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Bion and Mysticism: The Western Tradition

Bion is widely acknowledged to be an innovator in the Kleinian tradition responsible for drawing attention to the communicative aspects of projective identification, introducing the container/contained distinction, and postulating the existence of an undifferentiated unconscious. His late writings concerning O, F, and K, however, are generally dismissed or ignored by contemporary Kleinians. The author argues that these writings are coherent if we understand Bion's aims and sources. Bion's aim is to find a method to understand what is unsymbolized and exists only in fragments, so as to transform these fragments into words that can be interpreted to the patient. The author likewise suggests that Bion's technical language of O, F, and K is derived from philosophical and theological sources, most notably Plato, Plotinus, Eckhart, and Kant. He proposes that the unease felt by many in reading the late Bion stems from his belief in transcendence and the existence of Platonic Forms.

"I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without
love
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the
waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the
dancing."

—T. S. Eliot, "East Coker," *Four Quartets*

Introduction

Wilfred Bion is arguably the most distinguished innovator in the Kleinian tradition. His formulation of the "container/contained" distinction transforms projective identification from a concept that describes a one-person fantasy to one that describes a two-person interaction and thus serves as a model

for communication. Projective identification, for Bion, is not a ubiquitous aspect of early development but a defense triggered by failure to achieve language and thought. Similarly, he regards Melanie Klein's paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions not as developmental stages but as a polarity of dividing and uniting between which the mind continually oscillates throughout life.

One of Bion's signal contributions is a theory of the mental structure that underlies and makes possible the unconscious (Ferro 1999; 2002). Bion agrees with Klein that everyone has a psychotic aspect of the mind—that is, one that exhibits primitive anxieties and operates in a paranoid-schizoid mode—but he denies that psychosis is organized by fantasy that is present from birth. Rather, he regards psychosis as experience that takes the form of what he calls beta (β)-elements, which are not yet thoughts that can be accessed by the mind.¹

Bion starts with the phenomenology of the clinical situation, a focus on the inner processes of the mind (Symington and Symington 1996). He assumes two principles: the emergence of truth and the process of mental growth. What Freud calls impression of objects, Bion calls β -elements. Whereas for Freud these objects are a form of thought, for Bion β -elements are the matrix from which thoughts may or may not arise. They are undigested facts, nameless sensations devoid of meaning or coherence, the raw material of thinking but not thinking itself. β -elements can be stored but are only suitable for evacuation by projection or through acting out. For use in thought, β -elements must be transformed by α -function into α -elements—that is, visual, auditory, and other sensory patterns available for dreaming and unconscious waking thought—and only with α -elements can a sense of subjectivity develop. Dreaming, for Bion, is a form of psychoanalytic work (Ogden 2004) in which preconscious thoughts are pressing toward awareness. Dreaming allows the undigested facts of experience to become unconscious in the dynamic sense. Further integration with reality is necessary for the unconscious α -elements to become conscious.

Bion employs a unique terminology— β -elements, α -elements, α -function, and K-links—that may appear obscure at first but each component of which is clearly defined and has immediate clinical usefulness. His aim in developing a more

abstract psychoanalytic language is to show concepts in a fresh light, and these contributions have all been absorbed into the Kleinian canon.

The Epistemological Period

From the early 1960s, Bion entered what his biographer Gérard Bléandonu (1994) calls his epistemological period in which he employed what Bion himself terms a “scientific deductive system” (1963, 24). In an attempt to adapt a neopositivist project to psychoanalysis (Sandler 2006), he paradoxically sought to base his theory on ideal mathematical objects in the Platonic tradition.² In *Learning from Experience* (1962), he holds that thought is grounded in experience but that it evolves progressively toward abstraction and complexity. This evolution is made possible by the influence of functions, which Bion defines as “the name for the mental activity proper to a number of factors operating in consort” (1). The most basic concept is the growth of thought. An inborn preconception seeks a realization in a conception, thereby providing an emotional experience. An unsaturated element thus becomes saturated.

Bion’s abstract system of notations is further developed in *Elements of Psychoanalysis* (1963), where psychoanalysis is held to work by means of “calculi” (24). Five concepts are borrowed from mathematics: Frege’s theory of numbers, the theory of factors and functions, the selected fact from Poincaré, transformations/invariants, and intuitionism. Building blocks of Bion’s system such as elements, notations, the grid, and the distinction between saturated and unsaturated communications are all based on mathematical terms. According to Paulo Sandler (2006), who had access to Bion’s personal library and notes, his range of reference spans Plato, Aristotle, the medieval mystics, Descartes, Hegel, British empiricists, the German Romantics, French Enlightenment thinkers, neopositivists, mathematicians, and physicists, though he always utilized these sources to advance his vision of psychoanalysis.

Starting in *Transformations* (1965) and continuing through *Attention and Interpretation* (1970), Bion moved away from but

did not abandon these mathematical ideals, though what had been logical constructs mutate into something transcendent. I would suggest two reasons for this development. First, the “empirical facts” of psychoanalysis are meanings, values, and emotions, all of which have no place in a neopositivist scheme. The attempt to represent psychoanalytic facts mathematically, then, is inherently self-contradictory. Second, as a practical matter, Bion’s mathematical system was not taken up by other analysts, although many of the basic concepts of this period were to pay long-term dividends clinically.

A New Language

In *Transformations* and more fully in *Attention and Interpretation*, Bion recasts his theory of α - and β -elements into a contrast between K, O, and F. Many Kleinians have ignored this aspect of Bion as unimportant or even dismissed it as crackpot (Symington and Symington 1996).³ Even Antonino Ferro (1999; 2002) rarely mentions O and makes little use of it in his work.⁴ It is true that Bion’s later writings become more ambiguous and evocative, employing aphorisms and metaphors. It is also true that he abandons scientific language for philosophical and mystical language. Why does Bion find it necessary to do so? It is not that he repudiates his previous theories. His fundamental understanding of the development of thought remains unchanged and is fully incorporated into the new terminology.

