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DISSOCIATIVE READING—PHILIP BROMBERG AND
EMILY DICKINSON

A review of *Awakening the Dreamer: Clinical Journeys* by
Philip M. Bromberg. Mahwah, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2006, 236 pp.

MAX CAVITCH, Ph.D.

THE WRITING OF PSYCHOANALYSIS, by practitioners and theorists of all stripes, has been remarkably slow in overcoming its reticence with regard to one of the most common and compelling features of intrapsychic and intersubjective experience. The capacity to dissociate has, until recently, been so strongly (and often so sensationally) linked to psychosis, multiple personality disorder, and the horrors of child abuse that the dissociative features of everyday life have been difficult, even risky, to observe and to avow. Things began to change by the late 1980s. But it wasn't until 1994 that a major psychoanalytic text—Nancy McWilliams's (1994) *Psychoanalytic Diagnosis*—redirected the attention of large numbers of students and practitioners to the documented frequency of dissociation as an adaptive resource and as an aspect of character structure. Over the past 10 or 15 years, interpersonal and object relational analysts, especially, have made it more and more difficult to ignore the significance of dissociation as what Philip Bromberg (1998), following Peter Goldberg, has called "a fundamental organizer of personality structure" (p. 190).

Still, the prevailing tendency within and beyond the psychoanalytic community is to continue to think of dissociation chiefly in relation to a system of alters, a multiplicity of personalities more or less hidden according to the functioning of the dissociator and the perspicacity of the clinician. This tendency is motivated in large part by the all-too-human wish to believe in the reality of a fully integrated or "whole" self—a wish that stubbornly survives, like cockroaches and kudzu, all modern efforts to eradicate it. To discover a dissociative *disorder*—to imagine that dissociation plays a role only in the patient's pathology and not in her normality as well—is, in effect, to shore up one's sense that a riven self is the product of a disordered but treatable mind. To recognize that dissociative processes play a role in everyone's normality to some degree is, on the other hand, to be more directly confronted with the possibility that the integrated self is a mere shibboleth. As Bromberg (1998) puts it, "There is no

such thing as an integrated self—a 'real you.' Self-expression and human relatedness will inevitably collide, and emotional health is not integration" (p. 195). To some, this may sound terrifying or nonsensical. But for many it is a key to new ways of living.

For relational analysts like Bromberg it is the key, as he puts it in his excellent new book, *Awakening the Dreamer*, to revising "the basic premise of what analysts call technique" (p. 130). He cites admiringly a group of papers, published over the last decade or so by Lewis Aron, Jody Messler Davies, Stephen Mitchell, and others, on the clinical uses of the analyst's affective openness. As part of this cohort, Bromberg argues not merely for the inevitability but also for the *necessity* of the analyst's self-revelation as part of an "affective, cognitive, and interactional configuration that is at once subjective and interpersonal" (p. 131). His essay on "The Analyst's 'Self-Revelation'" may be the book's most provocative chapter, not only because of its challenge to practitioners—especially to those who cling to a classical perspective on analytic posture—but also because it asks the rest of us, as well, to do some very difficult conceptual work. Bromberg asks us to think in terms, not of self, but of a congeries of self-states "relatively unknown to one another at any given moment" (p. 128), thus frustrating our desire to believe in unitary consciousness. And he asks us to think of unconscious material as "coconstructed rather than revealed" (p. 131), thereby undermining our sense that, at the very least, we own and contain, even if we cannot freely spend, the grubby treasure plundered from our conscious lives.

The therapeutic alliance that is the beneficiary of Bromberg's metapsychology and the subject of his numerous clinical vignettes is also a challenging model of human relatedness more generally. We do not need to be analysts with our patients to become immersed, dissociatively, in the enactment of another person's traumatized relation to unsymbolized affect. And we do not need to be patients with our analysts to learn better how to symbolize our fear of the prospect of self-dissolution in moments of intense affective arousal. But Bromberg's lucid and daring presentation of the analytic experience of dissociation is an important reminder to those beyond the clinical dyad and the analytic fold what an important contribution the writing of psychoanalysis still has to make to the phenomenology of mind.

