

Sexual Rapture, Ego Rupture and the Role of Transgression: A Discussion of Megan Rundel's "The Fire of Eros: Sexuality and the Movement Toward Union"

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Rundel's paper explores exciting conceptual links between sexuality and experiences conventionally thought of as mystical. Here she makes the convincing argument that sexuality and orgasm are uniquely equipped to produce experiences of dedifferentiation, which can, in turn, lead to radical psychic transformations. I explore this idea to propose that not all sexualities are equally viable candidates for the evocation of dedifferentiated experiences. Transgression is a vital ingredient to that process, and I explain why I think so. I end with suggesting that we have to approach dedifferentiation with measured excitement, as a topos of instability. What can issue from it are not only productive and transformational dysregulations but also self-destructiveness and, at times, more malignant psychotic fragmentations.

In her absorbing paper Megan Rundel (this issue) offers an exciting theoretical and clinical account of how the sexual bears on experiences of continuity that border on the mystical. Her articulation of how the vertiginous qualities of sexuality and of orgasm galvanize the intrapsychic operations that propel us into what she calls "the movement towards union" is both refreshing and relieving. As analysts we struggle greatly to speak about experiences of this sort that exist outside the realm of psychic representation.

This is, in large part, because of how incredibly difficult it is to gather unrepresented experience into language; this is more the land of the inchoate and less so the terrain of words. In his Italian seminars Bion (2005) summarized this problem as follows: "How are we to see, [to] observe ... these things which are not visible" (p. 38)? Trying to speak about these matters requires "dreaming up," as Ogden (2005) might have put it, an associative link between tangible and intangible. On this, Rundel is truly gifted. Not only is she able to walk us through the elusive ideas that craft her argument, she also offers us a beautiful clinical narrative that illustrates how her propositions might translate in the consulting room. This very helpfully fleshes out the considerable technical and therapeutic implications of her thinking.

With equal measures of talent and rigor, Rundel ventures into the thick territory of theorizing the state that Bataille (1957) described as "uninterrupted belonging." This state, for which she reserves the term *dedifferentiation*, is a particular variant of destructiveness that undoes difference and softens separateness. It is brought about by the *fire of Eros* and it is, she proposes, psychically transformative.

The first kernels of that idea have long existed in our analytic lineage—Spielrein wrote about destruction as a “cause of becoming” as early as 1912—but, with very few exceptions, they are not often taken up in our professional literature and rarely are they theorized in relation to sexuality (for rare exceptions see Stein, 1998; 2008). I have, thus, greatly appreciated Rundel’s efforts to import into her work multiple theoretical perspectives to wrest such experiences from obscurity and from unnecessarily pathologizing analytic frameworks. Insisting that dedifferentiation is not de facto a manifest of psychotic and narcissistic defenses (Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1996; Khan, 1969; Mahler, 1967) or of regressive or infantile strivings, she suggests that the dismantling of difference and separatedness can be an enlivening and psychically enriching, even therapeutic, process.

Rundel’s main proposition joins the handful of analytic thinkers writing on the process of ego shattering which produces such states of oneness. These authors view the ego’s undoing as a topos of heightened generative potential and of transformational possibilities for the self (Bersani, 1986; Bollas, 2013; Ghent, 1990; González, 2014; Saketopoulou, 2014). This is an important claim because it so directly clashes with psychoanalysis’ valuation of synthetic functions and, also, because it parts ways with the belief that an integrated ego is a necessary precondition to psychic health. From a traditional developmental perspective dedifferentiated states are reflexively understood as an infantile or regressive processes. But Rundel unlinks them from their developmental tether: for her, dedifferentiation does not have to automatically default to regression. This is not only because, she notes, the notion of early symbiotic fusion between caretaker and infant has not been borne out by research, but mostly because she finds that conceptualizing dedifferentiation in terms of a temporal framework is confounding. We might better understand such states if we think about them “in a way that is more spatial than temporal” (p. 618), and Rundel proposes that we may more profitably shift our focus from an overemphasis on *psychic time* to attending more to *psychic depth*.

