



Michael Eigen

1999

Toxic Nourishment

London: Karnac



CONTEXT

www.patricktomlinson.com



I came across this book by the psychoanalyst Michael Eigen, not long after it was published in 1999. It was impactful on me and is one of those books that has stayed with me.



The way that Michael Eigen captures toxic nourishment is illuminating. The concept is real and practical not just in therapy, but across life and work.



For example, in therapeutic work with traumatized children,

- The attachment figure who simultaneously damages and sustains.
- The survival strategies that protect but also harm.
- The staff members, whose strengths and liabilities are inseparable.
- The child whose resilience and self-protective aggression are entwined



The same types of paradox can be found in any kind of human relationship. For example, Control that provides safety also restricts and inhibits.

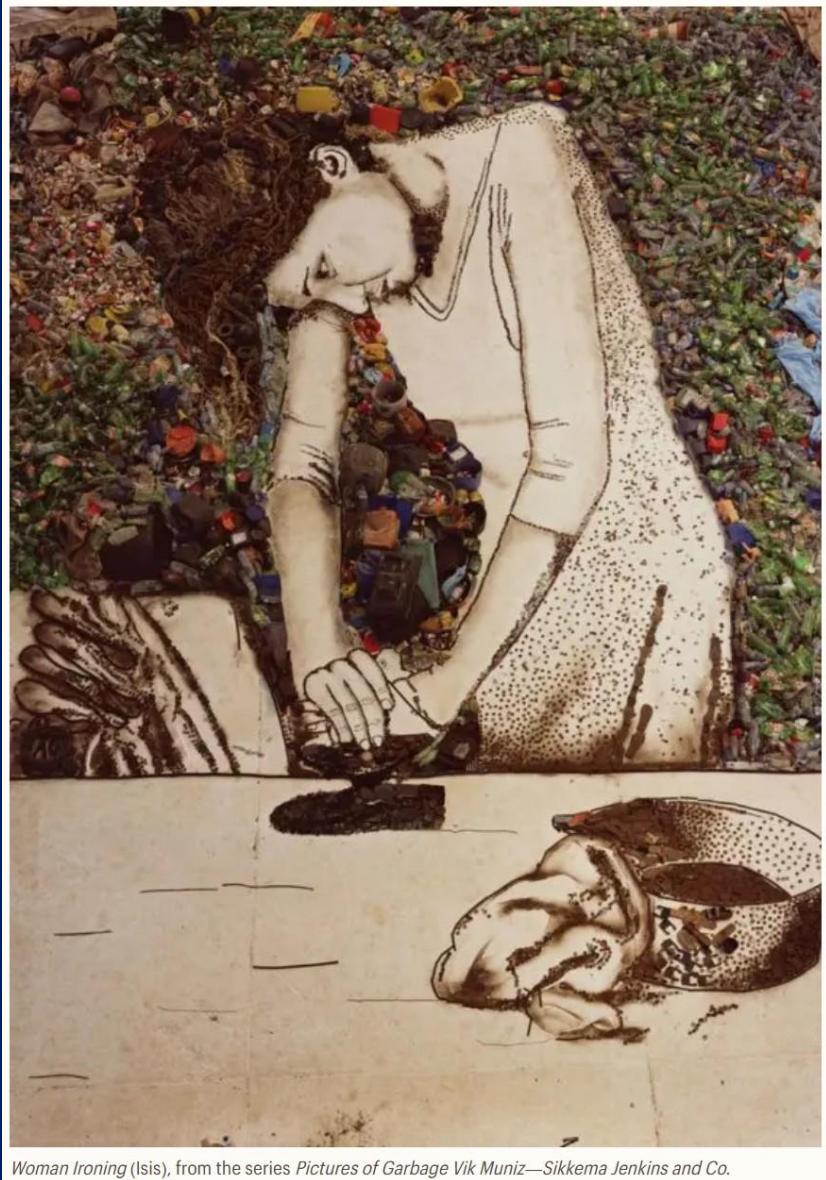
- Love that suffocates.
- Care that creates dependency.
- Pain that leads to growth or harm.
- Risk that leads to opportunity and danger.
- Trigger warnings that create anxiety.

WASTE LAND

In 2010, I saw the documentary movie Waste Land. This is a great representation of Toxic Nourishment in both literal and symbolic senses.



The Gypsy Magna, from the series *Pictures of Garbage* Vik Muniz—Sikkema Jenkins and Co.



Woman Ironing (Isis), from the series *Pictures of Garbage* Vik Muniz—Sikkema Jenkins and Co.

WASTE LAND

The movie follows the American Brazilian artist, Vik Muniz, as he travels to the world's largest landfill, just outside Rio de Janeiro, to collaborate with a lively group of "*catadores*" (workers who salvage recyclable materials from the garbage).



WASTE LAND

The collaboration produces great art incorporating some of the picked refuge. The success of the project, the documentary, and the art produced was transformative. It is a moving testimony to human potential in the least expected circumstances.

OVERVIEW



Eigen's Toxic Nourishment is a sophisticated psychoanalytic concept that moves far beyond typical therapeutic framing. Rather than binary thinking (good vs. bad, healthy vs. unhealthy).



It moves us beyond the reductionist way of thinking and towards being able to hold ambivalence.



This is precisely the kind of ambivalence-holding that clinical wisdom demands but rarely articulates clearly.

**WOUNDED
HEALER**



**Eigen articulates the paradox
that: We are simultaneously
nourished and contaminated by
the same experiences.**



**Destructive activities can
heighten our sense of aliveness.
What poisons us can nourish
us—and vice versa.**



**Eigen's work grounds itself in
serious psychoanalytic tradition
(Freud, Melanie Klein, Bion,
Winnicott).**



**His invocation of Bion's
Transformations observation about
well-being arising from the same
characteristics that create trouble
carries real weight.**



**This has something in common
with the concept of the wounded
healer. Where one's suffering
becomes a gift.**

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

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**In therapeutic work with
traumatized children, we encounter
this constantly:**

- The attachment figure who
simultaneously damages and
sustains.**
- The survival strategies that
protect but also harm.**



- **The staff members, whose strengths and liabilities are inseparable.**
- **The child whose resilience and self-protective aggression are entwined**



**This isn't abstract theory—it's
the lived reality of the work.
The same types of paradox can
be found in any kind of human
relationship.**



