

Phantoms Of The Clinic: From Thought-Transference To Projective Identification

By Mikita Brottman.
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Mikita Brottman's *Phantoms of the Clinic* is likely to evoke three kinds of responses. The reader who regards logic and science to be his guides will find the book naïve, mystifying, and odd. The reader who is poetically-inclined and can hear the trees breathe will find the book charming, refreshing, and brave. And, the reader who is deft at passing "political-correctness" as humility will find the book to be unusual, interesting and worthy of attention. Now, if you are a psychoanalyst, you might have surmised that these three imaginary readers reflect my own diverse reactions to Brottman's book. All I have done is to externalize my un-integrated responses and deposited them into the psychic containers of the three imaginary readers. What was inside me has come to reside outside, not that such individuals might not exist in actuality.

And, this conundrum touches upon the essence of a book that is strikingly mysterious and yet disarmingly familiar. The former results from the author's fierce loyalty to concepts such as telepathy, thought-transference, and other "paranormal" phenomena. The latter arises from her honourable attempt to locate such occurrences in the context of psychoanalytic history, developmental theory, and clinical observation. While Brottman strives for balance, her heart belongs to the unfathomable. She registers a protest against the "quest for legitimacy" (p. 112) that has led psychoanalysis to align itself with science, and more recently, to neuroscience. She chides analysts who deny that "both analysts and analysands regularly experience moments of deep connection that challenge ordinary assumptions about what we are capable of knowing and perceiving about each other" (p. 112). But let me not get ahead of myself. Allow me, instead, to first delineate Brottman's lexicon, content, and message in some detail.

Words, phrases, and terminology sprinkled throughout Brottman's book would be new to the psychoanalytic reader. Note the following: "spiritualism", "magic", "telepathy", "phantasm", "crypto-inference", "clairvoyance", "thoughtographs", "British Premonition Bureau", "psychokinesis", and "morphic

resonance” (pp. 1, 8, 17, 25, 36, 37, 47, 78, 80, and 87, respectively). Add to this the diverse range of scholars cited by Brottman and you get a sense of the startling freshness of her text. Her *oeuvre* includes – besides psychoanalysts – philosophers (e.g. Schopenhauer), psychiatrists (e.g. Bleuler), anthropologists (e.g. Levy-Bruhl), biochemists (e.g. Sheldrake), developmental theorists (e.g. Mahler), roboticists (e.g. Mori), physicists (e.g. Pauli), and, of course, researchers in the field of parapsychology (e.g. Myers). The brew she offers is piping hot and quite heady. Four ingredients that stand out are the following:

- *First*: magic exists in our lives and in the world around us. Though it is more pervasive during our childhoods, magic never leaves us entirely. Psychoanalysis shares many characteristics with magic, starting from the darkened intimacy of the analytic office through the eschewing of critical thinking to the occurrence of mysterious communications between two minds. In a passage remarkable for its suggestive eloquence, Brottman draws the parallels between psychoanalysis and magic:

To become an adept, in psychoanalysis as in magic, the neophyte must first learn to dissociate themselves from the “natural attitude” of laymen; only then can they begin their lengthy training, under close supervision by a designated sage, who has special insight into the obscure dimension. Over many years and at great cost, the neophyte learns secret skills in dealing with invisible forces (transference, projection, and so on), becoming acquainted with a world not known to the senses (including “common sense”), far beyond the range of “ordinary” knowledge. Both magic and psychoanalysis encompass a bewildering variety of groups, branches, and systems of belief, each with its own history, masters, and particular rituals, each dominated by a small, highly qualified group of elders, mostly male, whose private lives, outside of the particular space and time of practice, remain largely secret. Both are mysterious realms of thought that can be understood only by the illuminated. (p. 12)

- *Second*: logical thinking is not the only pathway to knowledge. Advancement of thought and even problem-solving can accompany the audacity of primary process thinking. Artistic creativity and poetry draw heavily upon the mobility of cathexis in the system Ucs; metaphor is not the off-spring of a scientific mind.
- *Third*: animistic thinking (i.e. endowing the inanimate world with meaning and intention), while typical of childhood, persists in adult life. This is true not only for “primitive” people but for the contemporary Western man as well. The imposition of laws governing mental life upon real things undergirds superstitions of everyday life and forms a part of religious belief. Under the predominance of aggression, externalizing mechanisms can lead such animism to create the diabolically controlling “influencing machine” (Tausk, 1933) and “bizarre objects” (Bion, 1967). In more benign circumstances, our dialogue with inanimate objects eases the pain of early separation (Winnicott, 1953), contains un-mentalized affects (Bollas, 1992), and

sews up the lacerated perceptual screen of the immigrant (Akhtar, 1999, 2011). The human psyche speaks to physical objects and physical objects speak to the human psyche (see also Searles, 1960, in this regard).

