

The late Bion

Antonio Ciocca

Abstract

In February 1968, aged over 70, Wilfred Bion moved to California and worked there for a decade, active until shortly before his death. Only recently have we been able to know more about this period of his life that corresponds to a deep theoretical development that makes the theory and technique of psychoanalysis pivot on the concept of experience of O. The memoirs of his American patients, Grotstein (2007) and Gooch (Culbert-Kohen, 2011) introduce us to Bion *at work* in his analytical room and show us his “disciplined and focused” technique.

Key words: the late Bion, O, wisdom, theory and technique of psychoanalysis

In February 1968, aged over 70 and disappointed by the British psychoanalytical circles that he found too conventional, Bion (1897-1979) accepted the invitation of a group of Californian psychoanalysts and moved with his wife to Los Angeles at 225, Homewood Road. We do not really know the reasons for this decision but we can imagine they were quite serious if the move was undertaken at such a ripe age. In California Bion was delighted with the warm climate that reminded him of his native India, but did not really like the American psychoanalytical culture: “American psychoanalysts actually converse with their patients”, he remarked with surprise (Grotstein, 2007) but he was also struck by the powerful youth protest movement that was totally distant from him. His clinical and teaching activity was intense and caused debate and controversy in the very group that invited him. He was invited to take sides in this but refused. He thought it improper for a clinician to advertise himself, meaning that he considered the affiliation question like a search for identity for the sake of the public¹. He tirelessly held speeches and seminars in Europe² and South America, in particular Argentina and Brazil where instead he felt welcome and understood³. Lopez Corvo (2002) sums it up neatly: He was obscure with the British, sparing with the Americans and sweetly patient with the Brazilians”.

¹ A defensive form of *public-action*, we could call it, where the public presentation substitutes the internal identity change.

² He held seminars in England in 1976, 1977, 1978 and 1979; in July 1977 in Rome and in July 1978 in Paris.

³ Bion compares his reception in South America to a second marriage described as an example of the triumph of Hope on Expectation (Bion, 1985). In Rio he even met people called Bion coming, like the English Bions, from La Rochelle and happily said “Long live the tribe!” (Bion, 1985).

Bion's work

Bion's work followed a complex but linear course. After a few essays on military psychiatry, he published articles on group dynamics later collected in *Experiences in groups*⁴. Later, in the 1950s he wrote a series of essays on psychotic thinking collected in 1967 in *Second Thoughts*. He then moved to epistemological reflections on psychoanalysis as a science and the mind as a thinking apparatus: *Learning from experience* (1962), *Elements of Psycho-Analysis* (1963), *Transformations* (1965) and *Attention and Interpretation* (1970).

After this book Bion did not publish any other *scientific* essay, abandoned psychoanalytical language and started experimenting with a new idiom, the artistic language of his fantasy trilogy *A memoir of the future* (*The dream*, 1975, *The past presented*, 1977, and *The dawn of oblivion*, 1979) along with the ordinary but evocative language of his autobiography published posthumous in two parts: *The long weekend* (1982) and *All my sins remembered* (1985)⁵. But most of all, he continued to work and dedicated himself to the oral transmission of his thought in seminars, talks, conferences, supervisions and analyses that we have recently started to know, as many unpublished papers, notes, transcriptions of seminars have been published along with the memoirs of his patients.

I like to mention *Notes on memory and desire*, a short paper of 1967, a series of articles collected in a volume published in Italian in 1976 that includes *Catastrophic change*, *The grid*, *The death of Palinurus*, *Caesura* and *Brazilian lectures* in addition to an interview with A.G. Banet jr; a series of seminars held in Los Angeles in 1976, New York in 1977 and Sao Paulo in 1978 collected in *Four discussions with W.R. Bion*. Four papers (*Emotional turbulence*, *On a quotation from Freud*, *Evidence* and *Making the best of a bad job*) and the second collection of *Brazilian Lectures*⁶, *Taming wild thoughts*, 1997, *The Tavistock Seminars* and *Seminari italiani*, 1983, in addition to a seminar held in Paris on July 10, 1978, *Autour de l'entretien préliminaire*, 2000.

⁴ The only book he didn't care about had long lasting success (Bion, 1985).

⁵ To his autobiography we should add also his *War memoirs 1917-1919* (1983).

⁶ As far as I know, these are the only clinical supervisions that have been published of the many given by Bion. Francesca Bion, for example, recalls that in April 1978 in the two weeks spent in Sao Paulo he held 50 clinical seminars, consultations every day and ten meetings in the evening. Only six persons could attend a seminar and the clinical presentations had to be "spontaneous"- As Francesca writes, he saw the patients to be discussed for the first time (Bion, 1987).

The most valuable testimony we have of *Bion at work* comes from the memoirs of his American patients: Grotstein (2007) and Gooch (Culbert-Kohen, 2011).

