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Cassandra at the Gates: Institutional Literacy, Group Dynamics, and the Social Unconscious in Contemporary Psychoanalysis¹

Stavros Charalambides²

This address explores the often overlooked dimension of institutional literacy in relational psychoanalysis, situating it within the broader context of group dynamics and the social unconscious. Beginning with mythic and historical illustrations—from the fratricidal tragedy of Eteocles and Polynices to contemporary geopolitical crises—it argues that psychoanalytic institutions, like analytic dyads, are subject to unconscious repetitions of trauma, rivalry, and disavowal. The central claim is that the inability to recognize institutional dynamics—succession anxieties, ideological rigidity, and legacy conflicts—renders psychoanalytic communities vulnerable to fragmentation and ethical incoherence. Drawing from the concept of the “institutional unconscious,” the lecture critiques the prevailing intersubjective paradigm for its neglect of the analytic field’s collective and political dimensions. While relational psychoanalysis has expanded the analytic third, it still tends to privilege the dyad and undertheorize the systemic transmissions of trauma within institutions. Instead, the speaker calls for a theoretical and structural shift that includes large-group phenomena—sibling transferences, group-as-a-whole dynamics, and the psychic life of institutions—as essential to psychoanalytic training and practice. By invoking myths such as those of Pentheus and Dionysus, the talk illustrates how institutional rigidity and disavowed affect can result in catastrophe rather than transformation. Institutional literacy, then, is not merely an intellectual exercise but a clinical and ethical imperative. Only by metabolizing difference and engaging with unconscious structures at the institutional level can psychoanalysis truly offer a space for healing and innovation—both for its practitioners and for the communities they serve.

KEYWORDS: Institutional unconscious; relational psychoanalysis; group dynamics; psychoanalytic training; intersubjectivity; sibling transference; social unconscious.

- 1 This plenary address was given at the twenty-first (2025) meeting of the International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy as part of Plenary III, “Caring for a Psychoanalytic Community: Using Social Unconscious and Group Dynamic Theories to Expand Our Understanding of Power Dynamics.”
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I begin with deep thanks—to Gila, Avi, and Haim for co-creating this panel; to all of you, here and online, for showing up; to IARPP [International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy] for hosting another space of thought and encounter; and to our psychoanalytic ancestors—those bold thinkers who built this institutional home.

You may have noticed: I've already referred to subgroups—my copanelists as one; you, the audience, as another; and IARPP as the institutional frame that holds us all—alongside the ever-present subgroup of our predecessors. This brings us to today's central question: How do we foster institutional literacy in psychoanalysis from a relational point of view—and why does it matter to relation to group dynamics and social unconscious?

To frame this, I turn to the myth of Eteocles and Polynices (Figure 1). Brothers. Sons of Oedipus. Heirs to a shattered lineage. Entrusted to share rule over Thebes. But they failed. What should have been a fraternal pact became a fratricidal war. Each refused to yield. Each saw the other not as kin but as a threat. And at the gates of their city—a symbol of community—they destroyed each other, crushed by inherited trauma and betrayal.

This is not just myth. It is a psychic pattern we replay—silently, unconsciously—in our institutes, boards, and alliances. When we fail to name the forces at play . . .

When we don't read the subtexts of succession, envy, legacy . . .

When we disavow our role in inherited conflict . . . we turn psychoanalysis into a battlefield of repetition. Institutional literacy is the antidote. Illiteracy—our refusal to see the unconscious codes of power, place, and belonging—allows trauma to fester beneath a surface of civility.

Trump's rise was fueled by disavowed wounds and systemic mistrust left unspoken. Similar dynamics fractured Hellenic unity when Sparta turned against Athens—and vice versa. The expulsion of Erich Fromm from the Frankfurt School reflected the same pattern: ideological rigidity masked as moral clarity. Ironically, capitalist America offered him tolerance—not out of agreement but out of institutional flexibility. Merton Gill stood out among Freudians for seriously engaging early interpersonalist critiques rather than rejecting them. We must ask, How can some denounce misogyny while overlooking misandry? How can we speak forcefully about Israel–Palestine and simultaneously forget the trauma of the 1974 Turkish invasion of Cyprus? Ethical seriousness demands consistency—not selective memory disguised as justice.

