



On the value of ‘late Bion’ to analytic theory and practice

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Most colleagues will no doubt agree that Bion’s theory of thinking has become an integral part of the *truncus communis* of psychoanalytic theory. It is among the theories responsible for shifting the focus of psychoanalysis from the content of unconscious manifestations to their actual psychic processing. It opened new treatment perspectives, especially in the treatment of severe pathology. However, Bion’s later work, with its focus on ‘O’ and its recommendation of a clinical attitude of ‘no memory, no desire, no coherence, no understanding’ has evoked many mixed reactions, ranging from criticisms of the theory for its foolishness to idolatry. In what follows I will take the position that Bion’s later work provides an important contribution theory and practice and that is possible to use in combination two models that are outlined in the ‘early’ and the ‘late’ Bion to produce a dual track model of psychic change.

Bion’s turning point

There is a tendency to link the major change in Bion’s thinking to his move from London to California, thus attributing it to external factors and diminishing its essence and power. My impression is that it is the other way around, that it was Bion’s new insights that led him to decide to change his life-environment so that he could start from scratch and focus on his writing. The change in Bion’s point of view took place at the end of *Transformations* (Bion, 1965), and was elaborated in *Attention and Interpretation* (Bion, 1970). Both works were written while Bion was still in London. Bion did not develop any new theoretical work after these two books, but he expressed his new way of seeing in three projects that he worked on in parallel. One of the projects was the books on psychoanalysis that were later published together in *A Memoir of the Future* (Bion, 1991). In line with his new insights, Bion used the form of a fictional drama because he hoped that a living language and content would transform each other. His seminars and lectures and his autobiographical writings also reflect the effort of the so-called late Bion to transmit his view in a living language. In all these works, there is a marked difference in style from his former work: his previously rather dry, rational, detached (although by moments humorous) approach gives way to a more experiential, open and emotional stance. This

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radical change is also clear in *Cogitations* (Bion, 1992), Bion's theoretical diary (Merciai and Borgogno, 1997). While Bion's later writings testify to the substantial change in his inner world and are full of wild thoughts, the personal testimonies of his analysands at the time, such as Tustin, Grotstein and Gooch, demonstrate that this change was not visible in his clinical work: as a psychoanalyst he remained a strict and disciplined Kleinian.

The insight that turned Bion's theory upside down

Earlier, in the fifties, Bion was working with severely ill patients suffering from thought disorders, in which to a pathological degree, emotions and perceptions do not become psychic. He developed a theory of thinking for clinical use (Bion, 1962b, 1963), in which he saw thinking, or unconscious processing of emotions, in line with Klein's ideas of unconscious phantasy. Bion's fundamental question was how an emotion or a perception that is not yet psychic can become psychic and how this process can be enhanced. This is a difficult question as 'Non-psychic' and 'just-psychic' are both unknown. In order to study the transition between the two, Bion used the mathematical theory of functions where the variables can be left unknown and the function between the two can still be studied. Non-psychic was designated as 'beta' and just-psychic as 'alpha' and the function between the two as the alpha-function. In studying this function, Bion relied on Freud's (1911) theory of 'the two principles of psychic functioning' and on the British empiricists, such as Hume.

Bion (1963) further developed his theory of thinking by applying Euclid's 'theory of Elements' in distinguishing the different elements of thinking and how they are used. These were categorised in a Grid. Thinking could now be seen as the transition between these elements, a transition which is described by the formula: 'Ps-D, container-contained and selected fact'. Bion's next step was to study these transitions between the elements or different categories of the Grid by using the geometric 'theory of Transformations' (Bion, 1965). Bion hoped that by putting the relationship between the different elements into algebraic formulae psychoanalysis could be freed from the limitation of being simply descriptive, as had been the case for geometry and physics. He pushed this attempt to such a degree that *Transformations* is almost unreadable, and then he realised at the end of the book that his attempt was doomed to failure. It became clear to him that if you take a row of transformations, starting from the result of the last transformation, it is only possible to reconstruct three or four transformations. There are too many unknowns to reconstruct more steps in the process, let alone to reach back to the point where the transformations started. Moreover, he realised that in performing the exercise of expressing the transformations of elements and their conjunctions in algebraic formulae he remained at the level of representations, which he called 'transformations in Knowledge' (T(K)). It was impossible to know the origin of the transformations, which he called O. However, he was convinced that it was at this basic level that real change can take place, a change which he called transformations in O (T(O)).

