The New “Maternal” Analyst: Containing, Desiring, and Caring for the Other

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Mitchell Wilson, MD

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1. Introduction

The so-called “feminization” of psychoanalysis has been an ever-evolving fact since Karen Horney (1967) challenged central tenets of Freudian dogma regarding the differences between the sexes nearly eighty years ago. Seminal analytic thinkers on fundamental questions regarding female development, gender, and sexuality, such as Chodorow (1978), Mitchell (2000), and chroniclers of the history of ideas about women in psychoanalysis (Strouse, 1974; Bernheimer and Kahane, 1990) blazed previously unimagined trails and asked us to confront untested assertions (as well as their often untoward clinical consequences). Patriarchal biases inherent in the building blocks of philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse were called into question (Iragaray, 1985); similar biases were unearthed regarding the psychoanalytic understanding of moral development of women (Gilligan, 1982). Mothering, in both its psychological and sociological aspects, in which everything from the subtleties of mothering practices to the stresses of role strain for the working mother, was an important piece of this emerging picture (DeMarneffe, 2005). Together, this gradual feminization of psychoanalysis informed the psychoanalyst’s appreciation of the complexity and multi-faceted nature of the subjective experiences of women.

The overall effort was descriptive and conceptual scholarly work about female development informed by psychoanalytic thinking. Little thought was given to the ways in which the maternal trope—and its evolving meanings independent of orthodox Freudian theory—had implications for the analyst’s working self, her position and ongoing engagement in the analytic task.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Over the past two decades a picture of a central aspect of maternal functioning has been applied, by way of analogy, to the analytic situation. I am not referring to the important work on infant-parent observation of Stern (1985), or that of attachment researchers such as Ainsworth and Bowlby (1965), Main (1993), and Hesse and Main (2000), work that, for better or worse, tends to be viewed as non-psychoanalytic. I am referring, instead, to the contemporary preoccupation with questions about the nature of *thinking* and *symbolization*. Within this copious literature, inspired by Bion, and to a lesser extent Winnicott, the mother is seen as *central* to the emergence of this thinking capacity. She is a manager and processor of emotional experience–hers and the infant’s–through her symbolic capacities. The analyst, by direct analogy, is figured as inhabiting this basic maternal position and providing these essential functions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this paper I argue that the now-typical rendering of maternal functioning–and by extension analytic functioning–as *containing* and *symbolizing* the child’s (patient’s) unconscious projections, is but one aspect (important though it may be) of a “multi-verse” (Kristeva, 2014) of maternal/analyst experience. If the mother is conceptualized as at the center of things, most descriptions leave her a cipher, a subjectless figure that provides necessary “functions,” but whose interiority–desire, passion, and what I call the *important unknown*–is left relatively unimagined. In this light, I want to question the “functioning” trope, and the specific signifier, “function.” The containing function, and the mother-who-is-containing, only make sense, and only can happen-in-action, if the mother is *not self-sufficient*, and is, therefore, a subject of desire. Containing is *part* of a lived, on-the-ground field of interaction and caretaking that houses within it a fundamentally dialectical, recursive component. I will use Kristeva’s (2014) *maternal reliance/eroticism* as a way in to a dense portrait of maternal subjectivity. I hope to articulate, then, a dynamic picture of the mother-as-desiring-subject, in which lack and excess, passion and desire together describe the first-person, interior experience of the mother.

This fuller, denser picture of maternal subjectivity has direct ethical implications for the working analyst. Following the recent efforts of Chetrit-Vatine (2014), I will describe a mother-of-desire who turns that desire into *responsibility*: she is able to wonder, question, and retain an orientation of curiosity towards the other, and, when necessary, towards herself. The psychoanalyst, likewise, is involved in care-for-the-other. This phrase, *care-for-the-other,* has meaning on multiple registers. The *other* (following Laplanche, 1999) refers not only to the “other” as person, but also and more importantly to the *otherness* in, or about–surrounding–each person, in that each of us is embedded in an unconscious.[[3]](#footnote-3) Each of us is subject *to* and the subject *of* aspects of psychic life that are potentially important to us precisely because we are unaware of them. They are *other*. Consequently, an ethics-of-care for the other suggests an attitude of fundamental *respect* for the unconscious in, or about, both the mother/analyst and the child/patient.

