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Book Review Essay: “Emotional Storm” by Michael Eigen

Emotional Storm is written by a knowledgeable author with a passion for learning from experience. This passion has taken him many times—as evidenced by unorthodox works such as *The Psychoanalytic Mystic* or, more recently, by the trilogy *Lust, Rage, and Ecstasy*—to tread paths traditionally avoided by “institutional” psychoanalysis.

All the same, love, respect and gratitude transpire in Eigen’s use of theories and models developed by other psychoanalysts, and it is from this gratitude that stems the freedom with which he can play to make them new.

Bion’s thought has had a most profound influence on his theoretical and clinical development. And Eigen, in turn, has himself influenced the way aspects of Bion’s thought have penetrated the cultural field. For Eigen’s Bion is, in fact, *not* the same as Meltzer’s, Grotstein’s, Symington’s or Corrao’s—as this book makes clear. The text oscillates smoothly between clinical and biographical reminiscences and theoretical musings. It is also enriched by theories and models that do not stem out of the consulting room and were not created to account for psychological phenomena. So we meet Bohm’s implicate/explicate orders and Edelman’s neuronal Selection and System’s theory, which the author brings to bear on the flesh-and-blood of psychoanalytic practice.

In a similar way, Eigen allows for figures like Montale, Levinas, Wittgenstein, Buber, Winnicott and Bion to meet and mingle with patients of his, people like Vance and Leila struggling beyond hope and despair to feel—think hard for dear life. Others also emerge, like Eigen’s old resilient granny from the *stetl*, who appears in the company of prophets, patriarchs and a host of uncanny characters from the author’s own dreams. All of these figures invariably function to personify thoughts and feelings which extend beyond immediate or obvious halos of meaning. One is reminded here of the dialogues of Bion’s *Memoir of the Future*, although in *Emotional Storm* the overall feeling is one of reversible perspective: of looking at the many faces of the other through oneself, and not vice-versa.

The words that constitute the title come from Bion’s paper *Making the Best of a Bad Job*, where he wrote: “When two personalities meet an emotional storm is created” (Bion 1994). Bion, in his unrelenting respect for facts, admitted that nothing could guarantee in advance that such a meeting would make things better for either party. Only from its fruits might one know. In “the moment” of meeting, according to Bion, one can only try not to run away from the apparent source of disturbance, and thus give chaotic perceptions time to evolve and become meaningful. He seemed to have in mind a battlefield of sorts, in which the capacity of going on thinking under the bombs was to be exercised and strengthened by endurance (Bion 1980).

Eigen, instead, chooses “storm” as vertex, and stays with the multiple evocations of the word; his intention is to look at things from the point of view of emotion, starting from it and staying with it a little bit more, a little bit longer, enough to get not only the full taste of an emotion or blend of emotions, but “the feel of feelings”. Sensitivity reflecting on itself. Sensitivity in its own right.

Storm is one of those words that have the capacity to reflect and open multiple worlds of experience ;

If there are such things as primal words, words that unify opposites, slide through contrasting realities, storm must be one of them (p. 17).

It is no coincidence, along these lines, that Eigen borrows from Montale, to evidence how the symmetrical, the infinite can be captured and bounded without killing its mystery and vitality. For it is poetry, the transitional phenomenon *par excellence*, that spans personal, social, religious, aesthetic dimensions [...] and has as cultural background an archetypal language of transformation (p. 3).

Bion likened the interpretive work of a good psychoanalyst to that of an experienced diamond cutter, able to shape a stone in such a way that it would capture and reflect back a ray of light with added intensity, by the same route (Bion 1980). Late in his life, he entertained the fantasy of compiling a poetry anthology expressly for the psychoanalyst's use, perhaps recognizing that the psychoanalyst, like the poet, is forever creating a language for the impact of events. In Eigen's own words:

Generative emotional work continues through feelings and images and actions mediated by all of human history: concerns of Sophocles are reworked by Shakespeare, are reworked by Freud. We hunger for each other's images and adventures and listen to voices of those who find ways to mediate feelings and thoughts that matter. We tell each other our dreams and sometimes listen to what they try to communicate (pp. 144-145).

Eigen writes of psychoanalysis as "the poet's partner, nothing but a language of intensity and injury, a language of emotional storm." In a previous book, *The Sensitive Self* (Eigen 2004), he wrote at length about the sensitivity/insensitivity spectrum and how we tolerate our own permeable nature. In *Emotional Storm* he elaborates further on the aesthetic component of unconscious processing of human impacts. And if such processing-what Eigen calls "working at becoming better partners with our capacities"-is an inescapable task for each of us (as well as one of the aims of therapy), it remains mandatory for the analyst at work in the consulting room: a form of training in which one must persist if one is to address and study what Bion called "the living mind", and not just sanitize it into a thing.

The terms Eigen uses to indicate the functions needing evolution-"emotional potency" and "emotional taste buds"-stem from two models of the mental system, the digestive and the sexual-reproductive. To these he adds another, which is, I think, very congruent with the windy atmosphere of storms-the respiratory system. The airy metaphor lends itself better to denoting and addressing the recursive but elusive nature of certain psychological phenomena and their in-between nature. In several passages of the book, Eigen seems in fact to be working, albeit not explicitly, with concepts like that of "transpersonal", "psychic transmission of psychic life" and "psychic fields".

