

## Keeping the Psychoanalytic Setting in Mind<sup>1</sup>

*John Churcher*

In 1835 Charles Darwin was in South America making the voyage which provided many of the observations on which he later based *The Origin of Species*. He was in the small town of Valdivia, in Chile, when the area was struck by a large earthquake. In his diary he described his experience as follows:

I was on shore & lying down in the wood to rest myself. It came on suddenly & lasted two minutes (but appeared much longer). The rocking was most sensible; the undulation appeared both to me & my servant to travel from due East. There was no difficulty in standing upright; but the motion made me giddy.—I can compare it to skating on very thin ice or to the motion of a ship in a little cross ripple. An earthquake like this at once destroys the oldest associations; the world, the very emblem of all that is solid, moves beneath our feet like a crust over a fluid; one second of time conveys to the mind a strange idea of insecurity, which hours of reflection would never create.<sup>2</sup>

Twelve days later he arrived in the port city of Concepción, where not a house had been left standing, and witnessed scenes of such desolation that he found it impossible to describe his feelings.

The earth on whose stability we rely, is a good analogy for the frame, or setting, in which the psychoanalytic process occurs. The setting remains constant, it is taken for granted, and ignored, until something unexpectedly makes us aware of it. Then we have an experience that may be more or less disturbing or unsettling; more or less possible to put into words.

My aim in this paper is primarily to present a view of the nature of the setting in psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic psychotherapy. I also want to bring out some points of connection between this view and wider issues concerning life in organisations and institutions. I shall begin by reviewing briefly the idea of the psychoanalytic setting as invented by Freud, which is largely unchanged in the current practice of psychoanalysis, and much of which is still preserved in psychoanalytic psychotherapy; then I shall discuss in some detail an attempt by the Argentinean psychoanalyst José Bleger to elaborate this idea in his 1967 paper, and his use of concepts developed a few years earlier by his colleagues Willy & Madeleine Baranger; I shall then go on to consider the idea of the 'internal setting' in the mind of the analyst or therapist, before concluding with some tentative suggestions about the potential relevance of these ideas for practitioners working in organisations.

I would like to say something about the position from which I am speaking in the setting of this meeting. Unlike Peter Clarke, I have no experience in running a large organisation, and unlike Philip Stokoe, I have no experience in consulting to one. I know very little about 'group relations' as a field of enquiry, and my view of organisational life has been

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper given to the Annual Conference of Lancaster Psychotherapy Clinic in collaboration with the Tavistock Clinic, at St. Martin's College, Lancaster, 9th September 2005. An earlier version was given to the Fourteenth Annual General Meeting of the Hallam Institute for Psychotherapy, Sheffield, Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> May 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Darwin, C. (1913 [1839]) *Journal of researches into the natural history and geology of the countries visited during the voyage round the world of H.M.S. Beagle*. London: John Murray. p.323

formed largely by working in universities. My clinical experience is mainly of individual psychoanalysis conducted for five sessions per week on the couch. I have done some less intensive psychotherapy, though not as a patient, and I supervise a number of psychotherapists, some of whom work in the NHS.

### The classical analytic setting

A view of the classical psychoanalytic setting can be obtained by summarising some of the advice given by Freud in his papers on technique, and by making explicit some of the conditions which are left implicit in this advice.

First, there is the explicit advice (and here I'm paraphrasing Freud): lease a definite hour of your available working day to the patient, and require payment for it whether or not the patient uses it; don't try to answer the question "how long will it take?", because the question is almost unanswerable and the most you can say is: "It will take years, rather than months or weeks"; get the patient to lie on a couch, while you sit behind the patient and out of sight; instruct the patient to follow the fundamental rule (the German is *grundregel*, meaning literally a 'ground rule'), of trying to put into words whatever comes into his or her head, without selection or reservation; don't try to remember everything the patient says, and don't take notes during the sessions, but give yourself over to listening, with 'evenly-suspended attention'; avoid giving the patient any personal information about yourself and your life; and undergo an analysis yourself before offering it professionally to others.

Unstated but implicit in these precepts are various other conditions, such as: that the patient comes to the same place each day; that this is a consulting room set aside for the purpose; that it is suitably furnished, private and quiet; that no-one else is present in the room. However, even the addition of these implicit conditions does not result in an exhaustive list, and I agree with Robert Young when he writes: "If I listed all the factors making up the analytic frame, I would still miss out some things and not capture its essence."<sup>3</sup> In other words, the setting is a totality which cannot be reduced to its component parts; it cannot be assembled using a manual.