I want to say that without a fuller picture of the workings of the mother and the workings of the analyst, psychoanalysis risks becoming a sophisticated form of cognitive therapy.

2. The Psychoanalytic Mother as Site, Function, and Cipher

Melanie Klein placed the mother at the center of human experience, both for the child and as the basic way to conceptualize the psychoanalytic task. For Klein the mother is a site, a place into which the epistemophilic child--the child whose given need to know is fueled by phantasy—imagines scenes of damage and repair. The “actual” mother is secondary to the child’s imaginary experience. Bowlby’s ongoing debate with Klein and her followers speaks to this difference.

Winnicott offered an evolving picture of the mother’s facilitating the growth of the child along several dimensions: primary maternal preoccupation leads to the creation of a holding environment, and, later, a transitional space. The capacity for play and the emergence of the object-as-other comes to be. Winnicott’s focus is the development of the young child *in toto*, especially the imaginative elaboration of feelings and functions, and the integration of psyche and soma.

Of significance for what follows is that this view, however descriptively rich, focuses on the self-preservative axis of life. The axis of sexuality, desire, and the unconscious is not figured here. The mother is minimally recognized as a subject of desire beyond her role in providing necessary provisions (nutritional, emotional, interactive). Thus, for example, Ogden (2004) writes of primary maternal preoccupation: “Primary maternal preoccupation is a subjectless state” (p. 1350). While Winnicott (1949) boldly alerted us to “hate in the counter-transference,” thereby suggesting not only something about the internal world of the analyst but also, by extension, the internal world of the mother, we are left with a relatively obscure picture of this interiority beyond the sacrifices the analyst/mother has to endure.

Bion’s work sends us further in the desired direction of the mother’s internal world, but only a certain distance. His interest is not so much on the developing child *in toto* as on the developing mind of the child. How does a mind—an apparatus for thinking thoughts—come to be? Bion (1962a, 1962b) centers his analysis on the question of *frustration*: can it be tolerated, or is it evaded by the infant? Frustration is not only inevitable; it is the motor for the development of thinking, if the mother engages the infant in ways, both minute and large, that facilitate this growth.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Frustration is a kind of social bond, faulty though that bond might be. Laplanche and Pontalis make clear in their *Vocabulaire* (1973) that translating the German *versagung* into the English word *frustration* puts misleading emphasis on the subject as “passively frustrated” (p. 175). Instead, based on the German root *sagen*, which means “to say,” a more complex view of frustration emerges:

“[Frustration] designates not only an empirical datum but also a *relation* implying a refusal…on the part of the agent and a requirement more or less formulated as a demand on the part of the subject” (p. 175, emphasis added).

An intimate relation obtains between the state of the external object (the “agent” in the quotation above) and the specific requirements of libidinal satisfaction on the part of the subject.[[5]](#footnote-5)

*Frustration-as-relation* suggests that the mother has an interior life in that frustration is one possible aspect of it. Let’s begin, though, with the “ordinary” case of the mother who is relatively open to the child. Bion (1962a) writes:

“Ordinarily the personality of the infant…is managed by the mother. If the mother and child are adjusted to each other, projective identification plays a major role in the management; the infant is able through the operation of a rudimentary reality sense to behave in such a way that projective identification, usually an omnipotent phantasy, is a realistic phenomenon. This…is its normal condition. If the infant feels it is dying it can arouse fears that it is dying in the mother. A well-balanced mother can accept these and respond therapeutically: that is to say, in a manner that makes the infant feel it is receiving its frightened personality back again, but in a form that it can tolerate…”(p. 308).

Here we have the basics described: the mother is “well-balanced,” and “manages” the personality of the infant so they are “adjusted” to one another. Importantly, the mother is figured as a therapist.