For Rundel, as I read her, sexuality in general and orgasm in particular make an exacting bid for the shattering of ego structures, and that is due to their sheer physical materiality. At their culminating point, we encounter a “softening of difference and separateness between self and not-self, as well as between internal psychic structures” (p. 618), “a feeling of a falling away of boundaries, of limits, of separation, and into an experience of union and largeness” (p. 628). *This* is the topography wherefrom new psychic structures can emerge and the reason why Rundel seems to favor the role of spatiality over temporality. Shattering alongside the ego are the encrusted and static forms that keep it stale and imprisoned in old, calcified structures; the result can be transformational in the Bionian (1970) sense, making room for the “experiences of transcendence, creativity, and fresh experiences of self and other” (p. 615). In the clinical portion of her paper, Rundel gives an extended example of what these transformations looked like for her analysand, Noelle.

I have more to say shortly about the clinical material, but I want to briefly note here my initial astonishment in reading the following account of Noelle’s phenomenological experience: “at the moment of orgasm ... she shatters into tiny particles” (p. 614); “she experienced our intermixed atoms dissolving into light and heat” (p. 625). The reason for my surprise is that this unusual description of sexual experience astoundingly resembles descriptions I have heard in my own consulting room: a patient described having “explod[ed] into thousands of tiny pieces, was hanging out in space like overheated pieces of dust” (Saketopoulou, 2014), and another felt “dispersed into pieces, as if breaking down into particles” (Saketopoulou, 2015). It is quite fascinating to

me that such similar language that draws on metaphors from physical science
and

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particle physics is being used by different patients with different analysts at different moments in time to convey what I understand as the psychic representations of the ego's dissolution. I suspect that these similarities point to an underlying thread of experience that others analysts may, perhaps, be also encountering in their analyses of their patients. Interestingly, Rundel seems to already be thinking about the possible meanings of this particular representational bent: since sexuality is an "intensely physical experience" she writes, "the phantasy representations we have for it are about changing states of matter" (p. 627, this issue).

DEDIFFERENTIATION AND THE PSYCHOSEXUAL

Critical to the power that sexuality and orgasm wield upon us is that they constitute "one of the most ubiquitous portals into the dedifferentiated states that are essential for psychic growth, [but which] ... can feel unavailable to us in ordinary conscious life" (p. 615). I read Rundel (this issue) to be saying that it is in the property of sexuality to propel us toward dedifferentiated states, a statement with which I fully agree. This enticing version of a psychosexuality that expansively moves us toward further psychic elaborations is quintessentially psychoanalytic. Sexuality, and orgasm in particular, can give us access to what in everyday, quotidian life lays mostly dormant; it awakens us to our unconscious (see also Frommer, 2006). I should note, however, that the unconscious of which Rundel speaks here is not the archival unconscious formed through repression or the unconscious of dissociative enclaves but Matte-Blanco's (1998a; 1998b) unrepressed, symmetrical unconscious. Sexuality's psychic work, therefore, does not pivot on the breaking down of defenses or the dismantling of psychic fortresses as, for example, as Kernberg (1995) might have it. Its unique labor and one of its major contributions is to usher access to the infinite (Bion's O, 1965), to permit a descend into a pond of uninterrupted continuity where differences become softened, where the boundaries of the self dissolve and the borders delimiting subjectivity begin to give way.

As she proceeds to discuss her work with Noelle, however, Rundel (this issue) seems to be shifting into a slightly different conceptualization. What appears to be under discussion here is no longer a moment of access to the infinitude of O but its *phantastical elaboration*. "Noelle," she writes, "*phantasizes* [emphasis added] sexuality and orgasm as a dissolving of the psychic and physical boundaries of self and other, and also as blissful contact with an experience of the infinite" (p. 614). "We all have an erotic relationship to a phantasy of absolute dedifferentiation and oneness" (p. 615), Rundel (this issue) writes elsewhere. Bion's O, we well know, can never be experienced in a direct or unmediated way—it is a becoming rather than a being, a reaching for rather than a destination (on this see also Massumi, 2002). Nevertheless, this slight yet noticeably different way of speaking about what happens when the ego dissolves leaves me uncertain as to whether Rundel wants us to think of the movement to union as one possible telos of sexuality and orgasm or whether she sees it as Noelle's highly personal way of psychically representing the state of unity. Is the feeling of oceanic continuity that Noelle conveys to her analyst this patient's particular phantasy or has sexuality and orgasm delivered Noelle into some sort of contact with the infinite? Noelle can be alternatively understood as having grafted this experience onto sexuality and orgasm or to have been transported there through the material tension and release that accompanies orgasm.

