

**Three Letters, One Crisis:  
Neutrality, Witnessing and Institutional Failure**

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**Abstract**

Three letters circulating in response to the Henri Parens Symposium on Resilience in Response to Violence and War crystallise a conflict that has been developing inside psychoanalytic institutions for several years. The letters, from Psychoanalytic Voices for Palestine, from an international group of respondents, and from IPA President Herbert Blass, together describe an institution struggling to bring its most powerful intellectual resources to bear on a catastrophic political reality at the precise moment when those resources are most strenuously resisted. This paper examines what each letter gets right and what each forecloses, arguing that the exchange as a whole enacts, at the institutional level, the structure of a clinical impasse. Drawing on Bion's concept of minus-K, Klein's account of the depressive position, Butler's work on grievability and precarious life, and the concept of strategic scotomisation developed in the author's previous work,

the paper argues that genuine psychoanalytic witnessing requires the capacity to hold asymmetry, historical memory and catastrophic political reality simultaneously, without allowing procedure to substitute for thought.

**Keywords:** *neutrality, institutional failure, Gaza, minus-K, projective identification, grievability, strategic scotomisation, witnessing, depressive position*

## **Three Letters, One Crisis: Neutrality, Witnessing and Institutional Failure**

Three letters have now circulated about the Henri Parens Symposium on Resilience in Response to Violence and War and its Aftermath.<sup>1</sup> Read together they crystallise a conflict that has been building inside psychoanalytic institutions for several years, not simply about Gaza, though Gaza is at its core, but about whether psychoanalytic institutions can tolerate genuine knowledge of extreme political asymmetry, or whether they will continue to manage that knowledge through procedural neutrality and the reassuring grammar of universal human suffering.

I want to be clear from the outset that this is not an exercise in false equivalence. I do not think the three letters emerge from equivalent positions of power or political urgency and any analysis that begins by distributing criticism evenly, as though even-handedness were itself a form

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<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this paper was presented at the EPF Annual Conference, Oslo, 2025, under the theme of Neutrality.

of wisdom, risks reproducing the very problem it seeks to address. What I want to do instead is look honestly at what each letter actually does rather than what its authors may intend and to ask what the exchange as a whole reveals about the state of psychoanalytic institutional culture at a moment when that culture or any institutional culture is under serious strain.

I should also say that I am not a disinterested observer. I lent my name to the PVP letter and I now believe that was an error, not in its political analysis, much of which I continue to think is partly correct, but in its method. I will try to say something honest about why.

I should add that I am not without sympathy for Israel's situation, and that after October 7th I felt the full force of the horror that was committed. Retaliation is cathartic, as Fanon (1961) argued, particularly when one carries the cumulative traumas held by both sides in this conflict, the Holocaust being the most shattering unprocessed wound in modern memory. I am also reminded of the corralled tribes of the Apache and other Native Americans and the atrocities they committed against their settler oppressors, celebrated in endless cowboy and Indian films that seemingly justified their ongoing oppression, negation and annihilation.

### **The Three Letters**

The first letter, from Psychoanalytic Voices for Palestine (PVP), challenges the Symposium's framing and the inclusion of Israeli training analyst Professor Merav Roth, posing a series of political questions to her as conditions for what the signatories describe as a morally viable encounter. The second, signed by an international group that includes Professor Roth

herself, frames the first as harassment and ideological coercion impermissible within a psychoanalytic community. The third, from IPA President Herbert Blass to the full membership, affirms members' rights to political engagement as citizens, then makes a firm institutional intervention: the public singling out of an individual IPA member violates the basis of collegial respect and cancel culture must not enter psychoanalytic debate.

Each letter is sincere and none is simply wrong. Together they describe an institution struggling to deploy its most powerful intellectual resources precisely where they are most needed and, I would argue, most strenuously resisted, at the intersection of catastrophic political reality and the particular kind of thinking that psychoanalysis, at its best, makes possible.

### **What the PVP Letter Gets Right**

The Symposium's title, Resilience in Response to Violence and War, performs a real occlusion and it is worth pausing on the texture of that occlusion rather than simply naming it. The language of resilience is not politically innocent. Drawn from trauma psychology and therapeutic discourse, it carries an implicit promise: that the wound can be survived, that recovery is the proper horizon of response, that the task is to restore function. Applied symmetrically to a situation defined by radical asymmetry, occupation, siege, colonial dispossession and what the International Court of Justice is currently examining as potential genocide, this language does not merely fail to describe reality; it actively organises the way reality can be perceived.