Relational Eigen goes beyond relationships, drawing from another vertex, another wellspring: he wonders whether we might speak of emotions in search of a feeler, of emotional fields into which we are born. As he writes in chapter 10, on the matter of guilt:

To be inserted into an emotional field ... or to claim possession of it is an important crossroad. There is a tendency to suppose that if guilt appears, then there is a tendency to believe that a person or thing must have caused it and be antecedent to it. This forecloses the possibility of an emotional field without ownership, a field we share (p. 189).

And also,

The emotion, virus-like, travels through people, gaining/losing momentum at each penetrating impact. Feelings resonate with feelings across their fading and dying out not only within individual lives but between individuals and generations (p. 144). Guilt in search of a home, a reason, acts as a force or pressure that people accommodate with all kinds of dramas, comic and tragic [...] in an attempt to give the latter form (p. 189).

What do we do with guilt other than being submerged by it, or trying to suck it dry with the heat of an even stronger emotion, the lust for power for example? Can we do better? In an age of rampant psychopathy, Eigen provocatively chooses to focus on guilt as something of a partial antidote. His testimonial from the western cultural milieu is Wittgenstein, whom he uses to promote a discussion on ethics: psychoanalysis as an ongoing ethical quest.

It has been written that if the science of psychoanalysis is to claim its ethics, it exposes itself to the accusation of not being objective, and therefore not a science. If it does not make a claim in this direction, Eigen seems to believe, it risks annihilating its true self. Guilt can bring us news of the real existence of the other in a way peculiarly compelling, the torment of injuring the other can open the way to murderous superego, crazy morality, or strengthen the capacity for reparation and love. What makes the difference? What helps compassion to be born and thrive?

Again, from the point of view of emotion, Eigen points to the delicate task of tasting and selecting the spices available for the brew. "Pure" emotions, like pure colours, alert by sheer intensity but can numb the very capacity to sense nuances, the feeble voice of other possibilities, the whisper of infinite creative seeds. A feed too good, too bad, can absorb the baby's energy to the point of mesmerizing her attention, distracting it from mother's face, the other source of intensity, the other pole of communication. The baby's cry can be so intolerable to compel mother to feed her to silence. The mouth, then, reduced to nothing other than a cavity leading to a stomach. The cry is silenced, but the smile is too.

Some people care for actual and potential smiles, and search for them relentlessly to protect and nurture them. A few even report to see them everywhere, even in the pits of desperation. Are they crazy? Are they saints?

Alternating paragraphs from Levinas' *Time and the Other* and *Alterity and Transcendence* with his own notes and reflections, Eigen cuts another facet of the stone, and more shines through. Smile as a human gesture is the primal answer to the face of the other; face as a realization of a preconception different from the one filled by breast, the face of the other as conduit to the infinite, to the implicate order of infinite differences unfolding in every human encounter, to the love of the unknowable: the irreducible otherness of the other, its most profound core.

Putting the other first – the hallmark of sainthood in the Judaic-Christian tradition – comes out as a dimension of personality, and as a potential endowment of the human race, as hungry for realization as other more evident and mundane propensities. In a less heroic or mystical key, we may recall the importance that Winnicott, the praiser of the normally good, attached to the existence in the human mother of a natural propensity to put the baby first for some time: "primary maternal preoccupation" as a building block of male and female creativity, far from being a mere optional in addressing the challenges of creating/inhabiting a cultural space.

Bion wrote at length about *alpha function* (Bion 1992), the name he provisionally gave to the unknown processes involved in digesting the impacts of life. In this context, he showed how the structure and destiny of a baby's emerging alpha function is related to her mother's capacity for love and understanding, and with her tolerance for the evolution of baby's emotional truth through her own reverie. Alpha, a character in *Memoir of the Future*, says:

All biological living constructs have an inborn mechanism for self disposal and a life form, including mind, is blind to the quality which is to lead to its own destruction (Bion 1991).

Taking Bion's ideas to a natural conclusion, Eigen asserts that to overcome the annihilating forces that mind itself, the new toy, can and does engender and release in the hands of the "sensuous beast", one mind is not enough: it takes two at least, and not just at the beginning of life, but forever.

If, in a sense, we are like fragile babies exposed and entrusted to each other's caring/killing beautiful minds, we are left with what looks like the paradoxical task of seeking salvation through the multiplication of potential sources of danger: meetings generating more storms. Can we face the risk of really meeting and waiting enough time for the emotional experience to produce the dreams it may?

Can we afford not to question Eigen, can we afford to go on solving problems by killing diversity when it becomes a nuisance, be it a black emotion in ourselves or a scandalous idea, and be satisfied with ourselves because, at least, we can refrain from killing a person of the wrong colour? Should we not take the idea of

interconnected psychic worlds seriously and care for their ecology, their reservoirs of vitality? Can we afford not to?

In *Emotional Storm* one glimpses the writer being processed by the experience of writing. Feeling, thinking, feeling and re-thinking, the recursive rhythm of the book extends even into and through the very detailed and precision-oriented notes at the end of the book. In fact, though more linear and very helpful in locating the sources of the many ideas that sprinkle the book's landscape, the notes too are spiced by the author's associations, opening potential and often divergent paths of research. Maybe this is what made James Grotstein, another writer who has built on Bion's legacy, call *Emotional Storm* a veritable "tour de force". For this reader, it proved a peculiar pleasure to be tossed about and lifted up by the "forces" on the tour.

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