Consequently, I am unclear as to how Rundel understands the relationship between phantasy and dedifferentiation. Does she view such experiences as making guest appearances in “sexual phantasy ... in creative and aesthetic moments, in mystical states and in emotional and dream life,” as a “facet of the psychosexual” (p. 615)? When Rundel (this issue) writes, for instance, that our patients “have different unconscious phantasies of what that experience of union will be like ... of blissful symbiotic union ... a transfusion of goodness ... an empty hole that will swallow them up ... an imprisoning symbiosis” (p. 622), is she speaking about primal experience, is she speaking of dynamically layered defense, or of an attempt to psychically represent states that are by nature elusive? To me, at stake here is whether Rundel sees dedifferentiation as agnostic (it may be eroticized; become fodder for paranoid feelings; trigger perverse responses; become idealized; be experienced as traumatic) or as important in and of itself, as core to all psychosexuality.

To me, sexuality is in a privileged relationship to the movement toward union and to the erotically infused experience of oneness. This experience is elementary and not a product of phantasy or defense. And I differ somewhat from Rundel in that I do not believe that all sexualities are equivalent in their capacity to evoke these epiphanic kinds of experiences. I suspect that there are meaningful qualitative differences on the psychic level between, for instance, deadened and monotonous sexual encounters (even when orgasmic) and those that, for a variety of reasons, may compel higher levels of erotic excitement. Economically speaking, the latter have far more chances to affect the overrunning of the ego and to induce its unraveling. The likelihood that the ego will shatter, delivering us into the experience of continuity and dedifferentiation, is even more heightened when sexuality pushes us *into overwhelm*. This occurs more predictably when we find ourselves in the realm of transgressive sexuality.

INTO OVERWHELM: WHY TRANSGRESSION IS VITAL TO EXPERIENCES OF DEDIFFERENTIATION

To better explain why I believe that the experience of transgression is a critical ingredient for the dissolution of the ego, I want to shift to another part of Rundel’s essay. Taking her cue from Bataille (1970), Rundel writes of several forms of excess energy that humans have a need to discharge. Sexuality, she explains, culls these excesses, progressively escalates them and releases them explosively at the moment of orgasm. Despite explicitly stating that she is not taking up energy from a Freudian perspective in this essay, Rundel’s argument has the distinctive tenor of an economical tension/release model. This is a model that I think it has much to offer in articulating further the relationship between sexualities and dedifferentiation and I, thus, want to engage it in more depth.

I mentioned earlier that not all sexuality and not every instance of orgasm are equally viable candidates for evoking psychically generative experiences of dedifferentiation. The element of transgression plays, in fact, a key role. So I want to take a brief detour first to explicate how I use the term. Transgression can map itself onto a wide array of sexual acts ranging from the bizarre and outlandish to the ordinary and prosaic. Which acts will be experienced as transgressive varies widely: lines of prohibition are perched on the highly personal divide between the intrapsychic, the social, and the temporal (who does what in what context and at what point in time; see Dimen, 2001, 2003). For one it may be the shame of anal penetration, for another

having sex with the lights on, for a third the longing to be reduced to begging one's lover. The precise act is not what matters—what matters for a sexual act to be experienced as transgressive is that it is *subjectively experienced as pushing the (idiosyncratically defined) line*.

Transgression runs on an economic regime of escalating excitations. Key to transgressive pleasure is not tension reduction (Freud, 1905)¹ but the welling up of pleasure even to the point of exhaustion (Laplanche, 2011). In that sense, sexual encounters laced in transgression can push us *into* dysregulation, *into* the too-muchness of experience. Because transgression vertiginously pursues sensory experience to the point of overwhelm, transgressive sexuality is in the unique position to disrupt the ego's integrity and to shatter the ego. This can generatively disrupt psychic equilibrium.² This accretion produces a sort of pleasure that is not only enjoyed but also suffered.

As González (2014) has noted, the fervor inherent in all sexuality may affect productive dysregulations. In my opinion, however, in those instances the resulting differentiation is merely epiphenomenal, an unintended side effect. Whereas all sexuality, thus, may stumble upon ego-shattering, the concerted effort toward the unraveling of the self is the exclusive territory of perversion. If “desire wants something *now*” (González, 2014, p. 112, italics mine), pleasure that is suffered is aspirational, it gestures toward futurity. As “a spectacular mode of access to the future” rather than a “betoken[ing of] ... the past” (Dean, 2014, p. 13), it offers up an opening to new ways of being. Transgressive sexuality and its pleasures move us to thinking teleologically (as opposed to our reflexive etiological inclinations), beyond the past and into the future of emergent possibility.