These aren't just political enactments. They are failures to metabolize difference, to think relationally, to hold complexity. And so the pattern repeats: exile, fragmentation, scapegoating, collapse. To become institutionally literate is to break that cycle. To read the story beneath the story. To resist false unity. To bear the creative tension of difference, without reaching for destruction.

This work is not optional. It is essential to our communities, our collaborations,



FIGURE 1. Brothers at the ruins of empire.

and the depth of our clinical work. Because if we cannot make peace at the gates of our Thebes, how can we offer a shelter to those who come to us in search of healing?

INSTITUTIONAL UNCONSCIOUS AND INTERSUBJECTIVITY

The institutional unconscious remains largely undertheorized within intersubjective models. Despite advancing relational thinking, these paradigms continue to privilege the analytic dyad, often overlooking the collective structures that shape the analytic field. Emphasis on asymmetrical meaning making between analyst and analysand leaves little space to examine how institutionalized fantasies, inherited traumas, and unconscious roles operate beyond the dyad.

While intergenerational trauma is frequently explored within the analytic pair, less attention has been paid to its transmission within institutes—and how it shapes candidate development. As Winnicott taught, there is no such thing as a baby without a mother. Likewise, there is no such thing as a candidate apart from their institutional surround: They are formed within, and by, the community that holds them.

In my recent work, I suggest that institutional processes mirror large-group dynamics. Identifications, disavowals, and projections unfold not only between individuals but between subjects and the institution-as-object and across institutions. Intersubjective theory, focused on small-group configurations, rarely addresses the



FIGURE 2. Myth of Pentheus and Dionysus. Reproduced from the *J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 15 (1987): 161.

collective matrix of memory and transmission that underpins the analytic frame institutionally.

This gap persists, in part, due to resistance to imagining the institution as a psychic and political actor. While intersubjectivity centers mutual recognition, institutions often withhold such reciprocity. As I've argued in my writing on the "group turn," analytic spaces are saturated with large-group phenomena—sibling rivalry, founder idealization, and phantom guilt—that escape dyadic containment and exceed the analytic third.

Without a meta-theoretical shift that includes power, historicity, and role sedimentation, intersubjectivity risks enacting the very blindness it seeks to expose—repeating rather than illuminating the unconscious patterns that govern institutional life.

The myth of Pentheus and Dionysus, as told in Euripides's *Bacchae*, captures this well (Figure 2): Institutional rigidity meets disavowed ecstasy, and what is refused returns—no longer symbolic but catastrophic.

Pentheus, king of Thebes, embodies institutional rationality—hierarchical, rigid, controlling. Dionysus represents the repressed collective: ecstatic, irrational, and embedded in group unconscious processes. Pentheus refuses to recognize Dionysus as divine, rejecting the Bacchic cult—a proto-large-group phenomenon. His denial is not mere disbelief but a failure of symbolic literacy: the incapacity to read the affective and mythical language of the social unconscious.

Entrapped in binaries—control versus chaos, doer versus done-to—Pentheus is ultimately undone not by force but by seduction into identification. Persuaded to dress as a woman and spy on the Bacchae, he is absorbed into the group unconscious. In a psychotic enactment of group-as-a-whole transference, he is torn apart by the maenads—led by his own mother, Agave, who, in her frenzy, fails to recognize him.

- **Pentheus:** institutional ego, in denial of its own ecstatic, envious, or destructive elements
- **Dionysus:** the repressed social unconscious that returns with catastrophic force when excluded
- **The Bacchae:** the group unconscious—regressive and violent when uncontained but potentially transformative if ritualized
- **Agave's dismemberment:** the collapse of symbolic order when institutional authority disavows its own destructiveness

Pentheus is destroyed not by Dionysus's violence but by his refusal to symbolize and contain what Dionysus represents. Likewise, psychoanalytic institutions risk fragmentation when they cling to victim/perpetrator binaries and repress internal group dynamics—phantasy, rivalry, dependency. What is denied returns—not as thought but as rupture.