The late Bion is neither well known nor well understood and has given rise to intense debate. Some authors explicitly talk of senile deterioration (O'Shaughnessy, 2005)⁷, others instead accuse him of having abandoned the scientific rigour of psychoanalysis, of having surrendered to mysticism, of having embraced oriental philosophy, of having assumed the attitude of a Zen master (Grotstein, 2007).

My impression is that there is a deep misunderstanding of the radical change in Bion's language and thinking that however remains in a basic continuity, as discussed in *Caesura*.

Only now can we say that this last period of Bion's life and work is being properly investigated and we start to see the depth of the change he suggests⁸.

Wisdom

When his American publisher Aronson asked him to republish his four books in a single volume, Bion chose the title *Seven Servants*. The number clearly did not refer to the papers but to their meaning. The title came in fact from a poem by Kipling, an Anglo-Indian poet Bion loved⁹, *Six Honest Serving Men*, included in the collection *The Elephant's Child*, part of the *Just So Stories*¹⁰.

⁷ "His thinking becomes less disciplined mixing and blurring categories of discourse, embracing contradictions, and sliding between ideas rather than linking them". According to O'Shaughnessy, an example of this decay is precisely the concept of O whose multiple meanings of reality, truth, divinity, and psychosis are too confused.

⁸ I wish to recall that in 1995 the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* hosted a debate *Whose Bion?* between Edna O'Shaughnessy, Elizabeth Tabak de Blanchedi and Antonino Ferro and in 2001 another debate *On the value of "late Bion" to analytic theory and practice* between Rachel B. Blass, David Taylor and Rudi Vermote. The book *Bion today*, edited by Chris Mawson in 2011 dedicates a chapter to the late Bion with essays by Rudi Vermote (*Bion's critical approach to psychoanalysis*), Margot Waddell (*From resemblance to identity*) and Harris Williams (*Underlying patterns in Bion's Memoir of the future*).

⁹ I am reading Kipling, an old friend... I find in him a depth that I did not remember (or always ignored) (Bion, 1985).

¹⁰ I KEEP six honest serving-men
(They taught me all I knew);
Their names are What and Why and When
And How and Where and Who.
I send them over land and sea,
I send them east and west;
But after they have worked for me,
I give them all a rest.
I let them rest from nine till five,
For I am busy then,

The poem talks about the search for knowledge through the work of six honest serving men (What, Why, When, How, Where and Who) that taught the poet all he knows and of the rest he finally accorded them (to live our life, we could say – *for I am busy* – with its needs – *for they are hungry men*) while the Elephant’s Child keeps asking himself *One million Hows, two million Wheres, And seven million Whys*. In his autobiography Bion recalls that as a child he had been actually compared to Kipling’s elephant’s child because of his unquenchable curiosity: he was like the elephant’s child who asks a lot of questions but never learns anything (Bion, 1985). This title then refers us to the difficult passage (that must have been especially difficult for him) from the search for knowledge, abandoning childish curiosity, to the achievement of wisdom that Bion instead felt was tied to the negative capacity Keats mentioned in relation to Shakespeare, i.e. “Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts and reasons” (Keats, 1817 quoted in Bion, 1970).

Language

What changes does Bion suggest? The first, immediately evident one is language. Bion leaves the scientific language (both the abstruse language of mathematical formulas and the jargon of psychoanalysis to which he had greatly contributed but now considers not only inadequate but also an obstacle that should be avoided) and after the uncertain outcome of his artistic writing in *Memoir of the future*, he adopts a more ordinary and expressive language, the everyday language shared by analyst and patient.

He uses this ordinary language to address his main theoretical change: to make the whole apparatus of psychoanalysis, as conceptual model and clinical practice, move from K to O, from the search for knowledge to what he calls experiencing O. A Promethean move if we consider that psychoanalysis was born with Freud as a search for knowledge – self-analysis – and that Bion had dedicated most of his work to its development: thinking, thinking disorders, its functional organization, the grid,

As well as breakfast, lunch, and tea,
For they are hungry men.
But different folk have different views;
I know a person small—
She keeps ten million serving-men,
Who get no rest at all!
She sends'em abroad on her own affairs,
From the second she opens her eyes—
One million Hows, two million Wheres,
And seven million Whys!

knowledge, the epistemology of psychoanalysis and so on. All this now is shifted and pivots on O.

In *Elements of psychoanalysis*, Bion had identified three basic elements in psychoanalysis: L (love), H (hate) and K (knowledge) that represent also a model of the development of psychoanalysis seen as a probe that goes through different mental layers expanding as a reflection and a theory from Freud to Klein to Bion himself that here sees himself studying the process of thinking and its epistemology. In *Transformations* Bion adds O that is not an element like the others, but is added to the others because it radically changes the meaning and function of the model itself.