My own answer to this question lies in the paradox of the nonverbal unconscious. Klein (1946) thought that, in the paranoid-schizoid position, the object is split into an omnipotent ideal object and an equally omnipotent bad persecutory object. There is a flight to the idealized object and the subsequent destruction of the bad object. Bion (1965) took this a step further by seeing love and envy as intrinsically bound up together. Under the impact of trauma, envy cannot be tolerated and love is worthless. For Bion (1970), the mind starts out in a catastrophic explosion detonated by the traumatic intertwining of love and envy. This leads to a split between material and psychic satisfactions. The need for love is deflected into a greedy

search for comfort, while there is a destruction of all feelings. α -function is destroyed or never develops, and the person is left with β -fragments. The idealized object becomes a "lost object" (Bion 1965, 11), longed for yet inanimate and worthless. This layer of the mind is experienced as terrifyingly psychotic and chaotic. It contains trauma, humiliation, paranoid attacks, and utter aloneness. If the β -elements cannot be transformed into thoughts, they are then expelled from the mind and end up as bizarre objects.⁵ These bizarre objects cluster around the patient and form a β -screen, an impenetrable barrier (Bion 1962; Grotstein 1980). This leads the patient to feel himself under constant attack by fragmenting forces and totally cut off.

The paradox for the analyst then becomes how to understand what is not available to him in words and not ever consciously available to the patient. Access to this part of the patient's mind comes only through reverie. Bion (1962) writes:

The term reverie may be applied to almost any content. I wish to reserve it only for such content as is suffused with love or hate. Using it in this restricted sense, reverie is that state of mind which is open to the reception of any "objects" from the loved object and is therefore capable of reception of the infant's projective identifications whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad. In short, reverie is a factor of the mother's alpha-function. (36)

Thomas Ogden (1997) has taken Bion's concept of reverie and applied it to unconscious communication between the participants in the psychoanalytic dyad. Reverie becomes the analyst's partly conscious musings, streams of thought, bodily sensations, and daydreams while listening to the patient, all of which must be attended to and self-interpreted. Ogden believes that reverie is generated by an intersubjective field in which the internal worlds of both patient and analyst participate.

The analyst has to use his own unconscious to receive the projections that are the patient's only means of communication. Bion was always searching for a way to express what reverie is, what is being communicated in an analysis, and how. The language of beta and alpha elements and alpha function conveys

in a theoretical manner the development of thinking, but not how we must listen and respond in the consulting room. The language of O, F, and K is meant to get us deeper into the experience of listening and containing. Bion attempts to move away from mechanism and causality and toward a phenomenology of what is. He goes beyond psychoanalysis to draw on philosophical and mystical ideas to impart a mode of apprehension that is nonlinguistic. In order to understand Bion we must be familiar with his sources, which are alluded to but generally not explained or even referenced. I will suggest that he was not concerned with philosophical rigor, but rather resorted to philosophical and theological ideas as metaphors to convey his psychological ideas.⁶ I will examine four such sources—Plato, the Neoplatonists, Kant, and Meister Eckhart—who were particularly influential in his late period.

Bion's Mystical Sources

Plato

1. The Transcendent Forms

Bion (1965) states: "I shall borrow freely any material that is likely to simplify my task, starting with Plato's theories of Forms. As I understand the term, various phenomena, such as the appearance of a beautiful object, are significant not because they are beautiful or good but because they serve to 'remind' the beholder of the beauty or the good which was once, but no longer is, known. This object, of which the phenomenon serves as a reminder, is a Form. I claim Plato as a supporter for the pre-conception" (138).⁷

According to Bion, pre-conceptions arise from an "inborn anticipation" (1963, 138) in the mind.⁸ James Grotstein (1981) understands pre-conception to be the potential awareness of infinite possibilities. There is an analytic space not accessible to sensuous objects, and the process of realization serves to make objects possible. The concept of container/contained describes the space in which pre-conception leads to realization. The container is an empty space of receptivity, elasticity, and transformation. The contained are the realizations, sensuous

mental contents too fragmented to be allowed into consciousness. Bion calls this space "a primitive apparatus" (1962, 92). As he puts it: "The pre-conception corresponds to a state of expectation. It is a state of mind adapted to receive a restricted range of phenomena. An early occurrence might be an infant's expectation of the breast. The mating of pre-conception and realization brings into being the conception" (1963, 23). Thus, for Bion, there is a mental space of innate Ideas, though the association of pre-conception with the transcendent is made explicit only in *Transformations* and *Attention and Interpretation*.

Bion also speaks of myth as an inherent pre-conception:

I am postulating a precursor of the Oedipal situation not in the sense that such a term might have in Melanie Klein's discussion of "*Early Phases of the Oedipus Complex*," but as something that belongs to the ego as part of its apparatus for contact with reality. In short I postulate an α -element version of a private Oedipus myth which is the means, the pre-conception, by virtue of which the infant is able to establish contact with the parents as they exist in the world of reality. The mating of this α -element Oedipal pre-conception with the realization of the actual parents gives rise to the conception of parents. (1963, 93)

Thus, with reference to both the inborn pre-conception and the mythic pre-conception, Bion postulates knowledge before experience and he conceives of this a priori experience as a Platonic Form. He elaborates:

