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AND FORMLESS INFINITE

BEYOND FREUD

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WILFRED R. BION: AN ODYSSEY NINTO THE DEEP AND FORMLESS INFINITE

JAMES S. GROTSSTEIN, M.D.

Bion wrote less extensively than many of the other subjects of this volume or than many other significant contributors to psychoanalysis. Yet, what he did write seems to have stirred profound respect, much antipathy, considerable confusion, and even astonishment in his audiences. Most who read him do not understand him. Many idealize him because of the experience his writing gave them, to say nothing of his presence when he was alive—"an odyssey through the deep and formless infinite void," as I once heard it described. Having had an analysis with Bion, I can well empathize with this extensive spectrum of feelings he inspired. Bion's influence and reputation owe much to his capacity for indirectly evoking experiences in his audience. As a particular instance of this "telescoped effect," some time after I finished my analysis with Bion I heard him deliver a lecture at the Los Angeles Psychoanalytic Institute. I recall having been unimpressed, somewhat bored, and a little restless. When I went home that evening, I found that my mind was in a whirl, and I could not sleep. I then felt constrained to complete the outlines of three papers before I could lie down to rest.

Who was Wilfred Bion? Why and how did he evoke such disparate emotions in people? He was first of all an Englishman (actually Anglo-Indian) who seems to

have been able to harmonize his Indian childhood with a magnificent education at an English public school and at Oxford, to mix them further with his capacity for wonderment and surprise, and to bring them all to psychoanalysis in a unique way. Specifically, he was able to bring to psychoanalytic theory and practice the perspectives of Plato's theory of forms and Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, and he expanded the Freudian theory of the unconscious from the narrower limitations of its biological foundations into a broader scope consonant with the long tradition of Western—and even Eastern—epistemology.

Among the concepts that formed his work, Bion appreciated the concept of inherent preconception from Plato's theory of forms and formulated that they, under the impact of sensory-emotional experience, link up with its external counterpart, its *realization*, to become a *conception* the continuing affirmation and abstraction of this conception allow it to become a concept—like the concept of a breast, for instance. Bion also called these inherent preconceptions “thoughts without a thinker,” in the sense that they are thoughts that are older than the human race that now thinks them. The mind had to be created, according to Bion, in order to think these primordial “thoughts.” He invokes Kant in this way: Intuition without concept is blind; concept without intuition is empty. The infant has the intuition of his or her experience but is as yet empty of the power to conceive of these experiences by a notational system—to make sense of them. The task of analysis, Bion believed, is to allow preconceptual experiences to be conceived so as to *realize* one's intuition. Bion (1980) states: “A ‘marriage’ is

taking place between you and you; a marriage between your thoughts and your feelings. The intuition which is blind and the concept which is empty can get together in a way which makes a complete mature thought" (p. 27).

Bion felt that, although language is one of the supreme accomplishments of human beings and is essential for communication, it is also a vehicle for deception and inaccuracies. Language is static and belongs to the sensual aspects of our development. It is therefore personal and ultimately misleading or even suspect. Bion's conception of the "suspension of memory and desire" reflects this belief on his part that language in general and *understanding* in particular are vehicles of desire and therefore obtrude the ultimate experience of pure Truth. Language, and even knowledge (which he mathematically symbolized as K), are only transient approximations to Truth (0), and we should not confuse one with the other. This was one of the reasons, I believe, that Bion used mathematical analogies and even spent a considerable amount of time trying to develop a mathematical grid on polar-coordinated space with the aim of giving exact definition to psychoanalytic elements. Mathematics are free of the sensuousness of memory and desire, he believed, and therefore are more suitable in their unsaturation to describe phenomena from the internal world that are not describable by a language, such as verbal language, that belongs to the sensory matrix.

Although this point may seem obscure to many, its merit lies in Bion's

attempt to help us get beyond (behind, below) the language barrier so as to approximate pure experience before language. In this regard, is closely in tune with the current work of Lacan and Derrida, the French deconstructionists. Lacan in particular has called attention to the alteration of subjectivity, as “I” descends into the “symbolic order of language.” Bion and Lacan seem to agree that words, like idols, become static reifications of experience and progressively alienate oneself from it. Words seem to grasp and enclose the experience so as to squeeze the life out of it and rob it of meaning. In addition to mathematics, Bion also cited music, poetry, and art as generally superior ways of presenting the domain of intuition.