For Freud, refraining from attempts to remember what the patient says, while listening instead with 'evenly-suspended attention', was "the necessary counterpart to the demand made on the patient that he should communicate everything that occurs to him without criticism or selection"<sup>4</sup>. His advice concerning memory was echoed and elaborated half a century later by Bion, in his justly famous, and very short, paper 'Notes on memory and desire'. The psychoanalyst, Bion wrote, "must cultivate a watchful avoidance of memory", because memory only gets in the way of observing, or intuiting, a process which he called "the evolution of the session", which can only be observed while it is taking place.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Young, R.M. (1998) The analytic frame, abstinence and acting out [<http://human-nature.com/rmyoung/papers/pap110.html>] ; (2003) Containment: the technical and the tacit in successful psychotherapy [<http://human-nature.com/rmyoung/papers/pap145.html>].

<sup>4</sup> Freud, S. (1912) Recommendations to physicians practising psycho-analysis. *S.E.* 12, pp. 111-12

<sup>5</sup> Bion, WR (1967) Notes on memory & desire. *Psychoanalytic Forum*, 2, pp. 272-3, 279-80; reprinted in Spillius, E. B., ed. (1988) *Melanie Klein Today*, vol. 2, pp. 17-21. Routledge.

Concerning the use of the couch, Ogden<sup>6</sup> points out that Freud's focus was not primarily on its role in facilitating the patient's free associations, but rather on the way in which it affords the analyst the privacy that he requires to do his work. According to Ogden, Freud's famous reluctance to be stared at while listening to his patients was neither idiosyncratic nor pathological, but a technical consequence of the need for privacy in order to do the work of analytic listening; work which involved what Freud called giving oneself "over to the current of unconscious thoughts" in order to be receptive to the unconscious of the patient. The idea that the patient derives a similar benefit from this arrangement, Ogden suggests, remains implicit in Freud's discussion. He describes how, in his own clinical practice, at the start of an analysis, he presents the use of the couch in a manner that emphasises his own need as well as that of the patient for an area of privacy, a psychological space in which to think and generate experience.<sup>7</sup> I find Ogden's discussion helpful in thinking about my own clinical work, and I think it illustrates the fact that to give a full account of any single aspect of the setting, in this case the use of the couch, soon involves one in all the complexity of the setting as a whole.

Although psychoanalytic theory, including the theory of clinical practice, has seen major developments, innovations and disputes since Freud's time, the basic features of the classical psychoanalytic setting have remained remarkably constant. Rules about time and money, the use of the couch, the fundamental rule itself, the rule of abstinence for the analyst, and the training requirement for a personal analysis, are essentially the same now as they were 50 or 60 years ago. The frequency of sessions has dropped from 6 per week, which was Freud's practice, to 5 or sometimes 4 in this country, and in some countries to as few as 3, but the analytic hour is still a fixed period, usually 50 minutes.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, a number of related practices have evolved in parallel with psychoanalysis, in each of which the setting is modified in a particular way. Child analysis and child psychotherapy regularly include toys representing people, animals, etc., drawing materials, a box or cupboard for the individual patient's work to be kept in, a sink with running water, etc., all as part of the setting. In psychoanalytic psychotherapy with adults, the patient may be using a chair instead of the couch, and the frequency of sessions may be reduced to 1, 2 or 3 sessions per week. In institutional contexts, such as within the NHS, there are further modifications, such as the dropping of the sessional fee, and the establishment of a time-limit in advance, whether ostensibly on clinical grounds or because of rationing. In all of these situations, however, if the practitioner is trying to work psychoanalytically, there will be in his or her mind, a version of the analytic or therapeutic setting as a something to be established, maintained, and protected, and kept as constant as possible.

### Bleger's paper

We might expect that something as fundamental as the setting would be the focus of extensive theoretical elaboration in the psychoanalytic literature, like gravity or space-time in physics, but this is not the case. After Freud, discussion of it in the English-

---

<sup>6</sup> Ogden, T. H. (1996). Reconsidering three aspects of psychoanalytic technique. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 77:883-899

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 886

<sup>8</sup> Except in the case of the Lacanians, who have decisively abandoned the fixed period for theoretical reasons of their own.

speaking psychoanalytic world has been relatively sparse, with only a dozen or so papers making it their central topic. Even so, I have not tried to review this history, and I want instead to concentrate on a particular contribution to it.

José Bleger's paper on the psychoanalysis of the psychoanalytic setting was originally read at the Second Argentine Psychoanalytic Congress in Buenos Aires in 1966. An English translation<sup>9</sup> was published in the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* in 1967, the same year as the Spanish original appeared as a chapter in his book 'Simbiosis y Ambigüedad' [Simbiosis and Ambiguity]<sup>10</sup>. In the earlier chapters of this book Bleger argued that prior to the paranoid-schizoid position as described by Melanie Klein's, there is a position which he called the 'glischro-caric' (from the Greek words *gliscros*, meaning 'sticky', or 'viscous', and *karion*, meaning 'nut' or 'nucleus'). The characteristic anxiety of this position is confusional rather than persecutory, and the object relation is one of symbiosis with a primitive 'agglutinated nucleus', which also constitutes the earliest form of the Oedipus complex, characterised by fusion and non-discrimination of the parents.