Experiencing O

What is O? O is the *origin* as in the geometrical example of the Cartesian axes. It does not mean zero, which would indicate a void, because Bion here refers to something full, alive and active: external reality if we look out of ourselves, internal reality if we look inside ourselves. O is the cause of what we are and of what we feel even if we can never explain it because reality, internal and external is in itself unknowable. What can we know of the exchange of quantum forces and elemental particles that form reality or of the activation of cells and chemical substances that form our feelings and emotions? We can only feel and try to identify their effects on ourselves and in ourselves, which corresponds to experiencing O. It is not an experience of reality in itself, external or internal, that would be impossible – except in various forms of delusion, but it is the experience of a world of feelings, perceptions and emotions that are activated by the contact with reality and activate our thoughts, feelings, motives and behaviors, our subjective world. I would like to stress here that in keeping O at the center, Bion's thought is radically unified and allows to see the whole human being as a person with his core of mystery moving him. Bion does not like to use the terms that imply "body" and "mind" and so prefers to use the term Self to include body or mind and a mental space for other ideas still to be developed. In philosophical terms it is the concept of monism (Bion, 1987). Bion feels that he has reached the mysterious core of human experience, he quotes mystical writer such as the Spanish Doctor Mysticus San Juan de la Cruz, the German Meister Eckhart, and talks of a *leap of faith*. O is not only the epistemological limit to human knowledge but also the ontological limit to human experience. The myth of Palinurus, a moral tale, a serious moral tale (Bion, 1973) describes the limits of our being and the meaninglessness of our experience. In Virgil's tale Aeneas does not know that happened to his helmsman Palinurus who vanished in the sea in a clear

night and when he meets him in Hades and questions him, even Palinurus does not know anything¹¹.

According to Bion in front of O one can assume basically three attitudes: *to know O*, which means to try and learn as much as possible about O without experiencing it, a way for protecting oneself from a scary experience; *to rival O*, which means to convince oneself that there is something better – a higher reality – than facing the pain of the experience; and lastly *to become O* which means instead to try to accept experiences as they are, accepting emotions, tolerating them, elaborating them, giving them a meaning, inserting them in our story, in our life, becoming what one is, we could say with Nietzsche.

The thoughts and works of the *late Bion*, the sense of transformation in O, which means being able to live our experiences in the very moment, bearing the relevant anxiety without fleeing in memory or desire seem to express Bion's most radical acceptance of the human frailty so deeply represented for example by the wisdom of Monsieur de Montaigne when he writes about life: "When I dance I dance, when I sleep I sleep" (Montaigne, 1580).

O cannot be known but can be experienced and this experience becomes the apex of the analytical work and its aim. To be attuned with O, *at-one-ment*, means first of all to acknowledge our emotional experience, to find ourselves, being *one* with ourselves. In other words, the aim of analytical work becomes to introduce the patient to himself so that he can recognize himself – not only know himself, that would be a defense – and become what he is.

The autobiography

To introduce himself to himself seems to be real aim of his autobiography and he shows us how to do it, what experience we should go through.

Other psychoanalysts have written about their lives, such as Ernest Jones and I would like to compare Bion's to Jones' *Free associations* (1959) to highlight the difference in their work. Jones describes many episodes of his adventurous life, the relevant persons he met, the dramatic events he lived through, some of them troubling for him too and some decidedly funny – like his meeting with a policeman in Munich that having seen him jump over the fence of the *Englischer Garten* wanted him to walk out and retrace his steps without treading on the grass. The story closes when the

¹¹ On the other hand Bordin (1998) who has no relation to mysticism, stated that the specificity of psychoanalysis as compared to other forms of psychotherapies rests in the very depth it promotes with the great issues of human existence.

policeman realizes that Jones is just another Englishman who has not enjoyed the benefit of German discipline (Jones, 1959). At the end of the book we know quite a few things on Jones, but we do not know what he thought and felt, *who* he was. It is a purely external knowledge. On the contrary, while reading Bion we are immediately drawn in his emotions. We do not understand well what is going on, what are the facts, because Bion does not tell us clearly¹² but we feel a truly troubling intimacy with him, his emotions, even the most extreme: anxiety, the senselessness of life, the blocks and sense of foreignness that plague him. We can see his tragic aspect. His early move to England, his voluntary enrollment aged 18 with the Royal Tank Regiment posted to Flanders, the nightmare of a meaningless war¹³, the battle of Amiens: “I died on August 8, 1918 on the Amiens-Roye road” (Grotstein, , 2007), the problems of resettlement, the tragic death of his first wife Betty Jardin, the problems in bringing up his daughter Parthenope to whom he begs for forgiveness at the end of the memoir. This intimacy is truly uncanny. We feel that Bion’s writing reaches its goal of writing about himself (Bion, 1982). “The drawings made by Nansen to show how he reached the North Pole does not tell us how it feels to be Nansen roaming in the desert Arctic land, and we will never know it” (Bion, 1983).

