

Growing as a group

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in conjunction with a film showing of the Memoir of the Future*

The psychoanalytic pair

For Bion, psychoanalysis offers a distinctive method for engaging in the process of ‘catastrophic change’ or mental development: set in motion by the encounter between two minds, in a way which has vital links with art, science, philosophy and religion. Asked if there was a psychoanalytic way to the truth, he replied ‘None whatever. Psychoanalysis is only a technical instrument, something we can make use of for any purpose we want – ... to mislead or deceive people, and so on. It all depends on who is making use of it.’

I would like to say more about his very distinctive view of the mind as a group, which grows when it is a work-group and fails to grow when it is a basic assumption group. The work focuses not on authority and obedience but on the task of personality development

For Bion, the ‘psychoanalytic pair’ represents just such a specialised work-group, which has come into being in order to concentrate on the task in hand: namely, to introduce the patient to himself, since that is the person to whom he is irrevocably ‘married’. It is, he says, a ‘transient’ group (one of his puns on ‘transference’) precisely because it is not eternal; rather, it is exemplary – an attempt to liberate or re-start a growth process which has got into difficulties. Bion is very much aware that psychoanalysis is simply one (very recent) method for this type of meditation; and says that self-analysis is a ‘natural’ function.

This however is where resistance lies, where the enemy is to be found. ‘Natural’ is different from ‘automatic’. Psychoanalysis can be used to mislead – whether the patient or the analyst. Resistance is not to psychoanalytic interpretations (which he feels may often be justifiable) but to the growth process itself. Hostility is liable to be aroused by the psychoanalytic process precisely because it disturbs the status quo and engages turbulence. Yet if the pair are ‘lucky’ and also the analyst can moderate the fear of turbulence (ultimately, of death), and the meaning of the anxiety takes shape, it loses its destructiveness and becomes absorbed into the structure of the mind in the form of self-knowledge. As in ordinary personality development, there is a continuous oscillation between Ps (paranoid-schizoid) and D (depressive) positions: anxiety (requiring patience and suffering) and security or harmony (the sense of being understood, of being in line with O).

Something that Bion hints at from early on and makes clearer in his late talks, is that the analysis, rather than the analyst, is the true container for this turbulent oscillation between Ps and D (Ps↔D). ‘The personality has a container-contained relationship with psychoanalysis.’ This applies to both parties and explains how the analyst can ‘stand it’ – stand the turbulence. The modifying of anxiety is not entirely the responsibility of the analyst but rests on security provided by the psychoanalytic setting (though Bion does not use the word ‘setting’ much, just as he prefers not to use ‘transference’). A mind-scene is created like a play in a theatre, in which the germ of an idea may be noticed and held for observation by the protagonists. And the idea is ‘born’ of the *relationship*, he says emphatically. Thus the sense of at-one-ment or alignment

with O (when it happens) represents an intersection not with a single person but with the analytic pair.

And the pair is perhaps greater than the two evident bodies that are in the room. Although there are two main protagonists, there are actually more 'shadowy' objects in the psychic setting, gravitating around the psychoanalytic pair. Bion insists there are always 'at least' three parties in the analytic setup – to include the third one that is observing or analysing the analyst. The psychoanalytic pair are themselves a container for a wider group of potential participants in the attempt to 'align with O', to look at the truth, to allow a pattern to emerge. Bion implies that these shadowy participants, like the outer heavenly bodies in a galaxy, have a significant impact on the situation. It seems that part of the potential of the psychoanalytic setting is to enable the patient to get more in touch with the group that is his own mind. It is a different view of splitting or disunity of the mind from the traditional psychoanalytic one (or at least it expands the idea of splitting into a non-pathological sphere), and as such it has more in common with theatre.

On the other hand, if it is not a true conversation (Bion warns) it may commonly be a false 'imitation' that looks like psychoanalysis but is really a basic assumption group, probably of the dependent or pairing type, whose sense of security is based on 'being good' rather than on the aesthetic harmony of 'That is sooth; accept it'. There is a danger in misconstruing container-contained as this type of comfortable complacent mutual parasitism. Just as the psychoanalysis itself is the container for the encounter, so the patient's attacks will be made on the *link* between the analyst and the analysis.

The psychoanalytic task is to look for evidence of a potential idea that is trying to get through the psychic atmosphere (and that may appear as a 'wild idea'). It is an exhausting struggle since we humans are barely beginning to learn how to receive ideas, which are almost imperceptible to our undeveloped mental apparatus, and we are constantly being obstructed by what he calls the 'noise' of basic assumptions, theories, and other stuff that obscures observation. For example, by way of defence, when tired or perhaps pushed by the patient, the analyst may get a 'rush of theories to the head'. Such theories when new may have represented genuine discoveries, but using them as part of a moral system denudes their language and the original or 'basic' or thing is lost to sight. He was suspicious even of the terms transference and counter-transference, feeling that too much falsehood had accrued to them.

The counter-force to the 'noise' of the enemy is observation. Bion often quoted Freud's quotation of Charcot on the importance of observation; but he extended it to include the use of imagination. According to Bion psychoanalytic observation cannot take place without the use of imagination and he encouraged analysts to 'speculate' and 'give your imagination an airing', for the only 'facts' to be met in psychoanalysis are 'the facts of feeling' and these cannot be apprehended sensuously as the body can be by the physician, so they need to be imagined. Bion also liked Freud's definition of consciousness as 'an organ for the perception of psychic qualities', but added that it could be turned either outward (as in the daytime) or inward (at night, in dreams). This implies that the psychoanalytic session is itself a type of dream being surveyed by the organ of consciousness; for Bion differentiated between the dream that 'happened' last night when the patient was asleep, and that which is told or occurs during the session, which is the only real evidence available to the psychoanalytic pair.

Finally, Bion saw psychoanalysis itself as one of those wild ideas with an 'origin' somewhere in the roots of human history and culture, awaiting Freud's specific genius to catch it and give it earthly form: it is an art-science both modern and ancient: 'Who are our ancestors?' The idea of psychoanalysis aligns itself with the idea of an individual personality that is wondering how to become itself. When in a seminar someone declared that everyone should have 'the right to make up their own mind' Bion replied that it was 'a nice idea' but that unfortunately, we need to come to terms with the fact that 'our minds are made up for us by forces about which

we know nothing'. And the matter is put even more succinctly by the heroine of his *Memoir of the Future* when she says: 'I don't make up my mind – I let my mind make *me* up.' The psychoanalytic task is no different from that of everyday life: it is to relinquish illusory omnipotence, and align oneself with reality (O), internal and external. We can only become ourselves through reality-testing, namely, learning from experience the difference between truth and lies.

These then are the features of Bion's thinking that have been used, or at least intimated, in the 'transformations' made of his *Memoir*, both the original film and now the film of the play.

I would like to conclude this afternoon with giving a concrete example of what I believe he means by the 'tracking' of an idea through a group (like his reference to the river Alpheus, going underground and resurfacing at other times and places). This is based on a transcription of three of the Tavistock seminars (from 1977), from a much better recording than the one used in the published book *The Tavistock Seminars*, showing how my mother Mattie Harris moderated or mediated between Bion (whom she had invited personally) and the huge audience that the Tavi could accommodate in those days.

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 suggestion 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 ('Cognitive development', 1968), what is being introjected is a function of the object, not just a piece of knowledge. 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; 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.' 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 spatial metaphor 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 Bronte'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 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

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

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

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 the 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'; 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.

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 demands 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 'our eternal home – our Self' (p. 146).