This is the leap in Bion's thinking (Vermote, 1998; Vermote, 2010) that I referred to at the beginning of this paper. From here Bion moved away from focusing on how something becomes represented (the so-called early Bion), and began to consider what happens at an unrepresented, undifferentiated level and how changes at this level can be initiated or at least not be inhibited by the analyst (the so-called late Bion) .

The undifferentiated zone and the differentiated zone

In order to describe this unrepresented, undifferentiated zone, which by definition cannot be known, but can be experienced, Bion began to use new metaphors such as the concept of infinity from mathematics and deity from religion. He turned to philosophers like Plato and Kant, who were also concerned with the same problem that now challenged him: how to initiate, formulate and conceive the contact with what is beyond the limits of our thinking, behind the curtain of illusions. Without being a mystic, he found descriptions in their writings that he could make use of to describe what it is to experience that which is beyond representation.

In relating his new ideas to classic psychoanalytic concepts, it is striking that Bion distinguished between transformations in O (TO) and making something unconscious conscious. In his view, the resolution of unconscious conflicts is not a guarantee per se for T(O). Facilitating T(O) also requires a conscious attitude of being radically open to the unknown. Moreover, Bion (1970) found the notion of unconscious-conscious to be linked too much to the sensuous pleasure principle, while O and T(O) are happening at a non-sensuous level. He, therefore, introduced the idea of an infinity-finity vector which he found more appropriate to T(O) than the unconscious-conscious vector. He suggested that one can see T(O) as a movement along the vector infinity-finity. In other words something comes from an infinite zone and finds a finite form. According to Bion, during the sessions the analyst should try to be at this point where the undifferentiated takes a finite form, in other words: a point in infinity where he/she could see the thoughts as they emerge (Bion, 1970).

From now on Bion saw every thought as 'won from the dark and formless infinite' (Bion 1970:88). In this sense T(O) could be characterised as something new happening; this is different from T(K) which is the processing and thinking of existing emotional experiences in the realm of the pleasure-pain principle.

In Bion's formulation, the undifferentiated realm is a powerful living and life-giving world, an idea which is wonderfully explored by Grotstein (2007). Bion believed that great artists such as Leonardo da Vinci, Michelangelo, Shakespeare and others were in direct contact with the undifferentiated realm (Bion, 1991). He gave different names to this realm, names that he took from his earlier works and to which he gave a slightly different meaning: the Matrix, taken from *Experiences in Groups* (Bion, 1961), and the hallucinatory zone from *Second Thoughts* (Bion, 1967), which he no longer linked to psychosis in its new meaning, and the zone of the pre-natals from *a Memoir of the Future* (Bion, 1991).

Redefinition of concepts and recommendations for technique in the new model

In the model of the 'late Bion', the focus is no longer on thinking or T(K), which takes place at the level of representations, but on psychic change at the level of experience, the non-represented or T(O). From this new perspective, everything that had previously been formulated, took on new meaning. For instance, the Grid, which had been seen as a categorisation of representations and which can help in the understanding and facilitating of T(K), now became what Bion (1965) calls a 'Reality Scale' for T(O): a scale that indicates the distance from O. In this scale beta is the closest to O, while for T(K) beta elements were seen as the least processed elements.

As we have seen, Bion (1962, 1963) saw thinking or T(K) as a transition between elements, a transition that he could define as a PS-D oscillation. This entailed an attitude of tolerating insecurity and frustration until a container finds the contained and a coherence between dispersed elements is revealed, a 'selected fact'. In T(O) Bion (1970) recuperates this PS-D oscillation, but now as a movement between Patience-Security, which entails waiting and tolerating doubt and mystery until something finite emerges from infinity.

Bion explores this difference further in his description of the attitude required for facilitating T(K) or T(O). As O is of a non-sensuous realm, Bion (1970) proposes that for T(O), the analyst should train him- or herself to discard the sensuous and therefore try not to understand, remember or look for coherence and to attempt to get rid of desire. Whilst for T(K) an attitude of relaxed attention in the analyst is important in order for him/her to be maximally open to his/her reverie, for T(O) an attitude of faith and awe (what Kant called 'Achtung') is important in order to allow what has not happened yet to take place, what Bion called subsequently an 'Act of faith'. In this sense Bion (1970) stated that as in 'T(K) a no-thing is related to a thought, in T(O) something that (has)not happened yet is related to an Act of Faith'. This last phrase captures the distinction that Bion makes between T(K) and T(O) very clearly. Both are necessary, and they are in a dynamic interaction.

