

Memoir of the future and the defence against knowledge

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Abstract

The Author seeks to show how psychoanalytic work consents the continuous opening of different possible worlds and the threat of dogmatism.

Key words Pictogram, orthodoxy, characters, protomental states

It is well known that “Memoir of the Future” is Bion’s way of giving free expression to the theatre of the mind that is usually censored by various spontaneously triggered diaphragms.

Somites, Devil, Immature, Term, Twenty Months, Six Years, Heart, Thirty, Seventy–Five Years, and so on, all take the floor with equal rights, in a real democracy of the proto-mental. This makes me think of what a truly free mind would be capable of producing, where the right to take the floor and to be heard is given to each sub-unit of ourselves and to each planet of the galaxies of possibilities that comprise our minds.

No thought is so unseemly that it cannot be expressed. This means that all thoughts are allowed to be guests in the agora of the mind and it pre-supposes that sense impressions have been transformed into images/thoughts.

It reminds me of a typical renaissance banquet in Mantua at the time of the Gonzagas. There are dozens of guests and then behind the scenes, unbeknownst to most of them, dozens, even hundreds of cooks, servants, pages, butchers, greengrocers, wine makers, and so on. It is like saying that behind each written book stand the mental functions that enabled the book to be written.

Two clinical examples come to mind. Here they are:

1) Patient: Today I ate lamb and so did my daughter...

1a) Possible responses:

- a) Longeque inferior stabat agnus! (the lamb was by far smaller).
- b) As Montalbano might say, you were as hungry as a wolf.
- c) Your daughter is preparing for a future as a little wolf, too.
- d) I’ll never swallow that.
- e) You are telling me that you have managed to avoid inhibiting the most instinctual and voracious part of yourself.

Which models does the analyst have in mind? What is the implicit interpretation in the examples and why is it not spelt out?

2) Patient: This summer I’m going on a trip to China, and where I really want to go is Shanghai. I’ll get there in small stages.

2a) Possible responses:

- a) It sounds like an exploration of an unknown world, something to enjoy.
- b) Small movements so as not to stir up too many emotions.
- c) You are telling me that you are going to discover a part of yourself you have never passed through.
- d) Perhaps you are afraid that the only alternative to the caution of Shanghai might be an earthquake.
- e) Could this be the way to make contact with “Chiang Kai-shek”?

There was a time when I would have opted to give more decoding types of interpretation out of a greater concern for the linear development of the patient’s ability to dream (alpha and container functions), but now I prefer more open and more daring interventions. They correspond more to the possibility of tempting the patient and the field to face emotional tsunami rather than engaging in “civil protection” and organizing “defences” and diaphragms.

What is more, I appreciate and embrace what Bion says in the last lines of *Memoir of the Future* - which in the light of *après-coup* seem to be the key to understanding the whole work.

Every analyst’s greatest anxiety and concern (and this applies first and foremost to Bion himself) is learning how to speak in such a way as to be understood (this has always been my own main concern both on a technical level with patients, and on a scientific level with colleagues). But what Bion says in the *Epilogue* seems to me connected to the themes he talks about admirably (and with no possibility of return) in his *Tavistock Seminars* and the *Lyon Seminar*: theories like wrecks to cling to for fear of sinking; the analyst who espouses the idea of being an artist; being an artist, which means multiplying and then offering points of view – which not everyone will accept, understand or embrace; being curious about the experience you are going through even at the point of death.

Likewise, being curious in each sub-unit of the session about the worlds it will be possible to open by means of the “PIN” that analyst and patient create continuously.

The vertices are multiple. There may be one from the anus to the mouth (Vol. I); the bottom may be made to speak (vol. III); others are Mortimer, the Somites, Sherlock Holmes, etc.

It seems to me that Pirandello was someone who attempted to open up the mind to extreme consequences in daring to challenge the potential identities that inhabit us in continuous transformative movements. Then perhaps also Beckett and, of course, Shakespeare, who tried to compile an encyclopaedia of every possible expression of what it means to be human. But Bion goes further. I see him more as the printer who enables us to publish our own *A Thousand and One Nights*, transforming it into *A Million and One Nights* or, better still, a *Google/Googol nights plus one*. In other words, the expansion into what we know to be an unattainable “O”, but which in its infinite disguises continues to create the backstory to the various fables and plots.

A memoir of the future, but one that acts as a kind of diaphragm, is to be found in the film Planet of the Apes and its sequels. The wise apes know that humans have brought mankind to the point of nuclear destruction and feel compelled to try to avoid a repetition of what would happen in the future if the survivors of the past were to take over the evolution of the species.

Here I can see a link with another essential point Bion makes: never take anything for granted. The gods laugh when they hear men talk about their plans, so all optimism about our future is left in suspension, destroyed by a nuclear war, swallowed up by a black hole and supplanted by viruses that elude our domination.

But what does this mean?

I believe that we must live in a spirit of curiosity, without depending on the book of life or the book of analysis that the many Bibles we cling to promise to provide.

According to the theory of fractals, this curiosity and this risk should be extended to include the micro-level of each sub-fraction of analysis or session of analysis.