- *Fourth*: Interpersonal communication extends far beyond the realm of spoken language. Messages from one person to another can be relayed through non-verbal means, including bodily movements and posture. Silence, too, carries all sorts of missives. There is therefore a channel other than the observable and explicit through which thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, and cautions are relayed from one individual to another. Striking examples of such 'intuitive' grasp of the other abound in daily life as well in clinical practice.

Brottman's genius does not lie in her making these four points. It lies in her (i) demonstrating that the awareness of these existed in Freud's mind, (ii) linking these seemingly strange phenomena with contemporary psychoanalytic theory and, (iii) deploying all this to make a plea for greater tolerance of the magical, the uncanny, the unfathomable, and the sacred, in human psychic life.

Brottman notes that Freud recognized the role of the unconscious in problem-solving and talked about "ideas that come into our head we do not know from where and with intellectual conclusions arrived at we do not know how" (Freud, 1915, pp. 166–167). He was also keenly aware of the puzzling and often obscure pathways of communication between individuals. He observed, for instance, that "it is a very remarkable thing that the unconscious of one human being can react upon another, without passing through consciousness" (Freud, 1912, p. 194). Brottman reminds us that Freud speculated that telepathy:

is the original method of communication between individuals and that in the course of phylogenetic evolution it has been replaced by the better method of giving information with the help of signals that are picked up by the sense of organs. But the older method might have persisted in the background. (Freud, 1922, p. 198)

Brottman proceeds to offer a panoply of illustrations that give validity to the phenomenon of "thought transference", a term originated by the founders of the London Society for Psychical Research (Gurney, Meyers, and Podmore, 1886/1997). It refers to someone "tapping into" the thoughts, experiences, or emotions of another person not physically present but otherwise emotionally close. Brottman provides examples of such occurrences from great literature (especially from the writings of Tolstoy and Nabakov), psychiatry (e.g. the concept of *folie-à-deux*), daily life (e.g. a premonition that a loved one is going to fall ill and he or she does actually fall ill soon afterwards), and the clinical practice of psychoanalysis (e.g. the analyst becoming aware of what the patient is going to say before the patient opens his mouth), and so on.

Somewhat more strange, if not “spookier” is the psychoanalyst Jules Eisenbud’s account of “thoughtographs” that Brottman describes in considerable detail (1967, pp. 47–51). Eisenbud (1967) reported on his many years of work with Ted Serios, an elevator operator from Chicago, who had the uncanny ability to transmit images of his thoughts to a Polaroid camera facing him. To be sure, Brottman finds this curious but what she finds more uncanny is the way such images of real objects merged with the inclinations of Serios’ mind, in the manner of dreams.

From this point on, Brottman’s discourse bifurcates. One direction links up such phenomena with Freud’s (1919) discussion of the uncanny with Klein’s (1946/1986) concept of “projective identification”, and with Mahler, Pine, and Bergman’s (1975) proposal of symbiotic dual unity between the mother and infant. The other direction rejuvenates the antiquated and ill-understood notion of “synchronicity” (Jung, 1952/1972) while also evoking “morphic resonance” (Sheldrake, 1999) or the idea of mysterious interconnections between the collective memories of various species and even those of inanimate objects. She rightly credits Jung for being more open to the mystical than Freud but misses an opportunity to de-construct the Freud–Jung split in this light. Brottman also fails to include the contributions of Bion in her discourse. Some concepts of the latter, especially “O”, might have served as significant bridges between the unfathomable and the understandable. Bion (1965/1984a, 1967, 1970/1984b) used the designation “O” to denote the ultimate truth of the moment or for the thing-in-itself, waiting to be found by a receptive mind that has emptied itself of pre-conception, memory, and desire. Thought thus pre-exists the human mind and is not a product of thinking. This idea could have been useful for Brottman’s discussion of the uncanny and animistic realm.

Such omissions, however, do not detract from the overall value of her book, which rests in its revivification of the mysterious and reverential dimensions of psychoanalytic discourse. And this, in turn, can profoundly impact upon our view of the discipline itself. In sober terms, Brottman lays down her argument.

When the discipline is reformulated in this light, we need to reconsider whether psychoanalysis can still be seen, as Freud saw it, as a “natural science”, or whether it should be seen as more of a social-behavioral science, or as no longer a science at all, but a historical, cultural, or philosophical discipline. (p. 15)

More evocatively put, Brottman’s message reads this way.

The analyst creates the conditions (low lights, couch, quiet), for the emergence of magic (or at least, of magical thinking), conjuring up the characteristic rapture and excitement attendant upon the beginning of a successful treatment. From this perspective, psychoanalysis can be regarded, like magic, as a ritual to produce astonishment, a way to catalyse the phantasm. (p. 11)

One may or may not concur with Brottman’s assertion but anyone who reads her book is assured of a literary sojourn of fresh information, intellectual

challenge, lexical giddiness, reverence towards the unconscious, and yes, even a bit of magic!

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Salman Akhtar, MD
833 Chestnut East 210-C, Philadelphia, PA, 19107, USA
salman.akhtar@jefferson.edu