The Platonic myth of the cave offers a parallel allegory of institutional awakening (Figure 3). Prisoners, chained and facing shadows, mistake illusion for truth. When one is freed and turns toward the light, one suffers disorientation before seeing reality. But when one returns to the cave, one's revelations are mocked and rejected.

This mirrors the experience of directors and board members who attempt to illuminate unconscious institutional dynamics—idealizations, scapegoating, disavowed eroticism—only to encounter resistance, ridicule, or exclusion. The institutional unconscious becomes the “cave” where unexamined roles and inherited narratives are enacted as if they were objective truths.

The ethical cost of seeing—of naming shadows—is high. But as Plato insists, it is necessary for transformation. Once the institutional unconscious is glimpsed,



FIGURE 3. Plato's allegory of the cave.

it cannot be unseen. It destabilizes static identifications and demands a reckoning with collective truths.

Institutional enlightenment, then, is not an individual victory but a conflictual and collective process—one requiring courage, containment, and the willingness to see beyond the comforting shadows of institutional mythology.

The myth of Oedipus, often read through the lens of individual psychosexual development, acquires new meaning when examined in relation to the institutional unconscious. In Sophocles's tragedy, Oedipus becomes king by unknowingly fulfilling a prophecy—killing his father and marrying his mother. The horror lies not only in the acts themselves but in the shattering of identity and institutional role. Once a symbol of civic order, Oedipus becomes the embodiment of contamination and exile.

Similarly, in psychoanalytic institutions, founders, directors, or charismatic leaders often occupy ambivalent positions: idealized and resented, admired and scapegoated. Oedipal dynamics reemerge unconsciously: Loyalty becomes entangled with rivalry, succession crises echo patricidal fantasies, and innovation is felt as betrayal. These tensions play out in committees and boards, where unconscious identifications with institutional “parents” shape reactions to leadership and dissent.

Like Oedipus, institutions are often blind to their truths—repressing knowledge of their own histories, exclusions, and abuses of power. In this sense, the institutional unconscious is a repository of denied origin stories and unprocessed guilt. Large groups may function like a tragic chorus, voicing what the institution cannot consciously acknowledge—revealing the emotional cost of institutional knowledge.

The myth warns us: What is not symbolized will return as fate.

To avoid repetition and rupture, psychoanalytic institutions must confront their oedipal configurations—not to pathologize leadership or dissent but to metabolize the unconscious forces that underlie them.

Reframed in this way, the myth of Oedipus offers a vital lens through which to rethink the ethics of institutional power, blindness, and self-recognition in the analytic field.

DEFINITION AND RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE INSTITUTIONAL UNCONSCIOUS AND INSTITUTIONAL ILLITERACY

A working definition of the *institutional unconscious* might describe it as the latent imprint of transgenerational social and political forces that silently shape the everyday operations of a psychotherapeutic institute. The institution thus becomes more than a container for training or treatment; it functions as a psychic actor, saturated with meaning, memory, and affect.

Institutional illiteracy, by contrast, reflects the failure to recognize and symbolize these unconscious dynamics. It is the incapacity to read the symbolic and affective

subtexts of organizational life—perpetuating cycles of fragmentation, scapegoating, and doer/done-to binaries. This illiteracy masks inherited traumas as administrative necessity or moral principle, thereby contributing to institutional pathology.

The relationship between these two phenomena is cyclical: The institutional unconscious thrives in atmospheres of illiteracy, where unresolved identifications with founders, disavowed rivalries, and unprocessed collective traumas shape the group matrix. Without symbolic work—that is, without the development of institutional literacy—these dynamics do not become thought but erupt as rupture.

