

Transformations in O and conversing with the object

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In this talk I want to use an example from poetry to help make vivid and imaginable the very abstract progression towards self-knowledge that Bion calls 'transformations in O'. A major problem in talking or writing about psychoanalysis is the difficulty of expressing the mysterious quality of the psychoanalytic reverie – Bion's 'language of achievement', something that is not automatically available but has to be worked towards by each psychoanalytic couple, indeed in each session. In reverie, the object relationship, and the problem of finding an authentic language for communication, are closely entwined. It is essentially an unconscious process and the 'language' is not only verbal but includes the language of dreams and nonverbal communications. Meltzer calls the psychoanalytic setting a 'forcing house for symbol formation'. On the basis of dreams, associations, and other material, a private language is evolved that is meaningful to the psychoanalytic couple.

The journey in the direction of O (the truth), or under the aegis of O, is of course an object-related journey taking place internally, sometimes but not necessarily with the help of an external object. Indeed the word 'object' is one of the many meanings implied by the term 'O'. The object is also the internal observer, of both the analyst and the analysand, since according to Bion, observation is the key to transformation and the observing analyst is always himself being observed by his object – he speaks of 'at least three' people in the room. In each individual situation of conflict or turbulence, the object is the mediator with the truth on behalf of the self, as in Bion's model of maternal reverie and alpha-function. This applies to the analyst as much as to the analysand. Neither of them are in a position of knowledge at the start of the journey of the session; the analyst, in fact, in Bion's view, if being truthful and not tied to memory and desire, enters each session like a newborn baby. He is not the possessor of truth but the mediator through example.

The truth of the session does not of course mean absolute or final truth but is a lesser manifestation of O, relevant to the emotional conflict of that moment. Its pattern underlies the session and, with patient observation, gradually appears. It is known by means of an aesthetic feeling that does not signify contact with Absolute Reality (the ultimate O), but a step on a continuing journey known as 'becoming oneself'.

Bion calls this the 'evolutionary' aspect of O. The fact of the analyst not-knowing and of being in the process of learning, on a quest for truth, is of prime importance for

the patient's own capacity to learn from experience. Analysts such as Bion, Meltzer, Money-Kyrle, always stress that what the patient introjects is not just the understanding of a particular emotional problem but the process of understanding, the thinking function.

This 'evolution of O' refers to a general pattern of development in which psychoanalysis or psychotherapy has a specialised role, facilitating movement when development has stalled or become confused. A thought or idea is latent and needs to become conscious, in the process Bion terms 'psyche-lodgement' or 'intersection with O', the basis for the language of achievement. This is different, in some ways the opposite, of any kind of psychoanalytic theory, which Bion says often turns into a 'language of substitution', a pseudo-understanding designed to explain away and get rid of the problem. He felt that theory or 'knowing about' was a rigid defence against true 'knowing' or psychoanalysis as a thing-in-itself. A language needs to be evolved that describes and contains the problem and its resolution. But this is also the role of the arts, and is demonstrated by the process of symbol-formation in each particular artwork.

I would now like to use Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale' to draw some analogies that can help delineate some of the basic psychic movements involved in constructing the language of achievement: demonstrating how they are based on internal conversations with the object, or objects. The difference with a poem is that poetic language is public and private at the same time; it is worked out subjectively by the poet on behalf of a wider humanity, and the poet's construction is equally available to us. In poetry, the internal object is traditionally termed the muse, and takes many forms, in this case the Nightingale. The poet always feels in service to the muse, rather than the owner of creativity. The Nightingale's song represents the path to O, or 'intersects with O' as Bion describes moments of knowledge that occur within a psychoanalysis as a result of a dialogue that is primarily unconscious or dreamlike. But instead of a Grid we have the spiralling progression of moments of contact between the poet and his Nightingale-muse. The ebb and flow modality of the Ode explores various types of identification with the object, and in the process, constructs a symbol or container for the experience, equivalent to reverie and alpha-function in psychoanalysis.

