

'Could Beauty help?' Responses to turbulence illustrated by scenes from *The Becoming Room*

Saturday 26 June 2021, Brazilian Psychoanalytic Society of Ribeirão Preto

In this talk I would like to illustrate the relation between psychic turbulence and the sense of beauty, in the post-Kleinian aesthetic model of the mind. I want to use some extracts from a film that we made inspired by Bion's *Memoir of the Future*. There were actually two films: one in the 1980s, directed by Kumar Shahani, and never completed; and this one, called *The Becoming Room*, which uses images from the original film as a phantasy background for a monologue in which Bion as an old man reviews moments of turbulence in his life history, in the process he calls 're-membering' the past in the present.

In Bion's *Memoir*, his heroine Rosemary asks the question 'Could beauty help?' (1.130). And on another occasion, the phrase is expanded to: 'Could beauty help the fumbling infancy of sensuality-based mind?' This is in response to the quarrelsome turbulence and anxiety of the group of internal characters who are trying to engage in 'organised discussion', that is, to form themselves into a work group, though so far they are having difficulty even in detecting the sources of their anxiety.

First I will summarise the relevant features of the post-Kleinian model that I would like to illustrate; then I will turn in more detail to the film.

The post-Kleinian model

The post-Kleinian model of the mind sees personality development as taking place by thinking through an idea which is trying to enter the mind, and finding a symbol to contain it ('psyche-lodgement'). The idea or thought appears initially in the form of a feeling, and the first step is to notice this 'fact of feeling' as Bion calls it. Bion and Meltzer adopt Freud's formulation of consciousness as a specialized organ of attention, that operates in sleep as well as in waking modes. Meltzer stresses the importance of who has control of this organ, and the danger of it being encapsulated in the claustrum (which we can assume explains the current appetite for false facts). Feeling disturbs the existing state of mind and arouses fear but also the search for an aesthetic object to digest and transform it. For, Meltzer says, 'In the beginning was the aesthetic object, and the aesthetic object was the breast and the breast was the world' (SEM). This view of mental development is in line with that of poets, and of philosophers such as Susanne Langer who see the fear and curiosity aroused by beauty as lying at the heart of man's symbol-making capacity. As Coleridge first said, 'an idea can only be contained in a symbol'.

The developmental role of aesthetic experience is acknowledged in Meltzer's work from the beginning. But in his later works, *The Apprehension of Beauty* and *The Claustrum*, he explicitly states his view that all defence mechanisms are essentially defending against the impact of the aesthetic object: the primary developmental push that begins at the moment of birth when the infant first learns to split its response between external beauty and internal beauty, and that we might associate with the concept of a 'life-instinct'. Meltzer writes:

The psychopathology which we study and allege to treat has its primary basis in the flight from the pain of the aesthetic conflict. The impact of separation, of deprivation – emotional

and physical, of physical illness, of oedipal conflict – pregenital and genital, of chance events, of seductions and brutality, of indulgence and over-protection, of family disintegration, of the death of parents or siblings – all of these derive the core of their significance for the developmental process from their contribution as aspects of the underlying, fundamental process of avoidance of the impact of the beauty of the world, and of passionate intimacy with another human being.

This unknown quality is experienced as ugliness: it embodies the possibility that the aesthetic object is untrustworthy and may cause the death of the infant personality. The tension created by this ugliness in juxtaposition with the sense of beauty aroused by the knowable, sensuous exterior of the object, creates psychic turbulence. If this turbulence is felt to be intolerable, the infant (or adult) is tempted to collapse into various modes of defence that include: puritanism, cynicism and perversity, or on the intellectual level, false symbols and sophisticated forms of lying such as ‘false logic, semantic ambiguities, spurious generalizations, counterfeit emotions’ (p. 37). The difference between tolerating and not tolerating aesthetic conflict is notated by Bion as LHK *versus* minus LHK: that is, positive versus negative emotions – which are not nasty or ugly emotions but rather, non- or anti-emotions, a defence against emotionality altogether. According to Bion we have only two choices when faced with turbulence: ‘kill it or find out about it’ – hence the K-link is brought in, to work through the love-hate ambiguity (or minus K if this tension is avoided). Our minds can develop, or they can ossify inside an ‘exoskeleton’ that puts a stop to further growth.

If beauty causes the problems in the first place, how can beauty help to solve them? Essentially, as always, by finding a symbol to represent the emotional experience which will contain and organise its frightening disruptive elements and make them part of an ‘underlying pattern’: that is, seeking an aesthetic response that can contain the meaning of the turbulence.