The mother’s capacity for reverie, reflective of her love for the infant, is central to this managing process:

“…reverie is that state of mind which is open to the reception of any ‘objects’ from the loved object and is therefore capable of reception of the infant’s projective identifications whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad. In short, reverie is a factor of the mother’s alpha function” (Bion, 1962b, p. 36).[[6]](#footnote-6)

Regarding the crucial term *frustration*, Bion (1962a) asserts that the germ of an infant’s “thought,” in the psychoanalytic sense, arises when a pre-conception, the expectation of the breast let’s say, meets with a frustration. Bion is alluding to the possibility that the object—the mother/breast in this case—is in a state of frustration.[[7]](#footnote-7) The frustrated mother, perhaps the very same one who had been relatively open, is now relatively closed to the child. *The mother-as-frustrated (the object the child encounters) asks us to wonder about the nature of her interiority—not only in service of care for her child—but also her experience as a desiring subject in all that phrase entails*. If the mother is frustrated, then she is in a *particular* state of desire-not-satisfied. [[8]](#footnote-8) Within this picture of maternal frustration, of unsatisfied desire, we can begin to appreciate the complexity of maternal receptivity: an openness to experience; a closing down in the face of unnamed preoccupations; the wave-like movements of her attention and care-taking; her relief in finding refuge in refusal, in denying the other what it wants.

But the language of function (maternal, alpha, containing, and the like) severely limits our field of vision when it comes to picturing the breadth and depth of the mother’s inner world. This is because the notion of *function* sets our thinking and imagination in a certain operational direction. In mathematics, a *function* is an operation in which a given input is transformed in a specific manner to generate an output. We might think that this is weirdly mechanistic language to describe the care-taking activity of a living being; for Bion it is useful in conveying that “something happens” to sense experience as it is transformed into mental/symbolic (alpha) elements. The mother transforms (alphabetizes) the real of the infant’s emotional and physical experiences into the symbolic of mental life.

“The term alpha-function is, intentionally, devoid of meaning,” Bion (1962b) writes (p. 3). That is, “something happens.” This truism suggests that the language of function de-subjectivizes the symbolizer, de-natures the mother/analyst, rendering both a cipher, a black-box that mysteriously processes non-sense into sense. Other images Bion uses to describe alpha-function—the reticulum, for example—also seem to minimize the interiority of the mother, and obscure her passion, at once channeled and excessive, forever conditioned by what she does not know.

By extension, the analyst is seen as the symbolizer, the thinker, the metabolizer of the patient’s projections (this conflation of symbolic and gastro-intestinal/nutritional functions is common). The patient is pictured as unable to think and symbolize. Instead, the patient, without knowing it, projects unwanted “parts” or “bits” of his emotional self into the analyst.[[9]](#footnote-9) For example, Mitrani (2011) writes: “I…think [to myself]…how best to offer myself as a *processing plant* for unbearable feelings and happenings; and how to further facilitate the patient’s introjection of objects that can perform what Bion referred to as the *alpha function*” (pp. 238-239, first emphasis added). Similarly, Levine (2013) offers: “…contemporary formulations remind us that, since it is the *very capacity to think* that is at issue, what we are after may not yet have achieved a level of specificity and organization so as to be discernible and hidden; may not yet be embedded in a network of associated meanings; may not yet have achieved a specific form and so may only ‘exist’ as a spectrum of possibilities that have yet to come into existence” (p. 608, emphasis added).[[10]](#footnote-10)

3. Desire and the Containing Function

The language of function obscures the human desire that underwrites it (and the panoply of subjective experience that constitutes any person). This obscurity becomes clearer if we consider the containing function and its central image, that of the container. One must be careful not to indulge a naïve reification regarding a metaphor that in fact designates a complex process (Cartwright, 2012). Yet, as the metaphor was not chosen blithely, it behooves us to take its image seriously. A container, if it is to contain, has at its center an *open space*. A containing vessel shapes space in such a manner as to create or constitute a *lack*. This is a crucial point, because it leads us fairly straightforwardly to begin to consider in what *position the mother must be in* to engage her infant such that an opening for communications, both conscious and unconscious, is available. The issue is not simply that in order for the mother to contain she must have psychical *room* to receive her infant’s projections. More importantly, the mother is in a lacking state, one of desire relative to her baby. That is, the mother is open, interested, and desirous of recognizing her baby’s emotional and physical needs and responding accordingly. But this place is a dialectical self-experience in the mother. Given her decentered status, hers is never a static opening. The mother “knows” (or lives out the knowledge) that she is, both at times and always, enigmatic to herself. To know this *is* to be open.

The containing function, and the mother-who-is-containing, only makes sense, then, and only can happen-in-action, if the mother is *not self-sufficient*. In other words, it is the *lacking* mother, the mother of desire, who is able to wonder, question, and retain a curious orientation towards the other.[[11]](#footnote-11)

If the mother is closed to her baby’s emotional states and physical needs, then the container is already filled, her mind is already shut, and she is in an omnipotent, narcissistic position (negative K mode). Deaf to her own desire, she is in a position of imagined self-sufficiency. If such subjective states persist, the infant’s development can be compromised, perhaps severely.