Bion is perhaps best known to the mental health public for his *Experiences in Groups* (1961), in which he revealed some of the most far-reaching innovations in the psychoanalysis of group process since Freud. Like Freud before him, Bion viewed the group as a single entity, with a psychology that is superordinate to the individuals who comprise it. By applying the principles of individual psychoanalysis, however, he localized unique transferences to the group leader and special forms of resistance unique to the group situation.

Bion’s vast experience with the psychoanalysis of psychotic patients allowed him to make fascinating forays into psychotic thinking, and his metapsychological concepts owe much to these experiences. One key concept he obtained from analyzing psychotics is the notion of the *container and the contained*, which

designated a mother who was able to contain her infant's projective identifications. Her ability to do so (her reverie) allows the infant to internalize her as a mother who can, through her reverie, contain the infant's anguish and can thus form the basis of a "thinking couple." Bion's theory of thinking distinguishes between thoughts and the mind that had to be created to think them. Thinking in the normal individual comprises projective identifications of "thoughts without a thinker" and sensory-emotional impressions onto an internalized object surface, which endures the impact of these "thoughts" and then "thinks" them.

The concept of the container and the contained is often associated with the more passive aspect of its action—that is, the passive absorption of the infant's or patient's mental pain. Bion meant far more than that. The mother (or the analyst) must not only absorb the infant's (or patient's) pain without being *transformed* by it—that is, yielding to the infant's projections, identifying with them, and responding reactively in turn—but must also delay them, sort them out as a prism does with a beam of intense light, refracting them into a color spectrum of hierarchic meanings, and then, finally, act upon them by relating to the infant's specific needs. By doing this, mother turns the infant's screams into meaning, and, rather than thoughtlessly resorting to reflex action because of her hurt, uses the containment experience for purposes of thoughtful *translation*. Not only does this become internalized by the infant as a model for thinking, but it also becomes a model for permitting the experiencing of the experience so as to "learn from experience," which Bion believed to be the sine qua non of normal development.

Before elaborating some of the concepts that are of importance in a survey of Bion's work, I will digress for a moment to give a few facts of Bion's life. I must caution the reader, however, that these facts are an "exercise in K," and Bion would not for a moment want them to be confused with the truth (O). He was born in Muttra, in the remote United Provinces of British India, on September 8, 1897. His father belonged to the British Civil Service and was an engineer. His mother was from a lower social caste than his father. Bion was raised by two native women who read him stories from the Mahabharata¹, which made an everlasting impression on him. As was the custom with children whose parents were employed by the British Civil Service, he was sent back to England at age 8 to study at a public school, Bishops Stortford, which he attended from 1906 to 1915. Shortly after World War I broke out, he gained a commission in the Royal Tank Regiment, took part in the Battle of Cambrai (the first major engagement in which tanks were deployed against the Germans), and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order by King George V. He fought in every subsequent major battle on the Western Front, poignant pictures of which can be read in his posthumously published autobiography, *The Long Week-End: 1897-1919* (1982).

Bion was demobilized late in 1918 and then went to Queens College, Oxford, in January of 1919, where he studied modern history. It was there that he met H. J. Paton, a tutor of philosophy who introduced him to the works of Kant and other philosophers. Following graduation, he returned to Bishops Stortford College to teach history and French. He also had an active amateur career as a rugby football

player and coach for the swimming team.

In 1923 or 1924 he left to study medicine at University College Hospital in London and qualified in 1929. While there, he came under the influence of Wilfred Trotter, the distinguished surgeon, who was interested in the psychology of groups. This association was to be of great importance in Bion's future years when he made his important contributions to the theory of groups. After a short stint as a medical officer in the Royal Air Force, he went to London in 1932 and began to practice psychiatry. He entered analysis with John Rickman and began his training as a candidate in the British Institute for Psycho-Analysis, but was interrupted by the outbreak of World War II in 1939. While Officer-in-Charge of the Military Training Wing at Northfield Military Hospital, Bion seems to have arrived at the first inklings of his conception of group psychology.

After the war Bion returned to the Tavistock Clinic and was appointed chairman of the Executive Committee. After finishing his analysis with John Rickman, he was introduced by the latter to Melanie Klein, with whom he began a second analysis.