We are inside an intolerable, unthinkable and unlivable *catastrophe* and all his work and research seem to acquire a personal and intimate character: how the mind works and how it can digest its nightmares, how it can get free and reach O, experience O, experience oneself in the present moment.

But what does the experience of O mean clinically according to Bion? Now we know, mainly thanks to the clinical seminars and especially thanks to the story told by Grotstein who relates and comments many episodes of his analysis and also to Gooch who confirms it. Bion had a disciplined and focused attitude, did not let himself be taken by fantasies, was able to create immediately an analytical situation, interpreted systematically along the lines of current emotions and constantly stressed how the activation of the impotence/omnipotence couple was a unique dissociative mode to avoid lived experience. Without memories, without desires, without the need to understand Bion is able to focus with the least interference possible on the current emotional experience with the patient opening up all possible channels of communication. As he became able to silence prejudice, he realized that he could be

¹² War episodes are immersed in confusion and meaninglessness even if in his war memoirs Bion is perfectly aware of battles and has a good technical knowledge of the tanks he was driving.

¹³ I recall that at the time Winnicott too was at war, embarked on a torpedo boat he spent his time reading Henry James (Rodman, 2004).

aware of the evidence present instead of complaining of the evidence that was not there (Bion, 1974).

Paying systematic attention to the unfolding of the line of emotions in the session allows to focus on the analytical field of observation with great depth and to see any lack of contact, the conflict levels, blocks, inversions, and transformations of experience. The perception of sensoriality, the new experience of one's own body, the recognition of reality have a specific value for the organization and integration of the whole personality and allow to relate the patient's sensory experience and mental states (Lombardi, 2003) even when the latter seem absent or better present in their negative form of disavowal and rejection, thus supporting that kind of psychic functioning in touch with reality that Freud discussed in *Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning* (Freud, 1911).

I would like to stress the importance of this mental functioning. Dissociation, splitting, repression, all the defense mechanisms in the end, represent a continuum that expresses the active capacity of our mind of facing experiences, selecting, organizing and elaborating them and at the same time organizing itself in the light of these experiences (autopoietic capacity, Maturana and Varela, 1972).

It is a basic need of our physical and mental functioning, a need already noticed by Freud, as for example in the famous example of *the game of the spool* that he had called *herrwerden* (mastering the experience). Freud relates it to the mastering of one's own body starting from the efforts a child makes to be able to master its limbs (Freud, 1915) thus seeing a continuity between the mastering of anxiety with the mastering of an experience and the child's joy at being able to stand up and start walking. The mastering of one's own body is not only the basis for the development of the sense of self, as stated by Frances Broucek (1977) but keeps supporting it all along our life experiences that we continue to try and make ours attributing to them a personal meaning. Until the other vertex of our life cycle when child play is confronted by the games of an old person who is getting ready to a separation without return. He is no longer the one who holds the thread. It is the spool that no one can give him back (Anzieu, 1998).

So I think we can explain Freud's expression that gives us not only the aim of our psychoanalytical work but also the meaning of our life: *wo Es war, soll Ich werden* (1922). This Freudian sense is consistent with the late Bion's aim of facing the *experience of O*, the ultimate personal reality, turning it into a tolerable emotional reality that allows thinking and considering reality: *taming wild thoughts*. As Grotstein writes, "*impersonal O* becomes transformed into *personal O*: that is the subject *claims* impersonal faith as his portion *-moira-* to accept and to live out" (2007).

The late Bion and Italian psychoanalysis: Armando B. Ferrari and Luciana Bon de Matte

The knowledge of Bion in Italy followed various paths supported also by his daughter Parthenope's commitment. But I like to recall the meeting with the late Bion represented by Armando B. Ferrari and Luciana Bon de Matte.

Born in Montreal in 1922 Ferrari spent his childhood in Italy and at the end of the Second World War he moved to Brazil where he stayed for thirty years. There he studied anthropology and psychology and became professor at the Sao Paulo University, then dedicated himself to psychoanalysis and worked as training analyst of the Brazilian Society and a collaborator of Bion while he was teaching in South America. Around the mid-1970s he returned to Rome and was active clinically and in training. His work has been collected in 2004 in *From the eclipse of the body to the dawn of thought*. In the same period Luciana Bon de Matte, a Chilean psychoanalyst followed her husband Ignacio Matte Blanco to Rome where she became training analyst of SPI and started a long and fruitful clinical and theoretical collaboration with Ferrari focusing in particular on clinical technique on which she couldn't complete the work she had started writing. On June 23, 2013 a clinical seminar was held at the Roman Psychoanalytical Center to discuss her work.

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