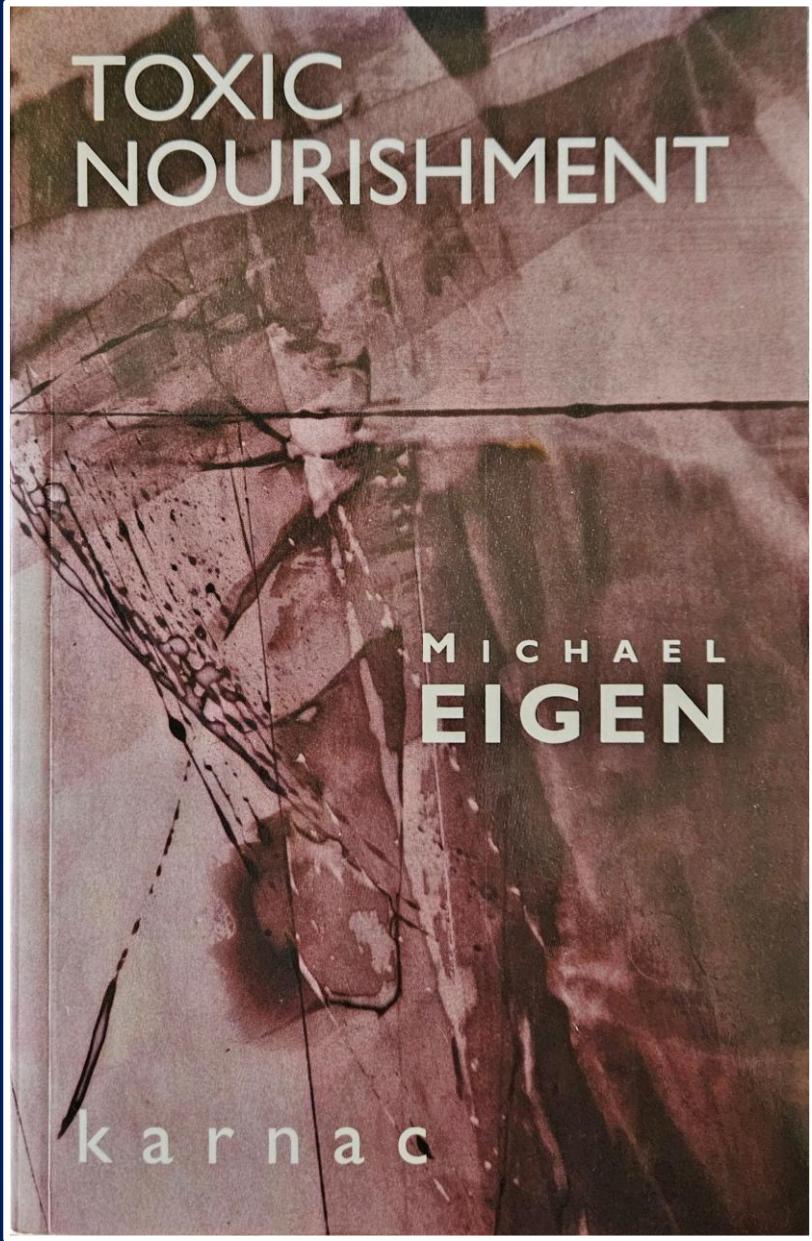
For example,

- **Control that provides safety also restricts and inhibits.**
- **Love that suffocates.**
- **Care that creates dependency.**

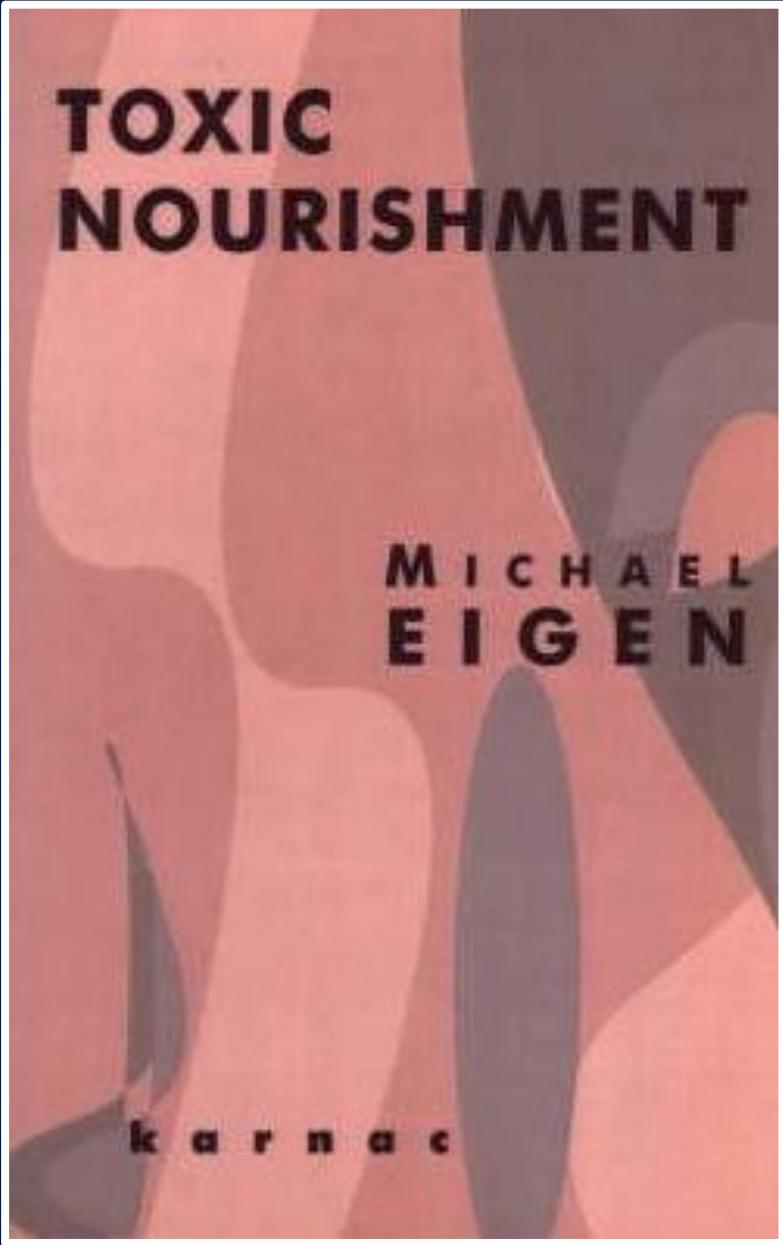


- **Pain that leads to growth or harm.**
- **Risk that leads to opportunity and danger.**
- **Trigger warnings that create anxiety.**

