

Madness

I. Introduction: a plea for madness.

In the fall of 2008, the CTP Alumni Association asked the faculty to share with us their reflections on the theme “What I would not part with.” In return, Alumni were invited to speak at What Is Psychotherapy? Day on the same theme. These events were both moving and edifying, yet in their wake I was left feeling agitated and yearning for something more. Where was the darkness that lies at the centre of our art? In my thinking about the question of what I would not part with, I kept returning to something I remembered Michael Eigen saying about Wilfred Bion: that it was Bion’s madness that made him an exceptional therapist. The challenge to speak what seemed to remain largely unspoken propelled me into a sustained reflection on madness and its interweaving with darkness, mystical spirituality and creativity in my own experience. This paper is an expression of that largely unconscious reflection.

I wish to make a kind of plea for madness, and so I think I should first attempt to state clearly what I am talking about. After all, madness has pretty much disappeared as a meaningful entity in medical and psychiatric discourse, having been replaced by a host of very specific, symptom-defined disorders. However, the term retains some of its cachet in psychoanalytic writings, historical and contemporary, and I use it primarily in deference to a tradition that includes Donald Winnicott, André Green, Michael Eigen and Christopher Bollas, to name but a few. My own choice of the term ‘madness’ is meant to circumvent diagnostic questions about the degree, the developmental level and the specific form of disturbance. These are important questions to ask and wonder about in our attempt to understand individual clients; I don’t wish to suggest otherwise. I am, however, wary of how our adherence to well-defined categories may blind us to important phenomena that do not fit within the range of our expectations. This happens to me often enough as it is and I hope to never stop learning this lesson. It is a danger inherent in any theorizing. Moreover, as I am using myself as an example I must listen to my gastric aversion to being labelled. To me that conjures a deep fear that, once labelled, I will

be inventoried, shelved, and forgotten, a fear which fairly accurately, albeit glibly, describes the fate of my “true self” in relation to my mother’s narcissistic selfobject needs. Clearly, I hope to avoid sticking myself with these labels and reenacting this threat. ‘Madness’, as a label, seems, however, to be vague enough that I can embrace the specific meaning it has to me. I can live with madness; indeed, I already have. Part two of this talk is a telling of that story.

In any case, I am not sure where I would land in the minefield of “borderline tendency”, “psychotic patch”, “obsessional delusion”, “depressive psychosis” (which I assume refers ultimately to manic states), “schizophrenia”, “schizotypal personality” and the like. All of these categories speak to me to some degree, but, like a buffet lunch, I only want a little of each on my plate. I am, however, fairly certain of three things. First, aside from some minor and mostly deliberate somatizations in my childhood, I have generally avoided hysterical tendencies. Second, that whatever of these my madness involves, it hasn’t kept me from appearing here tonight, despite my playful fantasies of appearing thoroughly drunk with bandaged forehead and knuckles. Third, and more to the point of tonight’s talk, there is an overarching structural issue at stake in what I am calling madness, one that exceeds the limitations imposed by the above categories and which carries important implications for our understanding of some core aspects of psychical development and human existence. I will attempt to elaborate some of this in part three of this talk, once it can be grounded in the concrete experience outlined in part two. Let me now restrict myself to presenting provisionally the two main points of my understanding of madness, so as to lend some shape to this structural issue in advance of its concrete elaboration.

The first key notion I want to hold up here is the importance in development of what Melanie Klein called the paranoid-schizoid position, combining her understanding of destructive and persecutory phantasy with Fairbairn’s account of the splitting of the ego. Following upon this, many writers and practitioners deal with splitting and more general dissociative processes, taking as central the struggle between integrative and disintegrative forces in development. Given, as we are, to working with fairly well-functioning, more or less “neurotic” clients like ourselves, it

doesn't surprise me that we take a great deal of our client's relative integration for granted in our day-to-day work. We may appeal on a regular basis to a broad notion of dissociation and a few fairly narrow examples of splitting, even make references to greater or lesser ego-strength, but the overall question of integration tends to remain in the background. Engaging in this process of exploring the meaning of madness has left me increasingly attentive to two things: one, that when I get deep enough glimpses into the unconscious lives of my clients I can begin to recognize a chaos there that is obscured by the functioning "neurotic" self they present; and two, that when we speak to each other about the specific struggles that emerge in psychotherapy, we rarely approach this level, preferring to remain with our more comfortable understandings of personal history, relationship dynamics, ability to access painful feelings and the like. I understand why this is. The disorganization that remains outside the comprehensible depths we can articulate is both an inchoate mystery and the thoroughly frightening realm of Winnicott's unspeakable anxieties, hence very difficult to stay with. My plea for madness is firstly an insistence on the importance of staying open to whatever disorganization exists in ourselves and our clients.