The poem begins by establishing two separate mental states or worlds – that of the poet, and that of the Nightingale, the object with which he wishes to establish a creative reverie that will lead to understanding the human condition. The opening emphatically stresses the poet's pain or heartache, evoked with a sensuous heaviness:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,
Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains
One minute past, and Lethe-wards had sunk.

His slow-moving, heavy, paralysed state, suggested by dragging, plodding rhymes like 'aches... pains... drunk...sunk', contrast with the delicacy and lightness of the nightingale, who seems to inhabit a different world:

thou, light-winged Dryad of the trees,
In some melodious plot
Of beechen green, and shadows numberless,
Singest of summer in full-throated ease.

That is, the poet seems separated from the nightingale, owing to both his imprisoned senses and his heavy heart, his emotional paralysis. He hears the nightingale's song of summer, but she does not hear his pain, she is 'light-winged' and can escape at will from earthly sorrows, a muse who is out of reach. The poet cannot identify with the light-heartedness and imagines an artificial way of imitating, or introjecting, what he believes to be the nightingale's immunity from pain. In an attempt to gain this immunity, to identify with this privileged condition, he summons up the rich knowledge contained in the poetry of the past and imagines that he swallows it all in one single draught, seeking an anaesthetic:

With beaded bubbles winking at the brim,
And purple-stained mouth,
That I might drink, and leave the world unseen
And with thee fade away into the forest dim –

But the drug does not work; it is merely a grotesque caricature of happiness, a fake spiritual drink, with 'beaded bubbles winking at the brim', a form of lying to the self. The poet is no closer to entering the state of mind represented by the Nightingale. She remains oblivious to his suffering, wrapped up in herself and her own delights, and the poet feels an ambivalent mixture of love and hate towards his object-muse: love of the song, and hate owing to the distance and lack of empathy. Again he tries to escape his condition:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou among the leaves hast never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;

In this beautiful transition, the listener suddenly finds that instead of his expected union with the Nightingale, he appears to have created an unbridgeable gap between them. He is not 'with thee', but 'Here', where groans are the only music; and the Nightingale, as a result of the poet's own escapist desire to fade away, takes on the significance of something removed from and ignorant of the poet's mortal state. The bird's original volatile position as 'light-winged Dryad of the trees' becomes specifically one of sheltered self-indulgence ('thou among the leaves'), reflecting the poet's own mental state. In reaction, therefore, the imaginary draughts of hemlock and of wine disperse before the emphatic reality of 'Here', repeated in a triple 'Where':

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectre-thin, and dies,
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs;

The dying youth (an image of Keats's younger brother Tom who had recently died of tuberculosis) contrasts with the singing bird in an antithetical music; there is no counterpoint, no communication.

In the next movement, the poet seems to realize that he must actively project himself into the Nightingale's being; if thinking means to be full of sorrow, he needs to in some sense become the Nightingale in order to transform his own thoughts. It is the equivalent of the baby latching on to the breast:

Away! away! For I will fly to thee,
Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards,
But on the viewless wings of Poesy,
Though the dull brain perplexes and retards.

Suddenly he is energised, not leaden-eyed in escapism but in poetic flight, rejecting the anaesthetic drug of Bacchus and committed to the poetic route: 'I will fly to thee'. He recognises that poetry is not an anaesthetic but a means of transformation of pain and despair, and reciprocally, the significance of the Nightingale singing begins to change and become relevant to his mental state.

Already with thee! Tender is the night,
And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne,
Clustered around by all her starry fays;
But here there is no light,
Save what from heaven is with the breezes blown
Through verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways.

Where the poem began with heavy sounds and rhythms that gave the impression of being locked in a somatic state, now we see the operation of imagination. The Nightingale leads to a vision of the Queen-Moon, a higher representation of O, the beautiful source of knowledge and spiritual light. As Meltzer has written in relation to the aesthetic conflict that the infant experiences from birth, the potential response to the mother's mystery and inscrutability, that lies behind the initial impact of her sensuous beauty, may be of two types: either a turning away into the illusion of control and possessiveness (as in an adhesive or projective identification), or an imaginative journey into the qualities of the object's interior. Here Keats, having tested one way and confronted the reality principle, which demonstrated the uselessness of the anaesthetic drug, then tests another way, that of the imagination. The Queen Moon is 'haply on her throne', that is, imagined, not actually visible.