The phenomenon of Good or Beauty would not then be that which "reminds" the personality of a Form (pre-conception) but is an incarnation of a part of an independent Person, wholly outside the personality, to whom the phenomena are "given." The phenomenon does not "remind" the individual of the Form but enables the person to achieve union with an incarnation of the Godhead, or the thing-in-itself (or Person-in-Himself). For convenience I shall refer to these two configurations as "Forms" and "Incarnation." In both there is a suggestion that there is an ultimate reality with which

it is possible to have direct contact although in both it appears that each direct contact is possible only after submission to an exacting discipline of relationships with phenomena, in one configuration, and incarnate Godhead in the other. (1965, 139)

2. *Empirical Preconception*

There is an alternative way that Bion speaks of preconception. Any conception can become a preconception for new progressions of thought: "Each stage is a record of a previous stage and a pre-conception of the subsequent stage" (1965, 43). Growth occurs in increasing degrees of complexity and abstraction. Preconception in this sense refers to any mental idea that is unsaturated. *Unsaturated* means preserving an openness of field, of possibility, being a variable without a value. The preconception awaits a realization (in the form of concrete and particular facts) to become a conception. By *saturated*, Bion means that a fixed meaning has been accepted, which then limits other possible meanings.

It is therefore possible to envision the growth of thought without invoking transcendent Forms. Preconceptions are meanings that are not limited and focused but keep open multiple layers of possibility. André Green (1973) thinks of preconception as dwelling in expectancy rather than anticipation. Words, thoughts, and theories all tend to saturate and obscure the original encounter with the no-thing, its radical ambiguity and uncertainty (Ferro 1999; 2002). If we stay at the level of words and symbols, the preverbal elements remain hidden and cannot be "heard." This is an Aristotelian reading of Bion. In the *Posterior Analytics* (II.19), Aristotle (Barnes 1984) holds that the basis of all knowledge is sensory. Starting with perception, we have experience and memory, then skill and understanding. *Nous* for Aristotle is the highest mental faculty. It allows us to pick out the universal in the particulars by following an upward path and abstracting from experience. Experience mediates between the perception of particulars and the knowledge of universals. Each discovery of a universal allows for further abstractions and the discovery of further universals.

Neoplatonism

1. Plotinus

Neoplatonism is a modern term used to designate the period of Platonic philosophy beginning with Plotinus (204–270 CE) and ending with the closing of the Platonic Academy by the Emperor Justinian in 529 CE (Wallis 1972). After Plotinus, who was born in Egypt and taught in Rome, the principal representatives include his pupil Porphyry, Iamblichus, and the schools of Athens and Alexandria, among whose members were Plutarch, Syrianus, Proclus, and Damascius. The works of Plotinus were preserved in their entirety by Porphyry as the *Enneads* (McKenna 1969), but those of the other philosophers, excepting Proclus, are available only in fragments.

Neoplatonism rests on the principle that the essence of everything comprises a fundamental unity, though there is a hierarchy of degrees of unity in different levels of reality. The basis of this unity is the Forms of Plato. The three fundamental principles or hypostases of Plotinus's metaphysics are the One, Intellect, and Soul: "There is the One beyond beings . . . and next in order there is being and intellect, and the nature of soul is third" (V.1.1–4). Thus, the universe consists of hierarchically distinct things, but all things are part of a single continuous emanation of power from the One. It follows that Forms are not only transcendent objects but also subjects, found within individual souls, each of which contains all the Forms within itself (Corrigan 2005).

The Neoplatonic concept of emanation implies that all secondary things proceed or flow from the more primary thing, a primal principle. The perfect being does not keep that perfection to itself but spreads it by generating an external image of its internal activity. As Plotinus writes in the *Enneads*, "The One is all things and no one of them. This is the first act of generation, as it were: being perfect because it seeks nothing, has nothing, needs nothing, the One, so to speak, overflows and its overfullness has made another" (V.2.7–12). The One is a pure unformed power that only acquires form in the Intellect and Soul (Corrigan 2005). It overflows without a conscious act, merely by its nature, and loses nothing of its fullness. It goes from more perfect to less perfect, a decline into pluralities. From the One emanates the Intellect, and from the Intellect

emanates the Soul. The One is neither being nor essence; it has no substance or extension but is the source of all existence. The One cannot be known directly but only experienced indirectly through its power. It transcends all understanding. The One can be approached in both rapt contemplation and ecstatic creativity. Plotinus describes emanations as the "Image of light from the sun" (V.4.1.23–41), which goes forth "without inclination, will, or movement" (V.1.6.25–27).

The first derivation from the One is Intellect, the second fundamental hypostasis. The One effortlessly overflows or radiates and, in its excess, begets Intellect, the source of multiplicity. Contemplation is the "power" uniting the One, the Intellect, and the Soul in a single all-productive force to which all existing things owe their life. The Intellect contemplating the One gives birth to the Forms, and its task is to account for the plethora of distinct Forms united in the One. The highest form of desire is the Intellect contemplating the One through the Forms that are internal to it. Intelligence is the location of intuitive truth, a direct and instantaneous vision, as opposed to discursive truth, which is located in the Soul. Intelligence is perfect self-awareness, a single timeless vision, a unity of subject and object. Contrary to Plato, Plotinus believed that each individual has a Form, giving each personality an eternal pattern. It makes the sensible cosmos alive and intelligent, no less than Plato's world-soul.

The third fundamental hypostasis is Soul. It is in turn divided by Plotinus into the "higher" or contemplative part, which remains in constant contact with the Intelligence, and the "lower" part that descends into the changeable (or sensible) realm in order to govern and actively shape the Cosmos. The lower part of the Soul undergoes the drama of existence and suffers, while the higher part remains unaffected and persists in contemplating the Cosmos. The lower Soul is the locus of desire for external objects. The true self, the upper Soul, is absorbed in contemplation, where it finds its true happiness. Only the contemplative life is truly free. The aim of the Soul is to turn away from the sensory world toward contemplation.