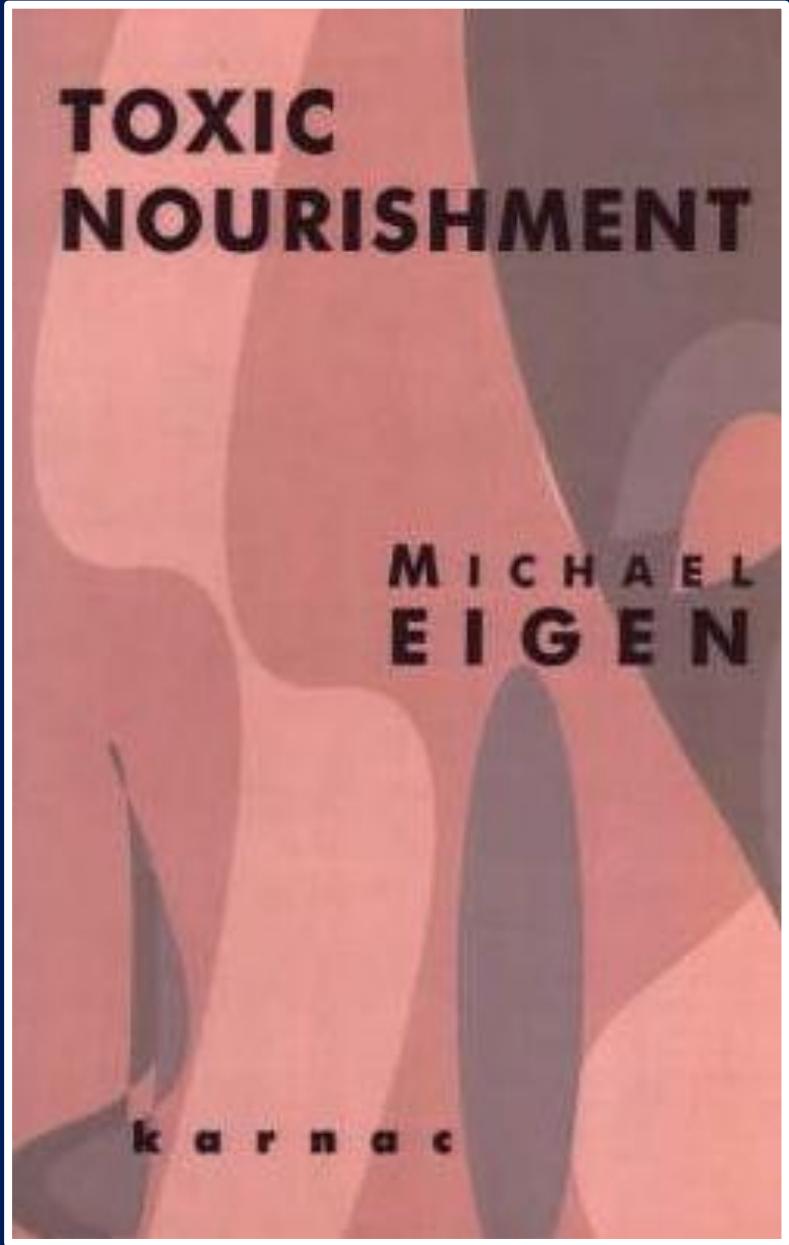
INTRODUCTION



“We are, simultaneously, contaminated and uplifted by nourishing and toxic aspects in the stream of events.” (p. xiii)

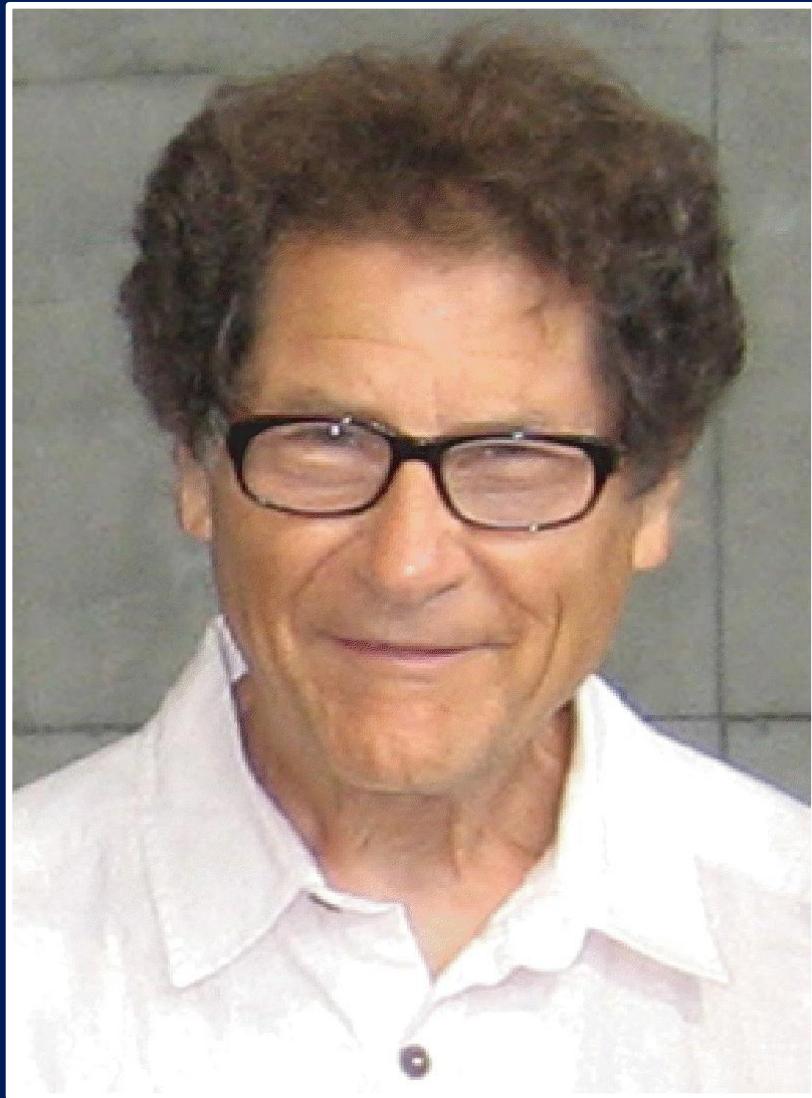


**“Freud and Melanie Klein
intuited the amazing
conjunction of toxins and
nourishment in every
human act.” (p. ix)**

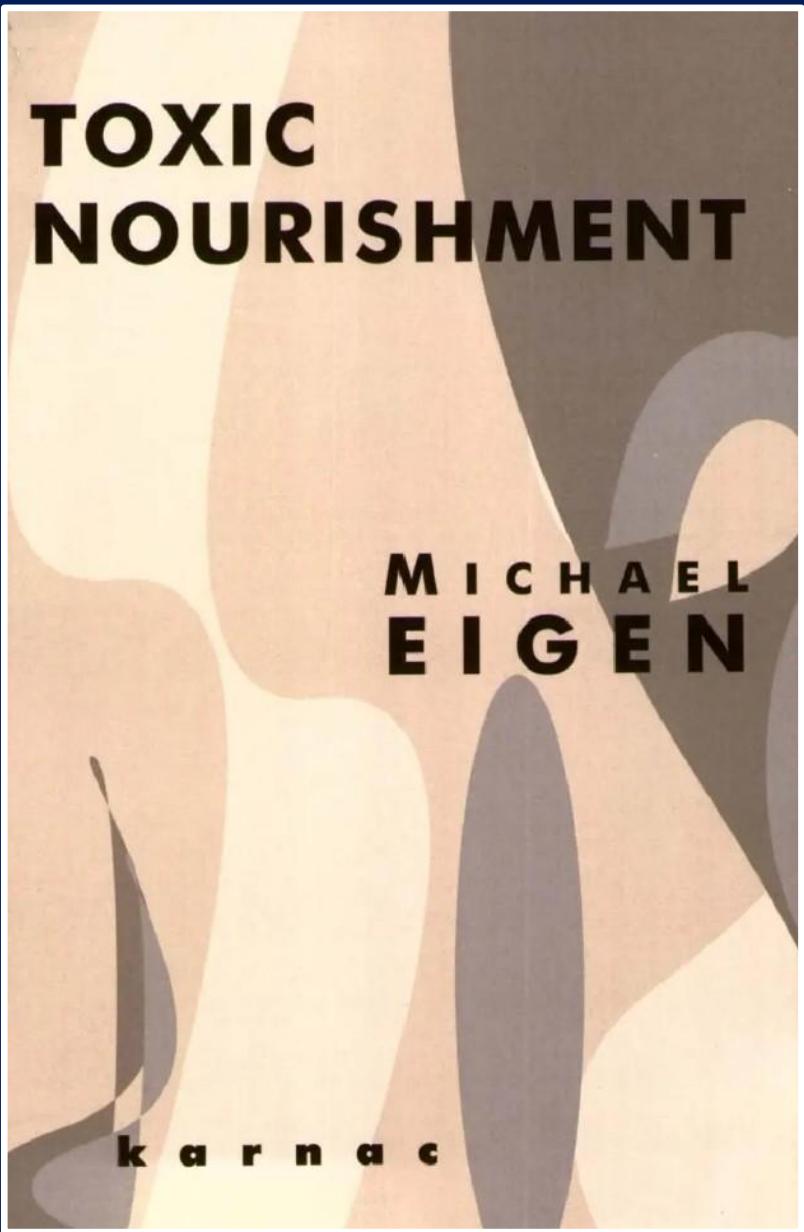


“Bion and Winnicott felt keenly how our very sense of aliveness has destructive properties and reverse, the ghastly fact that destructive activities heighten our sense of aliveness.” (p. ix)