Bromberg's model of therapeutic action under the sign of dissociation is also a theory of intersubjectivity—one that resonates with other, very different disciplinary approaches to the phenomenology of mind, including

those of cognitive psychology, social constructionism, and neuroscience. In the humanities, the influence of the philosophical deconstruction of the subject has been pervasive and profound, although the stickiness of humanistic, political, and specifically identitarian commitments has prevented this influence from being transmitted uncritically. Indeed, much of the current health of the humanities, like that of the psychoanalytic field, is due to the richness and abundance of interdisciplinary work on the relation between identity and multiplicity—what Bromberg calls "playing with boundaries" (p. 51).

Another word for that is literature—literature understood not statically, as the mere artifacts of writing, but rather as an activity, a potentially limitless set of discursive strategies for the ethical disinhibition of identificatory mobility. "In my opinion," wrote Freud, in a passage quoted by Bromberg, "all the aesthetic pleasure which a creative writer affords us . . . proceeds from a liberation of tensions in our minds. It may even be that not a little of this effect is due to the writer's enabling us thenceforward to enjoy our own daydreams without self-reproach or shame" (p. 64). Bromberg seems here to ratify Freud's opinion that the experience of literature takes place in the realm of daydream and that this realm exists beyond or apart from the pressure of ethical considerations ("without self-reproach or shame"). I agree wholeheartedly that the richest experience of literature creates a ludic space. But the playing with boundaries that occurs there is probably not best thought of as an opportunity to relinquish our mindfulness of the anxieties with which identity is lived. Precisely through its suspension of the requirement for *ethical resolution*, literature makes possible the play of identification through which we encounter in our own experience the forms of its problematization. At its best, literary criticism is an account of the phenomenology of this encounter, which proceeds dissociatively in the perfectly common, inevitable way that Bromberg describes so lucidly in his accounts of therapeutic action. Indeed, the penultimate chapter of his book includes his own dissociative engagement with a literary text: Emily Dickinson's (1960) poem "One need not be a chamber to be haunted."

Bromberg makes clear that he likes this poem because it offers up some excellent figurative language for his meditations on trauma and dissociation "in the personality functioning not only of persons whose history is linked to massive physical violence or sexual abuse, but also of those who grew up without such a history. . . . [W]hat makes Emily Dickinson's words hit home is that, to one degree or another," Bromberg writes, "we all know

the experience of feeling haunted" (p. 155). Of course, the choice of Dickinson as the prepsychoanalytic voice of dissociative universalism is overdetermined, as even the hackneyed phrase "hit home" reminds us. There is much speculation as to what sort of traumatic experiences Dickinson may have endured that would help explain her famously extreme shyness and virtual self-sequestration in her family's Amherst home. Anyone averse to such biographical speculation need only turn to the poems themselves to encounter an imagination stamped with the imprint of all manner of violence: eyes gauged out, lungs pierced, brains trepanned, bodies subjected to extremes of heat and cold, soldered lips, gushing wounds, dismemberment, rape, torture, hanging, drowning, death in every form. To affect sensibility painfully, injuriously—to "hit home"—was for her the very definition of poetry, as she (Dickinson, 1958) told her friend Thomas Wentworth Higginson: "If I read a book [and] it makes my whole body so cold no fire ever can warm me I know *that* is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know *that* is poetry" (pp. 473–474).

Dickinson's appeal to Bromberg is easy to understand. There may be no other writer in the English language who engages readers so relentlessly and so powerfully in the intersubjective experience of dissociative states. One sign of this is the tremendous confusion and even violence that have characterized the reception of her work over the past century and a half. Many of her manuscripts were mutilated before they ever saw print publication. Early editors sought to normalize what they perceived as her tortured, incoherent syntax and grammar, in effect rewriting her poems to comport with genteel, late-Victorian tastes and sensibilities. Later, more responsible editors and scholars continue to argue over the form Dickinson's writings should take, both on the printed page and, now, in hypertext versions on the World Wide Web. In fact, the way in which Dickinson's writings are treated physically—how they are arranged, organized, reproduced, and disseminated—is of much greater urgency to many scholars today than ongoing debates over the meaning of their contents (interesting and important as those debates are). As in relational analysis, diminished emphasis on content-interpretation may be the sign in Dickinson studies of new ways of thinking about the intersubjectivity of writers and readers—a topic Bromberg addresses with interest and insight in chapter 3 of *Awakening the Dreamer*.