Matter is understood (on the model of the Receptacle of Becoming in Plato's *Timaeus*) as the unsubstantial flux of the sensible world. Only with form does matter take on magnitude and extension. The body, then, is formed matter

that is governed by the soul, which, in itself, has no spatiality. Plotinus, unlike some Christian Neoplatonists, does not see the body as an enemy. The body deserves to be taken care of and disciplined. Yet one's true nature resides in the higher soul as contemplation. The philosopher will wait patiently for death to release him, as when a musician abandons a lyre that has served him well (*Enneads*, VI.4.16.13–29). The beginning of evil is the separation from the One by Intellect, an act that the One itself ultimately causes. The human person is a soul employing a body as an instrument of its temporary embodied life. Evil results when the Soul loses contact with the Intellect and forgets its divine origin. Evil is “utter sterility or poverty” (VI.8.10) without the Forms.

Plotinus has a mystical side that equates states of consciousness with degrees of reality. He speaks of personal union with the One. The higher levels correspond to true reality, which is otherworldly, where differences disappear and unity is achieved. The One does not need to turn toward us; it is present everywhere. To see the One, we must “divest ourselves of everything” (VI.3.17.38), that is, all multiplicity that differentiates us from the ground of being. To seek the One, the Soul must pass through the intelligible world and become formless. The fearful Soul may seek to remain in the sensible world. To find the One is to merge into the light that illuminates both the One and the Soul. When the Soul obtains the “first level of Intelligence” (VI.9.3.27–8), it can only wait for the One to show itself. This mystical union is incommunicable in words, though the individuality of the Soul is not lost. The One is not our innermost Soul but its transcendent source. Plotinus's mysticism differs from Christian versions of Neoplatonism in that the One has no love for or interest in the soul, and there is thus no true reciprocity: “The soul naturally then is in love with god and wants to be united with him; it is like the noble love of a noble daughter for her noble father” (VI.9.9.33–34). In the self-contemplation of the Soul, there is also the contemplation of the One.

2. *After Plotinus*

Much of later Neoplatonism was concerned with clarifying and resolving the contradictions in Plotinus's thought. There

was a turn toward ritual and incantation (theurgy) as a more accessible way than contemplation to achieve mystical union with the divine. Iamblichus (c. 245–c. 325 C.E.), the chief representative of Syrian Neoplatonism, argued that thought alone is not enough for union with the gods; rather, the gods need to be forcibly drawn into the sensible world so as to purify the worshipers and elevate them into the intelligible world.

Iamblichus likewise developed the tradition of logical realism, based on Plato's *Parmenides* (132b–132c), which maintains that objects of thought must exist prior to and independently of our thinking of them. The Forms are treated not as principles (as in Aristotle) but as real substances responsible for the existence of particulars. There is a separately existing whole before the existence of the parts. Following Plato's *Timaeus* (52a), Iamblichus held that the Forms do not enter the sensible world. Rather, they are "Unparticipated" terms that operate indirectly on lower realities, which places a greater stress on transcendence over immanence. This leads to the triad Unparticipated-Participated-Participant. Since most of Iamblichus's writings have been lost, these doctrines are found in Proclus (410–485 CE), who was born in Constantinople, studied in Alexandria, and taught at Athens, and who likely developed them further. Proclus, Plotinus's biographer and popularizer, is known as the great systematizer. He developed the doctrine of the divine Henads ("ones"), which are intermediaries linking the lower orders of reality to the One. They are not attributes of the One but self-sufficient entities derived from the One and dependent on it. The Henads, while unknowable in themselves, can be known by their products. Providence is a specific function of the Henads, bestowing Goodness on the lower levels. The Henads become the transcendent source for the lower order's distinctive characteristics.

3. Augustine

St. Augustine (354–430 CE) recounts in the *Confessions* (Ryan 1960) how his contact with "certain books of the Platonists" (VII.7.13) in 384 was a turning point in his spiritual life. Like Plotinus, Augustine considers God to be the absolute source of Goodness and Truth. God provides a unifying hier-

archy for all the beings that come below Him. The intelligible realm of abiding realities is contrasted with the sensible world of fragmented materialism. As can be seen in Books VII and IX of the *Confessions*, the idea of ascent from the material human condition to union with God is central to Augustine. According to James O'Donnell (2011), "Augustine pursued a philosophy that got its doctrine from scripture, interpreted that doctrine in the light of Plotinus, and hedged it around with mystical expectations that mixed Plotinian intellectualism with ritual purification" (18; see also Wallis 1972; Rist 2011). Yet there are a number of areas where he differs from the Neoplatonists. Christianity elevates faith over reason, and revelation over rationality. It regards human nature as fallen, while classical Neoplatonism emphasizes the formlessness of matter. Similarly, whereas Neoplatonists understand creation to be the result of an involuntary emanation by the One, Christianity sees the created world as the revelation of a creator and grace as a voluntary act of God, bestowed on humanity through the incarnation of Christ and the resurrection of His body.

4. *Bion and Neoplatonism*

Bion does not cite Plotinus but does make a brief and inconsequential reference (1965, 55) to Proclus. Since Bion does not mention any specific Neoplatonic works, we do not know what he read. It is likely that he had access to the *Enneads* but not to Proclus, as the latter's work is not readily available in translation or scholarly editions. Bion (1957; 1961; 1965; 1970) does refer to Augustine on four occasions, but always to Book 19 of the *City of God*, on the importance of an individual's dependent relationship to God. In the absence of positive evidence, we can only infer Bion's sources from his ideas. Since he often links emanation and incarnation, it seems likely that Augustine was one of his main conduits for Neoplatonic thought.

