

INTRODUCTION

Themes and conversation

Meg Harris Williams

Themes

Where the first New York talk begins with a personal address ('Newbury House, Hadham Road ... The World ... the Universe'), the last Sao Paulo talk ends with another universal definition of personal address: 'our eternal home – our Self' (p. 146). How does one fit inside the other – the heavenly home within the earthly home? This is the task of psychoanalysis – 'to introduce the patient to himself, for whether he likes it or not, that is a marriage which is going to last as long as he lives' (p. 40).

All these talks or seminars are concerned with the nature of links, tensions, communication between different poles of experience: psyche and soma, patient and analyst, love and hate, sleep and waking, unconscious and conscious, pre- and post-natal, primordial and sophisticated, oneself and oneself. The list is long; it is the way Bion sets the scene for thinking, for trapping any idea that might possibly be floating around in the psychic atmosphere of the group – whether the group be the seminar itself, the 'psychoanalytic

pair', or the mind of the individual. The locus for catching the idea is the point at which the tension between opposites is most intense or noticeable: it is the emotional 'storm centre', a caesura, diaphragm or contact barrier – which may indeed be a blocking barrier, or else, permeable so that feelings can seep through from either side and in both directions. These are the growth-points of catastrophic change, of 'break-down' or perhaps 'break-through' (as he puts it in the *Memoir of the Future*), when the endoskeletal mind has a chance of expanding the boundaries of its knowledge in the direction of wisdom through a type of death-and-rebirth. Unless, of course, it is strangled by the limits of an exoskeleton (of lies or basic assumptions), or drowned by the 'noise' of psychoanalytic theories and other jargon – the brambles imprisoning the 'sleeping beauty' of truth. Behind and beyond the confrontation at the caesura is O, the 'basic thing', the source or origin of the turbulence.

Such is Bion's picture of mental struggle; he becomes increasingly allergic to calling it 'theory', but he does have certain favourite metaphors (which he used to call 'transformations' or 'myths' owing to their 'invariant' core). To list some of these: the trauma of the dinosaur being superseded by the mammal; the vibrations transmitted by or to the foetus in its watery medium, initiating the process of projection and introjection; the spiral nebula sending invisible waves in astronomical time; the sculpture trapping light; the diamond-cutter revealing a two-directional passage of light; the fate of Palinurus who did not see the turbulence beneath the smooth latency surface of the Mediterranean; the tracking of the river Alpheus; the blindness which reveals 'things invisible to mortal sight'; the mathematical 'points conjugate' which appear to be a single point but structurally represent two separate vertices in harmony. 'That is sooth, accept it' as he quotes from Tolstoy's Prince Andrei (p. 116): an aesthetic feeling is probably the nearest indication of knowing the truth, passionate love (love-and-hate), or at-one-ment with O.

Donald Meltzer has pointed out that Bion's concern is not with psychoanalytic theory as such but with the theory

of psychoanalytic observation. Here the metaphor is the giant radio telescope that enhances our capacity as ‘receptors’, or the ‘psychoanalytic microscope’ that can bring into focus a spark of insight that may be ‘lost in depths of knowledge’, so insignificant it is hardly noticeable (p. 71). ‘And in the course of this journey which the human race makes in its attempt to reach the truth we discover that we observers disturb the thing we are observing’ (p. 112). That is both the problem and the fascination of psychoanalytic observation and it cannot be done without the use of ‘speculative imagination’. This entails a sense of being observed, by some more advanced part of the mind: a picture which allies the psychoanalytic process with other methods of self-analysis, art forms in particular. For self-analysis is, says Bion, a ‘natural’ phenomenon; the Grid was an attempt to map its thought-structure. He cites Valéry on the ‘cold’ or mathematical stance of the poet who must be ‘in service to the dreamer’ in a detached, objective way, whatever the heat of the passion at the moment of communication (p. 177). By analogy, ‘What form of artists can we be?’ (p. 105).

Conversing with Bion

Martha Harris, who organised the annual Tavistock seminars and personally invited Bion (who had been her supervisor), introduces the ‘experience’ of listening to him in a seminar of 1978 with the words: ‘Those of you who have had this experience will know that you will always get an unexpected answer which may seem extremely enigmatic, but afterwards may be very illuminating – and sometimes incredibly obvious’ (*Tavistock Seminars* [2005], p. 39). His ruminations on the nature of thinking and of psychoanalytic observation have the kind of authenticity which, when linked with the authentic experience of the listener, have the effect (she says) of being sometimes ‘blindingly true’. To read or listen to Bion requires this particular kind of self-analytic receptivity. It is an active process, but not one of arguing or debating – debating gets you nowhere; instead, you have to

ask *yourself* what he means as far as *you* are concerned – and he admits frequently that if the meaning doesn't get through then it is his fault for being unable to express it properly. The task is to participate in the tracking of an idea: if it does get through, it has germinated owing to an encounter between two or more minds.