This notion is similar to one that was put forward many years later by Ogden, which he called the 'autistic-contiguous' position<sup>11</sup>. Ogden acknowledged the work of Bick, Tustin, Meltzer and others, but appeared to be unaware of Bleger's work. Noting this in a letter to the editor of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, the Spanish psychoanalyst Rafael Cruz Roche lamented the fact that Bleger's work and that of the Argentinian school generally was not well known in Europe and North America, and he made a plea for more of it to be translated into English.<sup>12</sup> Fourteen years later, the situation is largely unchanged. Bleger's 1967 paper remains a classic of psychoanalytic writings on the setting, but the translation is of such uneven quality that in places its meaning is obscure, and much of the conceptual context in which it was written is explained only in works which are not yet available in English.<sup>13</sup>

Bleger begins his paper by defining 'the psychoanalytic situation' as comprised of a 'process', i.e. the analytic process, and a 'non-process', something that is held constant and within which the analytic process occurs, which he calls the frame, or setting. The Spanish word is *encuadre*, which literally means a frame, such as the frame around a picture, and this is the word used in the translation published in the *International Journal*. However, Etchegoyen in his book on technique<sup>14</sup> translates it as 'setting', and that is the term I shall mainly use.

Instead of focussing on what happens when the setting is disrupted in some way, Bleger considers what would be involved in maintaining what he calls an 'ideally normal' setting. He likens this to a 'thought experiment' in physics, or *Gedankenexperiment*, which cannot actually be performed, but which is nevertheless a useful fiction. He notes that at times the psychoanalytic setting does change, as he puts it, "from the mere

<sup>9</sup> Bleger, J. (1967). Psycho-analysis of the psycho-analytic frame. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 48:511-519

<sup>10</sup> Bleger, J. (1967). *Simbiosis y ambigüedad*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.

<sup>11</sup> Ogden, T. H. (1989). On the concept of an autistic-contiguous position. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 70:127-140

<sup>12</sup> Roche, R. C. (1992). The autistic-contiguous position. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 73:363-363

<sup>13</sup> A translation of *Simbiosis y ambigüedad* was announced some years ago by Process Press/Free Associations Books, but none has yet appeared. For the purpose of quoting from the paper here I have modified the published translation where this seems to me necessary, after consulting the original.

<sup>14</sup> Etchegoyen, R. H. (1991) *The fundamentals of psychoanalytic technique*. London: Karnac Books.

background of a Gestalt into a figure, that is to say, a process". This is a reference to the demonstrations by Gestalt psychologists, in particular Edgar Rubin, of the reversibility of figure and ground. In the best-known example, what appears to be an empty space between and behind two faces drawn in profile suddenly turns into the silhouette of a vase. What at one moment was mere background at the next moment becomes the figure, and *vice versa*.

Rubin's 'ambiguous figures', which have appeared on the covers of countless Psychology textbooks, were originally intended to demonstrate the *asymmetry* of figure and ground; the fact that, as Koffka put it, "we see things and not the holes between them"<sup>15</sup>. In the Gestalt psychology of perception, the figure-ground relation is asymmetrical in various ways. The contour or boundary which defines a figure 'belongs' perceptually to the figure, not to the ground, and it contributes to the figure's coherence and relative stability. When a reversal exceptionally occurs in everyday perception, as for example when a gap between two rocks seen in sharp profile from a certain angle may look like a face, or an animal, or some other object, the reversal is usually temporary, and normal perception is quickly resumed.

Similarly, Bleger argues, at such moments of change in the analytic situation, the analytic setting does not permanently turn into the analytic process, because we preserve a distinct attitude towards it: as psychoanalytic clinicians we do our best to maintain or restore the setting, to return it to the background, so that we can continue to observe and analyse the process that is occurring within it. We strive to maintain it as an ideal norm, even though we repeatedly fail, and Bleger's theoretical focus is on the setting as it exists while it is successfully kept in the background. He wants to consider the setting when it is being seen as *non*-problematic, in order to show that in fact it is a problem which hasn't been recognised as such.

He points out that the psychoanalytic relationship is a particular kind of social institution and argues that institutions actually form parts of the personalities of individuals. In this respect he follows a similar path to that taken by Freud, Fenichel, Bion and others. The distinctive part of Bleger's argument, I believe, is his statement that institutions also function as limits, or boundaries, of the body schema, and as the basic nucleus of personal identity.<sup>16</sup> I think he means by this that the body schema is continuous with, and partly consists of, internalised social institutions. This implies that in the psychoanalytic setting the body is experienced in ways that are peculiar to that setting, and that these may differ from the ways in which the same body is experienced at home, in the workplace, on the bus, or in the conference hall.