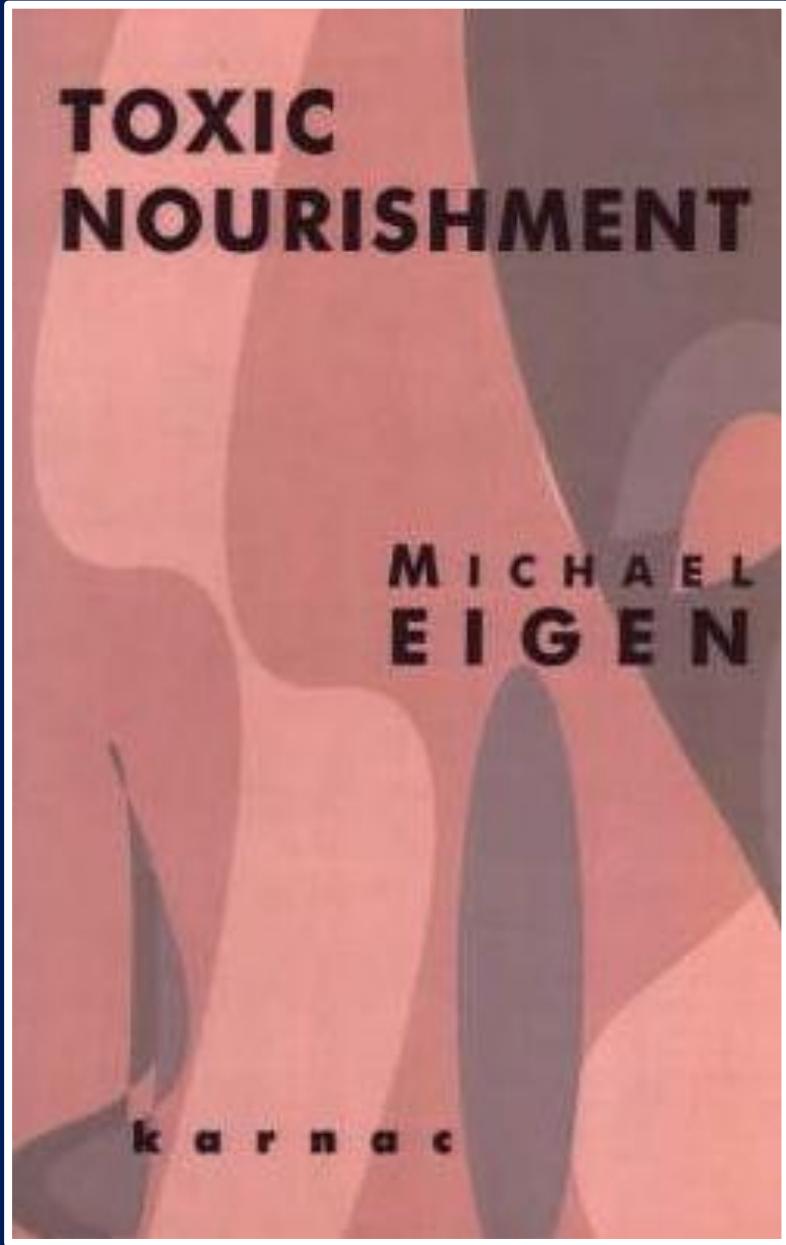
**ILLUMINATION &
GROWTH
FROM PAIN & MISERY**



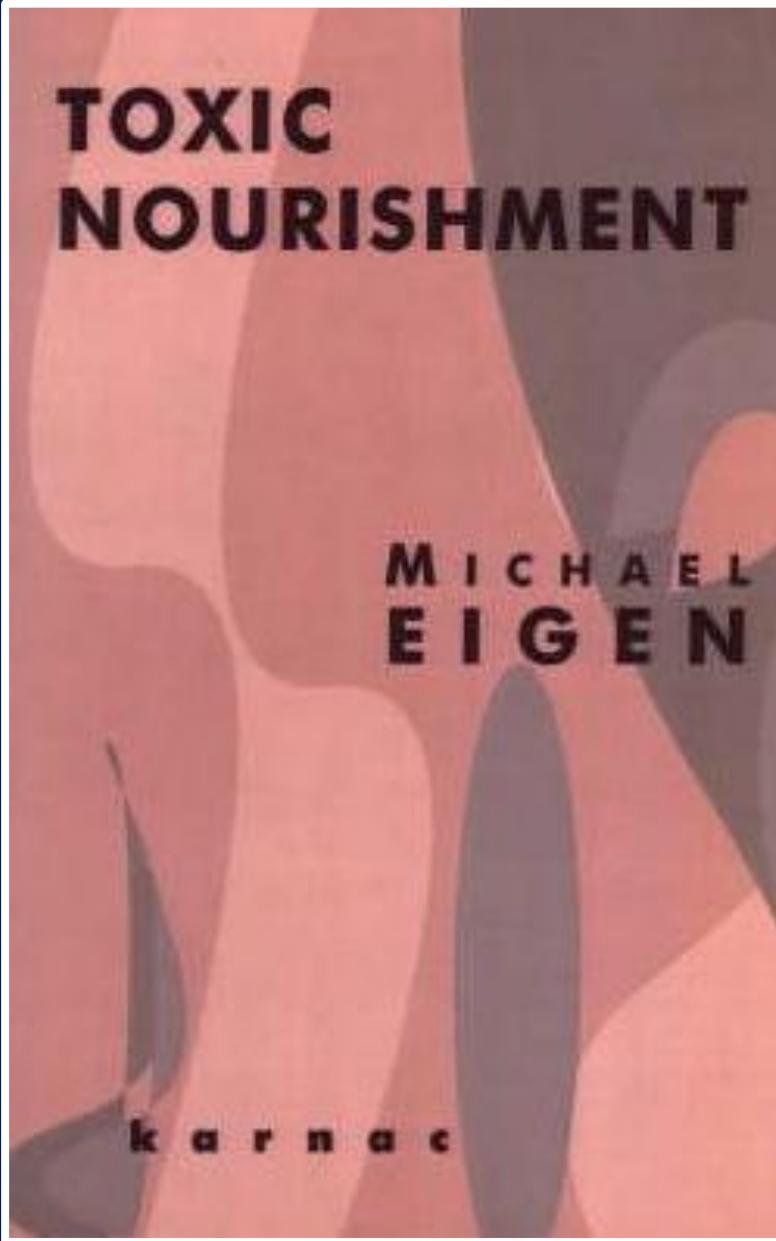
“We find ourselves in positions where we nourish ourselves by the very things that poison us and poison ourselves by what nourishes.” (p. ix)



**“I find incessant confirmation
of transformations that go on
in the depths of misery, the
gold of illumination from the
bitter cup.” (pp. ix-x)**