The kind of knowledge being sought at the core of this poem concerns the nature of communion with the object, the basis for knowing as distinct from knowing about (in Bion's distinction). Bion says that the nearest he can get to describing the experience of O is 'passionate love', that is, the intense tension between poles of love and hate that stimulate the desire for knowledge of the object – which becomes his formula LHK, or Meltzer's 'aesthetic conflict'. The emotional turbulence demands to be transformed into a symbol that contains its meaning – something different from an interpretation or

explanation, retaining the aura of mystery. This is the point of germination of a thought, that Bion calls 'psyche-lodgement', the fruit of a reverie between baby and mother, self and object. For the ultimate mystery is of course that of one's own personality, only knowable by means of this dialogue with internal objects.

In Keats's Ode, we see that for a moment this poetic flight leads to a mystical union with the object, a sense of oneness: 'Already with thee! Tender is the night'. This is the furthest reach of the imagination. But we note that almost instantly the light of consciousness reverses its pathway to 'But here there is no light'. The poet was in danger yet again of forgetting the context of 'Here'. But this time, instead of feeling yet again imprisoned in the claustrophobia of sickness and despair, he perceives pathways of light winding through the foliage of the trees, an opening-out of the poem's landscape which had previously been cloistered and confined. A connection with the object still exists, but of a different kind. The path towards O, the message of the object, is not a direct revelation but has to be inferred from chance gleams of light. The poet is still 'here': the same word, and the same place, as that where men sit and hear each other groan; but simultaneously, his vision is stretched to accommodate an extension of poetic knowledge, a whole poetic flight away; and the winding, irregular path of the new light (conveyed by the rhythm of the verse) illuminates the branching obstacles of what is fast becoming a mental landscape. The poet who listens 'darkling', is at this moment identified with the Nightingale who sings darkling. The climax of the poet's actions, beginning with the observation 'My heart aches', and mobilised into 'I will fly', then 'I cannot see', and finally 'I listen', is the achievement of this state of 'darkling', in which communion with an external voice of higher knowledge results directly in the harmonious numbers of poetry.

In a letter around this time Keats spoke of 'straining at particles of light in the midst of a great darkness', and of how he needed to extend his horizons of knowledge in order to tolerate the pains of thought: 'an extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people'. Meltzer describes the psychoanalytic reverie as 'counterdreaming', and compares the cultivation of this internal vision to glimpsing white deers' tails in the darkness.

It is difficult to explain the technique of counterdreaming... I compare it with waiting in the dark for the deer, grazing at night, seen by their flashing white tails.' This nocturnal vigilance is on the alert for movement of the quarry, part object minimal movements which with patience can be seen to form a pattern of incipient meaning cast before.

Bion likewise lays stress on the 'organ of consciousness' as a way of looking inward and outward at the same time, whether asleep or awake. It operates in the 'uncertainty cloud', the reverie that can tolerate its lack of definite knowledge, and is content to notice glimpses of light and to infer their source - the moon beyond the forest of the obscure unconscious. Bion also distinguishes between pain and suffering: pain being on the same spectrum as pleasure, namely intense sensation, hence tending to sado-masochistic indulgence: wallowing in the pain rather than seeking its meaning. Suffering, by contrast, involves a continual oscillation between the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, and the toleration of turbulence that he calls 'patience'. These are the alterna-

tives that Keats is dramatizing in the Ode: beginning with the overly sensuous prison of pain, then piercing its boundaries through the ‘viewless wing of Poesy’, the strenuous attempt to fly through the forest, like a singing bird, in fluttering passages from branch to branch, stage by stage. In his previous ode, the Ode to Psyche, Keats had written of ‘branched thoughts’ and earlier, of ‘thoughts branch-charmed’. The forest is rich with potential.