He married in 1940, but the marriage ended with his wife's tragic death after the birth of their only child, Parthenope, in 1945. Some years later he married Francesca, whom he met at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations and with whom he had two additional children, Julian, now a practicing physician, and

Nichola, a linguist who is currently working in publishing. Bion developed an excellent reputation as an analyst in London and became president of the British Society for Psycho-Analysis. He disliked this prominence, however, and often quipped “I was so loaded down with honors that I almost sank without a trace!”

In 1966 he made a lecture tour of Los Angeles and returned the following year to remain for 12 years. During that time he exercised a profound and extensive impact on the psychoanalytic community of that city. He also frequently traveled to Rio de Janeiro and Sao Paulo. It is interesting that Bion seems to be more popular and his works are better known in the psychoanalytic community of South America than in any other area.

Bion retired in 1979 and returned to England to be with his children. He died suddenly of leukemia on November 8 of that year.

BION'S WORK

EXPERIENCES IN GROUPS

It is interesting to note that the mental health public knows more about Bion's (1961) concepts of group psychology than they do about him as a psychoanalytic theorist. What is now known as the “Tavistock method” began during his experiences at Northfield Barracks during World War II and was completed after the war at the Tavistock Clinic. As already noted, Bion, like Freud

before him, observed that groups behave with a psychology that is characteristic of the group as a unit, above and beyond the psychologies of each of its members. A group convenes in order to focus on a common project; in the original case at Northfield Barracks, this was a return to the battlefield. In the course of the group's progression, resistance, not unlike resistances in individual analysis, develops toward the progress of the group's functioning. Members of the group seemed to cluster into resistance subgroups, which Bion designated as (1) fight or flight, (2) pairing, and (3) dependence. Bion analyzed the expectations of the individual and resistance subgroup members toward the leader as analogous to the transference expectations in individual analyses. The Tavistock method is largely known in the United States through the work of A. K. Rice (1965) and is used to study authority relationships in institutions. It has never found its way into formal group psychotherapy to any significant extent.

EXPERIENCES WITH PSYCHOTICS AND THE ORIGINS OF A THEORY OF THINKING

Overlapping and succeeding Bion's interest in the psychology of groups was his analytic work with psychotics and borderline patients. His first contribution stemming from this interest was "The Imaginary Twin" (1950). The patient discussed in this clinical paper was suffering from persecution by an imaginary twin, which seemed to be derived from an earlier conception of the breast as the first imaginary twin. In "Differentiation of the Psychotic from the Non-Psychotic Personalities" (1957a), Bion offered the thesis that every psychotic demonstrates

a normal or neurotic as well as a psychotic personality, which long antedated Kernberg's similar formulations. His papers, "Notes on the Theory of Schizophrenia" (1954), "Development of Schizophrenic Thought" (1956), "On Arrogance" (1958a), "On Hallucinations" (1958b), and "Attacks on Linking" (1959) all examined the schizophrenic experience of attacking thoughts by attacking the links between objects and between object and self, the precursors of thoughts.

Ultimately, Bion saw the psychotic experience as the result of a failure by the mother to contain her infant's fear of dying. This is, again, the concept of the *container and the contained*, which was to have major significance not only for Kleinian metapsychology but also for psychoanalytic metapsychology generally. For Kleinian metapsychology it added the adaptive principle, the formal enfranchisement of the importance of external reality, a concept that previously was sadly lacking. It added the concepts of "thoughts without a thinker" and inchoate emotional sense impressions that need a thinker to think them—originally a mother—container whose ultimate internalization by the infant provides for this developing function. The concept of the container and the contained long anticipated Kohut's concept of the functions of selfobjects.

Another important contribution from Bion's work on psychoses is his conception of alpha function, alpha elements, and beta elements (Bion, 1962a, 1963). He used letters from the Greek alphabet in order to avoid terms that were

in ordinary use and therefore already saturated with meaning. The second part of his terms, “functions” and “elements,” he borrowed from mathematics for the same reason. Experience, according to Bion, begins as a *beta element*, which is a raw stimulus confronting the sense organs in order to be experienced. If the sense organ allows itself to experience the beta element stimulus, it does so through *alpha function* and therefore *transforms* the beta element into an *alpha element*. The latter is analogous to metabolized food—it is suitable for mental digestion, whereas the raw beta element is not. The alpha element comprises not just the impression of the senses, however, but also the inherent and/or acquired preconceptions of that experience, which the organism is prepared for beforehand; thus, the mating between preconception and beta element forms the alpha element, the necessary ingredient for mental digestion. The alpha element may then be transformed into dream or mythic elements for storage and/or may be processed by the mind for immediate experience, to be thought about and acted upon.