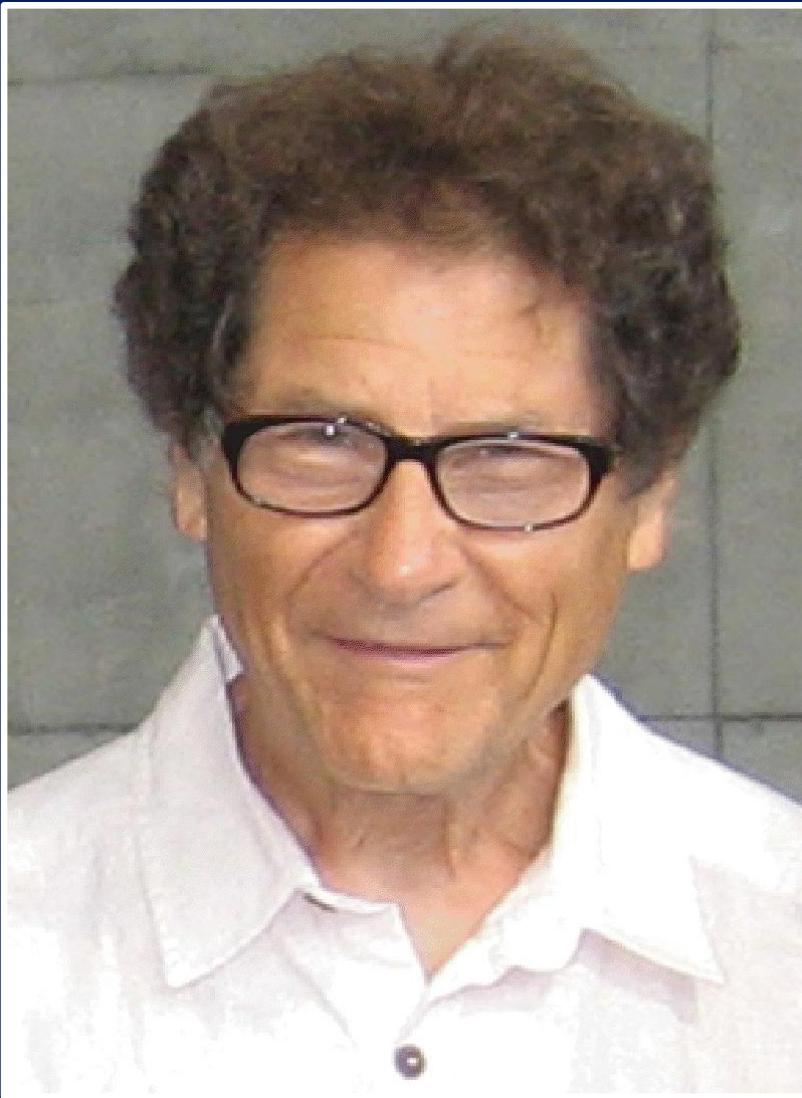
“Psychotherapy plays a vital role in ensuring that those who struggle in the night do not do so in vain.” (p. x)



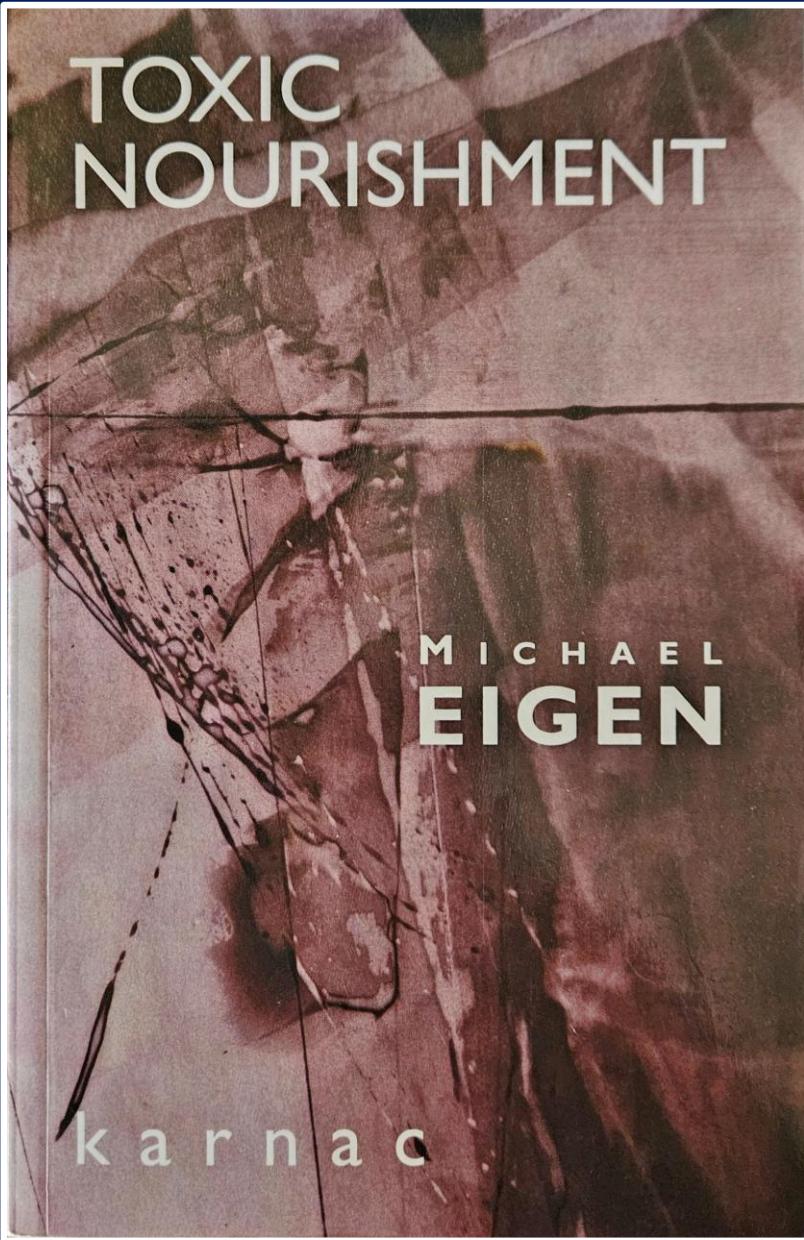
“The ratio of toxins to nourishment may be lopsided, the balance in favour of toxins. Nevertheless, even in adverse circumstances, something positive often comes through, if only as a promise or wish.”

(p. xix)

