

When Is the Unconscious, Conscious?*

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(1988)

What we call the beginning is often the end
and to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from...(p.38)

“Little Gidding,” *The Four Quartets*

T.S. Eliot

*This is a revised version of a talk given at The New York Center for Psychoanalytic Training seminar series entitled "When Is the Unconscious Conscious?" (1988) All quotations of T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding" are from: *Four Quartets* (1943) New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.

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Freud, as we know, made the acceptance of the unconscious one of the cornerstones of psychoanalysis. I would like to talk about this concept and interweave in my discussion some lines of T.S. Eliot's "Little Gidding," from *The Four Quartets*.

Since Freud's first use of the term, the conceptualization of the unconscious has varied, most notably with the introduction of the structural model in *The Ego and the Id*. When psychoanalysis was primarily concerned with symptom removal and lifting infantile amnesia, particularly as related to traumatic events, the unconscious was conceptualized as a psychic place, with its own topography. That is, Freud spoke about the mind as if it were a land mass, psychic places being different "locations" in their own right – the conscious, preconscious and unconscious were, so to speak, nouns.

Delineating this topography, Freud postulated that the preconscious was not only a reservoir of word representations but also the "place" of the counter-cathexis to any repressed material "in" the unconscious. With Freud's positing of a censorship between the system unconscious and preconscious, and between preconscious and conscious, we have the beginning of a sophisticated model of defenses, the importance of repression as the model defence, and the everpresent counterforce manifested in the experience of the return of the repressed. With

these basic postulates, Freud was able to decipher neurotic symptoms, the text of dreams understood in terms of manifest and latent readings, as well as the psychopathology of everyday life.¹

Upon reflection, it is clear that the term “unconscious” is best understood as a model, an analogy if you will: as consciousness is to perceptual awareness so is the unconscious to the hidden, the unknown, in human experience. In Freud’s early reflections, this “hidden” part of human experience is known as *the descriptive unconscious* (unconscious functions, phylogenetic inheritances, psychic instinctual representatives) and *the dynamic unconscious* (what has been repressed). Freud did not “discover” the unconscious as one might discover a buried artifact, he employed it and used it as a model. To think otherwise, to forget that we are speaking about a conceptual model, is, I believe, to collapse a powerful metaphor for understanding the psyche and human conflict into concrete thinking. It would be to understand an abstract concept regressively, that is, via primitive primary process thinking. Consequently, to “believe” in the unconscious is indistinguishable, in my judgement, from a religious transference. One does not believe in a conceptual model, one applies it and, if it is useful in explaining phenomena, one employs it.² (Obviously, therefore, one cannot locate neurologically *the psychoanalytic unconscious*.³)

Freud, as I have mentioned, speaks of the unconscious, for the most part,

vertically, as “placed” or located within the individual. Although he was quite aware of social repression, his primary model for understanding human conflict is the individual psyche. His models are, consequently, open to a solipsistic reading. Freud's eventual move away from the topographical to the structural model reflects not only his awareness of the unconscious ego's defense functions, but also the dangers of conceptualizing the unconscious as if it were a thing in itself. In *The Ego and the Id* the unconscious is appreciated adjectivally – modifying id, ego and superego functions alike – and its primary understanding is in terms of the repressed.

We could equally speak of an unconscious, without sacrificing the notion of repression, by following the lead of phenomenology. That is, an unconscious as present in the psychic space between individuals as well as between individuals and society. That society, both familial and communal, has its own areas of unknowing, its specific repressions and its collective defenses is a truism, as Freud himself noted in *Civilizations and Its Discontents*.^{4,5} Unfortunately, this societal perspective has been under appreciated by the therapeutic profession of psychoanalysis.⁶ In this regard the work of Ariel Dorfman, studying the presence of unconscious phantasies of anal possession and oral greed operative within the American capitalistic system as articulated in such cultural heroes as the Lone Ranger, is of particular interest.^{7, 8}