Bion stated that alpha elements are able to produce an alpha screen, something akin to a repressive barrier, which differentiates sleep from wakefulness. The psychotic, on the other hand, has so much fear of experiencing his or her feelings because of being overwhelmed that he or she projects out not only feelings and thoughts about these feelings, but also the mental apparatus that can accept, absorb, and process these feelings—the psychotic’s very ego. As a consequence, the psychotic cannot “alphabetize” sensory-emotional experiences

—cannot allow them to be registered (cannot transform them through alpha function into alpha elements). These experiences do not become properly transformed for mental action; instead, they become pathologically transformed into altered beta elements or *bizarre objects*, which comprise delusions and hallucinations. The psychotic seems to develop a beta screen (rather than an alpha screen) of bizarre and persecuting objects which cluster around him or her and alienate him or her from the presence of and communication with others. The absence of an alpha screen forecloses on the psychotic’s capacity to differentiate between waking and sleep and therefore between dreaming and reality or between the delusional and real worlds.

Bion began to realize that the sense organs of the psychotic “do not talk to one another to make common sense,” and that the psychotic uses these sense organs to project sensations onto objects, which then become hallucinations because of their propensity for abnormal projective identification. The “arrogance” of psychotic thinking is the defensive smugness of the psychotic in believing that he or she can “think” by evacuating thoughts and the organ that thinks thoughts (the mind) into an object that is then subjected to the patient’s curiosity—not for knowledge, but for control.

Bion formulated the notion of an infantile mental catastrophe as the basis for the development of a psychotic personality. This catastrophe is a result of the infant’s hatred of experience in conjunction with a defective maternal container,

which can not soothe or contain the infant's pain. Bion invoked the concept of catastrophe for normal thinking as well, and his ideas in this respect seem to have been misunderstood by many (see Hamilton, 1982). Catastrophe is a prerequisite for normal thinking, Bion believed, because thinking requires overcoming the steady state of homeostasis and therefore always involves pain. Thinking is in response to rents in the smooth surface of serenity; the adjustments and adaptations we have to make inaugurate the need for thinking. Thus, to Bion, catastrophe, in its theoretical sense, is a normal property of change, and thinking is our capacity to anticipate, adjust to, and regulate it. This conception of "normal" catastrophe does not obviate its counterpart, the child's normal epistemophilic tendency, with the attendant enthusiasm and joy in acquiring knowledge about the world.

During the years in which he worked on these concepts, Bion steadfastly endeavored to mathematize psychoanalytic concepts so as to give them "scientific precision." Bion's mathematical adventures occupy his first three major metapsychological works, *Learning from Experience* (1962a), *Elements of Psychoanalysis* (1963), and *Transformations* (1965). Bion's theory of transformations borrows from Melanie Klein's theory of the existence of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, two basic sequential stages of development in early infantile mental life. The first stage is characterized by states of persecutory anxiety in the infant, the latter by states of depressive concern for the object, along with withdrawal of projections from the object back to the self.

The depressive position is considered a state of integration, and the paranoid-schizoid position is considered a state of potential disintegration.

Bion proposed that all emotional states and thoughts begin in the paranoid-schizoid position as definitory hypotheses. In other words, the infant experiences as a definitory hypothesis a sense of certainty about its state of pain and feels persecuted by this pain. The infant thus experiences itself as the innocent victim of pain superimposed upon it by some outside source, the nurturing object. The infant who is able to tolerate this pain eventually may realize that the pain is like a hole or an absence where a breast belongs and that it developed in the first place because the breast was not there when it was needed. If the infant can tolerate the pain long enough, then the concept of an empty space develops (like Kant's "empty thoughts"). The infant (and, by corollary, the patient) can use this space as an area of transformation in which a thought may alter from its original definitory hypothesis of persecutory pain to a depressive awareness of the need for the breast and of the pain of mother's absence. Thus, the "thought" or "feeling" undergoes a transformation from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position (P-S→D) on its way to integration and acceptance.