Bion introduced the term O in *Transformations*, where he writes: "Something occurred during the session—the absolute facts of the session. What the absolute facts are cannot ever be known, and these I denote by the sign O" (1965, 17). The Neoplatonic heritage of this concept is apparent in the following passage:

I shall use the sign O to denote that which is the ultimate reality represented by terms such as absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the thing-in-itself. O does not fall into the domain of knowledge or learning save incidentally; it can "become," but it cannot be "known." It is darkness and formless but it can enter the domain K [Knowledge] when it has evolved to a point where it can be known. (1970, 26)

As a signifier, O may stand for "origin" (Bion 1965, 15), or for the One. This interpretation is supported by Bion's declaration that O designates "the absolute truth in and of any subject . . . it can be known about, its presence can be recognized and felt, but it cannot be known" (1970, 30). As the One, O is the generator of the Forms, or what Bion terms pre-conceptions. When O becomes embodied in time and space, it is no longer metaphysical but can be known, though not through the senses. In Neoplatonic terms, O has emanated into the Intellect and into the Soul.

For Bion, there is an original oneness that is split by the catastrophic divisions of birth and subsequent traumas, while at the same time oneness defends against the movement toward differentiation and complexity. O is the eternal search for and fear of oneness. Fantasies of oneness can be found in the need for fusion or what Freud (1930) termed the "oceanic feeling." Ogden (2004), from the empirical side, reinterprets O as universal truths that are constitutive of our very being: "O is that set of inarticulate, universal human truths that we live, but do not know; it is what we hear in music and poetry, but cannot name; it is who we are in dreaming, but cannot communicate in the telling of the dream" (292). O for Ogden is a state of being in the present moment. Michael Eigen (1981) sees O as the emotional truth of a session. O, for both commentators, has luminosity; it expresses wonder and ineffability, a truth that cannot be reduced to facts. These are clinical uses of O that avoid the transcendent. In this tradition is Stanley Leavy's (1995) view of O as a manifestation of "unitive experiences," that is, the unity of past and present, subject and object. Leavy, like Bion, situates such experiences at the center of mental

life, in the prereflective and preverbal ground of being, and they live on in deeply embedded fantasies of lost ideal objects.

Bion's theory conceives of thinking as a type of emanation, in which unitary and transcendent ideas flow out into greater complexity and symbolization: "The religious approach postulates an emanation of the deity and an incarnation of the deity. Both formulations are needed to represent states of mind in which there is an interaction between states of an object that is sometimes whole, sometimes split into fragments dispersed within a multiplicity of objects" (1970, 88). This alludes simultaneously to the Neoplatonic concept of the One, in which each individual soul participates (Merkur 2010), and to the Christian doctrine of incarnation; and both references emphasize the transcendental nature of the One in our lives.

The mystical side of Plotinus surely had an influence on Bion. Both espouse a negative theology according to which the transcendent One cannot be described in words, but can only be defined by what it is not. The soul's ascent in Plato and Plotinus toward the One is a probable source for Bion's mystical admonition that the analyst should approach each session without memory or desire. So, too, is it for Bion's aphorism, "thoughts without a thinker," which he introduces in *Attention and Interpretation*:

It is necessary to postulate "thinking" without supposing a thinker to be essential. . . . All thinking and all thoughts are true when there is no thinker. In contrast to this, for lies and falsities a thinker is absolutely necessary. In any situation where a thinker is present the thoughts when formulated are expressions of falsities and lies. The only true thought is one that has never found an individual to "contain" it. (1970, 117)

In the phenomenal world, thoughts without a thinker are impossible; they can only exist in a realm beyond empirical knowledge. As Iamblichus and Proclus expressly state, the One does not think, but instead produces a divine mind. As soon as the One emanates its power, there is a degradation of Truth. The thinker corresponds to the Intellect, where thoughts

are only replicas of the Truth. Only in the Intellect can we distinguish the object of thought, the power of the object to be grasped by the subject, and the thinking subject. Grotstein (2007) extends this when he postulates a Thinker, with a capital T, which he equates with the godhead or psychic reality. This transcendent Thinker corresponds to the One, from which all thinking originates. Bion's argument that the human thinker produces falsehoods echoes the Neoplatonic premise that truth is degraded as it emanates.

From an empirical standpoint, however, the notion of thoughts without a thinker does have a developmental substrate. In the β -space, we have proto-thoughts when the mental apparatus has not yet been formed. If the infant flooded by sensations does not experience containment by the maternal object, these β -elements must be evacuated. Only when the α -function matures is there a thinking person.

Kant

1. Preconception

The influence of Kant on Bion is found in two important concepts. The first is preconception. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant holds it to be a condition of every perception that it anticipate the existence of a real quality to be perceived. The category of reality must be given in order for perception of genuine objects to take place. Sensory impressions are not enough to form perceptual images; there must be a unifying synthesis (Kitcher 2011). Kant called genuine perceptual images intuitions. These involve an awareness of things as being thus and so, of representation as representing something (Dickerson 2003).

In an explicit invocation of Kant, Bion states:

We may use the unknown constant ψ to represent an inborn pre-conception. Employing a model to give temporary meaning to the term "inborn pre-conception" I shall suppose that an infant has an inborn pre-conception that a breast that satisfies its own incomplete nature exists.

The realization of the breast provides an emotional experience. This experience corresponds to Kant's secondary and primary qualities of a phenomenon. (1962, 69)

As Kant maintains that there must be an "anticipation of perception," so, too, for Bion thinking starts with an "inborn pre-conception" that is filled in with experience to form a conception.