The Becoming Room

Bion always said that he was not a psychoanalyst but was ‘becoming a psychoanalyst’. In his *Memoir* we can follow his own self-analysis, the story of his own becoming, using our own countertransference to the story he tells. The images and events are memories that have to be re-membered, not simply recalled but put together in a new way in order to make sense of the present personality. This is what he calls ‘becoming O’ – approaching reality, by means of symbolization of the present experience. The story is itself a symbol and, as he says, this makes it potentially ‘generative’, stimulating a reciprocal response in others. The films of the *Memoir* represent an attempt to follow and mirror Bion’s own search for psychic organization after the wreckage of the ‘war’, mapping those areas of turbulence where growth was restricted or avoided. Such areas occur in all phases of life; he presents examples from childhood, war, and then psychoanalysis itself.

In the beginning was the mother. In his autobiographies Bion presents himself as having in a sense two mothers: his actual mother and her alter-ego, the Ayah or childhood nanny. The external beauty of the mother is partnered by the hidden beauty of the Ayah which is associated with the mysterious, forbidden qualities of Indian religion and superstition. This hidden religion is opposed to the strict nonconformist Christianity of his European family tradition, which is associated with the conformist values of the Raj and respectability. In Bion’s narrative, the qualities of beauty and awe are presented as belonging to the Indian aspect of his personality, which was lost or repressed when he moved to boarding school in England at the age of eight in order to be ‘educated’, that is, trained in basic assumption mentality under the aegis of harsh superego figures.

The characters in the film, as in the *Memoir*, bear a superficial resemblance to the real people who inhabited Bion’s childhood. But as he insists, this resemblance is an illusion even

though a necessary one (as in all fiction), and really they represent abstractions, aspects of his psychic reality that he cannot formulate any other way; when he tried a mathematical notation he felt that it failed to engage the identification of readers – what Coleridge called the ‘suspension of disbelief’.

The story begins at the end with Bion in old age, on the threshold of death, feeling the need to revisit moments of turbulence in order to understand the nature of catastrophic change. Like a plant ready to shed its seeds, he urgently wishes to transmit something of his own experience of ‘becoming himself’ so that it can be used by others and become part of their own growth process. As always, the model for any ‘catastrophic’ transition is the moment of birth itself, when the personality changes from a watery to a gaseous medium of existence and senses the distinction between somatic and psychic. This is the ‘coming together of the prenatal and postnatal personalities’ which, in Bion’s picture, is the prerequisite for the birth of any real thinking process. This first ‘caesura’ is the foundation for all subsequent points of structural change; it is both a biological event and a metaphor for psychic tension, marking the confrontation between sensuous experience and suprasensuous or psychic experience, external and internal beauty.

The story told in the film is preoccupied with the effort to get these two perspectives to converse with one another – feelings and ideas. Bion reminds us frequently that we use the same word – conception – for both the human infant and for a new idea. In philosophy the soul, like any conception, derives from infinity, eternity (Bion’s ‘O’) and is the anchor to reality. In the film there is a periodic interjection from a ‘Somite’ representing the primitive part that keeps the mind in touch with its prenatal capacity to listen to bodily feelings, despite its hostility to the ‘devil Psyche’, the strange and monstrous excrescence of the adrenal glands that seems to swallow up its established existence and transform its shape:

SOMITE: I resisted being absorbed. All the same it happened – my feelings became idealised. Somehow I got born.

For Bion’s view, like that of the poets, is a Platonic one, in which the capacity to see beauty is already present in the foetus: it is innate, part of the human condition, and accompanies the newborn soul with ‘clouds of glory’ when it enters the world, although as Wordsworth said, this is also where its struggles begin in earnest.

But it’s hard to re-member – those impressive caesuras happened time and again. The meeting between my sperm and ovum was a passionate one. A blush on the walls of the uterus, a stain on the white radiance of eternity became my love of beauty. It was there, in my mother’s wonderful hats, full of flowers and fruits. She was an abandoned woman – my uncle said so.

Wordsworth’s lament that ‘getting and spending we lay waste our powers’ is called by Bion basic assumption mentality, as in the efforts of his parents to be respectable in social and religious terms: to obey the precepts of science on the one hand and religion on the other, strictly regimentalised. Even in this context, the child believes there are aspects of his mother than are ‘abandoned’, or that she abandons when she can be more truly herself and in emotional contact. But mostly these are projected onto the Ayah. ‘There were other truths’, says the Father, that would ‘pollute the purity of science and religion’.