Who, then, is responsible for interrogating the embeddedness of the institute within the broader social fabric and for mapping the multiple unconscious attachments it contains? If not the institute's members—directors, faculty, candidates, alumni, and even patients—then who? The analytic institute is not a neutral space but a relational field, structured by transgenerational transmission, cultural identifications, and large-group dynamics.

The crucial question becomes, Are its members adequately prepared—through training and reflective practice—to identify and metabolize manifestations of the institutional unconscious? Without such capacities, the institute risks reenacting the very dynamics it aims to transform.

WHY DIRECTORS AND BOARD MEMBERS MUST UNDERSTAND GROUP DYNAMICS AND THE SOCIAL UNCONSCIOUS IN PSYCHOANALYTIC TRAINING INSTITUTES

Understanding group dynamics and the social unconscious is not ancillary but essential for psychoanalytic leadership. Directors and board members occupy symbolic positions that inevitably evoke institutional transferences—idealization, rivalry, envy, disavowal—often unconsciously. Without literacy in group processes, such dynamics risk being misattributed to the so-called difficult candidate or reduced to interpersonal tensions.

Leaders untrained in large-group dynamics may struggle to metabolize projections, contain scapegoating, or withstand the emotional turbulence of institutional change. This absence of symbolic capacity fosters institutional illiteracy—the failure to read unconscious processes shaping culture and governance. To serve as a container for transformation rather than a site of reenactment, leadership must engage the psychic life of the collective. This involves recognizing sibling transferences and plural subjectivities and resisting reductive binaries. Only then can an institute sustain itself as an ethical community capable of holding difference.

A clinical vignette illustrates this point. A candidate, newly elevated to prospective faculty, began arriving late to group sessions—though was punctual in individual therapy. What initially seemed like resistance gradually revealed itself as a symbolic expression of his unresolved positioning within the institute's hierarchy.

Following a charged enactment, he shared,

In the group, I carry not only the envy directed at me, but also that projected onto candidates and members more generally. What's unbearable is witnessing unconscious envy between others—envy unseen by its object. I become a silent witness to an invisible injustice.

His experience evokes the figure of Teiresias, the blind seer of Thebes—condemned to perceive what others disavow (Figure 4). Like Teiresias, the candidate occupies a liminal position: both inside and outside the institutional order. His lateness, misread as resistance, was a symbolic protest—a refusal to fully inhabit a role saturated with projections. In the analytic group, he became a vessel for what the institution could not name.

This position was not chosen—it was unconsciously assigned by the group structure. And, like the prophet, his insight carried a cost: He held what others disowned, witnessing what could not yet be spoken. The group functioned as a tragic chorus, enabling what was foreclosed to emerge—not through interpretation alone but via enactment and rupture.

The myth of Teiresias thus offers a powerful lens through which to understand how the institutional unconscious deputizes certain members to carry collective denial—until what was disavowed must finally be symbolized.

THE PROPOSED RELATIONAL PSYCHOANALYTIC MODEL

The training model at the Institute of Relational and Group Psychotherapy in Athens, which I direct, integrates core elements of psychoanalytic education—supervision, personal therapy, seminars, and thesis writing—with a distinct focus on group-relational processes. It maintains clinical rigor while embedding candidates in an institutional matrix grounded in mutuality, pluralism, and reflective authority.

- All faculty are dually trained in relational psychoanalysis and group psychotherapy, cultivating a dual lens that privileges both intersubjective and group-level dynamics.
- While drawing on the Eitingon model, the institute reconfigures the role of senior analysts. Rather than exerting top-down authority, they serve as relational anchors and collaborative mentors. Faculty appointments require competence in both modalities, ensuring a pluralistic analytic ethos.
- Inspired by the French and Uruguayan models, the program decenters academic performance as the sole criterion for readiness. Graduation rests on sustained community engagement and the embodied capacity to contribute to institutional life. Through collaborative projects and dialogic learning, candidates internalize psychoanalysis as a socially responsive and ethically grounded practice.
- The curriculum includes the study of the social unconscious; institutional transference; and the intersection of vertical and horizontal dynamics across



FIGURE 4. Johann Heinrich Füssli, *Ulysses in Cimmeria (The Descent of Ulysses to the Shades)*, circa 1803. Egremont Collection, Petworth House, National Trust, West Sussex, UK.

family, organization, and culture. Trainees also engage with cultural material, such as public theatrical events, and participate in cross-institutional seminars to cultivate transdisciplinary and sociopolitical awareness.

