the analyst’s receptivity’, International Journal of Psychoanalysis 96, 1091–1116.

Chapter 5 is based on ‘The unconscious. What is your theory of unconscious processes? What are other theories that you would contrast with your conceptualization?’, International Journal of Psychoanalysis 92, 277–280 (2011); Revista de Psicoanálisis 68, 1, 29–32 (2011); Rivista di Psicoanalisi 57, 2, 401–405 (2011); Revue Française de Psychanalyse 75, 3, 839–842 (2011); Revista Brasileira de Psicanálise 45, 2, 63–66 (2011).

Chapter 8 is based on ‘La Griglia di Bion e la pulsione di verità’, Rivista di Psicoanalisi, 58, 2, 335–360 (2012); The Italian Psychoanalytic Annual 7, 91–114 (2013); Revista de Psicanálise (SPPA), 21, 1 (2014).

INTRODUCTION

For Bion, truth is the food that makes the mind grow. Not only that: what moves humans is a real drive to truth. But what are the truths of the unconscious? How can we grasp them? What attitude must we adopt if we wish to comprehend the facts of the unconscious? And which unconscious are we talking about? Freud’s repressed unconscious or Bion’s ‘aesthetic’ unconscious? And lastly, what does psychoanalysis have to say about the concept of scientific truth?

This book attempts to formulate some answers to these questions, questions which have become even more fundamental in an age such as ours characterized by the deconstruction of positive reason and in which all values are seen as relative. It should be emphasized, however, that while I consider it essential to expand the horizons of psychoanalysis to embrace the most topical issues of the contemporary world and, with all due caution, to incorporate other approaches, I remain faithful to the Freudian principle of Junikin, the indissoluble binding together of method, theoretical reflection and clinical practice. In my view, indeed, it is the cognitive and ethical dimension of therapy that makes psychoanalysis unsurpassed.

The occasion that prompted the writing of this book was the IPA Congress in Mexico City in 2011. I was asked to participate in the inaugural session on the unconscious. I felt a great responsibility and put in a lot of preparation. I soon realized with a certain apprehension that the familiar concept of the unconscious was becoming more and more alien to me. The closer I came to it, the more it seemed to elude me. Indeed, it is true: the more we study the unconscious, the darker the picture becomes, and the tangle of various conceptualizations becomes almost impenetrable. Already in Freud we have the problem of the transition from the first to
the second topography. Then there are also its major reformulations to consider, from Lacan to Laplanche, passing through Klein and Bion, not to mention the various hybrids that combine psychoanalytic theories and the various models of brain function current in neuroscience.

The attempt to map some of the essential nodal points of the conceptual network that developed from the key notion of psychoanalysis cost me no little effort, but in the process I was able to draw up a small atlas of the unconscious. However provisional and imprecise, this atlas will I hope be helpful to readers in continuing explorations I would like to think of as being cautious but also courageous in spirit.

The first place we come to on this notional map is ‘the inaccessible unconscious’, as Bion puts it, an unconscious that dates back to foetal life and whose effects can be felt powerfully in adulthood. The question I address in the opening chapter is how we can confer figurability on the primitive traumas inscribed in an unconscious that is not made up of representations. My idea is that a possible way forward would be to adopt a theory of the analytic field and for the analyst to use reverie. But it can also be helpful to ‘dream in the body’, and in the next chapter I theorize this idea through the notion of body reverie. Unlike Ogden’s concepts of ‘sensory reverie’, which is perceived as such almost immediately, and ‘interpretative action’, which is characterized by obvious intentionality, body reverie is neither intentional nor conscious. Rather, it is an action or sequence of actions to which the meaning of an acted out performance can be attributed only in retrospect: a performance that is a kind of understanding through the body or of dreaming in the body what is unconsciously going on in the analytic field at a given moment or over a longer period of time. I would not even use the term enactment, a word too closely identified with the idea of the unreflective offloading of instinctual drives or protoemotions, and not necessarily through behaviour. Moreover, the concept of enactment is still framed within a theory that sees two separate subjects in interaction and that strictly speaking is not authentically intersubjective in nature.

In the next chapter I try to explain why we should trust dreams, and how this reflects a different idea of the unconscious from the classical one. The human capacity to dream both at night and while awake can be seen as the task of creating a film of meaning that
functions as a para-excitatory screen against the traumatic nature of reality. The psychic skin that dreams produce is a mask of self-deception or pretence (finzione), in the etymological sense of ‘pretend’ (fingere; imagine/think), which enables us to become persons. In Latin, ‘persona’ does in fact mean mask. Dreaming thus expresses the poetic ability of the mind. Like a poem, the dream-text seeks each time to restore harmony between body and mind, to give the body back to the mind or to reinstate the mind in the body – as Winnicott puts it, to ‘personalize’; in other words to propel the process of subjectivation.