To name this is not paranoia or political projection. It is a careful reading of how depoliticised psychological discourse can function ideologically, how the very vocabulary that seems to address suffering can simultaneously neutralise the political conditions that produce it. Psychoanalysis, of all disciplines, should be alert to such operations. It is, after all, the discipline that gave us the most rigorous account of how things that cannot be thought return disguised as something else (Freud, 1915; Bion, 1962).

The question the PVP letter raises about structural asymmetry within the Symposium itself, whether the Palestinian participant was constrained into case presentation while other speakers enjoyed the freedom of commentary, deserves a direct answer from the organisers. If the asymmetry is as described, it would mean the architecture of the event reproduced, possibly without conscious awareness, the very asymmetry it ostensibly gathered to address. This would be a clinical level observation worthy of the most careful attention: the enactment, within the therapeutic or scholarly space, of the very dynamic under examination. Analysts are familiar with this kind of structural unconscious and we should be able to recognise it in our institutions (Menzies Lyth, 1960; Hopper, 2003).

More broadly, neutrality between the structurally powerful and the structurally powerless is not neutrality at all. It is a position, one that benefits those with power by naturalising the conditions of their dominance. The refusal to name this is, in Bion's (1962) terms, an instance of minus-K: not simply ignorance, but an active turning away from knowledge that threatens to disturb a settled equilibrium.<sup>2</sup> The minus-K operation characteristically presents itself as balance,

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<sup>2</sup>I use the term 'minus-K' in Bion's sense: not merely the absence of knowledge but an active, motivated turning away from it. See Bion (1962).

as judiciousness, as the avoidance of inflammatory partisanship. It carries the affect of thoughtfulness while what it actually performs is the evacuation of thought.

### **What the IPA Letter Gets Right**

And yet the PVP letter also crossed a line and I think it is important to say so plainly rather than retreating into the qualifications that can make honest assessment feel like betrayal.

The letter does not subject Professor Roth to political argument. It subjects her to political interrogation, demanding that she publicly account for her nation's conduct before she may participate in a professional forum. However legitimate the political questions, the structure is not dialogic. It is pre-emptive. It establishes conditions of participation that function as a tribunal rather than an invitation. And whatever one thinks of Israel's conduct, and I hold views about that which I do not think are morally ambiguous, reducing a colleague to a representative of a state forecloses exactly the kind of encounter that might produce genuine movement. It substitutes the performance of accountability for the possibility of thinking together, which is precisely what psychoanalysis, at its best, refuses to do (Britton, 1989).

The signatories who responded named this as coercion and they were right to do so, even as they declined, for the most part, to name the conditions that generated the urgency that produced it. What is required and what neither letter quite manages is the capacity to hold both truths simultaneously: that those conditions are real and appalling and that the method chosen to address

them was wrong. The failure to hold both is not merely a tactical error. It is the essential problem on each side of this exchange.

The IPA letter's invocation of historical resonance deserves acknowledgement that goes beyond tactical concession. The singling out of Jewish and Israeli colleagues and the shadow of exclusion and persecution these evoke carry genuine weight. They do not dissolve the reality of Gaza, but a psychoanalytic culture unable to carry that historical memory alongside the weight of the present catastrophe has shrunk below the complexity the situation demands. The capacity to hold multiple historical traumas in mind simultaneously, without allowing one to cancel the other, is not a political achievement. It is a clinical one. It is what the depressive position, when it is genuinely available, makes possible (Klein, 1940; Segal, 1957).

### **What the Blass Letter Gets Right and Forecloses**

President Blass is right that the values he invokes, respectful dialogue, protection from denunciation, the maintenance of the conditions under which intellectual community remains possible, are not procedural decoration. They reflect hard-won principles about how communities of thinkers survive across difference. These are not abstract niceties. Institutions that abandon them do not become more politically serious; they become factions. The history of psychoanalytic institutions is in part a history of factional collapse and it is a history worth remembering (Kernberg, 1998; Kirsner, 2000).