The mother, in short, must be in a particular, self-reflexive, dialectical mode of desire. For Bion this was something he called “passion.”

4. Kristeva’s Maternal Reliance/Eroticism

I have shown that various maternal “functions” rest on desire and a lack of self-sufficiency; but there is more descriptive work to be done in rendering maternal, and ultimately the analyst’s experience in its full dimensionality. Consider Kristeva’s (2014) concept of “maternal reliance.” First, and perhaps most importantly, maternal reliance is synonymous with maternal “eroticism.” Kristeva does not clarify why these are synonymous; she instead lets these signifiers both resonate and reverberate. The effect is to place a kind of embodied passion that is constitutively *excessive* at the center of maternal experience.[[12]](#footnote-12) This passion is multi-valent and possesses various “logics.”

Using the language of metapsychology, Kristeva (like Bion) lays stress on symbolic capacities, as the drives make a demand on the mind for work:

“[Maternal] reliance is a specific economy of the drives…that [are] counter-cathected by psychical representations and thus fixed by psychic inscriptions…Without…displacing those drives into a psychotic regression, maternal eroticism renders the fixation of the life and death drives both problematic and available, and places them together in the service of living as an ‘open structure’, related to others and to the environment” (p. 71)

These representational moments move from simple to complex, beginning with pregnancy, described as an “emergence” or “flash,” “the eruption of a new pre-object.” The woman is “gripped by biopsychic events” that gradually evolve into something more elaborated and familiar. But this familiarity–being of family, being with child–is nothing if not passionate: “it suffers and endures.” Passion, for Kristeva, is the mother’s “vocation.” This vocation involves the mother in the most intimate way with “*Not des Lebens*,” the state of emergency in life. The mother knows this emergency in life; such knowledge is a key aspect of her inhabiting, rather than denying, the open, fragile place in which she goes-on-being, goes-on-care-taking. The “economy” of this open structure, Kristeva concludes, is one of “extreme fragility” (pp. 71-73).

The mother is there from the beginning, in which the first traces of her experience with the other, by way of the symbolic (what Kristeva calls the “semiotic”), take form from the real of unmediated experience. Precisely here we can locate the origins of the linking functions (e.g., alpha and containing), as the mother’s touch is inseparable from her half-sensical coos, cries, and melodies. These interactions, numerous, subtle and inchoately meaningful, emerge within a field of care-taking. Notably (with a nod to Winnicott), Kristeva says that a key aspect of maternal passion involves a transformation of *hate* into an embodied sense of caring that enacts knowledge of life and death and the fragility of the entire arrangement.

What we have here is a thick description of maternal subjectivity, significantly deepening Bion’s key insights.[[13]](#footnote-13) Within this thick description we can situate lack and desire that, together, inform the containing function; this function will always have some residue of maternal passion and, therefore, the maternal unconscious.

5. Matricial Space, the Analyst, and the Ethics of Responsibility

In her remarkably relevant and wise book, Chetrit-Vatine (2014), deftly utilizing the work of Kristeva, Levinas and Laplanche, develops an idea she calls *matricial space*. Her ideas regarding the “fundamental anthropological situation”–in which the child, wholly dependent on the care-giving parent, finds itself in an irreducible situation of *primal seduction* (Laplanche, 1987)–have a direct and deep relationship to the analyst’s symbolic and ethical positions in any psychoanalysis. These positions give reasoned shape to the analyst’s activity, especially the analyst’s responsibility for minding (caring for) the gradient of transferencial desire that the offer of analysis necessarily creates. This offer of analysis recapitulates the primal seduction of infancy.

Matricial space is created and maintained within the asymmetry of the mother-child relationship, a relationship in which gradual *separation* of mother and child constitutes the other for the other (i.e., the mother for the child and the child for the mother). The mother, as Chetrit-Vatine likes to say, is interpellated into a practice of care for the other, her child. “The [child’s] face calls me, interpellates me,” she writes. “I answer; I am answerable for it. This response is made of this call that has been heard. Answering means being responsible, [being] capable of answering for it” (2014, p. 42).