The theme of the fourth chapter is also connected to dreaming. Here I look at Bion’s concept of transformation in hallucinosis. Bion describes transformation in hallucinosis as a psychotic defence, as the hallucinatory activity that infiltrates perception physiologically and allows us to know reality by contrasting it with a background of familiarity, and finally, surprisingly, as the ideal state of mind the analyst must enter into in order to grasp the facts of the analysis. If the analyst knows how to use his negative capability, he can come close to the state of passivity that makes him permeable to reverie. When he then wakes up from hallucinosis, in other words when he regains a sufficient critical distance, a transformation is produced that will inevitably be transmitted to the analytic field and to the patient.

At this point – after describing the new conceptual tools that we can use in clinical practice: reverie vis-à-vis the inaccessible unconscious, body reverie, the dream understood as a poetic creation of the mind and transformation in hallucinosis – I try to reformulate, more broadly and on a purely theoretical level, the differences between Freud’s conception of the unconscious and Bion’s. To do this, I start from a neologism introduced by Bion: ‘unconscioused’ – a term that expresses the idea that the point of therapy is not so much to make the unconscious conscious but the opposite, that is, to make the conscious unconscious, to ‘make/produce’ unconsciousness. For Bion ‘making unconscious’ means admitting the infant into the area of symbolic signification, making its mind grow – in essence, helping it to see the world using the rhetoric of dreams that Freud had already highlighted. Giving meaning to experience and dreaming experience become synonymous.

We then immerse ourselves in clinical practice to rediscover the continuity between conscious and unconscious experience. The
unconscious is no longer seen as an area in which repressed representations are restricted because they are incompatible with the ego, but as a psychoanalytic function of the personality that has been given the task of creating meaning. Unconscious and conscious experience interpenetrate with each other continuously and seamlessly. The unconscious is no longer beneath or behind the conscious, but rather inside conscious experience. To realize this, however, we must be receptive – a skill that cannot be taken for granted, even in an analyst.

Then we venture into some places that are even more inaccessible, albeit fascinating: the puzzle of the transition from body to mind and the difficulties presented by the metapsychologies that try to explain it. We look at Freud’s metapsychology, based on a psychology of the subject as isolated and studied in his intrapsychic functioning, and that of Bion, which on the other hand starts from a radically social theory of how subjectivity comes into being. But if we want to clarify our ideas about how therapy works, we cannot avoid taking this path, starting from the study of how the mind takes up position in the body for the first time.

Another place that at first glance may seem inhospitable is Bion’s Grid. But even here it is worth pausing long enough to look from this unusual and indeed surprising angle of vision at the themes of truth and the drive to truth. Conceived as a tool designed simply for scoring sessions, the Grid is revealed as extraordinarily stimulating when viewed as an updated map of the psyche.

Leaving the Grid behind us, we enter into a psychoanalytic area par excellence. Psychoanalysis is concerned specifically with intermediate processes; Freud called this area das Zwischenreich, the middle kingdom, something between, rendered in the English translations as ‘in-between’ or ‘halfway region’. In psychoanalysis, what we might call ‘the paradigm of intermediacy’ is absolutely central. The theory of the analytic field represents its most recent, coherent and radical version. Saying intermediacy is like saying the field of the symbolic: what distinguishes us from animals is the gap that we interpose between stimulus and response, the time-space of the symbol.

The route along which we have ventured in our exploration of the unconscious finally comes to an end with a re-reading of a brief but intense paper by Bion (1976), ‘Evidence’, which is absolutely crucial to the question of the senses and the analyst’s receptivity to
the derivatives of the unconscious. The central question addressed by this text – which in the account it gives of two sessions also lets us see Bion at work – is what constitutes the evidence of the analysis, the facts we are concerned with; whether we can be sure that we really grasp what is going on; how to intuit the facts, given that the senses are of little help – but the ‘senses’ of the title also alludes to the plurality of meanings that the unconscious generates. These are events that cannot be seen and are not felt directly.