These ‘other truths’ are associated by the child Wilfred with the alternative Indian culture in which he has been immersed by his parents in fact, who both rely on it and try to keep it from influencing him, unaware of their own internal contradictions and trying to hold their

own emotionality at arm's length, as it seems somehow unrespectable. From early on Bion experiences what he later calls 'home leave' – distance from the mother or internal object, called by Money-Kyrle 'the base' for cognitive development. There are morals and rules for behaviour but no space for curiosity or imagination; no secure grounding in the internal maternal reverie that performs alpha-function. Emotional education is foisted onto the Ayah, as in the scene where the Mother refuses to answer the boy's questions about her evidently pregnant friend, excusing herself by saying 'I'm too busy'. Hence the children attack their unconscious understanding of pregnancy in the form of tormenting the cat inside a flower-pot, which as Bion says, represents an attack on the idea of growth – they don't like to have their own structure expanded in an endoskeletal way. And the new thought always appears monstrous to the existing personality, just as the new baby arouses hostility in the existing children.

According to Money-Kyrle, the idea of creative parental sexuality is one of the innate preconceptions that are essential to cognitive development, along with the idea of the feeding breast, and of death (loss, end, separation). The childhood episodes in the film are all concerned with Wilfred's oedipal attempts to understand creativity and its relation to sexuality. In one episode he creates a flower arrangement of yellow flowers, his favourite colour associated with the Indian sun. It displays an imitative beauty, his own harmonious creation in the childish sense of possessiveness of his mother or object (the flowers themselves), and he is keen to get the approval of his father for what he considers to be his own manly efforts (projective identification with the father). However the father is not interested in the artwork and cannot intuitively understand the boy's attempt to identify with him as an internal father who enables the mother's beauty to bloom. His own idea of manliness is lodged in engineering technology (as in building canals, or the gun to hunt tigers) but flower arranging would come under the heading of his worry about Wilfred's excessive femininity, dreaminess and general sopiness – 'moonfaced coward' as he is described. The only way the child can get his father's attention is by introducing the word 'lying'. 'Why did you say that?' says the father, horrified. It makes no difference that the boy says he is *not* lying – the very idea that lying could be considered as an option shatters the father's sense that his moral system is secure.

Hence a category of the 'unspeakable' begins to form, associated with the 'untouchable' Indian servants, into which incomprehensible indigestible emotions are deposited. There is no place for them in the official educational timetable, whose ambience lacks what Bion calls the free 'valency' that can reach out and make links with other objects, people, parts of the self, vertices or perspectives. So, later, one of his characters says: 'I call it linking up' – but it feels like a 'strange meeting' and he is not sure if it might be the 'counsel of the Devil'.

The child thus constructs his own personal religious system in which a severe 'Arf Arfer' superego, obeyed by his father and to some extent his mother, is associated with restrictive exoskeletons and punishment for those who do not conform. At the same time he also believes in the unspeakable, untouchable beliefs of his Ayah, conveyed through the mythologies she relates to him and presided over ultimately by the tiger-god of the jungle, beautiful and terrible at the same time. The jungle, by contrast with social norms and affectations, is the place of reality – 'the real night and real noise'. This place of reality is also called 'Heaven' and it houses the mysteries of sexual procreation, the 'Electric City' associated with his father's magical, clever engineering and his swaying watch-chain. Wilfred is fascinated by the sexual play of the two little girls 'licking each other's tongues', but the Ayah, conforming to her social role, tells him it is not a game for nice white children. The child's mind is a profusion of imaginative confusions – turbulence with no resolution. 'Which way should I go from here?' he asks St Peter, the guardian priest at the gates to Heaven, O's threshold, where 'all his progenitors' are having a party.

War and turbulence

The mysterious place of reality (later called 'O') – where heaven meets the jungle – is the source of all the child's mixed-up ideas and language, and the object of all his unanswered questions. He cannot reconcile the different vertices that relate to it – what is good and what is the counsel of the Devil. The maternal aspect of the object seems unprotected by the punitive paternal aspect, as in the question about why the City has no 'city wall' (the city being his mother's lap – an early version of O that becomes 'electrified' by sexuality). Reciprocally, the paternal attack on the male tiger-god, using the blasphemous technology of the hunting gun, incites revenge on the part of the female tiger. The humans, or naughty children, have undervalued the awesome powers of the beautiful tiger-couple from the world of ultimate reality, the jungle. The sense of beauty is inextricable from the sense of fear – the new thought is always a monster. The terrifying live beauty is experienced as ugly until it has been tamed (as in hunted), converted into rugs and trophies. But of course this taming has its own ugliness, reflected in the internal death of supposed civilisation. The tiger's head with its underground roar becomes a container for a wider lament.