And yet, no answer is entirely transparent. There is always an enigmatic remainder. For the child, this constitutive enigma (a kind of excess within the making of meaning) is inherently seductive; it generates desire and fantasy. The inevitable transmission of aspects of the mother’s unconscious to the child can only happen if the mother is not entirely transparent to herself or to her child. She is always already split, animated, as a speaking being, by an “otherness within” (Laplance, 1999).

Though clearly linked experiencially (we might say “originarily”) with something like Kristeva’s maternal eroticism, “matricial space,” as Chetrit-Vatine emphasizes, “is to do with the mother, with the father, and with the adult world, occupying a position of ethical asymmetry in relation to the child” (2014, p. 94). Matricial space, then, is not irreducibly gendered, because desire and responsibility are meaningful exigencies for any person in a position of care in relation to the other.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Chetrit-Vatine describes the intimate connection between care-taking and psychoanalytic work this way:

“Now, this matricial space is created by the very fact of the offer of analysis, right up until the end of the analysis, by the very existence of the analyst’s person defined as that in him (or her) which allows him to position himself as responsible for the other, as the one who has within him, and who is, this matricial space for the other: the ethical subject. It is a matter of the analyst being in a position of ethical asymmetry in relation to his patient…The patient needs to encounter in his or her analyst not only a psychic space, but also the very offer of this space” (2014, p. 94).

Importantly, analogous to the enigma of childhood (Why am I here? What does mommy or daddy want from me?), the offer of analysis recapitulates this primary enigma (Why am I here? What does my analyst want from me?).

Imbued with a sensibility that captures both the risk and power of psychoanalytic work, Chetrit-Vatine offers us an analytic orientation, or positioning, that can take advantage of the forces alive in the analytic setting. She values letting the power of the enigma do its work, all the while taking care to attend to its effects. Like Kristeva’s “open system,” in which the fragility of the entire arrangement of life is, we might say, suffered passionately, Chetrit-Vatine wishes to help both analyst and patient endure the essential openness of the enigma so the subjective expression of the patient’s interiority–the texture and text of his or her inner world–gradually fills the room, the container, the frame that psychoanalysis offers.

And so, regarding the enigma of psychoanalysis and the questions it engenders, Chetrit-Vatine says, “Once again it is not a question here of a literal answer, but of a responsive, available and malleable position. This position will be all the more effective if, in due course, the literalness of the response is declined. It will be all the more transformative to the extent that the moment when its benevolently enigmatic power can be received as such is patiently awaited” (2014, pp. 102-103).

6. The Ethics of Psychoanalysis: Care for the *Other*

The external other (relative to a given subject) and the other as internal theater (i.e., the important unknown of the Freudian unconscious) condition our living within an ethical field. Simply put, how do we relate to this other? What ought be our attitude toward it? How do we know when *it* is calling us? And what do we *do* with this call? The short answer is that we relate to it within a structure of care, in that the other, as unknown, is futural, the possible, to be disclosed in experience…perhaps. We approach this other with a particular kind of *respect* as well as with particular form of *responsibility* towards it.

Lacan (1992), in his seminar, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, made the claim that the non-symbolic world—what he called the Real—is linked with the forbidden object, that of the maternal/feminine place, which the father’s Law both obscures and forbids. As forbidden, the Real persists in refracted forms, in fantasies, or in features of objects or people that captivate the subject (what Lacan calls rising to the level of “the Thing”). The call of the “Thing,” which takes the subject by surprise as a kind of “truth event,” confronts the subject with some-thing ineluctable about his or her desire (Ruti, 2012). Then the ethical question is one of judgment: do I act in accordance with my desire or not?

I have dealt with some of the complexities and problems with this view of the “subject of desire” in other writings (Wilson, 2012, 2013). Of particular relevance here is that Lacan began a questioning of the ethics of psychoanalysis—a judgment of our action, why we do what we do—and linked it, in its provenance, to the feminine. Kristeva and Chetrit-Vatine greatly expand and deepen this view. They offer a picture of what might be called a maternal field of care-taking—from the place in which the mother feels within her the very pulse of life, all the way to her fulfilling various symbolic functions (including containing projections, and limit setting).[[15]](#footnote-15) In their hands, the *subject of desire* becomes the *subject of responsibility* for the other in all its complexity.