Just as it is the pathology of the body schema in the form of a 'phantom limb'<sup>17</sup>, the experience of a living, functioning arm or leg where one no longer exists anatomically, which demonstrates the existence of a body schema, so, argues Bleger, the psychoanalytic setting reveals itself only when it is broken or on the verge of being

<sup>15</sup> Koffka, K. (1936) *The principles of gestalt psychology*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., Ltd. p.208

<sup>16</sup> In this sense, he adopts Freud's idea that "the ego is first and foremost a bodily ego", and socialises it. Bleger's argument could be seen as an elaboration of Freud's statement in 1895, in the *Project for a scientific psychology*, that the initial helplessness of the crying infant, by provoking the mother to intervene in a way which enables the infant to perform the specific action of feeding, is "the primal source of all moral motives". (*S.E.* I, p. 318)

<sup>17</sup> In the published translation the Spanish *miembro fantasma* is unhelpfully rendered as 'ghost member'.

broken. As long as the setting is maintained, and kept constant, we just don't notice it. He writes:

...although it exists as such it seems to be non-existent or is discounted, just as we become aware of institutions or relationships only when they are missing, are obstructed, or have ceased to exist.<sup>18</sup>

Bleger's theoretical step at this point is to understand the normal, silent, continuous presence of the setting in terms of the opportunity it affords the patient for a 'symbiotic' relationship, reproducing the early symbiosis of the infant with the mother, which in his view is a precursor and precondition of the differentiation of the ego from something he variously calls the 'non-ego', or the 'syncretic ego', which then becomes its background..

Insofar as the world is constant, present and dependable, as the body is when it is intact and healthy, Bleger argues, it provides no occasion for thinking, or for differentiating between what is me and what is not me. It does exist psychologically, however, and not just physically, but only as this 'non-ego'; and it is this that constitutes the necessary foundation upon which the ego, and a capacity for thinking and differentiation, are built up through experiences of frustration and gratification. Just as I would discover, if I were to lose a limb, that I also have an invisible 'phantom' limb, a live internal version of that part of my body, as part of my body schema - so, Bleger suggests, there is a live internal version of the setting, which I only become aware of when it is broken in some way, but which is there anyway. It is a primitive and undifferentiated version, because it has had no opportunity to be anything else, but it is no less psychically real. He writes:

In the same way as we speak of the 'phantom limb', it has to be recognised that institutions and the setting always constitute a 'phantom world': that of the most primitive and undifferentiated organization.... And this 'phantom world' inhabits the setting even when the setting has not been broken, or precisely because it has not been broken.<sup>19</sup>

### Field theory, the 'bastion', and the Barangers' work

I have now to take you on a small detour; it is not exactly a short-cut, but it will, I hope, afford a clearer view of the conceptual terrain on which we are travelling. In parallel with this account of a symbiotic relationship with an object experienced as unchanging, Bleger employs the concept of the 'bastion' developed by Madeleine and Willy Baranger in their paper of 1961-62 on the psychoanalytic field.<sup>20</sup> The Spanish word is *baluarte*. Translated variously in English as 'bulwark' and 'bastion', *baluarte* refers to a type of fortification, an enlarged and reinforced structure protruding from a wall like a miniature fortress, which was developed in medieval siege warfare as a defence against artillery.

The Barangers had developed a theory of the analytic situation as a dynamic, bipersonal 'field' (*campo*). They wrote about their use of the concepts of field and bastion in some papers published in English between the mid-1960s and the 1990s, and their work has

---

<sup>18</sup> *Simbiosis y ambigüedad*, p. 239; cf. *Psycho-analysis of the psycho-analytic frame*, p. 512

<sup>19</sup> *Simbiosis y ambigüedad*, p. 239; cf. *Psycho-analysis of the psycho-analytic frame*, p. 512

<sup>20</sup> Baranger, M. and Baranger, W. (1961-62) *La situación analítica como campo dinámico*, in Baranger, M. and Baranger, W. (1969) *Problemas del campo psicoanalítico*. Buenos Aires: Kargieman.

been taken up by others, such as the Italian analyst Antonino Ferro<sup>21</sup>. However, a key reference is still the 1961-62 paper in Spanish.

They start from the idea that the analytic situation should be regarded not as a situation in which one person is confronted by another neutral person, but as one in which two persons are inextricably linked and complementary, and involved in the same dynamic process. They continue:

It seems feasible to us to apply the concept of 'field', in particular as used in Gestalt psychology and in the work of Merleau-Ponty, to the situation created between analyst and patient – at least descriptively -, and this doesn't mean that we want to translate analytic terminology into a different one. The need to introduce the concept of field into the description of the analytic situation seems to us to arise from the structural characteristics of this situation. The analytic situation has its spatial and temporal structure, it is oriented by determinate dynamics lines of force, it has its own laws of development, its own general aim and momentary objectives. This field is our immediate and specific object of observation. Because the analyst's observation is simultaneously observation of the patient and a correlative self-observation, it can only be defined as observation of this field.<sup>22</sup>

Now the Gestalt psychologists had taken the concept of field from physics, where it had been developed as a solution to the notorious problem of action-at-a-distance – how could two physical bodies which are separate from one another, such as the sun and the earth, or two electrically charged particles, or a pair of magnets, influence each other across empty space. The concept of a gravitational, or electrical or magnetic field replaces action-at-a distance, with a system of forces acting throughout space, or space-time, and locally upon every body within it.