There are three major types of transformations: (1) rigid motion transformations, (2) projective transformations, and (3) transformations in hallucinosis (-K). A rigid motion transformation, a term borrowed from solid geometry, is one in which an experience from the past is experienced in the

present virtually intact. It corresponds to the general classical notion of transference, that is, of a displacement of a past object experience to the analyst in the present. Projective transformations is Bion's term for Klein's conception of projective identification; it designates the projective translocation of aspects of the infant and/or patient in the present onto the image of the parent-analyst, who then is believed to be identified with the projection (transformed and controlled by it).

Transformations in hallucinosis designate a much more extensive and abnormal change. Bion believed that the psychotic cannot bear the experience of pain and therefore does not develop the space in which normal transformations can occur. Instead, he or she annihilates this space or never develops it in the first place. The psychotic also projects out not only the intolerable feelings and thoughts, but also the very mental apparatus, the ego, which feels the feelings and thinks the thoughts, along with them. Insofar as this is experienced by the "psychotic" infant as not being able to contain, feel, or think his or her thoughts, the infant correspondingly, thanks to projective identification, believes the object he or she is projecting the thoughts onto also cannot contain these thoughts and feelings or the infant's mind, which is also being projected into the object. The consequences, according to Bion, are as follows: The infant now is in a state of disorientation and is denuded of his or her mental capacity to experience his or her feelings and think his or her thoughts. The infant no longer has the alpha function to delay, sort out, and "alphabetize" feelings. He or she now lurks in the

twilight of confusion between sleep and dreams, where neither is distinguishable from the other.

The object to which the infant's mind and feelings have meanwhile been projected has been *transformed* into a *bizarre object* (transformation of rejected beta elements), which is unstable and controlled by the psychotic projections within it. The latter seem to "swell up" and bizarrely distort the configuration of the object. They then fragment, disintegrate, and reorganize as a *beta screen* of psychotic impermeability, a pathological autistic shell "protectively" surrounding the denuded infant. This beta screen is experienced as delusions and hallucinations, which circumscribe the infant or patient as a "protectively menacing" envelope. It is protective in the sense that former painful relations with external objects no longer occur, thanks to the beta screen, but menacing insofar as the infant and/or patient is now in a veritable "concentration camp."

Eventually, the patient may seemingly recover from this psychotic catastrophe but, as in the example of the famous case of Schreber (see Freud, 1911), will reconstitute a private mental world of his or her own which is a bizarre mock-up of the abandoned external world, totally cut off from and impervious to it. This is the domain of $-K$, the final stage of a transformation in hallucinosis, otherwise known as a "fixed" delusional system.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF BION'S METAPSYCHOLOGY

Bion's metapsychology is not only an elaboration of Freud's basic tenets amalgamated with the cartography of infantile mental life that Melanie Klein pioneered, but is also enriched with many unique contributions from general epistemology and some innovative speculations about mental life even beyond the caesura of birth. Bion believed that mental life may well begin when the sense organs first become operant, early in fetal life, and he postulated that there may be some dim "awareness" of the transition from the watery medium of the womb to the gaseous medium of postnatal life. These early "experiences" are "empty" in the Kantian sense and must await language in order to become filled as concepts. Before becoming "filled," they may be registered as *ideograms*. Psychoanalysis is an attempt to help the individual link up with his or her earliest preconceptions, giving language to those primordial experiences that are still beyond words and may date to a time before there were words.

Bion gradually became dissatisfied with the language of Freudian and Kleinian theory, because it dealt with objects that dwelled in the third dimension of external reality (the domain of senses). Bion's psychotic patients did *not* dwell in that third dimension but rather in dimensions alien to it. Because the dimensionality of the internal world normally and of the psychotic world abnormally is far different from that of the third dimension of external reality, it requires a language suitable to it. Today we might call this the domain of the nondominant hemisphere, which can be thought of as the zero dimension (see Grotstein, 1978).