Intertwined with the theme of receptivity is that of style. How can one convey to the patient the understanding that has been reached and speak to him in a language that touches him emotionally? Bion suggests that in some cases style is really a matter of life or death. In his discourse, writing, reading and interpreting converge on one point: all are significant if they are directed at understanding what is true and if they reflect an ability to learn from experience. Here I continue the investigation I started in particular with *The Violence of Emotions* and *Losing your Head*; namely, an exploration of the aesthetic unconscious. What do I mean by this term? Why do I use it? Not so much to refer to the theory or space of art, but in the more purely Heideggerian meaning of mode of sensibility in general (*aisthesis*) and reflection on experiential processes. What is ‘aesthetic’ about the unconscious is the expressive-creative aspect as reflected, for example, in the rhetoric of the dream. It is also true that from the very beginning this theme also refers to aesthetic experience in the proper sense of the term, in other words as a felicitous model of the creation of meaning and significance.

The aesthetic experience in art, the experience of immersion in a dream world, the miraculous moment in analysis when the evidence/truth of the unconscious emerges or the event occurs are thus brought together into the essential unity of the psyche. Sensibility and intellect, intuition and concept, semiotics and semantics, meaning and significance all coalesce.

It is no coincidence that, in an attempt to transcend the caesuras of these pairs of opposites, the most recent psychoanalytic research has been moving towards the body and the here and now. Familiarity with the unconscious, the cornerstone of Freudian theory and practice, becomes an opening up to the world, learning to see, the vision that transmutes into image and nourishes the faculty of imagination. Nor is it a coincidence that at the heart of Bionian
and post-Bionian psychoanalysis lies poetic reverie. The emphasis on the truth of the lived moment recalls some lines by Rilke which in one of his poems depict us as ignorant and astonished before the starry sky of our life. It is better, Rilke urges, to experience this vertigo rather than take refuge in an inauthentic life.
The treatment of patients with serious difficulties in symbolization is a riddle. How can we find a way to communicate with someone whose representational function is seriously impaired, to the extent that he is not able to give a personal meaning to experience? How can we begin to build some threads from experiences, however small, of sharing emotions, and then weave them with and for the patient into a fabric of thoughts? If repairing deficits in symbolization and representation depends upon intersubjective relationships and the patient is tenaciously avoiding every kind of contact, how can treatment go forward? It is my belief that an emotional connection can only be born out of living – or better, out of suffering – the same things, out of a moment of intersubjective connection between two separate subjects. But what is to be done when the patient – and sometimes the analyst, as well – has no language at their disposal with which to build this connection?

These difficulties are evident in overtly psychotic patients, but in this paper I shall deal with another category of patients who can be very difficult to treat: neurotic patients who possess autistic barriers or autistic nuclei (S. Klein, 1980; Tustin, 1986). These patients do not present the severe symptoms of the most serious cases, and their cognitive functions are in some areas usually well preserved. Nonetheless, the challenge they pose is that they suffer from a deficiency in their capacity for thinking, which originates in traumas that are filed in the so-called ‘inaccessible unconscious’.
Although limited, this deficiency is significant enough to determine subtle situations of impasse in the analysis.

Bion (1997) maintained that alongside conscious and unconscious states of mind, there is a third psychic category, which he calls the ‘inaccessible’. He relates this mental category, which has never been psychically represented or conscious, mainly to intrauterine life and a conjectured type of primitive form of projective identification. However, the notion of a non-repressed, non-representable unconscious goes far beyond Bion’s ‘imaginative speculations’ on the nature of foetal life in the womb and the persistence in the adult’s mind of embryonic vestiges of ‘thalamic’ or ‘sub-thalamic fears’. It was implicit in Freud (1915, 1923) and, indeed, its significance may extend to all forms of procedural, implicit or nondeclarative memory which are currently being discussed in contemporary psychoanalysis.

We now know that implicit and explicit memories are stored in different neuroanatomical structures, respectively subcortical and cortical. The former is the only memory ‘available’ in the first two years of life. This means that the most archaic mnestic traces, including those related to earliest traumas, can be registered only in a non-representational form. I propose to use Bion’s term, ‘inaccessible unconscious’, to refer generally to all these systems of basic and primitive memory. My aim is to highlight both Bion’s idea of a possible continuity between foetal and post-foetal life (Bion, 1976) and, above all, the link, which the term he employs suggests, between the traumas that we hypothesize have been inscribed in this inaccessible memory/unconscious and inaccessible patients who are difficult to reach.