The Gestalt psychologists extended the use of the concept from physics to psychology and physiology, notably in explaining visual phenomena, such as the figure-ground phenomena I mentioned earlier. Kurt Lewin applied it to social situations; in a paper of 1917 on the 'War Landscape', for example, he described the situation of a soldier near the battlefield, for whom the field is polarised between the enemy and danger in one direction, and home and safety in the other, so that wherever he is in the field he will be subject to a unique local combination of psychological forces, the resultant of which will tend to bring about his movement in a particular direction.<sup>23</sup> By the time of his death thirty years later Lewin was a major intellectual influence, not only in academic psychology but also in the nascent study of group relations and the management of organisations. As Tom Harrisson describes in his book on the Northfield experiments<sup>24</sup>, it was through the work of J.F. Brown, a student of Lewin's, that Bion, Rickman, Foulkes, Main, Trist, Hargreaves and their colleagues were strongly influenced by Lewin's field-theoretic approach to group dynamics. Shortly after his death in 1947, Lewin's much-cited paper on 'Frontiers in Group Dynamics' was published in the inaugural issue of the journal *Human Relations*, the same issue as Bion's original paper on 'Experiences in Groups'.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> Ferro, A. (1999) *The bi-personal field: experiences in child analysis*. London: Routledge

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.129-30 (my translation).

<sup>23</sup> Lewin, K. (1917), cited in Koffka, K. (1936), p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> Harrisson, T. (2000) *Bion, Rickman, Foulkes and the Northfield experiments*. London: Jessica Kingsley. pp. 64-68

<sup>25</sup> Lewin, K. (1947) Frontiers in group dynamics. *Human Relations* 1 (2) p. 145

When the Barangers made their commitment to the field concept, then, they had these ideas in mind, and they began by drawing attention to the spatial structure of the analytic situation – the configuration of the room, couch, chair, etc, and the fact that any variation in the relations between will make a difference to the analysis. But it is not just a physical field, nor just a field of bodily presence and action; it is also a space of phantasy, structured by reciprocal projective identifications between analyst and patient

Using this idea of the field, they introduced their concept of bastion as follows:

There is movement in the field, and the analyst can intervene effectively in it, when the patient takes a risk. We may assume that anyone who embarks on an analysis is taking a risk of some kind. He may risk time, money, power, hope (his career, if he is a candidate). But all this may be much less important than some other aspect of his personal life, or of [his] phantasy, which the patient regards as his bastion (and which, in general, is the unconscious refuge of powerful phantasies of omnipotence). The bastion varies enormously between one person and another, but it is never absent. It is that which the patient does not want to risk because the risk of losing it would place him in an a position of extreme helplessness, vulnerability and despair... The most frequent activity of patients in defence of their bastion consists in avoiding mention of its existence...<sup>26</sup>

This idea can be seen as an elaboration of Freud's insistence that *everything* be put into words without exception, because once you allow an exception you have created a sanctuary within which precisely the most interesting thoughts will hide<sup>27</sup>; and it is difficult not to see in it an anticipation of Steiner's concept of 'psychic retreat'<sup>28</sup>.

The Barangers describe how the bastion can manifest itself in various ways, most typically by a kind of stagnation, or immobilization of the analytic process, but it could be by a kind of superficial acceleration of the analysis, as if to get it over with; but whatever form this takes, it always affects the entire field, so that analyst and patient are caught up in the same web of transferences and counter-transferences.

### The setting as a bastion

We can now rejoin the main highway of Bleger's argument, which we left at the point where he was developing the idea that the early symbiotic relation with the mother is reproduced in relation to the setting, as something whose constancy the patient takes for granted. Now he takes the Barangers' concept of bastion and applies it to the setting. He writes:

The problem lies in the fact that the setting itself is the repository of the symbiosis and that the latter is not present in the analytic process itself. Symbiosis with the mother (immobility of the non-ego) enables the child to develop his ego. The setting has the same function: it acts as support, as mainstay, but, so far, we have been able to see it only when it changes or is broken. The most persistent, tenacious, and invisible "bastion" is thus the one that inhabits the setting.<sup>29</sup> [my emphasis]

For this reason, the setting becomes the refuge or dwelling-place of the psychotic part of the personality, which demands that nothing shall change. Bleger is here adopting Bion's phrase 'psychotic part of the personality', and in one of the earlier chapters of his book he

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* pp 150-151 (my translation)

<sup>27</sup> Freud, S. (1917) *Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis*. S.E. 16, pp. 288-9

<sup>28</sup> Steiner, J. (1993), *Psychic retreats*. London: Routledge.