The caesura between the two worlds

In his lectures (Bion, 1980) and seminars (Bion, 1987) and in *A Memoir of the Future*, Bion increasingly represented the supposedly undifferentiated realm as separated from the differentiated world by a kind of caesura. Bion (1979) represented the undifferentiated zone on one side of the caesura as a kind of subterranean flow, which he compared to the Alpheus – the mythical river that emerges now and then. Bion (1991) conceived of a communication between the two zones, with dreams being a reflection of what happens in the unknown, undifferentiated zone. He also suggested that the process could proceed in a reverse direction; that the facts from the differentiated zone could be noted in the undifferentiated zone. Along this line Bion stated that just as there are dreams to be interpreted on one side of the

caesura, so there are facts that should be interpreted on the other. He saw these as two worlds that can either meet or not.

Bion (1991) increasingly saw this caesura as an opaque screen made by language. In the model of the 'early Bion' verbal thought and language are characterised by alpha-function and can be seen as a living permeable membrane, a psychic skin (Anzieu, 1989); in the model of the 'late Bion' he often warns about the danger that language may become a sort of chitinous shield that hinders the experience of the undifferentiated zone. This means that thoughts from infinity have to pass through a kind of crust. In *A Memoir of the Future*, he described in a rather poetic way for example how after its passage through the caesura a foetal thought lies close to the Central Nervous System, flat to the ground, drowned in adrenal stimulator and how immediately logical thought and language try to capture this foetal thought. This foetal thought is presented as a character in this text in the form of a fictional drama and Bion makes it say, 'words have no right to be rigid definitory caskets, preventing my birth' (Bion, 1991, p. 279)

To facilitate passages through the caesura, Bion suggested that the analyst should use a 'Language of Achievement'. This is a language that functions both as a prelude to action through representation and as action itself. It breaks through the chitinous quality of language and liberates it from fixed meanings. It is a language that, whilst taking place in the differentiated world, has its roots or 'gist' in the infinite world. In this sense it is not unlike poetry. To stimulate this language, Bion (1979, 1997, 2005a, 2005b) emphasised the importance of paying attention to what he called 'imaginative conjectures, 'speculative imagination' and 'stray thoughts'. In the same vein, he experimented with what he called 'cuntish' language and even bigotry, writing that the 'unknown and bigotry are the essence of psychoanalysis'. (Bion, 1991, p.254). I will try to explain this quality through one of the case studies that will soon follow.

The non-sensuous psychoanalytic objects

Basing his developing thoughts on the work of Plato and Kant, Bion came to realise that emotions and personality have a non-sensuous quality before they are expressed. Bion (1963) already described the objects of psychoanalysis as ineffable and needing at least three grid categories to be discerned (sense, myth, passion). After the introduction of O he denotes the psychoanalytic objects as constant conjunctions that are also present at the non-sensuous level, forms that are not yet verbalised but that can be intuited (Bion, 1970). He compared these essences in internal reality to the 'Forms' which Plato conceives of in external reality like the abstract form of a triangle, manifesting itself in nature in many different sensuous objects. These invariant Forms which are specific to each patient express themselves, become finite, in the session in an ever changing variation of dreams and transference manifestations. In other words, the nonsensuous constant conjunctions remain invariant through the many sensuous transformations within which they are reflected. They are the essence of someone's Mind or

Personality, the irreducible minimum of the patient that the analyst must render to the patient (Bion, 1970).

In order to 'see' or experience them, it is important to look at the conjunctions between elements, not at the elements themselves. Because the conjunctions are of a non-sensuous realm, one should take care not to be distracted by emotions and senses. In this regard, Bion makes a comparison with a camera that is useless if light leaks into it. In the same vein, focusing on narratives which depend on illusory causal connections rooted in the sensuous pleasure-pain principle and which need a thinker should also be avoided, as should trying to understand phenomena by connecting them to past events and history in a rational way. Instead of this Bion propagated a radical 'docta ignorantia', a Socratic openness to the Unknown. He thought it was essential to have been through the experience of an analysis in order to be able distinguish, from personal experience, evolutions that are in O from those that are not.

'The ability of the analyst to achieve the 'blindness', is a prerequisite for 'seeing' the evolved elements of O. Reciprocally, his freedom from being 'blinded' by the qualities (or his perception of them) that belong to the domain of the senses should enable the analyst to 'see' those evolved aspects of O that are invariant in the analysis.'

(Bion 1970, p.59).