However to remain in that mystical oneness with the object-muse is as thought-stifling as to drown one’s sorrows in Lethe. It is an illusion in itself, as the poet instantly realises: the illusion of being chosen to be free from life’s sorrows and to use his talent for poetry as a personal comforter. In order to fully think through his pain, to suffer it constructively, the poet must return to his ‘sole self’, separating from the idea of literal union with the muse, and thereby introjecting the meaning of his quest. The baby only benefits from the mother’s capacity for reverie if he is capable of withstanding separation, rather than becoming tyrannically dependent. This is the most difficult movement in the poem, psychologically. It recalls that other anaesthetic – not drink but the wish for death to end all suffering, ‘easeful death’. Keats considers this, not literally but as a metaphor for ending the pain of continuing questioning. He tries to interpret the ‘embalmed darkness’ in which he finds himself, and asks whether his death now through ‘mused rhyme’ would not be an appropriate response to the Nightingale’s ‘full-throated ease’: would ‘taking into the air my quiet breath’ imitate (through a parallel cadence) the song which comes from ‘pouring forth thy soul abroad’:

Darkling, I listen; and, for many a time
I have been half in love with easeful Death,
Called him soft names in many a mused rhyme,
To take into the air my quiet breath;
Now more than ever seems it rich to die
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy.

But at this point, in his imaginative venture, he discovers that the song is cut dead:

Still wouldst thou sing, and I have ears in vain –
To thy high requiem become a sod.

The last rhyme sticks out, halting the well-established flow of the verse, and enacting a moment of awakening analogous to the Knight on the cold hill side, as the poet realises the consequences of a sentimental and self-indulgent ‘suicide’. In an earlier draft, Keats apparently began to write something like ‘But requiem’d [by thee although a sod]’ -which would have involved the Nightingale singing her song to the poet for eternity. But the poet saves himself from this self-glamourisation. The final phase of the poem describes in detail the emotional pain of separation from the object, which is in fact what clinches the meaning of his experience, and paradoxically, makes it both communicable and enduring, even though he is no longer in possession of the

mystical union which represents the ideal emotional feed of knowledge.

In the last two stanzas the song modulates from being a summer song of ‘full-throated ease’, of plenitude and comfort, and becomes a ‘requiem’, both for the poet’s separation and acknowledgement of loss, and for humanity as a whole.

For it is not the poet who fades away into the forest, but the song which fades as the bird moves elsewhere; and the poet’s enforced constancy, remaining ‘Here’ in his mortal status, shows that the kind of death which the Nightingale requires him to experience is not the easeful loss of all sensation, but the pain of separation, stage by stage in full awareness. After the intimation of a ‘high requiem’, the sense of mystic intimacy with the bird vanishes; but instead of leaving the poet ‘sans merci’ to starvation, the Nightingale’s gradually fading song awakens in him a new understanding of death and immortality:

Thou wast not born for death, immortal bird!
No hungry generations tread thee down;

The Nightingale’s significance has been reversed, since the poet first saw her in elevated ignorance among the leaves, unaware of the weariness, the fever and the fret. For the second time in the poem the bird is nearly visualised: not now as a winged Dryad, fanciful and decorative; but as the spirit of the hungry generations, hovering ever-present above their heavy tread, close to mortal existence but never caught and trampled by it – slightly out of reach.

The Nightingale is only immortal when her song passes out of the context of his own personal situation, with its possessiveness and desire for a favoured exemption from suffering, and into the wider system of the inner life of mankind. The depressive position involves concern for the object, rather than the self, and this implies also the other ‘babies’ of the internal mother – the others who are in need of the knowledge gained. It is an important feature also of the psychoanalytic reverie; that with each advance in self-knowledge, however small, comes a depressive sense of responsibility for realities in the world beyond the self.