<sup>29</sup> *Simbiosis y ambigüedad*, p. 240; cf. *Psycho-analysis of the psycho-analytic frame*, pp. 512-513

writes that it is psychotic because, fundamentally, it makes no distinction between internal reality and the external world.<sup>30</sup> Precisely because the setting is respected and preserved, much of this area of the mind may never be analysed. Yet it is this very immobility of the setting as a non-ego which makes possible the development of the ego; it becomes the background on which the ego is organised as a figure.

What are the implications of this view for psychoanalytic technique? Bleger is unequivocal:

In every analysis, even one with an ideally maintained setting, the setting must always be turned into an object of analysis...The de-symbiotisation of the analyst-patient relationship is only reached with the systematic analysis of the setting at the right moment. And here we will find the strongest resistances because it is not something repressed but something split off which has never been differentiated...<sup>31</sup>

The final part of Bleger's argument involves his recognition that the patient brings his or her own setting, or frame, which is not the same as the analyst's (and here the English word 'frame' seems to me to be a better translation of *encuadre* than 'setting', but I shall stick to the latter for the sake of clarity). Among the examples he gives is that of a patient who insists on using a familiar form of address and on manipulating the analyst into doing the same, against the analyst's own inclination. Only by eventually interpreting this, was it possible to reveal the narcissism and omnipotence of the patient, and his use of the familiar form to suppress the person and role of the analyst. He concludes:

The analyst should accept the setting that the patient brings ... because the unresolved primitive symbiosis will be found condensed within it. But we must state, at the same time, that to accept the patient's setting does not mean to abandon one's own, by means of which one is able to analyse the process and the setting itself [when it has been] transformed into a process.... Summing up, we may say that the patient's setting is his most primitive fusion with the mother's body and that the psycho-analyst's setting must serve to re-establish the original symbiosis, but only in order to change it. Disruption of the setting, as well as its ideal or normal maintenance, present technical and theoretical problems, but what fundamentally disturbs the possibility of a thoroughgoing treatment is [any] disruption the analyst introduces or admits in the setting. The setting can only be analysed within the setting; in other words, the patient's most primitive dependence and psychological organization can only be analysed within the analyst's setting, which should be neither ambiguous, nor changeable, nor altered.<sup>32</sup>

There is much more that could be said about Bleger's paper, but for reasons of time, my ignorance, and your patience, I will only say that it seems to me that *prima facie*, everything he says about the setting ought in principle to apply as well to psychoanalytic psychotherapy as to psychoanalysis. How to apply it clinically, in either situation, may not be an easy matter. And different types of setting may have different 'capacities' for containing the psychotic part of the personality.

In practice, we all have to cope every day with the fact that the setting we maintain is not ideal. It is constantly being compromised, infringed upon, and modified. Patients may attack it; colleagues undermine it; we ourselves neglect it. Like the house you live in, it only survives because you also care for it and try to repair the damage as you go along.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Simbiosis y ambigüedad*, p. 90

<sup>31</sup> *Simbiosis y ambigüedad*, p. 246; cf. Psycho-analysis of the psycho-analytic frame, pp. 516-517

<sup>32</sup> *Simbiosis y ambigüedad*, pp. 247-248; cf. Psycho-analysis of the psycho-analytic frame, pp. 517-518

And we know that often it does not survive, as for example in serious boundary-violations, or when the patient destroys it by walking out, or by suicide; or if the analyst or therapist dies; or, less dramatically but no less surely, when internal conditions in the practitioner's mind allow erosion of the boundary which protects the analytic setting by keeping it separate from the rest of life.

### The internal setting

This brings me to the idea of the internal setting in the mind of the analyst. I first came across this idea in explicit form in an unpublished paper by the Marie Bridge, in which she discussed a gradual increase in the intensity and duration of treatments in her psychotherapeutic practice. She attributed this growth partly to the effect of her own analysis in enabling her to find a different kind of space in her own mind, so that her patients could risk becoming more disturbed in the transference relationship while managing to remain in treatment. She suggested that the space was represented by the frequency of sessions, that her patients were unconsciously aware of its existence, and that it reflected a kind of timelessness, like the timelessness of the unconscious, that is afforded by the 5 times a week rhythm, which allows time for the unhurried exploration of details. She added:

Yet paradoxically this 'timelessness' is anchored in the external social reality of the alternation of week and weekend by which we run our lives. The pull towards timelessness and psychic stasis is constantly challenged by the analytic rhythm of weeks and terms. The time versus timelessness axis thus helps to structure the contrast between internal and external reality.<sup>33</sup>

The point of this is not to elevate psychoanalysis as a practice relative to psychoanalytic psychotherapy. There are ways in which less intensive psychotherapy is more difficult than psychoanalysis, for example in terms of the strain it imposes on a therapist who has to keep each patient in mind over a relatively long interval, and certainly this is so if the number of patients is high, and/or the institutional context is unfavourable. Instead, I think it draws attention to an important question for each of us, which is: what are the internal conditions necessary for doing the work that we each do, and what external conditions may be necessary for the adequate maintenance of these internal ones?