To demonstrate this we can look at some key points of the conversation between Bion and Martha Harris; she shows us how to listen to Bion in the course of a search for inspiration rather than for answers or explanations: how to be a mediator to oneself or to a wider group. In the seminars transcribed here, for example, she takes up two significant and characteristic themes in Bion's picture of the mind, in order to dwell on them further: that of the 'third party' in the analysis, and that of the travelling or 'tracking' of an idea through either a group or an individual mind. When he begins to consider the idea of there being a presence in the room that is other than the two sensuously detectable bodies, the conversation continues:

Bion: So, while apparently there are only two bodies in the room, I think one has to go beyond that and detect this third – at least, the third who is also of course detecting what it detects. The analyst is being analysed all the time by this third party. If you are fortunate, after a while I think even the patient gets this third party brought home enough for him to be aware of its existence.

Mattie Harris: I would like you to expand if you could on what you mean by at least a third party, as if you had others also in mind: as if you thought that the analysand also had some third party eventually – I don't know whether you'd call it 'internal objects' (a jargon term) – (p. 161)

Bion confirms that it is not 'reasonable to give an interpretation unless you feel fairly convinced that you at any rate have evidence of this third party and then third, fourth, fifth or anybody else.' This ties in with his view that several different 'vertices' are required to focus on a problem in order to gain the sense of 'harmony' (the aesthetic sense)

that suggests it is 'true'. It does however turn off at a tangent from his implication that the third party is specifically the analyst of the analyst (the analyst's internal object), which was what led to the idea that (beyond that third party) the *analysand's* internal object or objects were also involved in the process. Later, Donald Meltzer would describe psychoanalysis as a 'conversation between internal objects' – not between the everyday personae of the analyst and analysand. Like most psychoanalytic terms, 'object' is an ugly piece of jargon, but 'available' (as Melanie Klein said of the word 'psychoanalysis'). But the idea behind it is clear – that there is a more advanced part of the mind that surveys and governs the conversation that is going on. This is of course an idea of Bion's also, as when (at the end of *Attention and Interpretation*) he speaks of the 'evolution of O': indicating that at-one-ment with the first object, 'god the Mother', is then extended in line with 'god the ineffable' – the principle of infinite evolution. Internal objects have their own internal objects who lead the advance of the personality whilst, at the same time, evolving themselves towards more sophisticated and complex value-systems which can then be fed to the infant-self. As Roger Money-Kyrle explained, what is being introjected is a function of the object, not just a piece of knowledge ('Cognitive development', 1968). The function is the capacity to develop, to have ideas. This also links with Bion's speculation that ideas, beginning with a 'genomene' (his neologism), are transmissible in mysterious non-Mendelian ways.

Indeed the tracking or travelling of ideas through different people in a group, or through different voices within an individual personality, is a theme that, like that of the 'third party', characterises this series of seminars. Bion's favourite metaphor for this is the river Alpheus whose course goes underground and re-emerges in unexpected places, as told in Milton's *Lycidas*. You never know when an idea is going to 'come up'. Judith Elkan asks whether the genesis of an idea is in the analyst, the patient, or the relationship (p. 162); and Bion is (unusually) emphatic in his response that it is in the relationship. There are also internal relationships, and

'one's own ideas also track their course through the mind or the personality, which is very difficult to trace. I think these ideas which have never been conscious do seem to be floating around somehow and do break through' (p. 168). The tracking of the idea through a group, he says, can serve as a 'model' for 'how an idea tracks through the mind of an individual' (psychoanalysis itself constituting a group of two – or more). In the last 1977 seminar Martha Harris brings the topic up again, and Bion concludes, reservedly, that it was possible to conceive of 'a community which can achieve wisdom in a way which a more bigoted or restricted individual (or even community) can't' (p. 190). That is: it may, or it may not; the question is still open as to the circumstances which favour ideas finding their underground pathways.