But the letter is also a selective vision and that selectivity is analytically significant. Gaza is described as a tragic war in the Middle East, a formulation so emptied of specific content it could apply to almost any armed conflict in history. Terrible events are invoked without naming what substantial evidence, including findings from international legal bodies and the testimonies of humanitarian organisations working in Gaza, suggests about their nature, scale and causes. Cancel culture is identified as a threat entering psychoanalytic debate, while the possibility that something else might also be entering, namely a catastrophe of a scale and character that places real obligations on institutions committed to the pursuit of truth, is not entertained.<sup>3</sup>

The letter moves from acknowledgement of crisis to reassertion of procedural norms without passing through the difficult middle ground where the substance might actually be engaged. This is what I have called elsewhere strategic scotomisation (Morgan, 2019), the substitution of procedure for thought, the management of knowledge rather than its pursuit. It is not the same as lying and it may not even be conscious, but it is a clinical phenomenon and it is one we should be able to name when we observe it in ourselves and in the institutions we inhabit.

The appeal to charitable status as explanation for the IPA's silence on what is happening to a civilian population merits scrutiny. Charitable status is a legal category, not a moral epistemology. Many organisations with comparable legal structures, Médecins Sans Frontières, Amnesty International, Oxfam, have found language adequate to naming what is happening in Gaza. The IPA's apparent unwillingness to do so is not a legal constraint. It is a choice and like all significant choices it has a meaning that deserves to be read (Butler, 2009).

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<sup>3</sup>The IPA's invocation of charitable status as a reason for institutional silence deserves separate scrutiny. Many organisations with comparable legal structures have found language adequate to naming what is happening in Gaza.

### **A Transatlantic Parallel**

Kerry Sulkowicz, former President of the American Psychoanalytic Association, occupies an instructive position in relation to this crisis. In 2018, he argued forcefully that psychoanalysts had grown too neutral about what the profession stands for, that institutional abstinence had curdled into professional timidity, a refusal to witness and name. The analyst's traditional reticence, he suggested, had migrated from the consulting room into the public sphere in ways that constituted not wisdom but abdication.<sup>4</sup>

Yet when APsaA moved in a strongly activist direction, embracing institutional positions on political matters with a confidence that some found clarifying and many, including me, found troubling, Sulkowicz resigned in 2023. His resignation letter warned that institutionalised moral performance had replaced genuine complexity with a simplified moral landscape that foreclosed exactly the thinking it claimed to address. The institution had, in his reading, traded the difficulty of thought for the comfort of position.

His trajectory traces the precise arc of the problem we are facing. From the recognition that professional neutrality can be a form of complicit silence, to the recognition that institutionalised moral performance can itself be a flight from thinking, these are not contradictory insights. They are the same insight encountered at different moments of the same institutional pathology. The Blass letter's appeal to procedural norms echoes the concern that drove Sulkowicz to resign, while

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<sup>4</sup>Sulkowicz resigned from the APsaA board in 2023, citing what he described as the replacement of genuine intellectual complexity with a simplified moral landscape.

the PVP letter's demand for accountability echoes precisely the dynamic that, in its APsaA form, drove him to that point in the first place.

What Sulkowicz's trajectory confirms is that the problem cannot be resolved by choosing between institutional witness and institutional neutrality. Taken to their conclusions, both become defences against thinking. Institutional witness becomes the performance of political solidarity that substitutes conviction for analysis, while institutional neutrality becomes the performance of judiciousness that substitutes procedure for engagement. They are mirror images of each other and they share the same function: to relieve the institution of the burden of genuine encounter with what is actually happening.

### **On the Clinical Dimension**

I want to say something about what this exchange looks like from a clinical perspective, because I think it is where some of the most important observations can be made.

What strikes me most forcefully when I read the three letters together is how accurately they reproduce the structure of an analytic impasse. Each party is convinced that the other is failing to see what is obvious. Each party believes its own position to be grounded in reality while the other's is driven by something more distorting, ideology, fear, denial, coercion. Each party is partly right about the other and each party's partial rightness is being used to foreclose the more uncomfortable possibility: that they might also be partly wrong, in ways they cannot yet see, because seeing it would require tolerating something intolerable.