What this short exposition of the topographical and structural models highlights is that the operative terms within each model have different meanings. There is no one unequivocal meaning to the term “unconscious,” nor even of the “repressed unconscious,” nor, consequently, as to when or how the unconscious is “conscious.” Focusing on a patient’s distortions will entail transference interpretations, that is, “locating” the unconscious within an individual patient’s psychic experiences and conflicts. Focusing on a patient’s developmental lacunae will, of necessity, “locate” the unconscious within the analytic relationship. (Within this context Andre Green speaks about the analytic space as that which constitutes analysis and from which a new history is created for both the patient and the analyst.⁹) Whatever one’s perspective, however, the recurrent psychoanalytic understanding is that we humans hide from ourselves, *malgre lui*, as it were, despite ourselves. T.S. Eliot, speaking about progressive, even painful, self-knowledge, writes, "And last, the rending pain of re-enactment/ of all that you have done, and been; the shame/ of motives late revealed, and the awareness/ of things ill done and done to other's harm/ which once you took for exercise of virtue (p.35)."

The hidden in human experience in the sense of the unnameable, the forbidden, and/or the repressed, can be found/experienced in various mythologies. That is, in literature, in art, in philosophy as well as in various therapeutics from religion to

medicine to psychoanalysis.¹⁰ The hidden grounds a particular culture's theories of time, its understanding of history, its understanding of death and/or its articulation of human meaning.¹¹ "We are such stuff as dreams are made on/ and our little life is rounded with a sleep" is more than poetic metaphor.¹²

Eliot notes, paradoxically, that a society which acknowledges the unconscious and that structures the experience of time, in a cyclical manner, in its rituals, is capable of experiencing linear time – past, present and future. "The end is where we start from,(p.38)." A linear experience of time – without awareness of the timeless unconscious, the everpresent, eternal now – condemns humans to the futility of progress with the all-too-frequent repudiation of how we are continually formed by the unknown, the unknown of our personal histories as well as the perennial forces of desire and fate which continue to define our lives. The unconscious of psychoanalysis enables us to know of repression and the denial of death, to know the misreading of human desire or the everpresent possibility of collapsing into *thing* consciousness. Understood as a model of the hidden as well of hiding, we can see the unconscious all around us. To paraphrase Freud, we can say that the unconscious spills out from every pore of the body-cultural, not just the body-biological.

At this point I would like to thank you for having indulged me in a rather lengthy prologue to some short comments I wish to make as to when the

unconscious is conscious. Theodor Reik, (1948) quoting an old talmudic adage, speaks about “the sin being forgiven when one is no longer tempted.”¹³ In this simple formula we have, I think, a rather apt metaphor for what we refer to as working through. One can, with justification, speak about the *unconscious being conscious* when repression has been identified and lifted, with the consequent traumatic memories, feelings or phantasies being returned to consciousness. One could, with legitimacy, speak of the *unconscious being conscious* when one's operative defenses are genuinely recognized and appreciated; or perhaps, following Erik Erikson's injunction, when a person is able to will the inevitable that he or she has experienced.¹⁴

I would like to focus, however, on the fact that *the unconscious is conscious* when, forgive the paradox, it is no longer conscious. The unconscious is conscious not only when the therapist clarifies or interprets, not merely when the patient completes or ideally initiates the interpretation. The unconscious is conscious when the interpretation has not only been experienced, but forgotten – that is, when the symptoms have either been removed or are experienced as minimally bothersome, when the transference drama has eventuated in individuals who know themselves, locate authority within themselves and have resolved the need to find others who can tell them who they are. *The unconscious is conscious in the finished poem, in the finished work of art, in the person who forgets his or her*

analysis and whatever he or she learned there.