You may recall, for example, that Noelle is considerably anxious about recounting to her analyst the sexual phantasy that pulls her into dedifferentiation. On the manifest level, the anxiety is about how Rundel will respond to the narration and whether the analyst will pathologize the patient—something that Rundel does not in the least do. It seems to me, though, that on a deeper level what is at stake here is the anxiety of transgression. Few things can feel more transgressive to an analyst than an elaborate sexual fantasy about one's analyst. This, I suspect, is what happens with Noelle. But in this case the transgression is even more amplified because Noelle's imagining involves a phantasmagorical genital merger, which to top it all culminates in a spectacular orgasm (one is left to assume—but does not know—whether Noelle in fact masturbated to this fantasy). The dedifferentiated state that Rundel so sensitively tunes into has perhaps become possible in the first place *because* of the transgressiveness of Noelle's fantasy. As the vital ingredient that overruns homeostasis to unmoor the ego, it hurls Noelle into the dedifferentated state.

DREAD

As Rundel (this issue) tells us, the oceanic quality Noelle experiences within the dedifferentiated state draws its force from a “being together with,” being part of a larger whole. That is a different kind of “being together with” than the togetherness of mutuality. Mutuality presumes relationships between objects with clearly defined and distinct ego boundaries, where difference

¹ On this point see also Dimen (1999).

² The interested reader can follow a more fleshed out version of these ideas elsewhere (Saketopoulou, 2014, in press).

functions as an anchor to the self's integrity. Here the "being together in" draws on the erosion of boundaries and on the dissolution of subjectivity's distinctiveness. And yet, it is a belonging nonetheless. Akin to Ghent's (1990) notion of surrender, it involves the gradual falling away of the falsely constructed self.

In her beautiful description of her reverie to Noelle's sexual fantasy Rundel speaks of surrender as an integral part to the move toward dedifferentiation. "In order to participate in the movement towards union," she tells us, "surrender is necessary" (p. 627). I do agree with the centrality of surrender, but perhaps for different reasons than Rundel. Surrender, I believe, is critical not because it helps facilitate the movement to union but because it helps us *overcome our resistances* to this movement. And why are there resistances to this in the first place? Because lurking in the unconscious background is always the primitive terror of losing oneself, of being engulfed into nothingness.

To exclusively locate the ego's rupture in psychic transformation overlooks that not just capacity but also fragility that inhere in such experiences (Tobias, 2005). If we accept that the ego's dissolution opens up to potentially productive transient erosions of the self, we also need to consider instances where these continuous states herald a plunge into malignant disorganization. Dedifferentiation is not just a place of possibility, it can also be a place of primal dread, the dread of being vacuumed out of ourselves and into endless space. That fear is not excessive or anxiety driven, it is judicious. While the movement to union and to uninterrupted continuity can be transformationally productive as Rundel describes³ (aesthetic experience, mystical states and dreams), it can also come with more malignant outcomes, with the force of self-destructiveness or even fleeting lapses into psychosis. Ego shattering may be furnished with extraordinarily productive potential, but it is also perched on the turbulent edge of chaos. It congregates on the line that separates growth and collapse and can catalyze a wide range of different emergent reorganizations.

It is, I believe, at the precipice of this unstable line that Rundel (this issue) finds herself when she writes, "I felt as though I were getting pulled out to sea, a kind of fear of the undertow and where it could take me ... a moment of absolute terror, as though I might be subsumed, completely swallowed up, annihilated" (p. 625). It is only because of her considerable skill that Rundel is able to emerge from her reverie, to self-observe her dread and be able to treat it as meaningful analytic object. It is perhaps precisely *because* she has neither collapsed into her fear nor counterphobically pushed away her terror, that she is able to decide to let herself be pulled into the merger. This is in stark contrast with the more expectable and ordinary response where the analyst hurries to reassemble herself and, thus, steps away from the experience altogether. This courageous and unusual technical choice proves transformational. It permits Rundel more access to her erotic responsiveness to her patient (a moment she handles with aplomb) and, over time, to a surge of creativity for her analysand. Noelle becomes newly able to write and to immerse herself in her work.

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3 Rundel persuasively illustrates what this transformation looks like for Noelle. However, she stops short of theorizing how we might understand the nature of these psychic transformations on a more general level.

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