Yet it is not in that chapter but rather in the epigraph to chapter 8—his quotation from "One need not be a chamber to be haunted," his own physical treatment of the poem—that a reader of the poem may experience the

most startling and troubling sense of getting near the traces of a transferential encounter, of Bromberg's dissociative immersion in the enactment of the poet's traumatized relation to a flooding of affect in the process of being symbolized.

There are several textual variants of this poem. The text Bromberg cites is from the 1960 reader's edition of the 1955 variorum edition by Thomas Johnson. Here is the full text of the poem (number 670 in Johnson's arrangement):

One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted –
 One need not be a House –
 The Brain has Corridors – surpassing
 Material Place –

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
 External Ghost
 Than its interior Confronting –
 That Cooler Host.

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
 The Stones a'chase –
 Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter –
 In lonesome Place –

Ourself behind ourself, concealed –
 Should startle most –
 Assassin hid in our Apartment
 Be Horror's least.

The Body – borrows a Revolver –
 He bolts the Door –
 O'erlooking a superior spectre –
 Or More –

And here, exactly as presented in his book, is Bromberg's quotation from this text:

One need not be a chamber to be haunted—One need not be a house.
 Far safer, through an abbey gallop, than unarmed, one's self encounter in

lonesome place. Ourselves behind ourselves, concealed, should startle most. Assassins hid in our apartment, be horrors least [p. 153].

Bromberg's omissions, elisions, and substitutions—including his elimination of line breaks, recasting verse into prose—are left entirely unacknowledged and unexplained. One hardly need be a literary critic or Dickinson aficionado to wonder at this wholesale distortion of the text. Is it the result of mere sloppiness? Even if there were such a thing as "mere" sloppiness, I don't think I'd find that explanation satisfactory. The aggressiveness is too pronounced, and too interesting, to dismiss as unmotivated error. One notes first and foremost that this is a poem about the relation between inside and outside, about the self as a kind of container, and, even more reflexively, about the poem as a figure of the self's "wholeness." To rend, reduce, and suture such a poem, as Bromberg does without comment here, is to seem to participate with the poet in a dissociative enactment.

On the level of conscious motivation, one entirely understandable aim on Bromberg's part may be to render more simple Dickinson's extremely difficult figurative language. He wants us to get the gist of the poem without having to wrestle too much with her linguistic contortions. Yet this also has the perhaps unconsciously intended effect of evacuating her poem of its uncanny resemblance, in its seemingly unbridgeable gaps and cognitive dissonances, to the very dissociative processes Bromberg wants Dickinson to help him illustrate. He mutes, in other words, the audibility to reflective thought of those places in the poem where dissociative gaps are created. One can point, for example, to his omission of all but one of Dickinson's famous dashes—her most consistent and visible affront to linear narrative.

Omitted too is the reference to the "Host" in the entirely absent second stanza. The Christological significance of this figure suggests a religious reading of the relation between inside and outside that cannot wholly be assimilated to a psychoanalytic reading of the poem. I wonder if this omission points to something more telling than Bromberg's relative lack of interest, reflected throughout his work, in the relation between dissociation and religious experience. That is, does this omission reflect a religious or otherwise idealizing self-state adaptively dissociated from Bromberg's psychic self-organization as an empirical observer and practitioner of a discipline that he seeks to associate, not with the discredited subjectivity of religious experience, but with the contemporary prestige of the neurosciences?

If so, this may also help to account for his rewriting of the third stanza so as to eliminate its striking and puzzling archaisms: the participial "a'chase" and the colloquial contraction "a'self." Dickinson deployed this strange diction, in part, to help enhance the feeling of gothic romance evoked by the images of "Ghost" and "Abbey." She was self-consciously playing with gothic conventions to underscore her poem's own relation to the experience of reading—to the influence, for example, of *what* we read (gothic romance was an extremely popular genre among Dickinson's 19th-century contemporaries) on the way we shape our self-configurations. Furthermore, "a'chase" and "a'self" look and sound as if they are the same *kind* of word, and the effect is to open up the possibility of reading "a'self," not as a contraction, but as a participial, as if "self" were a verb (like "chase") instead of a noun. Why would someone as committed to a dynamic, relational understanding of the ongoing work of self-configuration as Bromberg suppress this feature of Dickinson's poem?