Wilfred is confused about the different object-values embodied in these different types of beauty and ugliness. He feels his father is accusing him of fraudulence, of usurping Daddy's position. He is convinced of his own cowardice, the 'moon-faced' boy, and confused about his own value in relation to these different types of internal divinity: the tiger type and the superego type whose power is founded on the tyranny of basic assumptions. Is he included or excluded? Do they invite identification or disintegration?

And what begins in childhood continues in situations throughout life – school, war, sexual relationships, psychoanalysis.

BION: It was the same later when it came to the psychoanalytical dovecote. Not reversed but repeated. You should see what goes on in there when feminine intuition intrudes.

SOLDIER: You should see what goes on in there when the snipers are firing.

WOMAN: I was terrified when my baby was born. And when the tiger roared after its mate was killed in the hunt –

BION: I was terrified of the old beggar woman – grey, faceless, shapeless.

The violated maternal object, the other side of the process of birth, becomes ugly in the sense of 'grey, faceless, shapeless'. Just as the tanks in the war reveal themselves to be death-traps not protective containers, ejecting their charred remains of men in a pseudo-birth.

Psychoanalysis is not itself a solution to the nightmare of the claustrum but a re-entry into the same patterns of turbulence, at a different time and place, in the way Bion calls 're-membering' rather than straightforward memory of situations which are now past. The temptation under stress is always to retreat and to attack the pregnant pot with its unknown inner meaning – to kill the new idea rather than find out about it. This can be done by imprisoning it in a respectable institutional exoskeleton – such as the 'psychoanalytical dovecote', or obedience to the orders of the 'Intelligence Officer' in the war, characterized by their stupidity. The special fear of being excluded from the 'dovecote' – being deprived of an exoskeleton - is represented in the film by the soldier quivering under his blanket of white feathers, the covering of basic assumptions and obedience to orders that appears to protect but when viewed correctly can be seen as putting life in danger. The pregnant pot has no city wall. Obedience is the ultimate answer that puts an end to any desire to discover the new idea that may have lodged in the psyche.

As Bion said in the paper on 'Turbulence', sometimes repetition compulsion can be put down to the fact that the question has not been answered (silenced) and is therefore still active;

it has not been killed off. Ultimately, it is voracious curiosity that pulls him in the direction of reality – curiosity about the internal conversations by fictional characters in his mind.

Psychoanalysis

Meltzer says that for the psychoanalyst, ‘it is more than analogical to say that analysts have the same type of aesthetic conflict in their love affair with the psychoanalytical method and its framework of theory of the personality and therapeutic process.’ The analyst’s personal story is one example of the universal human story. When the film turns to Psychoanalysis, it is focusing on this matter of universalization, on the question that Bion puts at the beginning of the film:

What parts of me, that once were my own, could ever enter into other people and their becoming?

What kind of useful identification can be set in motion? It means re-entering that state of potential catastrophic change, the possibility of death, either in the future, or perhaps recognizing that death has happened already but this time it may be different. Warning somatic voices come to his attention: ‘Don’t go down the unconscious Daddy!’ For the somatic or prenatal level of thinking (before transformation into alpha-elements) has its own defensive warning signals. It no more wants to be transformed into postnatal language than the postnatal voices wish to listen to these signals. They prefer to stay on opposite sides of their caesura – that is, unless they are captured by poetic language:

Where did I go last night? I asked myself, in the absence of anyone else to ask, other than a few crackpot poets.

The language of poetry and the voices of internalized fictional characters are responsible for keeping the mind alive even in its darkest times of burial under lies and basic assumptions. There is still turbulence beneath the smooth covering of respectability. In the ‘Turbulence’ paper Bion emphasizes the need to turn the organ of attention – consciousness – below the smooth surface of the Mediterranean sea, to discover the volcanic adolescent emotionality beneath its latency exterior. This part of the mind is a real place – you have to *go* there, in dreams. In his autobiography he quotes the end of Milton’s *Lycidas*: ‘Tomorrow to fresh woods’ – and adds ‘Yes *woods* you fool – it’s there in the jungle that you have to live!’ Woods, like waves, trap turbulence.