THE PARADOX OF TOXIC NOURISHMENT

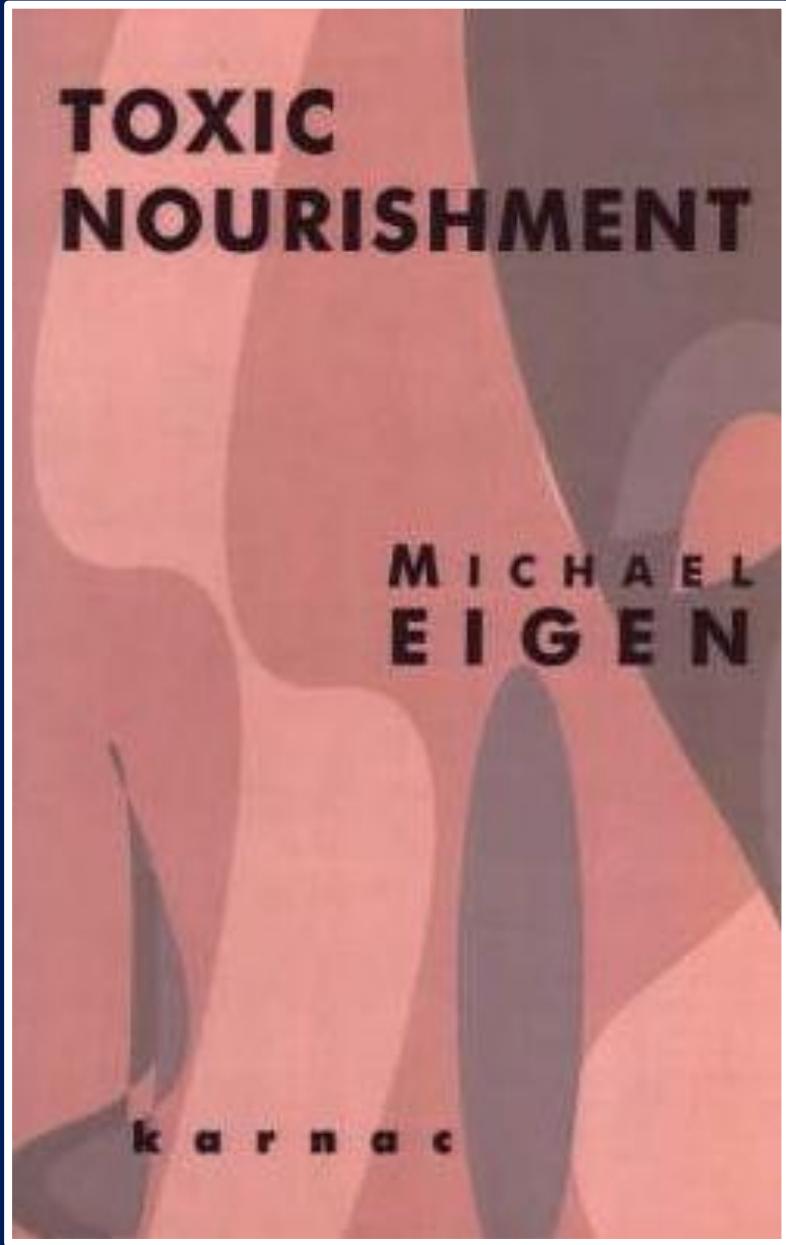


**“One is in the predicament of
being nourished by what
deforms one and deformed
by what nourishes one.”**
(p. xx)



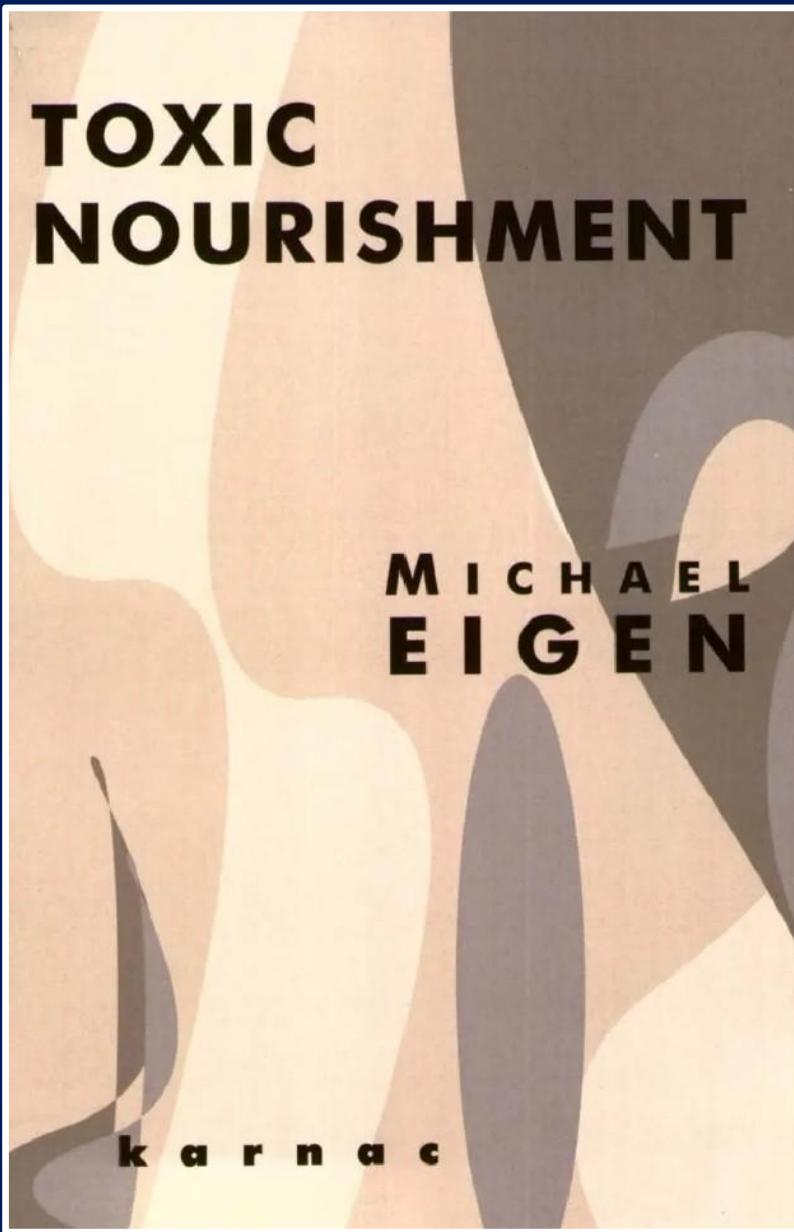
W.R. Bion (1965, p.144) observed that, “there are cases in which a person’s sense of “well-being and vitality spring from the same characteristics which gives trouble.” (p. xx)

Bion, W.R. (1965) *Transformations*, London: Heinemann



“Emotional nourishment and poisons can be so interwoven that it is difficult, if not impossible, to tell the difference between them.”

(p. xiii)

