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Notes On Bion's "Memory and Desire"

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Bion often protested privately that everything he wrote had been said before and that he merely dared to restate those ideas in a way that might shed additional light on them so as to enhance their value. "Memory and Desire" is one of those ideas. He would frequently cite Freud's letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé (May 25, 1916) in regard to the value of self-imposed blindness to memory and desire, as well as to understanding and preconception, two other *bette-noirs* of his. In his answer to the discussants of his article on the subject in the *Psychoanalytic Forum*, he cites one passage from Freud's letter. "I know that I have artificially blinded myself at my work in order to concentrate all the light on the one dark passage" (Bion, **1967b**, p. 280).

Once during my analysis with him, however, he retrieved the volume with the Freud-Andreas-Salomé letter collection from the bookcase in his office and, to the best of my memory,† translated Freud's letter from the German for me as follows: "When doing analysis, one should cast a beam of intense darkness into the interior so that something that has been hitherto hidden in the glare of the illumination can now glow all the more in that darkness." That was Bion's rendition, albeit with poetic licence, of Freud's statement, which has become the honored template for his stoic rule of abandoning memory, desire, understanding, and preconception, all seemingly debased (for doing psychoanalysis) derivatives of sense-derived information and opinions. This advice emerged from two sources in Bion's experience. The first was his service in combat in World War I. He painfully learned to distrust messages and advice from superior officers at headquarters far behind the lines. "They were propounding theory to us who were actually in immediate experience with the enemy," he would say. He distrusted psychoanalytic supervision as an authoritative entity and would only agree to "offering a second opinion" about colleagues' (he considered candidates as colleagues) clinical cases. He likened psychoanalytic theory, along with the patient's past

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† It has not been lost on me that I am depending on memory for the particulars of this event, and that memory is one of the pariahs of Bion's overall message.

history and the ritualized routine that typified how most analysts approached their analysands, as derivatives of the cant of the establishment, the latter of which descended in his life story from “headquarters” and was removed from the fresh and alive experience of the here and now.

In *Second Thoughts* one glimmers another reason for his now famous edict (**Bion, 1967a**). These early articles focused on his experiences treating psychotic patients. Equipped with Klein's concepts of the death instinct, envy, greed, the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, and the schizoid mechanisms (splitting, idealization, magic omnipotent denial, and projective identification) and Freud's concepts of the life and death instincts, the pleasure/unpleasure principle, and two principles of mental functioning (primary process and the reality principle), he adventurously sortied into the depths of his patients' psychotic thinking. He realized first of all that psychotics demonstrated an unusual aversion to the frustration that confrontation with reality imposed upon them, and that they consequently seek to avoid thinking by evacuating their unthought feelings and awarenesses into their objects through projective identification. Then he stood Klein's concept on its head by reasoning that in their infancies psychotic patients had been denied the normal use of projective identification whereby they would have access to a mother who could contain, sustain, tolerate, soothe, and “translate” their dread, particularly their dread of dying. Bion had broken the rules of theory and had established projective identification as the basis for attachment, bonding, and affect attunement in infancy and childhood.

Bion, the “broken field runner,” as they say in football, had reversed two of Klein's principal ideas, the death instinct and projective identification. In terms of the former, he reasoned that the infant experiences the death instinct not only as a destructive force directed toward others but also as directed toward itself as the “fear of dying.” Then he reversed and extended Klein's concept of projective identification, first by normalizing it as a requisite aspect of the infant-mother relationship, and second by extending it from an intrapsychic unconscious phantasy to an intersubjective process between mother and infant. In so doing, he was not only able to legitimize countertransference as a valuable analytic instrument; he also had discovered the psychoanalytic counterpart, as I have already stated, to Bowlby's (**1969**) attachment-bonding model, that of “container-contained” (♂ ♀), and also anticipated the concept of affect attunement, and a whole new approach (“second thoughts”) was thereby conceived by which to understand, not only psychotic patients, but also some of the ontology and phenomenology of normal infant development as well as establishing the validity for the intersubjective

approach in psychoanalysis. He could not have accomplished this had he followed the rules. In other words, Bion, by virtue of his character and his unique wartime history, had become profoundly wary of the danger of becoming hypnotized by the rituals, chants, and habits of procedures, and knew the value of the “Nelson touch”^{*} of spontaneity.[†] When Bion passionately exhorts us to abandon memory and desire, he is exhorting us to be Nelsons, especially in regard to biding our time; not being distracted by rumor, memory, or other deceptive information; patiently await the arrival of the “selected fact” (Poincare, 1952) that “Rosetta Stone,” as it were, which, like the “strange attractor” of chaos theory, gives coherence, pattern, and form to randomized or chaotic data, before proffering a bold and unexpected interpretation. There unmistakably lies a military tactician and strategist in the corpus of Bion's oeuvre.