Back in the jungle ‘where dreams are awake’, the Psychoanalyst of the film considers the position of psychoanalysis in relation to the internal object, the tiger, in its native habitat:

PSYCHOANALYST: I would describe psychoanalysis as just a stripe on the coat of the Tiger. Ultimately it may meet the Tiger, the thing itself, ‘O’ –

Instantly he becomes aware of the somatic voices that indicate the pain and distress of the ‘wounded men’ or internal babies, in a wordless chorus of animal moans with a hint of sad sexuality, trapped in mud rather than the ‘blush on the walls of the placenta’:

SOMITE: Look at the evidence of your senses. Look at those wounded men moaning in the mud – raucous, gentle, like bitterns mating.

At this point the group of characters are beginning to realise that it is not up to one of them to dominate but to all of them, as a group, to link up and attribute meaning to the sounds.

BION: This was after the war, but the problem was the same. Could the thing itself ever be altered by being observed? Could a mind ever be grafted onto a sensual glutinous base of fear and appetite? Can the adrenal glands give birth to spirit or soul?

If only two minds could have the real courage to get together and have a meeting – a real discussion about real things. I call it linking up.

The somatic level (the adrenal glands) has found a way to enter the conversation and to become observable by the organ of attention. The miraculous thing then seems to be the possibility that nothing needs to be done – the situation simply needs to be observed. This is an entirely new perspective: that observation might in itself enable development to take place, and turbulent emotions be transformed into a more elevated level of existence – mind, spirit or soul. (Bion says that for him, these terms are interchangeable.)

Catastrophic change

This internal meeting represents what Bion calls ‘introducing the patient to himself – for that is a marriage that will last as long as he lives’. Links need to be made in internal reality not just externally, as that is where the drama of Becoming really takes place:

ST PETER: Perhaps even Yourself is worthy of becoming a love object. Had you thought of meeting your own mind for purposes of reality testing?

At first it seems too much to hope for, that ‘some passionate love might be born’ – passion being Bion’s description of ‘alignment with O’, the result of the creativity of internal objects. ‘The nearest I can describe it is passionate love’ (he writes in *Attention and Interpretation*).

If that is too ambitious, then perhaps Bion might find a part of himself that he could ‘at least respect’.

But this would involve Breakdown, a necessary feature of Becoming. As a result of a new capacity for linking and meeting other parts of the personality, it becomes possible to imagine the type of breakdown that is ‘breakthrough’: as the Psychoanalyst puts it:

PSYCHOANALYST: Break up, down, in, out, or through?

I began to see the pattern underlying all the examples – the source of turbulence that Palinurus could not see when he forgot about our fishy selves beneath the smooth surface of the waters.

Untouchable, unspeakable – the emotional storm in which the germ of an idea might lodge – the lowly glandular origins of thought embedded in the mud of common sense.

These linkages include the one between pre- and post-natal selves. When the disparate parts come together, a container is formed in which a preconception can lodge and develop, analogously to a foetus in the womb. It is an aesthetic containment, founded in an apparent muddy mess, the ‘mud of common sense’ in which different senses join together into consensuality. The mind is the future shape of the personality and it evolves from a somatic situation of fertile breakdown of former exoskeletal shapes, into a vision of beauty, the fruit of self-knowledge:

BION: A mind might be generated by maggots, and the shadow of the Future, like Helen of Troy, emerge from the dungheap of rotting flesh, the carcasses of the war.

In this fertile ugliness an idea can ‘blush unseen’ analogously to the meeting of sperm and ovum. In the last section of dialogue the group of disparate characters manage to form into a work-group, contributing their own perspectives; they grow out of their turbulent mutual suspicion. They link up. The Scientist calls it ‘experience after death’. Instead of ‘making up their minds’ they have a new goal, namely, to allow their minds to be made up by forces beyond their own control – by internal objects, the godhead, in alignment with O. This is the process that opens to the ‘marvellous blue sky’ of Bion’s picture of the Platonic world of ideas. At the end he understands the caesura leading to new beginnings, that happens every time a new idea is born and the structure of the personality transcends its previous limits:

BION: I never realized birth and death were aspects of the same activity.

As in the neoPlatonic ladder, sensuous beauty is transformed into spiritual beauty, co-extensive with the birth of mind.

Link to *Could Beauty Help?* <https://youtu.be/eqgBt7LYj9s>

Link to *The Becoming Room*: https://youtu.be/14Wc8U6m2_w