The other point I want to make in advance has to do with the role of the unconscious. I alluded at the beginning to a quote from Eigen, about Bion's madness, that really got me started on this reflection and when I finally got around to looking for it I knew exactly where to find it. It comes from an interview with Anthony Molino in the book *Freely Associated* where Eigen discusses his meetings with Winnicott and with Bion. To my surprise, I couldn't find the quote I was looking for. After several scattered attempts to find it elsewhere in the interview, or even in another chapter of the book and not with Eigen at all, I finally rediscovered it in exactly the place I originally thought it would be. Only, it turns out that the quote doesn't quite say what I remembered it saying. What Eigen actually says is this:

Winnicott talked about having been somewhat liberated, of having been able to achieve a degree of madness in his work. Whereas I don't think Bion had to go through that process of apology for his madness. I think he worked more explicitly with and from his madness pretty much from the onset. I got the impression from his biography that he probably knew quite early that he was quite mad and didn't know what to do with his madness. At a time when people weren't all that concerned with problems of madness and the role of madness in

human life, Bion, especially, offered some of the most stunning portrayals ever of the mad dimensions of life. (*Freely Associated*, ed. Molino, Free Association Books, London: 1997, p. 120)

Not what I expected to find, and nothing really about how good a therapist Bion was. However, a couple of pages later, Eigen, in describing his conversation with Bion, adds, “His own unconscious mind was making selections that resonated with treasures buried in my own being...” (p. 122) This is a bit closer and it mirrors my own sense of what being a therapist is actually about. I think I can see how I might have got from what was said to what I remembered. Nevertheless, you don’t have to be Freud to see that something unconscious has already happened to shape my reflection on what I would not part with.

I have called my thinking an “unconscious reflection” as a comment on the creative process that underlies this presentation. What I mean specifically is this: I haven’t put a whole lot of thought into this paper. Over time, I have become increasingly clear about what I think belongs in this paper, being reminded of piecemeal elements of the understanding I hope to convey here, remembering some of the more disturbing episodes in my past, noticing the madness of others and how it stirs me. But to be perfectly honest, as I write these exact words I don’t really know what it is I have to say beyond the fairly abstract shape I think I am trying to convey. Moreover, I have hardly put any conscious work at all into figuring it out. Yet, as it comes out of my mouth, and prior to this as my fingers type these words, I am very aware that something quite thoughtful has occurred. Furthermore, I have been aware all along of a lot of mental activity associated with this process, but it occurs somewhere below the level where I can decidedly claim it as my own product. It is to me as though a certain range of my experience and a certain combination of things I have read and/or thought about, has been tossed like pigs of iron into an unconscious forge, melted down and reformed, infused with some kind of passionate energy and then is spat out, still half molten and dripping to cool on the page. The exact nature of my agency, and thus my ownership of the work, remains largely mysterious to me. Not only does more of the work happen at the unconscious level of ego, where I can recognize, after 15-odd years of therapy, that it is indeed “mine”, there also seems to be a fair bit of something that, following

Freud's terminology, I would like to provisionally characterize as the work of the "it", "*das Es*", the id. I will attempt to explain this in greater detail in part three but for now let me rest with this. The second part of my plea for madness is to sustain a complex understanding of unconscious processes as the chaotic and conflictual matrix of creative expression.

Now that I have stated my case in outline, let me show you what I mean.

II. Madness: a personal journey

Now it begins. I am 13 and in the wake of the divorce, freshly uprooted from my childhood home in pursuit of my mother's desire to better herself at all costs. As we drive through the dark streets of Vancouver, I have discovered that I can influence traffic lights with my mind. They do not obey me when I want them to stay green, but if I wish hard enough for them to turn red, they will stay green long enough for us to make it through the intersection. I think they do it out of spite, but I will turn this to my advantage.