Bion reminds us that Freud had postulated that the psyche's capacity for consciousness depends on mental processes that are "sensible" to the data of experience from external stimuli. Pleasure and unpleasure are the original "codes" of differentiation of these processes. Even though Freud hinted that the sense organ of consciousness was "sensible" to internal stimuli as well, there seems to be very little in the psychoanalytic literature to designate the exact nature of that internal sense organ system. Bion came to the rescue by reminding us that the sensual domain relates to the external world and that *intuition* is the sense organ that is responsive to the internal world. In order to be intuitively "sensitive" to this inner domain, one must blind oneself to the sensory capacities that are responsive to the external world of sense-dominated reality. Following a notion of Freud, Bion advocated abandoning memory and desire in order to allow oneself to be intuitively sensitive to this internal, dimensionless world. Ironically, we associate the pleasure principle with the id and therefore with the unconscious. Pleasure seems to be the designation by the sense organs that are responsive to external reality to code that form of information; therefore, paradoxically, we must eschew our tendency toward pleasure and desire (suspend them) to allow the "thoughts without a thinker" to emerge in the inner domain. These "thoughts without a thinker" do not have a language of their own and must borrow the language of external reality via free associations (day residue experiences) to become "visible" (sensible through intuition). Memory is the past tense of desire (of the senses), and desire designates the future (of the senses). Thus, the analytic procedure

requires suspension of memory and desire so that there can be intuitive receptivity to the inner world. The ability to do this requires the “man of achievement,” a designation Bion borrowed from Keats to connote the capacity for patience in a field of doubts, mysteries, and half-truths while awaiting the *selected fact*. The appearance of this selected fact rewards the “man of achievement” with intuitive security and clarification about inner meaning.

From another point of view, we can see this formulation as Bion’s concern about the difference between Truth (O) and knowledge (K). Our sense organs are “sensible” to knowledge about Truth but are limited to the acquisition of knowledge about it. Words correspond to K; O is wordless and is the thing-in-itself, unknowable. Psychoanalysis attempts to be a transformation in O, not by our understanding of K, but rather via the experience of K. Thus, knowledge itself does not permit transformation in O, only experience does. K is important only in being able, once accepted, to be used to facilitate experience itself, the only route to O.

GENIUS AND THE “MESSIAH THOUGHT”

In Bion’s last metapsychological book, *Attention and Interpretation* (1970), he returned to his earlier work on group formations and integrated that work with his earlier conceptions of elements, experiences, and transformations. Once again, Bion drew the analogy between the individual mind and the group

establishment and located within this group establishment the function of preserving and conserving the group's stability. The establishment resists change to defend against anticipated chaos. The protectors of the establishment need to anticipate rebellion or challenge to the stability of the group that may potentially endanger it. They therefore must locate the "enemies within," stigmatize them, and ultimately exile them from the group.

At the same time, the establishment must paradoxically anticipate the need for change so that the group unit does not decay or disintegrate of its own accord. It therefore must prepare the way for a *messiah* or *genius* (corresponding to the "messiah thought"), the new leader who is able to have a "memoir of the future" and to be able, as a "genius", to experience O directly without having to detour through K. The genius and the messiah thought correspond to the "thought without a thinker," the inherent preconception that has not yet been thought but that is needed to be known and thought so as to come to the rescue of the stalemated group establishment. The genius (and/or messiah thought) is then conceived of as the definitory hypothesis, the apodictic message to the group, which then attacks and challenges the veracity of this thought in an attempt to negate it.

When negation fails, the thought or feeling is accepted, notated, paid attention to, subjected to inquiry, and, finally, acted upon. These functions (definitory hypothesis, negation, notation, attention, inquiry, and action) occupy

the horizontal axis of Bion's mathematical grid. The vertical axis develops in terms of the transformation from beta element → alpha element → dream thoughts or myths to preconception → conception → concept to scientific deductive system → algebraic calculus. Thus, whether in the group or the individual, the "thoughts without a thinker," when allowed a transformative space and time to be contained, thought about, and challenged, can then be accepted and allowed to undergo their matriculation into ever-ascending conceptual schemes. This is how individuals and cultures grow.

Bion meant this conceptualization of the messiah thought and its conflict with the very establishment that summoned not only to be a statement in general about the evolution and maturation of the individual and culture, but also, undoubtedly, to be a generalization about the difficulties he observed in the psychoanalytic establishment. The classical Freudian school, locked as it was in the oedipal paradigm, seemed unconsciously to evoke the need for the messianic thoughts that Melanie Klein brought to psychoanalysis about early infantile (preoedipal) mental life. The same battle fought by Freud, the erstwhile messiah of another age, occurred again, with Klein in opposition to Freud's descendants. As it has turned out, the "messianic" ideas of Klein have not safely traversed the challenge imposed by the psychoanalytic establishment—they have not cleared negation. Yet there are ingredients in her discoveries that are essential to the normal progression of psychoanalytic theory. It therefore seems as if a compromise formation has been instituted in classical analysis in which Kleinian

ideas have been extracted from her matrix, alienated from her, and now regrafted to classical theory under a new name.