This is the structure of projective identification operating at the institutional level (Klein, 1946; Bion, 1959). What cannot be held internally gets evacuated into the other party, who is then experienced as the sole repository of whatever is being disowned. The PVP letter disowns its own capacity for coercion by locating all coercive power in Israel and its institutional sympathisers. The Blass letter disowns the IPA's own history of strategic silence by locating all the threats to institutional health in the activists. Professor Roth's defenders disown the legitimate political questions her participation raises by locating all bad faith in those who raised them badly.

None of this means the political analysis is equivalent, because it is not. The situation in Gaza is not symmetrical and I do not wish to construct a false parity between the weight of what PVP is attempting to address and the weight of institutional self-protection that the other letters are, in part, performing. But projective identification does not respect political asymmetry. It operates according to its own logic and that logic is available to people in any political position. Recognising it is not an alternative to political engagement but a precondition for political engagement that does not simply reproduce the dynamics it set out to address (Morgan, 2020).

### **On Professor Roth**

The PVP letter was wrong to subject Professor Roth to a public litmus test and I want to say this without qualification. Whatever its political intent, the effect was to reduce a colleague to a representative of a state, to make her presence at a professional event conditional on her willingness to perform political accountability in public. This forecloses genuine encounter before

it can even begin. It does not create the conditions for dialogue; it creates the conditions for compliance or refusal and either outcome leaves the thinking entirely undone.

The IPA and President Blass are right to defend her from coercion, but both risk treating that defence as a substitute for engaging with the substantive questions the situation raises about what it means to practise and theorise in conditions of collective violence, questions that are not harassment but are precisely what any psychoanalytic community genuinely committed to thinking should be able to hold (Davids, 2011; Rustin, 2001).

Professor Roth's published work shows substantial and serious engagement with exactly these difficulties. She is not, on the evidence of her writing, someone who has avoided the complexity of her political situation. That makes the PVP letter's reductive framing all the more an embarrassing symptom of what happens when legitimately felt political urgency curdles into demand, when the need to act overwhelms the capacity to think and when the desire to hold another person accountable becomes indistinguishable from the desire to be relieved of the burden of genuine encounter with them.

### **Toward Something Harder Than Dialogue**

It would be easy to end here with a call for dialogue. I am wary of doing so, not because dialogue is the wrong word, but because in its usual institutional register it means something rather comfortable, a panel discussion, a facilitated exchange, a process managed by the apparatus of professional civility that brought us to this impasse in the first place.

What is actually required is something harder and more costly: a genuine encounter not managed by time-limited responses and the expectation of consensual resolution, but one in which participants are required to stay with the difficulty long enough for something to shift. This means staying with the possibility of being wrong. It means tolerating the experience of being changed rather than merely confirmed. It means, in Bion's (1970) terms, maintaining negative capability, the capacity to remain in uncertainty and doubt without an irritable reaching after resolution.

Such an encounter would need to be structured with full awareness of power differentials. It cannot begin from false equivalence and it cannot use the IPA's procedural neutrality as its starting point, precisely because that neutrality is itself part of what needs to be examined. This is not a call for one party to concede to another. It is a call for all parties, including those of us who signed the PVP letter, including the IPA leadership and including those who responded with understandable hurt to what they experienced as coercion, to undergo something rather than simply perform something.

Psychoanalytic institutions are, in principle, better equipped than most to create such conditions. We know something, professionally and theoretically, about the difference between containment and repression, between genuine thinking and the evacuation of thought, between an encounter that transforms and one that merely manages (Bion, 1962; Winnicott, 1971). The space between professional abstinence and institutionalised moral performance is where genuine psychoanalytic witnessing lives. It is exactly the space these three letters, in their different ways and with their different failures, have been unable to occupy.

The asking is all there, underneath the accusation and the appeal to procedure. None of the letters has yet found a way to ask what the others might actually hear. But it is there, in the very urgency of what is being defended and demanded, if we can bear to listen carefully enough to what is not quite being said. As George Steiner wrote:

**Where speech fails, silence begins. But the silence that follows great destruction is not empty. It is charged with what cannot yet be spoken.**

That charge is what these three letters are, collectively, failing to bear. The silence after great destruction is not a problem to be resolved through better procedure or more collegial language. It is a condition to be inhabited, with full awareness of what it contains. What psychoanalysis offers, at its best, is not a method for managing such silences but a discipline for remaining present to them long enough for something genuinely new to become possible. That is a more demanding task than any of the letters has yet attempted. It remains, nevertheless, the only one worth attempting.

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