Now I am aware that my bleak adolescence is under surveillance. I feel like I am in a depressing movie like an old movie matinee on our black and white tv. Can I be the hero of a movie that has no plot beyond the meaningless automatism of everyday life? Someone is watching, and they judge my worthlessness without mercy. I cannot mobilize my energy into anything really productive for I am always disrupted by different motivations. I see myself as made up of many such threads, and I shift helplessly between them, slave to whatever desire is on top at the moment. I share this view of the human self with a friend and he says this terrifies him. I am rejected. As I struggle to find my way I have only my confusion to guide me. I dance with damnation, dodging leaves of corruption to maintain a sense of my goodness. God has a task for me but I can only fail it. I try to stretch my goodness across my face like a smiling mask but it is brittle, and I can no longer hold back the monster beneath it.

I walk the path up the bluffs from Wreck Beach and it hits me so hard I have to stop walking. I have only just arrived from another life, another world and I can almost grasp its detail before the flood of constructed memories of this life overwhelm me and I am lost here. I suddenly know that this has happened before, but this time I have caught it in action and will not forget it. Every moment is the emergence into another life where I don't belong, complete with its own history and the identity I am forced to assume. I have always forgotten who I am and where I came from.

I deny this life and this world, reject this body. The buddhists say everything is illusion and I leap at this spark of truth in the great lie of reality. I cannot do anything but there is no point anyway. I would transform my inactivity into stillness and become a mountain, arrayed with my friends along the north shore of Burrard Inlet, but I am too restless. I find peace in the darkness of night, with the Buddha-moon smiling down on me as I write poem after poem, looking for truth. In the dark I am entirely alone, and I wander the streets looking for signs to lead me in my quest. I don't think I find any, or I cannot read them when they appear, for I am only ever led in circles that bring me back to nothing. Now the city stretches before me like a tentacled monster threatening to consume me as it has devoured the souls of everyone in this evil society. There are only two kinds of people left: the robots and the clowns, so I will be a clown and wear my confusion on my sleeve. People are threatened by my difference and start to hate me openly. They just don't understand. Can't they see I mean them no harm? I try to tear down this world for their own good, not for myself. There could never be anything for me.

The man with the broken face tell me that the forces of good and evil are constantly at war. Whose side will you choose? A sign of this battle can be seen in the historical animosity between seagulls and crows. Seagulls are white and an angelic force for good in the world, while the blackness of crows displays their demonic allegiance. If we look directly into the sun as it rises and sets we take in healing negative ions through our eyes. I spend many evenings painting elaborate sunsets on the sky with the power I carry within me, but my days rot in a meaningless boring job I am powerless against. I stare at the blank page everyday

and die yet another death. I have nothing within me to put there and they would never understand anyway. How dare they judge me so when they haven't even read my poems? I am no longer sure about good and evil, and the seagulls seem to be nothing more than shithawks.

Midnight, my 19th birthday. I am naked in the cemetery, playing abstract melodies on a two-dollar chinese flute. I play for the dead and I dance with them, but they are dead, and will not come out to play with me. As fall approaches and the night air begins to cool I start to notice that things look very different suddenly. The lights are a bit sharper now, as though the air has lost some kind of obscuring glare that adhered to its very molecules. Cracks have begun to open in the world and it is darkness that shines through. The light is an illusion and a lie. In the darkness lies poetry and truth. I chase the darkness wherever I can find it in the hopes that it will give up its secrets to me. If I can tap this source I will create great art and redeem myself against the evil, lying critical voice of the world. But I am not strong enough to withstand it, I begin to lose myself in my fear of the dark and drift into a life of increasingly harder drugs.