What does Bion have Against Memory and Desire?

Bion states over and over again that information begotten by the senses should not be a part of the analyst's repertoire in experiencing the analysand. What does he mean by senses and why does he go to such an extent to banish these data? To deal with these questions I should first like to allude, but only briefly, to Bion's being a polymath and a polydidact. He was unusually well-informed in mathematics, especially in set theory and in intuitionistic mathematics. The concept of infinity, an interest in which he shared with Ignacio Matte-Blanco, was to play a significant role in his concept of “transformations” and “evolutions in ‘O’” (Bion, 1965, 1970, 1992). He was also very well grounded in philosophy, particularly in Plato, Hume, and Kant, who were to be the

^{*} The “Nelson touch” refers to an exploit by Admiral Lord Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen. His commander, Admiral Parker, thinking that the British fleet was facing defeat, sent the order (by flag signals) for the fleet to withdraw. Nelson held up his telescope to his blind eye (which he had incurred at the Battle of Aboukir), stated that he saw no signal, and went on to win the Battle of Copenhagen, which victory is commemorated as the middle of the three stripes worn even today on the uniforms of British “tars” (seamen). As a tank commander as well as a psychoanalytic theorist, Bion was a Nelson!

[†] One aspect of this capacity for spontaneity lies in his notion of “reversible perspective,” which he had originally discovered as a pathological trait in schizophrenics but later employed as a technique of innovative thinking. It is better known epistemologically as “reversal of fields” in the figure-ground matrix.

foundations for his radical contributions on psychoanalytic ontology and epistemology. He was also well-informed in religious and spiritual matters, calling upon the mystics, such as Master Eckhart, Jacob Boehme, and Gerson Scholem (the last in regard to Jewish mysticism). He was also deeply involved with poetry, particularly Milton and Keats, the former of whom he often quoted at length.

Many have thought that Bion had been deeply influenced by his Indian childhood and thus had come under the spell of eastern cosmic thinking. What seems to be more certain is that Bion's nature seemed to suspect the obvious (of the senses) and was always more alert to the possibilities that were to emerge from the covert. He seems to have taken sides in the age-old debate between empiricism and rationalism against the former and in favor of the latter. Empiricism propounds that the human being is a tabula rasa and begins to formulate thoughts and opinions on the basis of observed data, past and present, and even future, since the empiricist will anticipate the future (desire) on the basis of sensuous experience. The rationalist, on the other hand, believes that mind precedes experience so as to be able to format it. These anticipatory formats include Plato's Ideal Forms or archetypes and Kant's transcendental idealism, including primary and secondary categories (space, time, and causality), noumena, the things-in-themselves, and empty thoughts.

Bion was to employ ideas from rationalism *and* empiricism, however, for his epistemology. His concept of inherent preconceptions embraced Plato's Ideal Forms or archetypes, which he poetically called "thoughts without a thinker... that are older than their thinker." He united Kant's "things-in-themselves" and "noumena" into his now famous "beta elements," those primitive pre-thoughts or non-recognized proto-affects that await a mind to think them by "alpha-bet(a)-izing" them via alpha function into alpha elements that can then enter into "mental digestion" as memories, feelings, and thoughts. However, subsequent abstraction of the results of this processing must ensue so as to strip the processed feelings and thoughts from the concrete memories of their origins. The mother listening to her dread-filled infant must clear her mind of memories and preconceptions so that she avoids the danger of generalizing her infant's distress with other similar yet essentially different occasions. The infant, on the other hand, must learn to differentiate and enter into the cognitive realm of the asymmetry of differences so that s/he too does not fall victim to the concretization of symmetrizations which would keep him undifferentiated from his/her object.

Bion's injunction to abandon memory and desire simply means the encouragement of the asymmetrical mode of differentiation at an optimum

while still allowing some symmetrical thinking for purpose of comparisons. The latter corresponds to Bion's notion of "spontaneous" or automatic memory, as compared with purposely remembered memory, the latter of which he eschews. Thus, all that Bion is really saying is, "Do not prejudice the analysand's associations with ritualized routines of saturated anticipations; that is, do not project into them. Allow them to become incubated in the purity and virginity of your openness." A statement from Lacan bears on this. In commenting on the repetition compulsion, he stated that the patient repeats himself over and over again—differently! Or to put it more prosaically, it is the difference in repetitions that makes the difference for us and the patient. In so addressing the difference at the expense of the obvious sameness, we are keeping ourselves and the analysand at the cutting edge of aliveness. Put yet another way, Bion was exhorting us not to fall into the all too human trait of intellectual *habituation* to facts, memory, and wishes. He followed Heraclitus, who advised us that we cannot enter the same river twice.