Since these mnestic traces cannot be verbalized or ever become conscious (as memories that can be represented and recalled as ‘thoughts’), the question emerges as to how they can be evoked within the analytic setting, so that we may help our patients to work them through. Mancia (2003), following Freud, has noted that some traces of these very remote events can be found in dreams and of course in the transference. But what can be done when a patient does not dream or there seems to be no transference at all? What can we do in contexts where, rather than commenting on the film being screened and working on its plot, we first need to repair the actual device that projects images on the screen of the mind, that is, the alpha function of the patient?
It is my assumption that representational deficits connected with preverbal traumas that generate autistic or psychotic nuclei in the patient’s personality ‘force their way’ towards a stage of pre-representability via projective identification, action and enactment. In particular, I believe that they speak ‘semiotically’: unlike ordinary repressed memories, they can emerge almost exclusively in the form of disturbances in the setting. While such disturbances are most commonly thought to involve enactment and forms of action, they can also present themselves in a general feeling of blankness and deprivation; in a poverty of discourse or the relative incapacity to think or express emotions. Such patients appear frozen and stuck.

But this may be only half of the story. After a time, this void may reverse itself into a fullness of emotions, which overflows and overwhelms analyst and patient, as the terror that hides behind autistic nuclei breaks through. When this occurs, what will prove decisive is the analyst’s capacity for containment and reverie. If this proves sufficient, these tensions may take root in the subjectivity of the analyst and translate into particularly vivid images (an occurrence, however, that is not a sine qua non). It is the specificity and distinctive nature of these images that leads me to conjecture that they are triggered by projections of the inscriptions of early traumas ingrained in the inaccessible unconscious. I further believe that this vividness conveys the particular violence of their attendant emotions and at the same time bears witness to the genuine oneiric quality of the analyst’s reverie – i.e. that these images speak with the authenticity and truthfulness of the unconscious.

A parallel could be drawn between these analyst’s reveries and Freud’s (1937) description of überdeutlich or ultra-clear, quasi-hallucinatory memories, which may occur in patients in response to a construction. In my experience, the analyst’s reverie connected with autistic nuclei in the mind of adult patients – and psychotic elements as well – is characterized by a certain powerful, ‘hallucinatory’ sensorial quality. The working hypothesis of this article is that the reverie of the analyst as conceptualized within the theory of the analytic field (Civitarese, 2008a) may represent not only a crucial tool in order to access these negative areas of the mind, but also an opportunity to produce a transformation in the patient.

From the perspective of a post-Bionian theory of the analytic field, I will attempt to show in a detailed clinical vignette how the
The inaccessible unconscious and reverie

The analyst’s reverie can gradually lead to figurability (Botella and Botella, 2001) in the patient and that the more sensorial the quality of the analyst’s reverie, the higher the degree of thinkability achieved by the patient in relation to traumas originating in the non-verbal stages. Reverie is the place where the patient’s partially obstructed capacity to dream and the (hopefully more available) oneiric space of the analyst overlap – it is where the analysis actually takes place. The analyst’s core intervention in this context is therefore not so much an interpretation (i.e. a de-coding or putting into words), even if, from the point of view of the classical psychoanalytic theory, it could be described very much as an interpretation in the transference. Rather, it reflects the often silent, spontaneous, internal working through of the patient’s projected emotion and the analyst’s own emotion induced by the patient’s projections, which push us to tend towards fantasies and/or enactments of basic assumptions – i.e. a bipersonal unconscious phantasy.

Rather than reflect like a mirror, the analyst must try to be reflective by introducing his own mind as a function or locus of the analytic field and trying to detect its unconscious dimensions. In fact, reverie may be considered the equivalent of the slightly uncanny feeling whereby, as the unconscious comes to the surface, we may sense it as something situated not ‘underneath’ or ‘behind’ (as if in some sort of storage room/reservoir/sack/container) but inside consciousness. It is by creating a deep (somato-psychic) connection with the patient that the analyst can help the patient to expand both the area of ‘thinkability’ and that of his own psychic container (i.e. the process of weaving emotional threads which will be able to hold floating psychic contents), with container and contained understood as standing in a dialectical relationship with each other, comparable to the reversible dynamic figure/ground.

Step-down transformers

Some patients who protect themselves by building autistic barriers may, at times, make use of a mechanism comparable to what Meltzer et al. (1975) have termed ‘dismantling’. When this occurs, their senses follow different perceptual paths and no longer work in coordination with each other. At such moments, patients may, for example, focus exclusively on the sheer sound of the words they utter, rather than their meaning, like Beckett’s character,