Transformations in which the genius and his or her messiah thoughts are accepted by the group establishment are termed by Bion *symbiotic*, as both the group and the genius benefit from the interchange. The fate of Kleinian ideas might correspond to what Bion calls a *parasitic* transformation, insofar as the establishment did not recognize that it was in fact dependent on her ideas for its future welfare and therefore “extracted” the ideas parasitically without full gratitude to their author. A third form of transformation, which Bion calls *commensal*, designates the simultaneous presence of two separate kinds of ideas or subgroups within a larger group that live in peace and harmony. They either have not yet come into conflict or are able to live in harmony without the necessity of interaction or conflict. In sociopolitical terms we might call this “pure democracy.”

The other fate of the messiah idea, especially when it comes before its time, is to ignite the messianic idea in others via linear progression, much in the way that free associations transpire in a seemingly endless chain. Suddenly, the selected fact once again emerges as the messiah thought which is necessary for the survival of the person or group. The new messianic ideas may seem not to “remember” their ancestry. One can see this phenomenon today in the work of Kohut and self psychology with its emphasis on the empathic principle in

psychoanalysis, which does not yet seem to know its ancestry in Sullivan, Fairbairn, Winnicott, Balint, Bowlby, and so many others, to say nothing of Klein.

The coming of the genius and the messianic thought he or she expresses is apparently a historical pattern with fortunate as well as revolutionary consequences. If the establishment cannot bear the strain imposed on it by the messianic thought, then there is catastrophic revolution with violent change (transformation in – K). If the thought is accepted by the establishment, it changes correspondingly, in which case there is a transformation in K on its way to experiencing O (the thing-in-itself, pure experience).

BION'S CONCEPTION OF THE UNCONSCIOUS

When Freud first discovered the system unconscious, it comprised the domain of traumatically buried memories. Later, when he discovered the importance of fantasy, the unconscious became composed of the instinctual drives, those elements of experience that had become secondarily instinctualized and pulled into repression, the unconscious portion of the ego (especially the ego defense mechanisms), and the superego. Bion's invocation of inherent preconceptions modified this picture. First, he saw the psychic apparatus as being composed, as did Freud, by the ego, superego, and id. Unlike Freud, however, he saw them as three different *vertices* of experience of objects outside them. In other words, the phenomenon of pain can be understood from a moral or religious point

of view (superego), from a rational or scientific point of view (ego), or from an esthetic or need-desire (id) point of view, and correlations between these vertices of experience are required for integration.

Second, Bion's notion of inherent preconceptions modified the concept of the unconscious in yet another way by suggesting that what impelled its way into consciousness normally and abnormally was not so much the instinctual drives per se, but inherent preconceptions of danger ("thoughts without a thinker") that traumatic experience has evoked. Thus, danger is not from the drives, but from the driving force of the most atavistic reminder of imminent danger. This is a vastly different notion of psychic interaction, which can have enormous consequences in the treatment of patients, especially psychotic and borderline patients. It makes a great deal of difference if the therapist conceives of a patient's psychotic break as being due to id irruptions rather than to urgent warning signals of ancient preconceptions alarmed into readiness with an ego unable to listen or able to respond.

BION THE PHILOSOPHER

Bion was well versed in philosophy and was himself a philosopher as well. In terms of his formal philosophical background, I have already mentioned Plato and Kant. To this list must also be added Hume and many others, particularly the Intuitionistic mathematicians such as including Poincare. Bion the philosopher,

however, was another matter. One always felt when talking with him that one was in the presence of a person who had thought profoundly and intimately about the nature of relationships.

Although he revered the highly special and unique relationship between the patient and analyst, Bion correspondingly deprecated the supervisory relationship. He generally refused to take on supervisees for more than a few sessions. His rejection of the idea of supervision was based on his belief that the therapist seeing the patient, no matter how inexperienced and ill trained, has more authority about the experience that transpired than the “supervisor,” who is removed from the experience. All the “supervisor” can do is share his or her own feelings as a “second opinion,” a favorite expression of Bion’s.