2. *Noumenon*

Second, from *Learning from Experience* onward, Bion frequently refers to Kant's idea of the thing-in-itself or noumenon. He writes in a typical passage:

In any object, material or immaterial, resides the unknowable ultimate reality, the "thing-in-itself." Objects have emanations or emergent qualities or evolving characteristics that impinge upon the human personality as phenomena. Of these qualities the personality may be consciously or unconsciously aware; they differ from the ultimate reality. (1970, 87)

Bion, however, mistakenly equates Kant's "thing-in-itself" with the Platonic Forms because Kant does not attribute objectivity to noumena, as Plato does to the Forms. Noumena mark the limit of sensible knowledge, yet they do not preclude reality from existing outside our minds. Phenomena are sensible objects apprehended by the unities of the categories. The categories are synthetic a priori intuitions or transcendental.⁹ In perceiving objects, we order them in time and space as part of the cognitive operation of perceiving. Appearances are thus synthesized by the a priori categories to become phenomena.

Bion regards the "thing-in-itself" as synonymous with ultimate reality, the transcendent object. His corresponding use of the term "no-thing" avoids the Kantian association:

A thing cannot exist in the mind alone: nor can a thing exist unless at the same time there is a corresponding no-thing. The rules that apply to the thing do not apply

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to the no-thing. Contradiction is not an invariant under psychoanalysis though it may exist in the domain of psychoanalytic objects (which *must* both be and not be). If there is a “no-thing” the “thing” must exist. (1965, 103)

Here the no-thing is the pre-conception, the Form, the thought emanating from the Neoplatonic One.

Medieval German Mysticism

1. Meister Eckhart

There was a great flowering of mysticism in fourteenth-century Germany. It embraced the *via negativa* or apophatic tradition of mystical experience. Its adherents believe that there is a radical gap between the divine and human. To approach the divine, one must empty the mind and enter a cloud of unknowing (Meissner 2005), in which one knows and feels nothing, rejecting all clear ideas. One must be at home in the darkness. The cloud of unknowing comes from the cloud of forgetting, encompassing all awareness, memory, attachment to things or persons. Only love and desire stripped of all knowledge can penetrate the cloud to unite with God.

Bion was keenly interested in the medieval German mystics, whom he references both in *Transformations* and *Attention and Interpretation*. He mentions Meister Eckhart, St. John of the Cross, and John Ruysbroeck. Meister Eckhart, a late-thirteenth-century Dominican friar, was steeped in the philosophy of Aquinas, which he used as a springboard to write about mystical experience. From Augustine, Eckhart took the Neoplatonic concept of participation in the divine essence. As Bion comments, “Eckhart considers Godhead to contain all distinctions as yet undeveloped and to be Darkness and Formlessness. It cannot be the object of Knowledge until there flows out from it Trinity and the Trinity *can* be known” (1965, 162). In this Neoplatonic reading, the Godhead is equivalent to the dark and formless One, out of which flows the Intellect, where thoughts are differentiated into parts, the Trinity.

According to Eckhart, “life . . . would only say, ‘I live so that I may live.’ This is because life lives out of its own ground and springs from its own source, and so it lives without ask-

ing why it is itself living" (Colledge and McGinn 1981, 184). For the soul to ask why is to impose a distance between itself and the pure act of living, and thus to prevent the infusion of God. We, as God's creatures, can possess our being only by participation in the divine essence. God is simultaneously immanent, that is, totally available to creatures, and transcendent, beyond existence.

In the mystical union with God, there are two antithetical movements. The first is the *via negativa*, characterized by detachment (*Abgeschiedenheit*) and letting be (*Gelassenheit*). For Eckhart, while the outer man may be "undergoing trials" (Colledge and McGinn 1981, 167) in the world and receptive to the five senses, the inner man is removed from material life. Eckhart defines detachment as being "free from all creatures" (293), by which he means all attachments and relationships, emotional needs or fears, even internal objects. The soul "must aim at a pure nothing . . . in this there is the greatest receptivity" (292). Detachment enables the soul simply to be without asking why and makes it receptive to God because it is free of all other creatures.

Eckhart understood *Gelassenheit* to mean letting be, relinquishing, or abandoning. It is also translated as "releasement," suggesting an openness and receptivity. In letting be, the soul surrenders its self-will and its objects. The released soul, emptied of creatures, is completely open to God. It is nothing, a pure receptacle. For Eckhart, God is without external cause or aim for his being. This is the model for the soul's aspiration. The soul can meet God in a clearing, a hidden ground where there is no time or space but only an eternal now that kindles in it a "little spark," a small share in divine Reason.

In the second movement of mystical union, the *via positiva*, God the Father wells up and, in a Neoplatonic emanation, spills over into the Son and then into the heart of the detached soul, which forces or draws God to love it. God must fill the empty place and teach the soul to speak his Word, a silent and hidden language: "When the soul comes to this she loses her name and God draws her into Himself, so that she becomes nothing in herself" (Colledge and McGinn 1981, 292). When the soul is perfectly silent and devoid of objects, God can speak within it. For Eckhart, the distinction between the soul and God is

overcome in the *unio mystica*, a passionate relationship that is simultaneously a nameless unity.

2. *Bion and German Mysticism*

Transformations in O are a “becoming” while transformations in K are a “knowing about” (Bion 1965). The psychic reality of O cannot be expressed in words or perceived through the senses but can only be intuited. The analyst must wait until the unknown has evolved by means of emotional experiences to the point where an event emerges that represents it in the form of what Bion calls a “selected fact.”

How do we know selected facts? What are their sources and what makes them valid? In Bion’s theory of emanation, all selected facts flow out of transcendent Forms. These innate ideas serve as a foundation that ground more empirical truths. Truth depends on our ability to intuit and receive a vision of these Forms. Eckhart’s model of emptying oneself of sensory data and receiving God’s influx is a compelling prototype for Bion’s approach to psychoanalytic listening.