Of course what I am speaking about is an ideal. When we are no longer tempted, we have achieved an analytic distance that comes from insight and the tediousness of working through. When we are no longer tempted, we are in a different place not only in reference to ourselves, but to others. The hidden or repressed within us has been lessened; consequently, the hidden in our relations with others has receded. To make the unconscious conscious vertically has the same effect as making it conscious laterally. If we can appreciate this, we have gone a long way toward resolving the unproductive dichotomy between inner and outer, between self and world.

Ending "Little Gidding," Eliot writes, "We shall not cease from exploration/
And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the
place for the first time....(p.39)" These are the *perennial* patterns of human
existence; Freud likewise speaks to these issues in his "mythology." In listening
to patients, we step outside of time and we listen with the awareness that "the
moment of the rose and the moment of the yew-tree/ are of equal duration(p.38)."
That is, the quest for the oedipal or preoedipal mother reflects an everpresent
resolved and yet recurrent moment of desire; the struggle with the denial of death
is momentary and eternal at the same time. The battle with the everpresent yet
transcended tragic and evil in life are the issues of our listening.¹⁵ We listen to the

individual in the hope of helping him or her hear the eternally recurrent and repeatedly hidden. In this sense, what occurs between analyst and patient is the task of the poet. Just as the dream is an individualized myth, so is a patient's particular images and associations an individualized poem. We help each patient hear the themes, find the words and realize the reality, as well as the relativity, of the here and now. "History is now," Eliot concludes, "...the fire and the rose are one(p.39)." The unconscious is conscious when we are able, even momentarily, to experience Eliot's insight, and have no need to know our knowing of it.

Thank you.

Footnotes

1. Freud, S. (1923-1925). The ego and the id. (Standard edn, Vol. XIX). London: Hogarth Press, 1961.
2. Gargiulo, G. (1989). Authority, the self, and psychoanalytic experience, (in press). *The Psychoanalytic Review*, 76(2), 155-166.
3. Gillett, E. (1988). The brain and the unconscious. *Psychoanalysis and Contemporary Thought*, Vol. II, No. 3. New York: International Universities Press.
4. Gargiulo, G. (1987). Superman heroes and the american ego ideal. *Issues in Ego Psychology*, Vol. 10, No. 2. Washington: Washington Square Institute for Psychotherapy and Mental Health.

5. Freud, S. (1927-1931). Civilization and its discontents. (Standard edn, Vol. XXI). London: Hogarth Press, 1961.
6. Jacoby, R. (1986). The Repression of Psychoanalysis. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
7. Dorfman, Ariel. (1983). The Empire's Old Clothes. New York: Pantheon Books.
8. Schneider M. (1975). Neurosis and Civilization: A Marxist/Freudian Synthesis. New York: Seabury Press.
9. Green, Andre. (1975). Symbolization and absence in the analytic setting. International Journal of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 56. Note the following: *In the end the real analytic object is neither on the patient's side nor on the analyst's but in the meeting of these two communications in the potential space which lies between them, limited by the setting which is broken at each separation and reconstituted at each new meeting. The analyst does not only unveil a hidden meaning. He constructs a meaning which has never been created before the analytic relationship began.*
10. Cf. Slochower, H. (1975). Philosophical principles in Freudian psychoanalytic theory: ontology and the quest for matrem, American Imago, Vol. 32, No. I.
11. Read for example: Campbell, J. (1949). The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Bollingen Series. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Or, Eliade, M. (1954). The Myth of the Eternal Return, Bollingen Series. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
12. Shakespeare, W. (1979). The Tempest, The Folger Book of Shakespeare Quotations. Funk & Wagnalls Company.
13. Reik, T. (1948). Listening with the Third Ear. New York: Grove Press, Inc.
14. Erik, E. (1964). Insight and Responsibility. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., cf. Chapter 4.
15. Cf. Schafer, R. (1970). The psychoanalytic vision of reality, International Journal of Psychoanalysis, Vol. 51, Pt. 3. And Gargiulo, G. (1971). A modern dialogue with Freud, The Psychoanalytic Review, Vol. 28, No. 2.