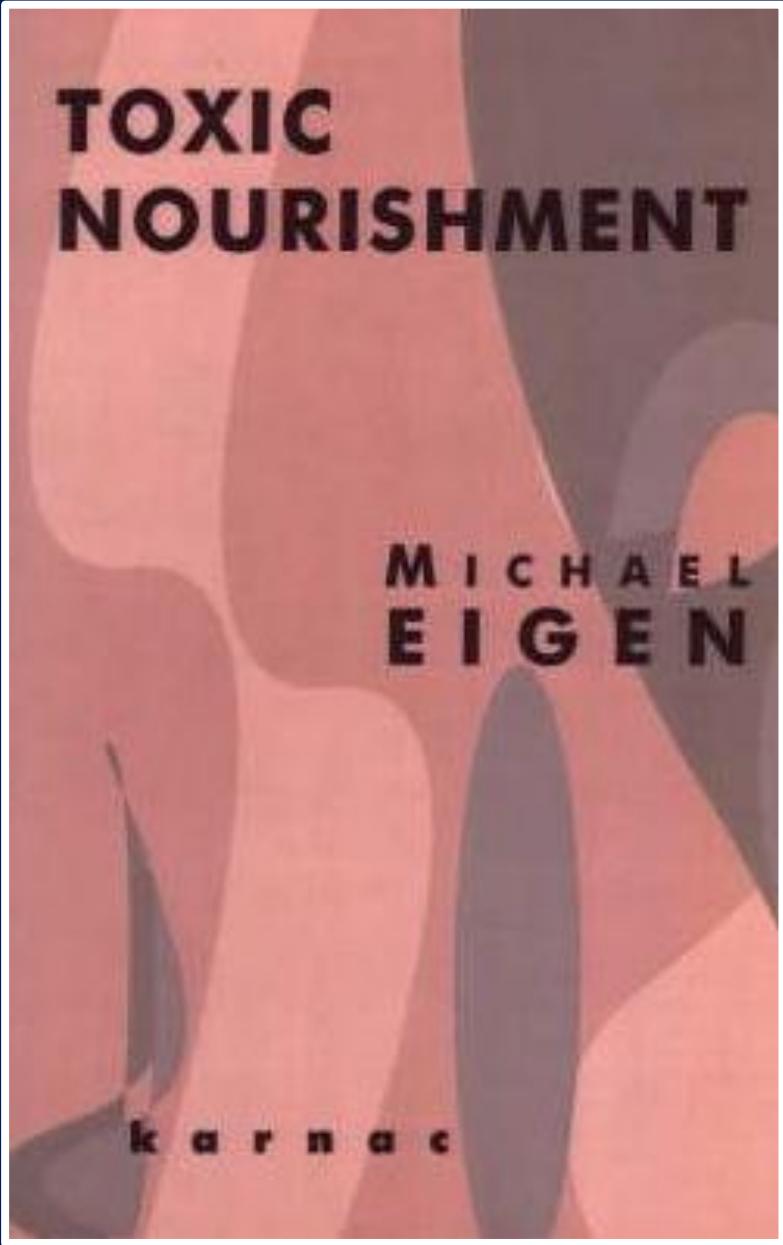


“The problem can be so extreme that nourishment one needs to support life is toxic or, worse, one learns to extract what nourishment one can from poisons at hand.”

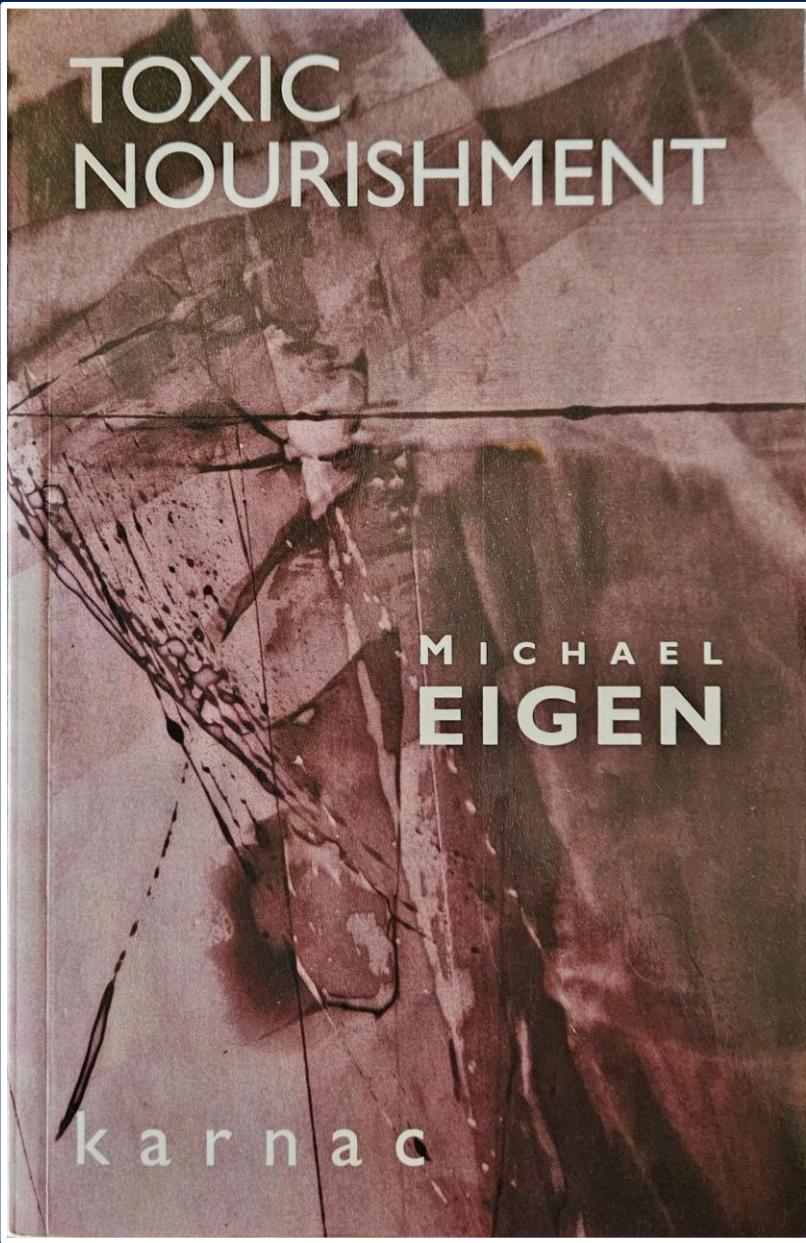
(p. xiii)



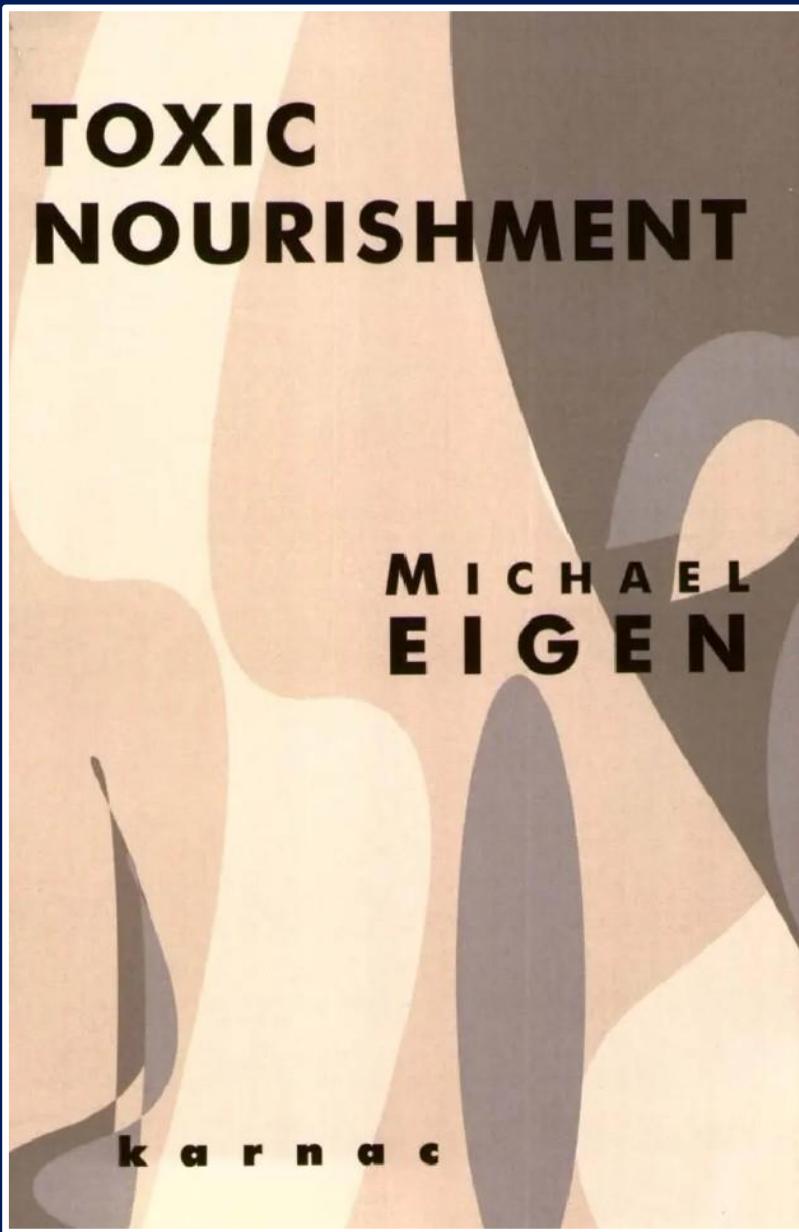
**“There are individuals
who feel poisoned by
love as well as by hate.”
(p. xiv)**