- Our psychoanalytic candidates engage in both group therapy and individual treatment as patients, with both modalities regarded as equally essential to their clinical development.
- Supervision is conducted primarily in weekly groups. Individual supervision is optional. Supervisors rotate, providing varied clinical perspectives and promoting analytic autonomy. Bimonthly intermodality seminars bring together trainees from both (relational psychoanalytic and Yalomian group psychotherapeutic) tracks for cross-theoretical learning and collegial exchange.
- Bimonthly large-group meetings—bringing together faculty, alumni, candidates, patients, and invited guests—provide a shared space for exploring

the institutional unconscious. These gatherings focus on themes such as authority, exclusion, and belonging, often mirroring broader societal dynamics. Communication is further facilitated through a dedicated Viber platform, which supports both formal coordination and informal exchange. Importantly, these large groups are designed not to assess candidates but to deepen collective insight into the emotional and symbolic life of the institution itself.

- Our institutional community is actively encouraged to participate in IARPP initiatives—conferences, webinars, and colloquia—which has contributed to a significant milestone: For the first time in IARPP’s history, we have become the second largest ethnic group represented. This achievement underscores the importance of sustained engagement and calls for a deeper commitment from those of us in senior leadership positions across psychoanalytic institutes. It is time to foster a more creative, enduring, and mutually enriching relationship between our institutions and IARPP.

This model departs from classical vertical hierarchies, proposing an ethically grounded, structurally innovative framework. It affirms that clinical expertise is inseparable from institutional awareness and that psychoanalytic authority must be reexamined through group process, social dynamics, and communal responsibility. In this spirit, training becomes a living, relational practice. This is my suggested way to help our psychoanalytic communities.

To end, let us recall Cassandra—the seer of Troy, she who saw with piercing clarity what others refused to name (Figure 5). Gifted by Apollo with the power of prophecy, yet cursed that no one would believe her, Cassandra wandered the halls of power speaking truths wrapped in flame. She warned of the horse. She warned of betrayal. But her voice echoed through corridors already sealed by denial.

Cassandra is not merely a tragic figure—she is a mirror held to our psychoanalytic institutions. For within our communities, too, there are those who speak the language of the unconscious, who sense the tremors beneath the surface, who see the rivalries, the phantoms, the disavowed inheritances. And too often, they are met, not with recognition, but with silence, dismissal, or exile.

To embrace institutional literacy is to break Cassandra’s curse—to create spaces where warnings are heard, where truths are not pathologized, and where insight is not confused with insubordination. It is to recognize that the health of our analytic communities depends not on unanimity but on the difficult labor of hearing what has long been unspeakable.

If we refuse to listen, the horse is already inside the gates. And so I leave us with this question—not rhetorical, but ethical: When the next Cassandra speaks within your institute, will you recognize her voice? Will you listen—not only with your ears but with your symbolic imagination? And will you have the courage to respond, not with expulsion or idealization, but with the relational labor of truth?



FIGURE 5. Evelyn De Morgan, *Cassandra*, 1898. De Morgan Collection, Watts Gallery–Artists' Village, Compton, UK.

Our future may depend on how we answer. And let us remember: There is no such thing as a dyad—only a large group speaking through two of its emissaries. There is no such thing as a candidate—only a candidate embedded in the relational weave of an institutional community. And there is no such thing as an institutional community—only a living formation situated in the here and now, resonating with the there and then of intergenerational transmission, shaped by the voices of ancestors and the silent architecture of the social unconscious. This is the “group turn” in relational psychoanalysis.