As a young punk I have learned to belong to all those who do not belong. There is no point even trying. I stand outside this world and destroy it with the chemical stew in my blood, denying the organizing power of the A-Z, 1-9, organic/inorganic substance. Rocking against reality, this world becomes nothing. Freedom comes from the barrel of a syringe. Everything carries a clockwise motion as it circles the drain of the canadian west coast, and only a counter-clockwise motion will let me escape. The European people have always followed a westward flow, waves of migration from the Caucasian heartland to the Atlantic and beyond. West across the continent from the new world colonies, across the Rockies to the Pacific, all in the name of progress. The westward flow stops here and all the shit collects in Vancouver. It all ends here, a collapsed junkie in a doorway on Hastings Street. Only the forest beckons now. Dzunikwa, the old woman of the woods, steals my soul and I am lost in the dark wet green and grey. I belong only to the rain forest now.

It is 1984 and everyone I know expects to die. I am standing on the balcony when it hits, but I feel it before it happens like a knife of fear in my heart. I look to the right and see it all reflected red as blood in the windows of the highrise. They must have dropped the bomb, that bastard Reagan and the rest. I have seen the world consumed by fire and blasted apart by the wind of the nuclear shock wave. It is over and we are all dead. It happened so fast that our disembodied consciousnesses float free over the waters of English Bay. I try to comfort the frightened voices I hear in my mind, to say, “see, there is life after death after all”. Noone can hear me, but now I know. There may be hope.

I join the seagulls and crows in scavenging for survival. Since the conflagration, society has begun to break down and we have to use everything we can find if we are to carry this torch through the dark times ahead. Breaking the orphic egg, I begin to write again. This time with a new voice and a sense of delight in the possibilities. I lie on my back at night and my ego begins to dissolve, merging with the infinite above and returning, skipping off the sky like a stone. I cannot let go, the obstacles between our eyes will never let us meet. I cannot bear it any longer. I stand on the bridge between the two shores and stare down at the waters far below. I will end it now and move on. Will I feel the water break my body and the life seep away out to sea, or will the impact kill me quickly? My mountain brothers bear witness to my last moments on this earth with their stillness, but it is the forest that calls me. There is a power here if only I can find it.

I sit on the shore, calling the name of Ra-Hoor, sungazing as the world-fire sets behind my forest-clad mountain brothers. The pink clouds reveal Thunderbird and the sun opens the eye of Ra and looks right at me. It is a challenge, can I see? Ra and Thunderbird are one. I know this now and it changes everything. I have been chosen and I am no longer bound to this place. I confound the flow and move east, to Ontario and a new life.

My first Ontario summer and I have never experienced a humidity like this one. A storm is brewing and I can feel the power of the thunder god behind the gathering clouds. I try to call forth the lightning bolts and relieve this tension but

they will not obey me. My first Ontario winter and invoke the lion of anger to keep me warm. The cold wind blows through the holes in my mind, purifying me to continue the struggle. I write and perform my life to date in a 25 minute purgatory called "The Descent and Redemption of Mind's Own Longing For Itself". I am a success. I burn all my writings and turn the page on the past. I embrace the meat and death of life in the slaughterhouse but I am wasting my potential. I find philosophy and enter university. It becomes impossible to write in this environment and so I eventually leave it to devote my life to family and psychotherapy. I rediscover my creativity but on the bus I sit with my hands in my lap to keep myself from wringing someone's neck.

III. Madness, creativity and spirit

The foremost sign of madness is delusion, the break from reality. The origins of any specific break, the traumas, stresses and isolations that precipitate it, are tangential to this paper, but I would like to make some general observations that I suggest apply in any case. I think it is helpful to think of delusion as the attempt to reconstitute the world and one's place in it as meaningful in the aftermath of some overwhelming emotional tension, traumatic event, or whatever leads to a significant failure of ego defenses. The specific form a delusion takes is an attempt to concretize the specific emotional and structural reality of the experience and to derive meaning from it by projectively identifying it with the external world, from whence it returns in the forms of hallucinatory perception, idiosyncratic belief and the like. The form of the delusion thus contains important communications about the particular struggle the madness presents to the one who suffers it. Furthermore, we are able to recognize several themes that occur quite regularly in accounts of madness and infer from this that they illuminate something important beyond the specific delusions within which they occur.