There is not yet much explicit discussion in the literature of the concept of the internal setting. Apart from Marie Bridge, and a few scattered references in recent years, the only sustained work on it that I have found is by another Argentinian psychoanalyst. Alcira Mariam Alizade gave a paper called "The Internal Setting: New Contributions" to a joint meeting of the Argentinian and the Paris Psychoanalytical Societies in 2002. At the end of this paper she writes:

What is essential in analysis takes place in the internal setting, in the field constituted by two internal worlds which know each other, which interpenetrate each other, and in which one (the analyst) holds the reins of the process...

...There will be times when it will be necessary to make a break with the external setting, in order to sustain the analytic process. In these situations, the external setting, even if it is the repository of psychotic anxieties (Bleger, 1967), has to be modified in its form in order to maintain a basis without which the analysis will not be able to continue.

---

<sup>33</sup> Bridge, M. (1997) Why *five* times a week?. Unpublished paper

If an analyst, due to character faults or to an excess of blind spots, deploys a strict external setting and a correspondingly weak internal setting, the analysis (the psychotherapy) will doubtless serve a cathartic or a holding function, but the results in terms of change and elaboration will be poor or non-existent.<sup>34</sup>

In these reflections by Marie Bridge and by Mariam Alizade, I think we can discern the outline of a theory of technique, in which there is a continual exchange between the external and internal settings in the minds of both the practitioner and the patient, and only by keeping the setting constantly in mind is it possible to preserve adequately the conditions in which the setting can contain the psychotic anxieties mobilised by the analytic situation, so that a psychoanalytic process can continue.

### Relevance for practitioners working in fraught organisations

I want finally, and briefly, to consider how these ideas might be relevant to people working in what might be called 'fraught' organisations. I am using the phrase as a convenient and informal label for something which seems to be common nowadays to the experience of most of the people I know who work in hospitals, universities and similar organisations. Each feels himself or herself to be weighed down by a rampant and ruthless culture of managerialism, by a perverse overvaluation of targets, indices, audits, etc which displaces trust and intrinsic motivation, and by a general political and institutional pessimism, and loss of morale. In supervising psychotherapists who work in the NHS, I often have the impression that a large part of any benefit they gain from the experience derives from the opportunity it affords them for creating a space outside their work-setting, in which clinical thinking can be temporarily freed from institutional demands and expectations which are experienced as mad, and which probably are mad.

In preparing for today's conference I did not have the courage of David Armstrong, who seems to have prepared for one of his papers<sup>35</sup> by surrendering himself to negative capability. I tried to deal with my limitations by reading up about organisational consultancy. I started with Armstrong's excellent, recent book 'Organisation in the Mind', and then began reading hastily and patchily backwards through a literature that I should have read long ago - by Menzies-Lyth, Jacques, Bion, and others. I soon realised that I had stumbled across an invisible border in my own mind, into a sizeable and sophisticated community whose dialect is only half-familiar to me. So I decided to take to heart Bion's remark at the end of 'Experiences in Groups', where he writes:

As a description of group dynamics, each individual is in a position to decide for himself whether the theories I have adumbrated give meaning to the phenomena which he, in the course of his daily life as a member of a group, can witness.<sup>36</sup>

I can see how, from the simple methodological step of treating a group as an individual, a rich field of phenomena becomes available for investigation. I can see, too, how a certain kind of organisational consultancy then becomes possible, in which the consultant genuinely consults to the whole organisation, and not to any of its individual members or

---

<sup>34</sup> Alizade, A.M. (1992) Le cadre interne. Société Psychanalytique de Paris, Rencontre APA-SPP 2002 : Le cadre en psychanalyse. [<http://www.spp.asso.fr/Main/DebatSansFrontiere/ApaSpp/2002/Discussions/texte2.htm>]

<sup>35</sup> Armstrong, D. (1989) Names, thoughts and lies. Reprinted in Armstrong, D. (2005) *Organisation in the mind*. London: Karnac.