7. Respect and Responsibility for the Other in Analytic Work

The other in all its complexity. In this final section I want to describe briefly some of the different senses in which the analyst grapples with otherness in the work. This grappling amounts to a fundamental respect for the other’s emergence within the analytic field, to be experienced by the analysand and/or the analyst. Respect-for-the-other places an ethical responsibility on the analyst (and, increasingly as the analysis unfolds, the analysand).

1. The analyst has responsibility to attend to the effects of the frame and the setting[[16]](#footnote-16): the office, furniture, smells, colors, lighting, and changes therein; scheduling; fee and cancellations; the basic working method of free-association and non-judgmental listening. These are features of analytic work that often go “under the radar,” operate at a sub-symbolic level, but can have significant impact on the analytic field (Goldberg, 2012). These aspects are *other* to conscious experience, constituting the background of analytic work. At times these sub-symbolic, background features must be given symbolic rendering in that words are needed to bring these more obscure aspects of experience into the conversation. The analyst’s cherished values also operate, for the most part, in the background, but at times must come into conscious play and be re-examined (Wilson, 2012, 2013). This includes the values that are the subject of this paper: respect and responsibility.

For example, Chetrit-Vatine (2014) describes a case in which her office had been newly painted and her patient has an intense emotional and physical reaction to this change. An impasse ensues, as the analyst, valuing what might be called “analytic understanding,” interprets in the usual manner. The impasse is broken when the analyst divests herself of her interpretive message, and through both word and deed takes responsibility for the new paint and the smell. Telling transference fantasy, linked to the patient’s history with her mother, then emerges in the analytic conversation.

2. We have a responsibility to listen to the call-of-the-other in the discourse of analysis: the speech of *both* analyst and analysand. We listen for slips, gaps, hesitations, contradictions, shifts in tone and discontinuities between tone and semantic content, associative leaps, striking or suggestive metaphor, dreams, day-dreams, conscious fantasies.[[17]](#footnote-17) We are less interested in what is already manifested than what is not yet manifest. That is, we are interested in the futural, the what-is-not-yet-known, rather than what has already been said and thus already “known.” This futural, anticipatory orientation is key to maintaining the “open structure” of analysis in which something new can happen.

There is an epistemological advantage to the analyst and analysand attending to speech in this way: it is there, having been spoken, having been heard. Speech has texture and form, and the distinct quality of live action. Its edges and fissures can be felt, sensed. The murmur of the *unknown* gives notice in the in-between of the patient’s spoken words.[[18]](#footnote-18) Such an analytic focus is not on “content” (a common bugaboo, as in “don’t focus on the content”), but on *the “other” of content*, on what agitates content and calls it, at least implicitly, into question. The analyst’s respect for the other-of-content fosters an alive listening, a desire for the new. It counters the habitual, the tried and true, the already known, the past-known.

For example, a patient, on the last day before a long summer break, says upon lying down on the couch: “I won’t see you again…until August 23rd.” The ellipsis was barely noticeable, a micro-hesitation. I said to the patient: “That nano-second pause was striking, in its way.” “Yes, I noticed it too,” he said. “I won’t see you again, full stop.” The conversation continued in an emotional and valedictory direction, as we talked about ending and loss, and the possibility of termination.

3. The other-of-content also, at times, points to its absence. That is, with some patients there seems to be nothing other than the brute concreteness of the manifest. The other-of-content is not generative of further meaning and experience, but is a blank, a haunting and moribund nothingness. Here we are in the realm that Green (1975, 1983) first described and many others have since written about (see Levine, et. al., 2013, for a contemporary view of this particular clinical picture). The analyst in this case uses all the symbolic and experiencial tools at her disposal to create meaning from absence (Guervitch, 2008).