A similar attitude was expressed in Bion’s memorable reply to a member of a group that had been meeting with Bion who had presented some case material for his “second opinion.” The case material referred to a patient’s relationship to his sister. Bion (personal communication) stated:

I don’t know why your patient feels guilty about his feelings toward his sister. After all, she is a member of his father’s family, not his. The father’s family is a temporary family, a rehearsal family, if you will, which has been ordained, one must presume, to complete the rehearsal of childhood until such time as the human being is able to find his own family, the permanent one, the thing-in-itself. His sister is no concern of his. It is a concern of her father and mother, if they care to be concerned. On the other hand, if your patient does desire to be concerned, then that is his business, and he may be experiencing feelings from the time when he actually was a member of

his father's family, along with his sister. Now that would be a different matter. Natural affection has no rules.

I hope the reader can follow the twists, turns, ellipses, and zig zags of this thinking. Bion was a magnificent tactician and strategist not only in combat, but also behind the couch.

Another example of Bion's "philosophy of relationships" came out during one of my analytic hours with him. I was complaining to him about how disappointed I was in myself. His reply was instant and surprising:

You are the most important person you are ever likely to meet, therefore it is very important that you be on good terms with this important person, you. You appear more than willing to bear testimony against yourself, yet are not supplying me with the evidence. Besides, whom am I to believe, the accuser or the defendant? You haven't yet presented evidence which either I or the defendant can respond to.

On yet another occasion, when Bion gave me a particularly powerful and cogent interpretation I (foolishly, in retrospect), said, "You know, you're right; that's a correct interpretation!" Bion sarcastically replied:

"Oh yes, you would have me be right. How right I am! you state. I'm right only because I uttered a second opinion about your associations to me. I could just have easily have stated, 'you're right! By God, how right your free associations are!' "

What I came to realize from this encounter was that Bion was enjoining me to be myself, respect myself, reclaim my "power of attorney," and use the mind

God gave me—that is, to accept the responsibility of my own importance and the importance of consulting my feelings and listening to my own responses to my experiences rather than trying to “understand” those who speak to me and whom I am in danger of making mentors rather than “partners” with second opinions.

Although also an astute logician, Bion was superbly “right brain” as well. He was not only an accomplished pianist and gifted artist in his own right, but he also had a high regard for the aesthetic vertex of human experience and this was his genius, he revered imagination, which he often designated as “image-ination.” “All that can be imagined is!” he was fond of saying.

BION IN PERSPECTIVE

Bion’s public language, both in his speeches and writings, closely epitomize his metapsychological beliefs. He eschewed understanding because of his belief that understanding closed off the experience and therefore foreclosed the transformation in O. He often cautioned that one should not try to understand what he said or wrote but rather should be receptive to one’s individual impressions and responses to what he said. “Do not listen to me, but listen to yourself listening to me,” would be a succinct restatement of his view. He thereby clarified a theory of thinking whose rationalistic roots go back to Plato and have coursed through Kant. It embraces a philosophical conception of the human being as the innovator of imaginative conjecture, that intersects with the data of

external experience (K) to emerge as thought. He arrived at these ideas about thinking from many years of psychoanalyzing psychotics who could not think. Psychoanalysis had previously concentrated on the treatment of neurotics who could think but would not in selected areas of inhibition. By clarifying that realm of psychotic transformation that is beyond repression and comprises the mutilation of thoughts and thinking, Bion added a whole new domain to our clinical knowledge as well.

The interested reader who wishes to become familiar with Bion for the first time, but who might be afraid of becoming lost in the progression of his works, might well begin by reading one of his last publications, *Bion in New York and Sao Paulo* (1980). No background is required, and the reader will be put quickly and effectively into Bion's way of thinking. For the more intrepid reader, I recommend all his works, especially his novel, *A Memoir of the Future* (1975,1977,1979), a trilogy that reflects his incredible virtuosity in fictional form and that constitutes a summary of his psychoanalytic thinking. For the reader who wishes to get to know Bion the man, I heartily recommend his autobiography, *The Long Week-End: 1897-1919*. This work is graphic, direct, uncharacteristically lucid, deeply personal, and moving.

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Notes

- [1](#)) Sacred Indian epic poem dealing with the ideas of goodness and evil.

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