It may seem impertinent to pose such questions. After all, Bromberg is not a literary critic, nor does he pretend to be. He is a clinician and theorist with a taste for the literary who, like Freud and many other contributors to the writing of psychoanalysis, often finds literary texts useful in his exposition of sophisticated concepts and complex intersubjective phenomena. But I think it would be a mistake *not* to pose such questions, given Bromberg's deep investment in the literary as a ludic space where relational as well as objectal experience occurs:

Through this complex relationship with an other who is inaudible to the ears and invisible to the eyes, but not to the mind, the reader is able to grasp a "new piece of experience"—a "new shape in the world"—that becomes his and, if he is lucky, becomes *him*, at least for a while. I think it is not unreasonable even to suggest that this relationship is actually a form of (not a substitute for) a "real" human relationship and holds the potential for being carried playfully into the "real world" [p. 54].

This characterization of reading goes well beyond Freud's account of aesthetic experience as a "liberation of tensions" in the realm of "daydreams." Rather too far beyond even for Bromberg's perfect comfort—thus the scare-quotes he repeatedly places around the word "real." But the trepidation becomes *him*, as one of the few contemporary analytic thinkers with the temerity to propose that literature encompasses the potential for an authentically relational experience of intersubjectivity between author

and reader. I'm sure Dickinson would appreciate both the trepidation and the temerity.

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SHADOWS OF THE MOON

A review of *Awakening the Dreamer: Clinical Journeys* by Philip M. Bromberg. Mahwah, NJ: The Analytic Press, 2006, 236 pp.

ROBERT LANGAN, Ph.D.

ON THE COVER of Philip Bromberg's new book is a telescopic close-up of the moon, half-lit so that its craters and plains show their pocked history, and half-dark, fading to blackness, no moon at all. In this case, you can tell the book by its cover.

Bromberg's territory is dissociation, the mental rendering of blackness. In his clinical explorations he traverses the borderland between unknown dark and the darkling plain of recollected conflict, the field of awareness wherein one lives one's conscious life. He manages in this luminous book two feats. One is a masterful presentation of clinical psychoanalysis in vivo, the interchanges between analyst and analysand and how his theoretical

way of understanding the process of psychological change emerges therefrom. The second and more difficult feat is to evoke through the overall import of the book, through its gravitational pull, a profound and unsettling recognition of what it is to be a human being, a shifting self whose understandings give way, who exists embodied in the gap between memory's farthest reaches and death's inevitability. *Standing in the Spaces* (the title of Bromberg's, 1998, first book) is no joke.

So, first, to the consulting room: "a central goal of any treatment is that the therapist enable the patient to move from experiencing his enacted patterns of behavior as the person he *is*, to experiencing these patterns as something that he *does*" (p. 7). Psychoanalytic self-reflection is crucial to the realization that one has more choice than imagined. Reality "blinks" in that not-me can intrude, like a "safe surprise," into more-of-the-same me-ness. The intrusion provokes, or, more properly, *is*, a shift in self-states: a previously dissociated possibility of being realized itself in the therapeutic interaction. Among consciously available self-states, a new harmony sounds.

Importantly, such mutative shifts are not solely the analysand's because "a person cannot transcend his dissociation without the presence of another who recognizes his own" (p. 16). That other is the analyst, although, ironically, for the analyst that other nascently is the patient. Psychoanalytic treatment remains focused on and for the benefit of the patient, yet both parties are faced with the necessity of emerging from the enactments in which they find themselves embedded. The analyst does not approach the treatment situation as a seer, or arbiter of reality, or interpretative mastermind (although a pull for any one approach bears scrutiny). Instead, the analyst brings simply the vicissitudes of ongoing present and personal experience as a shareable fodder, there to be talked about no less than the patient's experience. Indeed, "the analyst's use of his subjective experience, above and beyond his theoretical loyalties, is the critical factor in promoting a patient's self-growth. . . . The heart of the work . . . is negotiation between subjectivities, not interpretation" (p. 72). For Bromberg, attention to the vicissitudes of intersubjective experience reveals the interstices of presumed realities, the attentional blinks that belie the totalitarian domination of the incarcerating self who *is* to reveal (like the Wizard of Oz behind the big throne and booming voice) another self, one of many who *do* their respective shows.

A beauty of the book is that the abstract and theoretical scaffolding of explanation adheres closely to the contours of case studies. The proffered understanding of what goes on clinically gracefully matches the recognition