In constructing a narrative out of my madness I have given it the illusion of unity, but in doing so I hope that the diversity and confusion of its many threads may be made more obvious. Specific concretizations common to many accounts of

madness appear here and weave together in multiple opposing ways. Imagery of fragmentation applies itself across a permeable boundary of self and world: I experience discontinuity in myself, cracks seem to appear in the fabric of reality, the universe is engaged in Manichean struggle. Destruction and reconstitution follow a similar path: the world is destroyed by fire leaving only free-floating consciousness, I lose my soul in a specific worldly forest, my ego dissolves leaving the world behind. I am influenced from outside by alien forces, the crushing diminishment of machine-world surveillance and the grandiose selection by a divine look, by turns finding myself both persecuted and restored by an outside gaze. Life and death, good and evil, agency and powerlessness, fantasy and reality, solitude and belonging—these are the many threads that make up the tapestry of madness. They are themes common to us all, but a part of what makes them identifiably mad is the disorganized flow of their various permutations in relation to a defenseless ego struggling to make sense of its broken life.

But what is madness from a psychodynamic perspective that it shows itself in concretizations like these? I have already made references to Klein's paranoid-schizoid position, to overwhelmed defenses, and even the Freudian "it", so let me take a moment to elaborate this structural picture before moving on to sketch two specific examples of the dynamic that apply beyond our usual understanding of pathological disturbance. The structural view of madness is of an ego, weak, fragile and threatened with the disruption of its coherence in the face of overwhelming unconscious forces. In this state, the ego is subject to primitive defenses of splitting that leave it plagued by experiential discontinuities of feeling-states, self identification and temporal coherence. When we speak of disintegration or a "fragmented ego", or even the loss of self, this is what we mean. This is the schizoid element in madness. The ego suffers this dis-integration under the force of what tends to be understood as unconscious anxiety, but different theorists have different ideas of what that means. For example, Klein focusses on unconscious phantasies of persecution as the expression of innate destructiveness, Winnicott on the "unthinkable anxieties" of fragmentation, "falling forever", disembodiment and lack of orientation. All of these find their way routinely into the concretizations of delusion where they bear heavily on the experience of the suffering ego in its

response to what erupts from unconscious depth. This is the paranoid element in madness.

But is this eruption essentially anxiety? Freud ultimately saw anxiety as the signal of something deeper, which he identified as the threatened emergence of unconscious conflict occurring at the level of the “it”. There, where he saw the porous frontier between mind and body, he located a Manichean struggle of primal drives of unification and dissolution, life and death, Eros and destruction. Beyond this, he really could not say very much at all, for “it” never shows itself directly. At this level we really must take the “un” of ‘unconscious’ very seriously. Here too, interestingly, the specific nature that Freud ascribes to “it” can be seen most directly in states of ego breakdown, that is, in madness. Whatever we may be prepared to accept in our understanding of the deepest strata of human unconscious life, let me spatialize the relation thus: Madness is the confluence of a loss of ego integrity, as shown in imagery and feelings of fragmentation and annihilation, and the overwhelming emergence of unconscious feelings and fantasies through the gaps left by failing defenses. This is the overall picture I want to present and the link between the two aspects of my plea for madness in part one. I want now to use this dynamic metaphor to elaborate a certain family resemblance.

The connection between madness and artistic genius has been made and demonstrated often enough not to repeat here. Let me tone it down a notch and speak only of myself and my own more humble creative process. My search for artistic expression and inspiration is an important theme in my life and emerges regularly in the story I have given. But let me focus directly on the creation of this paper, for this example is fresh in my mind, and I have already begun to comment on its mad origin. It is true that I have avoided a full-scale ego disintegration in writing this but I have suffered through the intense dissociation of writer’s trance for the better part of the last week. Winnicott connects the creativity and spontaneous gesture to states of *un*-integration, which is a kinder, gentler phenomenon than fragmentation, but which, I suggest is different primarily in circumstance, and not in structure. The point I want to begin with is that a looseness of ego-structure allows freer flow of communication from the unconscious. It is the nature of this communication that I want to highlight as my talk winds down.