Clinical examples illustrating concepts implied by Bion's later work: a dual track mechanism of psychic change

I will now go on to give some examples from my own work with patients which I believe demonstrate the clinical value of Bion's later work. Bion did not offer clinical examples after the 1950s, because he realised that such demonstrations always deform the living experience of the unknown in a session and close down openness (Bion, 1967). This attitude on the part of the analyst would be quite the opposite to the one he wished to highlight.

Whilst I do not wish to comment on the general validity of Bion's theoretical and technical insights, I would like to give a taste of my own understanding of the difference between the early and late Bion and show how this has become essential to my work. For my own clinical use I have translated Bion's ideas into the requirement to be sensitive to two vertices T(O) and T(K) and to the movement between T(K) and T(O). The 'psychoanalytic object' and a 'language of achievement' play a role in this dynamic.

A field of flowers

In work with a patient, one sometimes finds that T(O) is there almost immediately, rather like a present. A middle-aged man was sent to me for analysis by a colleague in internal medicine because he had not experienced any feelings of pleasure for a long time. He had accepted this and lived with it. He no longer worked, had no interest in sex, in fact he seemed to lack interest in anything. He looked pale; he even forgot his own birthday. In the initial interview I did not interfere much. However, he did want help and believed

that seeing me would be his last chance. The existence of a major depression, psychosis or somatic diseases had been ruled out by the referring colleague. I did not ask questions in order to understand, not wanting to repeat an experience that he had been fruitlessly submitted to several times already. I was however very attentive to what might come from behind the caesura.

The second session was like a mystery. He entered and said, 'You told me that dreams may be relevant to what we are doing here. I do not usually dream or do not remember them, but strangely enough, last night I had a dream'. It was a dream that went right through the crust. He dreamt that he saw protrusions in his belly, like tumours that were growing fast. Later in the dream he saw that they were bulbs that were pushing against his skin; at one point they opened and his abdomen became a field of tulips. At this point, it was impossible to understand or interpret this dream or to link it with theories. However, it felt like a good experience, bringing something from behind the caesura into the field of the session. It was an experience of a contact with a living subterranean flow behind, which found expression in contact with me, within a psychoanalytic setting or frame. It was with 'awe' for this manifestation and 'faith' that the subterranean flow would emerge again that the sessions started. For this man, this T(O), a shift in the opening session, was a totally novel event. Neither he nor I understood its meaning, but we were both struck by the power and mystery of this something that was living in him outside his conscious awareness and experience. Experiencing T(O) and being open to it, is quite different from T(K). This would have been more about feeling, containing and representing his deadness and empty feelings. Although this event in the psychoanalytic field made a deep impression, the patient had a tendency to close and forget it consciously. However, it remained a landmark in the opening of his inner world that brought an undeniable change in his functioning and in our relationship.

Treezebees

I have elaborated elsewhere how the basic undifferentiated layer of the transference is like a kind of canvas from which more differentiated transference representations emerge and take form (Vermote, 2009; Godfrind, 1993). The following case illustrates how transference-countertransference dynamics are unique in creating passages in the caesura between the differentiated and the undifferentiated layers of psychic functioning, in offering gateways where the non-sensuous can find expression in the sensuous and, vice versa, the sensuous can influence the non-sensuous patterns.

The patient came into analysis because of sexual identity problems. At this moment, she was in a relationship with a man for whom she felt deep respect, trust and warmth, but this relationship was not sexually gratifying. The sexual identity problem meant that she could not decide about children, marrying, or buying a property before it was clear whether she was lesbian or not.

A psychoanalytic process developed on several levels. She came to terms with the early loss of her father. An integration of a split mental

representation of her mother took place. She had been experienced in part as an obstructive inner object. While the patient was often confused in the beginning of the treatment and had a tendency to block her mentalization (T(K)) with readymade aphorisms, she gradually came to be more and more open to her spontaneous thoughts and her dreams. After some two years, she did start to feel better and to arrange things in her life, but the same question about her sexual identity kept coming back. We began to feel stuck.