4. The analyst has a responsibility to wonder about his internal experience, experience that is often conceptualized within the wider view of countertransference. For example, the analyst believes, to varying degrees of certainty, that her having an unbidden mental experience (e.g., an odd image or memory that pops into mind when listening to a patient) is related, perhaps intimately, to an unconscious experience with which the patient is struggling. We call this projective identification. The otherness of the patient is somehow felt, in refracted form, by the analyst, in the analyst. The analyst may experience this feeling as an otherness (as alien), or it may be a more ego-syntonic reverie.[[19]](#footnote-19) Either way, but especially in the former case, the analyst has a responsibility to engage with this internal experience and see if can be put to use, put into symbolic form, into, that is, words. Here we are in the realm of the containing function.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In truth, this domain of psychoanalytic activity is intricate and often confusing (Wilson, 2013). The complexity of this interactive phenomenon makes it difficult to determine the *object* of respect--what, in other words, we ought to attend to. So-called inter-psychic communication (Diamond, 2014) involves the difficult task of disentangling analytic solipsism from meaningful analytic work. The basic enigma of the other is denied, if the analyst confuses herself with the patient; the patient’s message becomes, in this case, even more obscure. In contrast, countertransference narrowly defined as felt dis-ease, in which the analyst finds herself in a state of unpleasure (e.g., frustration, boredom, worrisome excitement), allows the analyst to question the particular state of frustrated desire she is in at that moment. This process is akin to Racker’s (1957) description of the analyst’s capacity for “internal division,” and the Barangers’ (1983) concept of the “second look.” The only way to work through the countertransference is to grapple with the desire that underwrites the experience to begin with (Wilson, 2013). We find ourselves back, then, to the issue of responsibility for the other.

An ethics of psychoanalysis, in which the analyst’s desire is a central focus of respect and responsibility, places the analyst within the matricial space of which Chetrit-Vatine writes. Bion (1963b) noted that, “Passion must be clearly distinguished from counter-transference, the latter being evidence of repression” (p. 13). This passion, this particular analytic desire, is precisely *that desire that questions itself*, recursively, openly, within the lived experience of doing analysis.

8. Conclusion

Psychoanalytic practice involves us in the intimacy of lives being lived as they are being spoken about in the analysis. Who is listening? This is a crucial question, because both the analyst and the analysand may, at different times and for different reasons, be deaf to the other within the discourse, the conversation. This speaking is also a living-with, as both analyst and analysand listen, feel, intervene.

Death is always on the horizon. The “emergency in life” is never far away. Analysis will end, as will the lives being lived that are giving themselves over to the turbulence and promise of the analytic field. The only reason an analysand would want to listen-to-the-analyst, or listen-to-themselves-in-analysis, is because time is of the essence. This basic exigency, held within the matricial space, conditions the analysand’s desire for subjective appropriation (Chetrit-Vatine, 2014).[[21]](#footnote-21) Subjective appropriation is the analysand’s taking-seriously what is being spoken about concerning his or her subjectivity in all of its dimensionality: desire, anxiety, fantasy, hatred, and love. This taking-seriously is a form of respect: a kind of owning, in which the analysand takes responsibility for his life, his or her human personhood, along these dimensions. Subjective appropriation is, of course, an ongoing, recursive, dialectical process of becoming, as the subject learns, and discards the learned, in the project of remaining open to the unthought, the unknown, that which he or she has yet to come across.

In this context, one can appreciate psychoanalysis as a particular kind of dialogue in the Socratic tradition. We are not interested in any kind of rigorous deduction or methodological interrogation of the object. Instead, truth is a happening. It comes about through a questioning openness that allows itself to be guided, in the back and forth of conversation, by realities that emerge in the room, in the analytic field. This openness can only be achieved by our knowledge of our own ignorance, as analyst and analysand speak to and listen to each other in the ongoingness of psychoanalysis.[[22]](#footnote-22)

The maternal sensibility that seems to rest at the center of analytic activity—at least as seen through our contemporary lens—involves us in this responsibility for the other, or, we might rightly say, *others*, that are both hidden and disclosed in the analytic work. Certainly helping analysands expand their capacities to “think emotional experience” is an important aspect of learning to engage otherness. But this capacity must be seen within a larger context of a lived life, a life of desire and responsibility.