<sup>36</sup> Bion, W.R. (1961) *Experiences in groups*. London: Tavistock.

specific sub-groups; and how the maintenance of a strict setting and technique, on the model of psychoanalysis, is necessary in order to do this. Bleger himself devoted much energy to what he called ‘institutional psychology’, and he regarded it as an important source of his ideas about psychoanalysis. In 1966, a year before ‘Symbiosis & Ambiguity’, he published a book on it<sup>37</sup>, in which he discussed in detail his technique of organisational consultancy, which to my eyes looks remarkably like that described by Armstrong and others today.

I am left with a feeling of unease, however, which I think has two sources. The first is that many writers appear to treat as unproblematic the definition of the ‘primary task’ of an organisation, or of a group. I realise that others have debated this, but I want to insist that organisational tasks are nearly always contested, whether actually or latently, and that the proper question, therefore, is not “What is the task?”, but “What should the task be?” In other words, defining the task has an irreducibly political or ethical dimension; it involves not just clarifying something but choosing among alternative views. In psychoanalysis the task is always being contested, as the patient challenges the analyst’s or therapist’s setting. Hence Bleger’s remarks about accepting the setting that the patient brings, but not abandoning one’s own. In the book on Institutional Psychology he wrote:

In psychology, ethics coincides with technique; or, to put it better, ethics forms part of the setting of the task, and no task can be properly carried out if the psychologist rejects the objectives, methods or procedures of the institution.<sup>38</sup>

The second source of my unease is where perhaps what I have been talking about today may have most relevance. Bleger’s discussion of the psychoanalytic situation culminates, as we saw, in his propositions that the most persistent, tenacious, and invisible “bastion” is the one that inhabits the setting, and that the setting can only be analysed within the setting. If this is right, and if it applies to institutions generally, then every work-setting must be a repository of this kind of symbiotic dependence, and the question will arise here too, of how far it is capable of containing the anxieties mobilised by organisational change, and whether it would benefit from analysis.

The situation is complicated, however, by the fact that not all change is good. Change for change’s sake that is imposed by a manic, frightened or psychopathic management, or through dutiful attempts to implement a misguided social policy, is usually bad. In the present political climate in the NHS and in education, it may sometimes be necessary to resist change in order to preserve something good which has taken a long time to create and which is at risk of being swept away. In an institution undergoing reorganisation, for example, when a department is abolished and its members dispersed, the experience on the ground may be one of wanton destruction, and of assault and deprivation for the individuals involved. If the institution has been internalised and it forms part of the personality of each of its members, then any organisational change which is imposed, and not experienced as coming from within, is liable to be experienced as an assault, and the resulting feeling of insecurity may be no less enduring or pernicious than that caused by any other traumatic event. Invariably, what is experienced as coming under attack is a network of personal relationships, and I think that much of current social, health and

---

<sup>37</sup> Bleger, J. (1966) *Psicohigiene y psicología institucional*. Buenos Aires: Paidós.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* p.63 (my translation)

education policy, at least in its implementation, involves attacking actual relationships in the name of idealised ones. I find myself in sympathy, therefore, with the view expressed by Susan Long<sup>39</sup>, that in order to address this sort of destructivity in organisations, which she analyses in terms of perverse states of mind, it is necessary to go beyond a therapeutic perspective.

So I would like, finally, and tentatively, to turn Bleger's thesis on its head, and suggest that the symbiotic relationship we each have with our work-place, and with the community of our colleagues, like that we have with wherever we call 'home', is something we may sometimes need to protect. Under certain social conditions we may need our bastions as much as we need our homes. At the same time, we need to be able to distinguish such conditions from those in which change, however difficult, is desirable, beneficial or even necessary. What people ordinarily need in order to grapple with such decisions is space - actual space and time to think, feel and discuss; enough internal space to be able to use these external resources; and the power to be able to give effect to the results of their thinking.

Provided it is kept stable and secure for long enough, and not abruptly or prematurely destroyed, the setting of the work-place itself may have the potential to afford the possibility of reflective emotional work, in which the setting itself, and the psychic investments each individual has made in it, could be explored before changes are made. After all, this is the sort of decision we expect someone to make when they decide whether or not to embark on the personal changes involved in psychotherapy or psychoanalysis. The paradox is that you probably need the space provided by a psychoanalytic setting in order to explore whether you want it in the first place. A mark of good management, in my view, would be a recognition and tolerance of the need for some kind of space like this by everyone from the cleaner to the chief executive.

Those who are trying to do psychoanalytic work within an organisation need it for two reasons - for themselves, and for their patients or clients. It is only possible to maintain a good-enough internal setting if, in addition to a roof over your head and dry ground beneath your feet, you have sufficient stability and privacy in the external setting. Only if the organisation can keep the psychoanalytic setting in its mind will it be possible for the practitioners who work within it to keep their patients properly in theirs.

\* \* \* \* \*

---

<sup>39</sup> Long, S. (2000) 'Organisational destructivity and the perverse state of mind', *Organisational and Social Dynamics*, 2 (2).