What sustains the analyst in the evolution of the unknown is faith (F). As Eigen has put it, faith is “a way of experiencing which is undertaken with one’s whole being, all out, ‘with all one’s heart, with all one’s soul, and with all one’s might’” (1981, 413; see also Eigen 1985). In this perspective, faith is an essential attitude in clinical practice, superseding knowledge, and it entails an emphasis on attention and perception. Faith means accepting the unknown out of which truth will emerge as the analysis proceeds. It is Eckhart’s openness and receptiveness, and it sustains the hope that trauma can be healed. Faith relies on intuition to grasp the psychic reality of the patient and is decidedly not an intellectual exercise. The analyst must renounce the Cartesian temptation to seek to grasp the object by means of the intellect (Grotstein 2004).

Bion’s famous dictum (1970) that one should approach each session without memory or desire—to which he subsequently added without understanding—corresponds to Eckhart’s ideals of detachment and emptiness. The analyst allows himself to become a pure container, into which flow the patient’s projections and β -elements. This is an even more

radical stance than that entailed by the movement from pre-conception and conception because here the analyst is asked to have no preconceptions. He should empty himself of counter-transference, theories, and any memories he may have of the patient. For Bion, both memory and desire represent anxious uses of the mind that interfere with receptivity by clinging to the illusory security of what is believed to be known. Because contact with O is intense and chaotic, it can be very difficult to tolerate and will arouse greed, envy, violence, and fragmentation. In response, memory and desire in the analyst become manifestations of resistance. Memories saturate the analyst's preconceptions, preventing emergence of the unknown and formless void, while desires replace attention to the present with reminiscences of the past and anticipations of the future. The analyst should instead await everything in a state of "unconditional preparedness," as if seeing it for the first time. The aim of intuition is "at-one-ment" with the reality of the patient, that is, with O and its outpouring of β -elements. Mental growth in the patient depends upon the analyst's capacity to remain open to his intuitions so that he is able to tolerate and to think about them.

This is not to say that the analyst does not have a theory. That would be wild analysis. Bion, who practiced as a Kleinian (Grotstein 2007), emphasizes that the analyst must learn and have available a working theory. One must also have a reliable technique as a background to forgetting. One forgets and then is pulled back into remembering. Bion (1962) states: "The analyst has to concern himself with two models, one that he is called upon to make and the other implicit in the material produced by the patient" (87).

What Bion advocates is not forgetting but rather refraining from memory or desire in the form of premature understanding. It is not memory per se that is the problem, but the attachment to memory. There can be an equally problematic attachment to forgetting (Symington and Symington 1996). Freud (1912) made the same point when he recommended that the analyst "should simply listen, and not bother about whether he is keeping anything in mind," and then went on to say: "Those elements of the material which already form a connected context will be at the doctor's conscious disposal;

the rest, as yet unconnected and in chaotic disorder, seems at first to be submerged, but rises readily into recollection as soon as the patient brings up something new to which it can be related and by which it can be continued" (112).

Discussion

What is the importance of these "mystical" sources of Bion's thought? How do they impact clinical work? The question for Bion is ultimately one of the meaning of life and how to account for values in a "scientific" world. It has justly been said that Bion lends himself to personal readings. Because his style of writing is unsaturated and open, each clinician is free to create his or her own Bion. Rather than found a school or have disciples, he wanted each analyst to find his or her own O, K, and F.

From a scientific standpoint, the universe can be comprehended by means of linguistic and mathematical propositions. Truthful statements must strive for clarity and exactness, and only strictly logical propositions are meaningful. This point of view informs Bion's "scientific deductive system" in the books of his earlier period, *Learning from Experience*, *Elements of Psychoanalysis*, and *Transformations*, in which he sought to impart a mathematical precision to psychoanalysis.

But Bion gave up on his dream of constructing a perfectly logical theory. He came to recognize that his mathematical system led to an evacuation of meaning, the very thing that psychoanalysis should strive to foster. Bion, according to Grotstein (2007), then adopted a "transcendent position" in which "the concept of O transforms all existing psychoanalytic theories . . . into veritable psychoanalytic manic defenses against the unknown, unknowable, ineffable, inscrutable, ontological experience of ultimate being" (121). Grotstein, while careful to say that he does not mean a transcendent God, is pointing to the Neoplatonic idea of the One. The aim of psychoanalysis, then, is to reveal glimpses of O, the preexisting unity that is ultimate reality.

Eckhart's vision of a God that pours—or is drawn—into the empty vessel of the soul is Bion's precursor here. In the

via negativa, the analyst, like the mystic, aims to clear himself of all attachments, preoccupations, and identifications in order to be “without memory or desire.” Through the practice of detachment and release, there is an ever-greater receptivity, openness, and elimination of barriers. The analyst becomes empty, a pure container. This is what Bion means by the no-thing. Only then can he hear the silent language of the unconscious. In the *unio mystica*, we can rekindle the spark of the transcendent, the basic preconceptions. Birth and early mental life are fragmenting attacks that sever contact with the transcendental One. The purpose of reverie is to regain contact with the preconceptions, which are absolute and eternal. In the empty mind, we can intuit and remember the Forms. By restoring this original unity the mind can begin to heal. As commentators such as Grotstein and Eigen have shown, if many Kleinians have had difficulty with O, K, and F, the reason is not that Bion was demented or psychotic but because of his transcendent move, which is inimical to modern sensibilities. Bion asks us to start from the premise that we cannot speak of O, but we can let it be.