**“Without bitter wounds,
how empathic can a
therapist be, how deep
can a therapist reach?
(p. xx)**

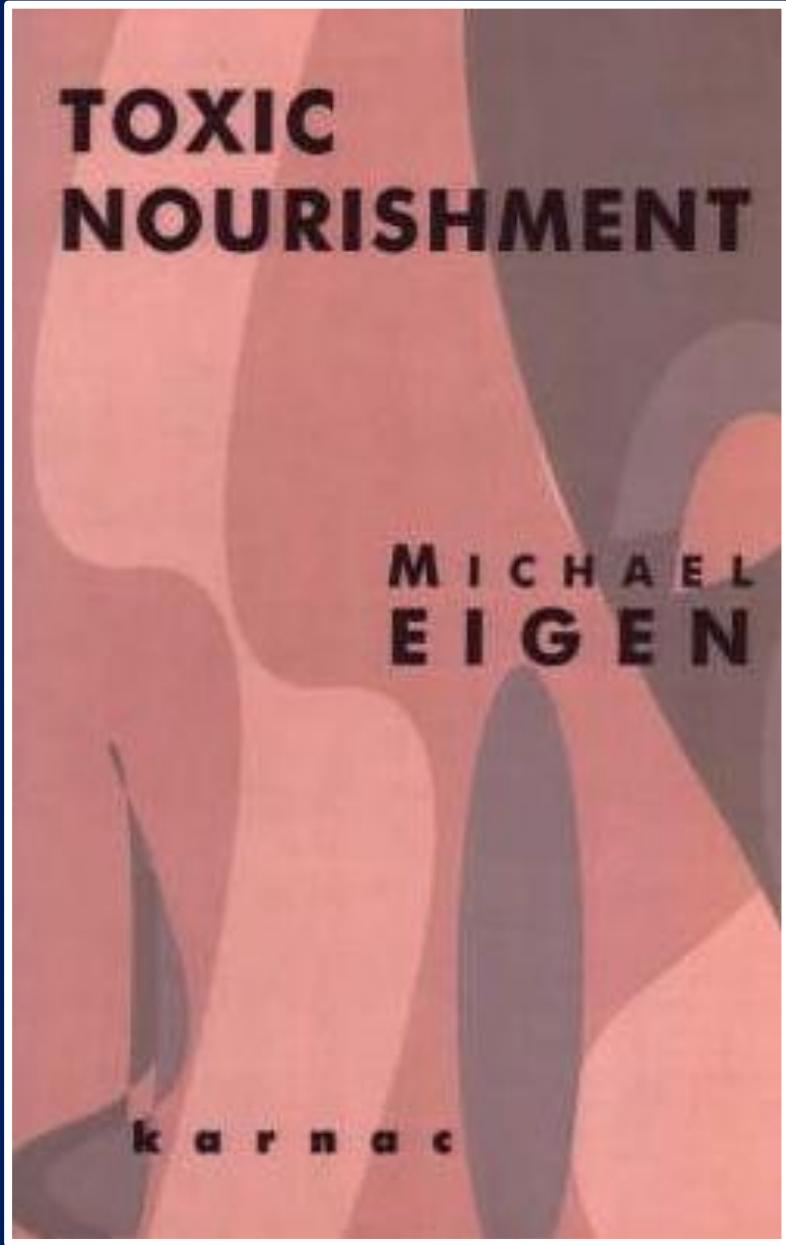


“We can be fooled. We can be wrong about anything, especially about things that seem so right. We learn, too, that we can cling to things that seem so wrong. This is especially so when desire is associated with toxic nourishment.” (p.219)

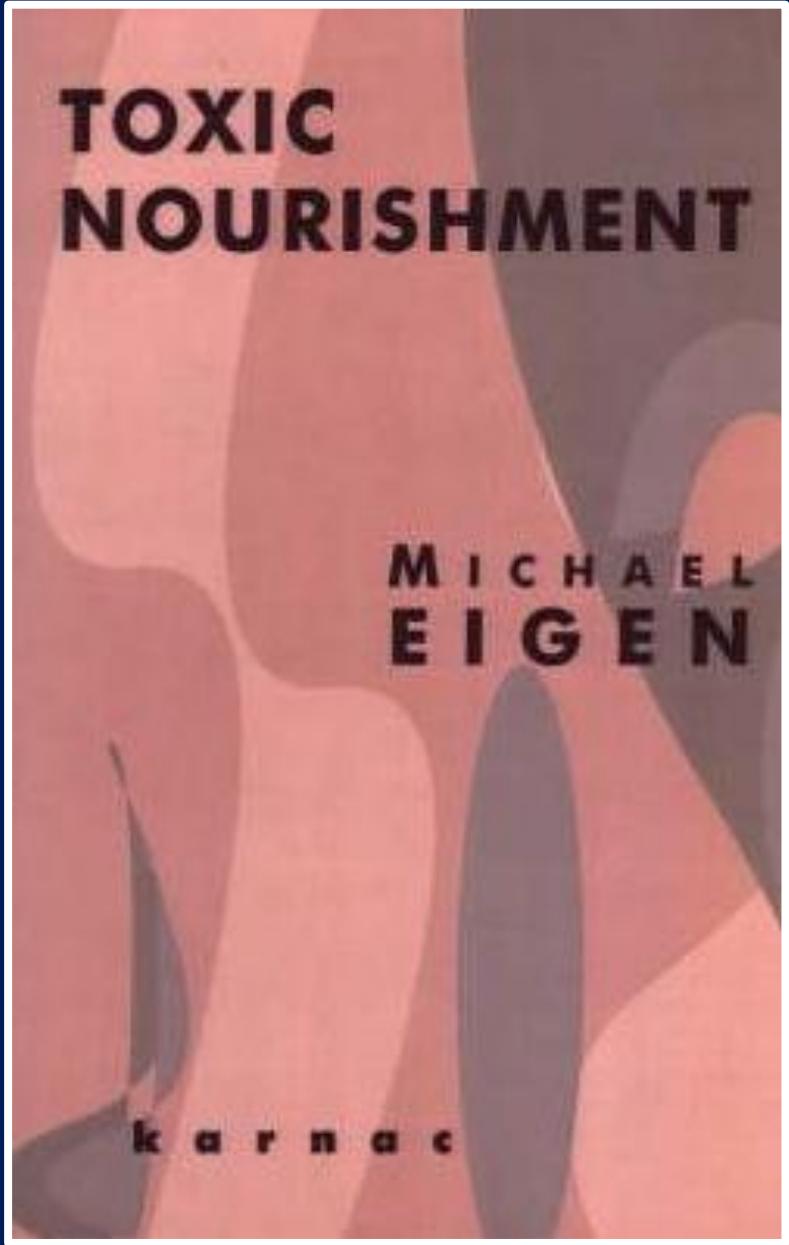


**“If one talks oneself out,
one might avoid doing
bad things. But one might
miss out on life as well.”**
(p.220)

NOURISHMENT TOXICITY & TRAUMA



**“Fusions of nourishment and
trauma mark all lives.
Sometimes the balance tips
very much to one side or the
other side ...**



... Trauma may be so severe that nourishment becomes less and less possible." (p.225)