With regard to the question of how we may know whether an idea has been accessed or not, Bion speaks of rare moments of illumination (the Prince Andrei example), by contrast with the anxious sense of 'things not coming together'; and Martha Harris (aware of Bion's frustration with the psychoanalytic jargon of the transference) dovetails his reference to illumination with another favourite metaphor, the spatial one of room for growth:

Mattie Harris: Would you be saying then that the real growth of the mind, or of illumination, is something that is outside transference, countertransference: it is where memory and desire are in abeyance and the new idea, the new illumination, finds room and development takes place in spite of the *chains* of those.¹

Bion: You see I don't think that they are always discernible in the direct relationship; but in the course of time they *are*; and there is where there is such a thing as the inheritance of acquired characteristics. (p. 166)

In the background is an echo of Emily Brontë's poem 'Then dawns the invisible; the unseen its truth reveals' (known as *The Prisoner*) whose climax is 'The soul to feel the flesh and the flesh to feel the chain.' The new truth or

1 *Tavistock Seminars* (2005) wrongly transcribes 'chains' as 'change' (p. 24).

illumination can only be felt in a context of earthly imprisonment, fleshly chains, memory and desire. They are two poles of the same spectrum, as Bion would put it. As in the metaphor of birth, the foetus needs to feel squeezed before it can get the idea of there being more room outside. As with Milton's 'things invisible' (another favourite metaphor), somatic blindness becomes the ground for insight. Elsewhere Bion calls it 'psyche-lodgement'; though the implantation of the germ of an idea may only be discernible from a wider perspective, over the course of time.

At the end of the 1978 seminars Martha Harris says that as far as they are concerned, Bion himself is 'going underground' but will hopefully 'resurface' the following year and give them an 'interesting time' again:

Mattie Harris: We have no doubt it has changed us in some way or another – we know not how.

Bion: Thank you. I hope not to be put under arrest when I return to California on the grounds of having changed so much. (*Tavistock Seminars* [2005], p. 72)

The joke is that in a genuine conversation there is a reciprocity which allows for both parties to be changed in the presence of a third party that will not result in hostile 'arrest'. It was to a large extent the timely 'surfacing' of moments of conversation between these two, oiling the wheels of the group, that made these seminars enjoyable occasions, even when the topic was not necessarily a pleasurable one.

In another seminar, in response to Bion's description of very tiny and hesitant signs of mental movement, Martha Harris brings up the question of fear of a hostile object:

Mattie Harris: I may be on quite the wrong track, but could it be that the slowness of these little signs that something is happening ... the slowness be in any way connected with the patient's fear of an unreceptive, rigid, or hostile object that would object as soon as it began to feel that things were moving?

Bion: It certainly plays a big part: because, these patients are not only improved, but are probably sensitive in a way

that most people aren't. And the result is, that they become painfully aware of the reality of hostility and envy; and one of the difficulties here is to do with the degree to which the patient is robust, to which the patient is able to stand finding out what sort of universe they live in.²

The focus is on the difficulty of tolerating the reality of 'the universe we live in'; contact with reality demands mental growth, 'things moving', which is naturally resisted (in particular, Bion suggests, by a sensitive personality); and if the personality is not strong enough to tolerate this development, the spectre of a 'hostile object' looms. The existence of a hostile object is a *fear*, in a situation where the (real) internal object is not sufficiently trusted, perhaps not sufficiently 'evolved' (as Bion would say), to be able to cope with the movement of a germinating idea. The container-contained situation is in such a case not adequate to sustain the catastrophic change of a new state of mind, so an alternative – if illusory – protection is sought. The mind is put back in the prison-house – authority, morality, tyranny, basic assumptions, etc.

This ties in with Bion's definition of a lie – something conjured up by the tyrannical or omnipotent self – and with the view that all defences are essentially defences against the process of growth itself. Growth is painful because of the turbulence it arouses and the insecurity of not knowing where it is going or what shape the personality may take; and so is strongly resisted by the status quo. Martha Harris, picking up (speculatively) certain possible implications of Bion's narrative about the patient who as a baby watched his entire family being murdered, asks him to speak more about 'the murder of the question' by lies and paramnesias. He replies with a line from *Macbeth*: 'I doubt the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth' (p. 207); but points out that, in order to lie or equivocate, we need to know the truth in the first place. The idea has germinated, but has been perverted, misdirected.

2 See the Harris Meltzer Trust website for this video extract (not in *Tavistock Seminars*, 2005): www.harris-meltzer-trust.org.uk.

When asked in one of the New York seminars ‘How about defending the right to make up our own minds?’ Bion answers ‘It’s a nice idea; otherwise we would have to consider the possibility that our minds are made up for us by forces about which we know nothing’ (p. 75). His heroine Rosemary, in *A Memoir of the Future*, says likewise: ‘I don’t make up my mind – I let my mind make *me* up.’ The only things we can make up for ourselves are lies, paramnesias and hostile objects. Room for growth entails that we don’t know the future shape our mind may take, we have to rely on *real* internal objects to take us there – ‘god the Mother’ and ‘the evolution of god’ (the object-principle, O). So when we return to the question of the reality of ‘the universe we live in’, the answer is indeed ‘our eternal home – our Self.’