In the transference, a basic feeling of safety had developed, but she experienced me as an undifferentiated background figure, rather like a kind of 'function' as she called it. Without this being present in feelings and sensuous phenomena, but because of a girlish outfit, fighting games as a hobby and other conjunctions – I could 'see' or intuit some undifferentiated wild sensuality in her without feeling it. Shortly after this realization, which I did not articulate, we were both taken by surprise by the following dream: a kind of "root" with little threads which had grown in her body was extracted from behind her sternum. The dream was very lively and made a deep impression. She was horrified by it. Was this root something that was blocking her, growing there like a corpus alienum, a parasite? Was it a kind of birth? Was it the expression of castration anxiety in a woman, in analogy with Winnicott's (1971) analysis of a little girl in a man? In any case, the dream had communicated something powerful that had found form and was unknown. Some sessions later, in listening to her, without any obvious reason, the word 'treezebees' sprang into my mind. In Dutch (the language in which the analysis was conducted) this word denotes a kind of frumpish, old fashioned naive girl. I was very surprised because this word did not seem to fit her seen from an objective and sensuous point of view. I was concerned not to make wild interventions, to judge or to upset her so I remained silent. After a while, however, I decided to share it with her, indicating that it was just an association of mine that did not necessarily represent reality, but maybe had something to do with dynamics in her psychic world. This intervention, which I felt was rather crude, nevertheless had a powerful impact. She said that she had the feeling that something had started to flow, to run in her. This something felt new to her, as though something had been opened up. It seemed as though she had been touched at another level.

The patient experienced this session as a turning point. She cried and cried and said that she felt able to let go of her feelings and that I was there to hold her when she fell. But this raw experience that she allowed herself to feel and the thoughts that she associated with it were something new, both in the transference and in her life. In Bion's terms we may see the 'Treezebees' as a 'language of achievement' that broke through the caesura and had resulted in T(O).

Some time later, she had a series of dreams. In one dream I was a young man studying to become a psychoanalyst who would be able to help her. She was moved by the image and attracted to me in the dream. It was the first time that I existed as a person in her dreams. In the next session she told me another dream about coming to her session. In this dream I was talking to

another man. We both had long beards, mocking smiles and were surrounded by an atmosphere of conspiracy. In the dream I put my hand on her knee and she was shocked and frightened. She felt manipulated and cried. I made an interpretation that both dreams were sexual but that there was a split in these representations. On the one hand there was innocence, attractiveness, on the other something about elder men being unreliable and threatening. Following the dream she was visited by a man to whom she had been attracted as a student. This contact after the dream was a strange coincidence, as it had been a long time since she had had any dates with men. There followed another dream of a very strong man, with whom she fought whilst being convinced that she could not win. The man did not move. During the weekend of this dream another coincidence happened; while at an exhibition she met a much older man who had himself been in analysis for years. Once again one had the impression that the phantasies, which were taking on finite forms in her dreams and in the transference, were also finding facts in daily life through which they could be expressed.

In the next session she reported a very erotic dream about me. Both the dream material and the fact that she could talk about it so freely were new to her. Here again, this dream was followed by something happening in her daily life. A man came into her house in order to repair something, and started to court her in a rather naive and romantic way. She enjoyed it and was in turn seductive. Something had changed in her, but not at an understanding level. The worlds on both sides of the caesura seemed to influence each other; this was expressed in facts, dreams and transference manifestations.

It was uncertain which experience had "set the train in motion" showing her these previously unknown landscapes. I have the impression that a T(O) was initiated by the dream and the somewhat rough intervention of 'freeze-bees'. I find it striking that the same non-sensuous 'something' found a finite expression in the transference and seemed to influence dreams as well as reality. While at this moment the patient did not yet have a new relationship, there was a feeling that a capacity to love grew over a series of sessions and that some real psychic change took place. Perhaps there are other explanations, but I thought about it as a T(O)-T(K) dynamic.. This at the very least enabled me to function in such a way that I did not stop something new from happening. As Bion states: as there is an interpretation of dreams on one side of the caesura, there must be an interpretation of facts on the other side. This patient was surprised that for the first time in her life men seemed to be attracted to her and two months later she started a satisfying relationship. When I asked the patient some months later whether I could use the transcript of these sessions, she seemed to have forgotten about what had happened and how important she found it at the time, although she was clearly aware of the effect. This makes us aware of how ineffable T(O) can be, just like dreams.

Conclusion

Bion's study of thinking as the transformation of psychic elements issued in his realisation that it is only possible to know and formulate transformations

to a certain degree, at the differentiated level of representations. This insight changed his focus from psychic processing or thinking of emotions, to psychic change at an undifferentiated, non-verbal and unknown layer which he called 'O'. In addition to his former theory of 'transformations in K' or thinking, he developed a 'theory of transformations in O'. One often refers to the first model as the 'early Bion' and the second model as the 'late Bion'. The models describe two different dimensions of psychic change that may meet or not. I hope to have shown that this dual track model of psychic change and the use of new metaphors and technical recommendations, may help us to understand and enhance psychic change in clinical situations.

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