Defences against knowledge

In the Paris seminar we find hardly any of the strange terms Bion deployed to revamp the entire lexicon of psychoanalysis. Nor do we sense the rarefied atmosphere of his most abstract writings, for example, in Transformations. There is a wonderful moment when one of the seminar participants tries to bring things back onto the known territory of psychoanalytic theory. Bion has just finished talking about the need to see what is not there, which is truer than what can be perceived through the senses. He gives the example of the painting of a tree and how the artist is also able to show the observer roots that are invisible because they are underground. A colleague then asks if this metaphor has anything to do with the unconscious. Bion just about manages to remain desolately patient (or patiently desolate), pointing out that “unconscious” is one of those words invented by Freud to draw attention to something that really exists, but then, as usual, discussion gets caught up in endless disputes between Kleinians and Freudians and all sorts of theories, and that eventually the simple fact that what is at stake is a human being and a mind gets lost. Often the limitations to the creativity of the analysis are a question of how far down the analyst, and consequently the analytic couple, is willing to go, bearing in mind that their relationship is in many ways asymmetric, with responsibility for the depth of the immersion lying with the analyst.

What means or defences can the analyst use to avoid diving into waters that are too deep for him?

One much used means is to fail to provide the humus suitable for the development of the characters the patient has brought into play. The easiest, most naive and, at the same time, most subtle of these means is to situate the “characters” as people in history.

For example, if a patient talks about an uncle suspected of uxoricide, this criminal aspect that he is trying to place in the field can be bonsaized and crystallized inside the patient’s history rather than providing him with all the seeds of growth and

development that would enable the criminal aspects of the patient (and perhaps of the analyst, or both) to find a script and an appropriate setting.

Another ploy that likewise extinguishes stories that it would be possible to develop is to turn to the comfort of a supposed External Reality, which can then be doubly chained when it becomes Historical Reality.

A patient talks of a cousin of his grandfather who had been a member of the Salvatore Mesina gang, a gang responsible for a number of kidnappings, some of which had ended fatally for the victims. Logically, this character, “the grandfather’s criminal cousin”, can be put to sleep or lethargized, or it can become a “seed” that will germinate any number of possible stories if it finds suitable terrain and is given adequate irrigation, making it part of the repertoire of split-off and never thought operations.

Essentially each story is the possible progeny of sequences of pictograms that may face a censor, like the priest in the Cinema Paradiso who cut out all the kisses or also the unforgettable Peppino De Filippo in Fellini’s *The Temptation of Dr. Antonio* (Boccaccio 70).

How will the following sequence of pictograms from a waking dream end?



Essentially each analyst at work often resorts to “blacklisting” potential characters to stop them causing disturbance, disorder or fear during the analytic work, but they will remain encysted in the patient, like the dangerous war remnants that are sometimes defused by bomb disposal experts and that sometimes explode unexpectedly.

However, the responsibility for an analysis, whether it be at 45°, 90°, 180° or 360°, rests mainly on the shoulders of the analyst. Analyses can be like a closed fan where the slats are still positioned on top of each other, meaning that many stories will never see the light of day; or they can be “fans with gradually opening slats” that will tell ever-growing numbers of possible stories. These fans can be opened more and more, so there’s never an end.

It is often the case that theories, even those that have proved most useful – like the Oedipus complex or the Unconscious – (and in saying this we are simply paraphrasing what Bion says in his *Tavistock Seminars*, 2007), insofar as they are already known, function as barriers, as light pollution covering what we do not know. This is the only really interesting work to be done in analysis: going in search of the

unknown and learning to tolerate knowing less and less but having learnt the method for trying to learn more.

I am in no doubt that many analyses are in fact conducted by analysts who behave like ostriches with their heads in the sand of theory – so as not to risk seeing things that might frighten and hurt them. My point is that the analyst often stands as the great anaesthetist or narcotizer of “possible stories”, all of whose subversive power remains embryonic compared to often more normopathic, adequate and orthodox aspects.

Perhaps the question of orthodoxy (and hence of adaptation to what is known and shared) is also connected to this as a phobia of possible subversion, and if psychoanalysis has historically had an incredible subversive power, many now call upon it as a way of tranquillizing using maps of pseudo-normality.

Defending ourselves from the “present” now often seems to be the imperative. This is what happened in the case of posters for an exhibition by Cattelan in Milan that featured Hitler kneeling in prayer. The posters were immediately banned on the grounds that they offended the memory of the victims of Nazism. Whereas this particular Hitler might not be the Hitler of the past, but a memento of the Hitler who inhabits the human community, while other deportations, both real and metaphorical, may still be continuing.

I still recall the scandal of puppets of children hanging in trees, another work by Cattelan from some years ago, also stigmatized for their supposed bad taste, although in fact they were perhaps making a comment about truths of today, for example, lack of respect for “children” in all possible forms. Everything thought-provoking is branded as bad taste and not seen as it should be, namely, a way of awakening lethargic minds.

The treatment received by the various religions is very different. Every religion represents a different attempt to curb all the emotions that seethe inside us using orthodox rules. Even a different religion is seen as a source of disturbance if it calls one’s own religion into question. Just imagine the absence of religions. And to repeat the point, the need for orthodoxy is no different in psychoanalysis.

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