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1. For example, in Winer, et. al. (2004), considerations of female development in the clinical situation, female “passivity,” the unique vicissitudes of female Oedipal development, and socio-cultural issues regarding sexual identity–are all thoughtfully written about by leading analytic thinkers. No article addresses the on-the-ground work of the analyst or clinical theory as it relates to the female/maternal “position” of the analyst. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. No doubt an important factor that encourages us to place the mother at the center of things is the slow, seemingly inexorable decline of the paternal function (Roudinesco, 2011). This is an important issue that deserves its own treatment, and space constraints prevent me from considering it more fully. But, importantly, the mother, or maternal subjectivity more symbolically, does in fact include attitudes and actions that were previously associated with the “paternal.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. My opaque description here is purposeful: it remains an open question where to locate the unconscious. Rather than a site to be discovered, it may be conceptualized more fruitfully as the *important unknown*, with the understanding that disclosure of the unknown may or may not, once engaged in experience, be deemed personally important by the subject. The analyst’s role in this assessment (never only a cross-sectional intervention, because of the *après-coup*) is itself not unimportant. The field concept implies that the unconscious is always “outside” the subject (Lacan, 1973). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. By now the contours of such maternal engagement are part of the *lingua franca* of psychoanalysis: reverie, alpha-function, and emergence of the container-contained. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A key feature of frustration-as-relation is that such a relation has an intimate connection with saying, or *sprechen*, speaking, even if this speaking is the infant’s cry. This emphasis will allow us to open our inquiry not only into the question of desire (forms of maternal and analytic desire of which *passion* is particularly central), but also the nature of analytic dialogue. I will consider these issues later in the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Reverie and alpha-function are also, by extension, key aspects of any analyst’s functioning in the analytic setting (e.g., Ogden, 2004; Ferro and Foresti, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The conventional reading of this pivotal sentence from “A psychoanalytic study of thinking”: “I shall limit the term 'thought' to the mating of a pre-conception with a frustration” (Bion, 1962a, p. 307), suggests that it is the infant who is in a frustrated state because there is “no breast available.” A more suggestive reading, on that follows from Laplanche and Pontalis, is that it is the *object* with whom the infant meets who is frustrated, which leads, in turn, to an infant in a *field of frustration*.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Most of the time, as Heidegger (1962) emphasized, we are engaged in the world, acting, involving ourselves in the flow of various practices, including child-care. Only when we stumble, and the embodied sense of ongoingness breaks down, do we then become aware of an unsatisfied state, namely a desire. This structure of flow, breakdown, awareness-of-desire is analogous to what happens in experiences of counter-transference in the psychoanalytic setting (Wilson, 2013). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. One cannot help but sense an assertion of hierarchy here, suggestive of a medical model in which the vector of distress goes in one direction, as the thinking doctor “heals” the unthinking patient through his symbolic capacities (see also Diamond, 2014). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Certainly these authors do not conceptualize their task as only one of processing and symbolizing. My point is that a common reading of Bion tends to lead to a reduction in the complexity of maternal/analyst experience to purified notions of *function*. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bion (1970) writes: “[D]esire relates to that which is felt not to be possessed: it is ‘unsaturated’. There is therefore a correspondence between desire as an unsaturated term and the evolution of O it represents” (p. 45). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Human desire is always “in excess” in relation to any object of desire. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For a more complete picture the reader is referred to Kristeva (2014, 1980, 1983). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Though not irreducibly gendered, one cannot help but notice the ways in which descriptions of the analyst’s “maternal” position now include features of what used to be attributed to the paternal aegis. As stated earlier, this question of the paternal function as *degraded*, wounded, because it is of great importance, deserves a paper in its own right. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. As Kristeva writes (with her eye forever on the openness of interaction as generative): “The good enough mother is one who can go away, making room for the child to have the pleasure of thinking about her” (in Chetrit-Vatine, 2014, p. 70). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. I will simply mention here that the analytic frame refers, in part, to something internal to the analyst; the setting has more of an external implication. Patients develop transferences to both, as well as the method (Donnet, 2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Though we are always interested in our own slips, metaphors, day-dreams, and reveries, because the analytic task is in the service of the patient, we may or may not pursue them internally, associatively. They may or may not help us in our primary task, which is to facilitate the gradual emergence of the patient’s subjectivity and inner world in all its dimensionality. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Obviously, a speech-act is both performative and constative (Autin, 1962). Semantic content is inseparable from its human delivery, marked by intention, feeling, and desire. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I am indebted to Stephen Purcell for alerting me to this aspect of “otherness.” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The process is more complex, of course. Often the symbolic work remains internal to the analyst, the product of which shifts the analyst’s position, and thereby the analytic field, though this work remains unspoken. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See also Kirshner (2012) for elaboration of a similar concept. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. I am indebted to R.M. Wallace’s Introduction in Gadamer (1991) for this wonderfully acute description of Socratic dialogue. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)