Let me refer again to my notion of “unconscious reflection” and the image of a creative forge. I have experienced my activity in this writing as something of a mystery. The extent of my agency and ego-engagement here is, to some significant degree, limited to these five—admittedly crucial—elements. I felt the agitation in January and immediately told Leah that I would write a paper on madness for this meeting. I have stuck to this intention holding it in consciousness as a commitment whose content has remained largely undetermined. I have sat myself down at the computer to write and I minimally edit the text as I go, so as to facilitate the flow of ideas that I know will continue to emerge. I have otherwise struggled to get my ego the hell out of the way of the writing process and managed to survive the high degree of dissociation this entails for me and to minimize its effects on my family—after many years of this I am getting pretty good at this last part. And finally, I have brought myself here to read it to you, clean-shaven, dressed up and sleep-deprived. Beyond these few places where I can unequivocally claim ownership, my overall experience is one of being at the mercy of something beyond myself, of which I am ultimately unconscious.

I don’t want to dishonestly overstate this point, so let me claim a bit more agency in the process. I do recognize more of my activity in writing this paper, in gathering the ideas together and retrieving them from memory, in carefully choosing the words to capture the ideas, and occasionally engaging my critical faculties in more sober second thought. I am also quite aware that I feel the passion behind the thoughts and the wish to communicate the general shape of my thinking as it becomes more defined in the process. I am aware thus that this writing is indeed mine, yet the question of ownership nevertheless remains murky to me. We are accustomed to identifying certain ego-functions, defensive processes in particular, as being unconscious. Their role in my creative process, positive and negative, I can, with some internal arm-twisting, admit into the sphere of “mine”, despite the alienness with which they tend to announce themselves to me. But the realm of unconscious dynamics extends far beyond the “still me” of unconscious ego into what Freud could only call “it”, “*das Es*”, the “id”. Freud was quite clear about how he saw its relation to the ego. Despite the usual habit of talking about “my

unconscious” or even “my id”, the “I” belongs to “it,” not the other way around.

In order to produce a work like this one, I must reactivate something of my madness in the creative process. In the dissociations attendant upon churning out my writing, gaps are opened that allow expression to the deeper it-levels of my unconscious mind, where something new is forged from out of the opposing forces of primal drive energy, however we are able to characterize them. Whatever the processes occurring at this level of unconscious life, I believe, on the basis of my experience, that it is indeed the ultimate source of creative expression, the font of creativity and even the work of creation itself. It does not belong to me, I belong to it. To access it requires an act of submission, to dis-integrate enough that gaps reform and allow the creation to emerge from its source.

In the interest of time, let me very briefly make the parallel with mystical experience and our relation to the divine. Many similarities exist between some kinds of mystical vision and the delusions of madness, and explicitly religious imagery is also fairly common in delusion, mine included. No offense intended to the faithful among us, but the Book of Revelation is surely the product of some pretty extreme mental state. Ascetic practices border on mild forms of traumatization and are intended to produce states of consciousness in which forms of ego-loss are a stated goal. In tribal cultures it is customary to elect one chosen by physical and mental trauma as healer or shaman, to travel through the gateways into the spirit world and intercede with the gods on behalf of the tribe. Oracles and prophets are all understood to give voice to something beyond themselves, the creative utterance of the divine source. Having been through the experiences I have described, I am suspended between two clear realizations about their nature: one, that I was crazy and imagined it all; two, that it actually happened and was fully real. Tonight I will say that both are absolutely true and that there is no contradiction between them. In the dis-integrated states I found myself in, I was confronted by something much deeper and greater than me, something that was able to shine through the gaps in my ego-defenses and connect me to a divine creative source. It does not belong to me, I belong to it. When I look within for a connection to the divine source I find it here, in the unconscious process that is greater than I.

When I reflect on what I would not part with, I am reminded that, for all of us, it is our own deepest suffering that connects us to our clients. This is what madness most means to me today. In the unintegration of the therapeutic reverie, we are able to access and give voice to something that holds and contains their suffering and allows them to unconsciously experience a healing connection with us. I am grateful to therapy and to circumstance for granting me enough cohesion to contain and survive the creative emergence of the intuitions that punctuate my attempts to connect with the deepest struggles of my clients. But it is the madness I contain within myself that allows me to access these depths in the way that I do. Surely giving oneself to madness is not the only way to be a good-enough therapist, or even a good-enough writer, but it is the way open to me and the only way I know. I would not part with this for all the world.