Understanding and Preconception

Although memory and desire are the more often cited negative injunctions in Bion's oeuvre, he occasionally added understanding and preconception. He dealt with preconception in a positive light in his epistemological conceptions. Uniting them with Plato's Ideal Forms or archetypes and Kant's things-in-themselves and noumena, he coined the term "inherent preconceptions" and "beta elements." The inherent preconception anticipates the future encounter with its counterpart; that is, the idea of a breast (noumenon) looks forward to its rendezvous with a realization of a real breast in actual experience as a phenomenon, at which realization a conception of the breast then emerges. After many successive experiences, more and more abstractions occur so that the conception transforms into a concept of the breast.

On the other hand, once the concept of the breast develops, the infant might then begin to generalize its realization as a higher order, secondary preconception so that it can conveniently categorize future experiences with objects. The more it does this, the more it is prevented from discovering the unexpected, new aspect of objects.

Understanding is the quest for a hasty security so that one can feel assured that one is not going to be surprised. One can consider it to be much like a pseudo-epistemological insurance policy against surprise. I recall once during an analytic session with Bion that I had uttered, "Yes,

I understand what you mean” only to have Bion respond stentoriously, “Why didn't you say overstand or circumstand?” It was then I knew that I had inadvertently triggered a sensitive point for him. Understanding to him would be more like collusion, like an “understanding” between couples in a folie a deux.

The Ultimate Rationale for Suspending Memory and Desire

The ultimate rationale that the analyst should abandon (really, suspend) memory, desire, understanding, and preconception is to allow the analyst to keep the inner container empty of sense-derived prejudice so that s/he can all the more be able to “look inward,” that is, intuit his/her own subjective responses to the analysand's projective (trans)*-identifications. In other words, when the analyst undergoes a “sensory deprivation,” in effect, s/he is more open to the awareness of the operation of his/her inner sense organ from which intimations and intuitions spring forth. It is very much like the operation of Stanislavski's (1936) “method acting,” in which the actor disciplines him/herself to find that inner being within him/herself that corresponds to the role they seek to play. The analyst is likewise enabled, after first receiving and then experiencing the analysand's communications (via counteridentification), to match up (symmetrize or align) his/her own native, personal, subjective responses with those of the analysand and thereby be able to have an intuition (definitory hypothesis) about what the analysand might be feeling. After experiencing this intuition, s/he then submits this emergent idea to correlation and validation. In other words, the initial process is “rightbrained” and the subsequent one “left-brained.”

Abstinence and Asceticism and its Connection to Memory and Desire

It is very interesting in retrospect to realize that psychoanalysis had been established as a theory of the ontogeny of (sensuous) sexuality, whose roots

* In other contributions I differentiate between: (a) the pure Kleinian concept of projective identification as an exclusively intra-psychic unconscious phantasy of a projection into the subject's internal *image* of the object, and (b) projective transidentification, which designates the process in which the projecting subject successfully induces a counteridentification in the object *transpersonally*.

had emerged through infantile (sensuous) autoerotism. Although Freud had posited the rule of abstinence for analyst and analysand alike, it was the theme of sensuousness, erotism, and sexuality that was to characterize the orthodox and classical psychoanalytic oeuvre. We must remember that the great achievement of the ancient Hebrews was to conceive of the ultra-sensual, ineffable, inscrutable God and thereby cast away the previous gods that were constituted as tangible, visible, and sensuous idols. We must also remember that there once existed ecstatic religious cults in bygone times, for instance, the Dionysian mystery cult of the ancient Greeks, whose descendants, for all the world, could be the ecstatic Gospel singers of today's evangelical sects.

In the founding moments of Christianity among those who were then known as the “Jewish Christians,” the values of asceticism, stoicism, and abstinence were accentuated, values that also were to characterize the more mystic strains of all religions. Perhaps we can equate these spiritual-religious values of asceticism, stoicism, and abstinence with what is today called the practice of sensory deprivation. The end result of this practice is the withdrawal of attention cathexis to external stimuli, resulting in the shift of attention cathexis to the internal world. In other words, in the experience of sensory deprivation, the subject is more sensitive to experiencing projections from his/her internal world. Thus, Bion's advice descends from the mystics, from Freud, and from hard science, all of which converge to justify what many analysts at first blush would have thought to be “off the wall.”

Summary

Memory and desire, along with understanding and preconception, are to be abandoned (really, suspended) for the analyst to be ever open to unexpected emerging from the analysand's unconscious. The discipline that Bion suggests allows the analyst to be open to his/her own native feelings as an emotion-receptor and analytic instrument.

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