In the case of the poet, this involves relinquishing any selfish pleasure in his poem, recognising that in psychic reality he is the listener rather than the creator of the Nightingale’s song, and that the song is not poured out for him personally but for humanity as a whole. As Susanne Langer, the philosopher of aesthetics, has said in relation to music, the essential musical activity is listening. The poet is a writer secondarily, primarily a listener. Reverie also depends on listening as much as on visual observation: observing the echoes that make the marks on the analyst.

In the Ode, the listener follows the path of the song away from himself, in space and time:

The voice I hear this passing night was heard
In ancient days by emperor and clown:
Perhaps the self-same song that found a path
Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home,

She stood in tears amid the alien corn;
The same that oft- times hath
Charmed magic casements, opening on the foam
Of perilous seas in fairy lands forlorn.

The marvellous suspension of time in 'The voice I hear this passing night' brings the mystical experience of the central 'fast fading -coming' into the context of mortality with its passing bell; the night is 'now' yet already past; and 'hear' is already 'heard', not recently, but in time unfathomable -the 'ancient days' inhabited by emperor and clown, who have less a historical than a timeless quality. The song weaves its way down the stanza, from 'The voice' to 'the self-same song', to 'The same', to 'opening', through the weird spectrum of humanity - emperors, Biblical Ruth and fairyland; entering the march of the hungry generations and finding its way in to the reality of the human mind in whatever shape or situation: in darkness, in hunger, or in 'alien corn'. The song's erratic path enters the human pageant like the light of the Queen-Moon, with the breezes blown.

It is this solidarity with the rest of humanity, epitomised by the sad heart of Ruth which is vividly identified with despite being distant in space and time, that transforms the poet's suffering and captures the meaning of the Nightingale's song for future generations. In order for the poem to serve this function, the poet has to release it as a personal possession and return to his sole (lonely) self:

Forlorn! The very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sole self!
Adieu! The fancy cannot cheat so well
As she is famed to do, deceiving elf.
Adieu! adieu! Thy plaintive anthem fades
Past the near meadows, over the still stream,
Up the hill-side; and now 'tis buried deep
In the next valley-glades:
Was it a vision, or a waking dream?
Fled is that music . . . Do I wake or sleep?

In a series of 'adieu's, the poet longingly traces the bird's fading song through the everyday landscape, including a gentle, wistful rebuke that the fancy has not cheated him -has not allowed him to fade away into the forest dim, to cease upon the midnight with no pain. He has to come to terms with the fact not that the experience was an illusion, but that he is alone once more: that not he, but the Nightingale, is fading away. The burial-place which he gives the song in his imagination, however, 'deep/ In the next valley glades', is not a purely natural habitat, but recalls the sensuous enclosure of the aching heart with which the poem began, and the embalmed darkness at the centre of the experience. When the song is no longer audible, its underground rhythm still pulses; the Nightingale still exists, and is remembered. The ache of a 'happiness' which at the

beginning threatened to lead to Lethe, has instead found a place in the Vale of Soul-making.

And finally, the last two lines of the poem look at the experience from the outside, framing it, giving context to the psychic drama that up to now has been viewed subjectively: was it a vision or a waking dream? Asks the poet. He conveys both the mystical moment of knowledge and the sense of disorientation that arises as a result of conversing with the object. There is a further process of digestion to take place. No reverie, no thought-process, is ever finished: each episode merely opens up the next stage in the mind's journey, following the Nightingale into the next valley-glade. The song, or mental feed, is no longer heard but neither is it lost, since the listening self (the baby) has an increased capacity for imaginative introjection.

The widening perspective of the last movement of the poem is essential to its meaning and value. We realise that the poet is our own analyst, and that in conversing with this representation of his object, he is demonstrating how he can transfer his own thought process to ourselves.

So from a therapeutic or developmental point of view, Keats's Ode offers an example of internal dialogue, made urgent by present pain, and made possible by means of projective communication with an object-muse, who is ultimately introjected at the time of separation. This journey, following the path of the Nightingale's song in the woods of the unconscious, conveys the trials and turbulations of identifications that underlie the thorny road to O.