To be sure, we can also understand Bion empirically. Without invoking transcendence, we can still say that the scientific model does not include all of reality.¹⁰ There is a realm that cannot be described exactly but can be experienced and felt. We were born out of a unity with our mothers. Much of early development cannot be put into words, as language did not exist for the infant. By O Bion was trying to capture what is most luminous as well as most terror-filled in the human psyche, neither of which can ever be fully encoded in language. Bion’s genius was to see that these are not repressed states but fractured bits and pieces of experience that are not accessible by the usual means of analytic listening. We must put aside the intellect and listen with the body and the emotions. Bion attempts to remain on the “unsaturated” side of meaning. The terror and wonder emerge out of these fractured states in reverie and containment. We hope for surprise and new combinations, leading to growth in adaptive abilities.¹¹

Hans Loewald (1960), too, has a vision of unity rooted in the mother-infant dyad. Throughout development, there is progressive differentiation and separation, yet in the deepest

layers of the unconscious there remains the need for union with another. Loewald believes that psychoanalysis should act to restore the links between the differentiated and the fused self, resulting in an ongoing exchange between the two sides, which he calls primary and secondary processes. This could be a reading of O.¹²

Most commentators on Bion, including Ferro (1999; 2002), Green (1973), Ogden (1983; 1997; 2004), and Edna O'Shaughnessy (1992; 2005), hold onto some version of empirical reality. For example, O'Shaughnessy (2005) writes as a staunch Kleinian: "my reading of Bion's opus is that the arresting qualities of language in his main writings free the reader's thinking, but that, as his late thinking becomes less boundaried, the defects of these very qualities make the texts too open, too pro- and e-vocative, and weakened by riddling meanings" (1525).

I have noted that Bion postulates a search for an idealized but unattainable and even inanimate object as one response to the catastrophe of early loss and resultant splitting. Would it be going too far to wonder whether Bion's theory might itself be an illustration of this tendency? Did his courageous grappling with psychosis and other clinical disasters lead to a compensatory search for idealized concepts? A transcendent object is certainly an idealized object. Does man need the infinite in order to live with the inevitable failure of mortal life? Nietzsche (1873), for one, thought so: "Only through forgetfulness can man ever achieve the illusion of possessing a 'truth' . . . then he will forever buy illusions for truths" (45).

Directions for Future Exploration

Bion has a unitary conception of the psyche that posits a primordial nonverbal unconscious, from which differentiated thoughts and mental structures emanate. He had in his later period a Platonic view of existence in which there are ideal objects that ground reality. We can conversely interpret the earlier Bion as Aristotelian, who regarded the growth of thought as a movement toward complexity and symbolization, but did not espouse a transcendental vision of ideal Forms.

The essential psychoanalytic listening stance is meditative, a clearing of the mind of preconceptions to foster detachment toward transference and countertransference. Meditation is a discipline requiring study and practice so as to be able to “hear” what cannot yet be put into words or symbols. These experiences will inevitably be transmitted by projective pressure if they are not overtly acted out. This invites a phenomenological approach, in which the what and the how of knowing are more important than the why. Becoming conscious of one’s internal fantasy and the current transference relationship is the goal of intuitive listening. Questions about defense, origin, and reconstruction can be pursued in a later working through. Attending to unconscious communication is not possible if one remains at linguistic levels of organization. Intuitions that begin as vague images or inchoate sensations often crystalize into clear and compelling insights after one has lived with them long enough.

Bion’s radical putting aside of all understanding and desire contrasts with the more moderate hermeneutic approach of Loewald (1960).¹³ Loewald does not advocate forgetting but rather holding a vision of the patient that will emerge as the analyst chisels away at impediments and distortions. The methods of Bion and Loewald fall at different point along a continuum but both are useful to the clinical analyst. Putting aside all desire and understanding is an ideal aim, never attainable in a pure state, but nonetheless worth striving for.

Determining the truth of one’s intuitions faces the ever-present dangers of subjectivism and the projection of one’s own desires and thoughts—that is, of countertransference. The analyst’s only recourse is to work intersubjectively in order to monitor the soundness of one’s intuitions through the patient’s responses. If we enlarge Bion’s conception of O to include not only trauma and terror but also love and fusion, O then encompasses the nonverbal origins of both our most catastrophic and our most blissful experiences. An analysis must dwell in these primitive areas of the psyche in order for healing to take place.

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Notes

1. This account of elements and functions is taken from what Ogden (2004) calls early Bion, up to and including *Learning from Experience* (1962), where he does not depart significantly from Klein. Only in the later papers does he move beyond Kleinian theory (Symington and Symington 1996).
2. Neopositivism holds that all assertions not grounded in empirical science are meaningless. Problems arise in the need to provide verification for empirical facts and the assumption that all propositions must either be true or false. Cognitive meaning often cannot be reduced to what is directly observable, in either phenomenological or intersubjective terms.
3. He is said by some of the London Kleinians to have suffered from strokes when he left for Los Angeles in 1968. Grotstein (2007), who was in analysis with Bion during the Los Angeles years, reports that his speech and intellect were unimpaired.
4. In an extended review of Grotstein (2007), however, Ferro (2008) clearly appreciates the concept of O.
5. Bizarre objects are an extreme form of projective identification in which aspects of ego and superego are attacked and fragmented, then projected into external objects. They are experienced as having a life of their own and capable of terrorizing the self (Bion 1957; 1962; Grinberg, Sor, and DeBianchedi 1974; Ogden 1983; O'Shaughnessy 1992). Bion (1957) uses the example of a gramophone that is believed by the patient to be listening to or spying on him.
6. Bion writes: "It may seem that I am misusing words with an established meaning, as in my use of the terms function and factors. A critic has pointed out to me that the terms are used ambiguously and the sophisticated reader may be misled by the association of both words with mathematics and philosophy. I have deliberately used them because of the association, and I wish the ambiguity to remain. I want the reader to be reminded of mathematics, philosophy and common usage, because a characteristic of the human mind I am discussing may develop in such a way that it is seen at a later stage to be classifiable under those headings—and others" (1962, vii).
7. Plato (429–347 B.C.E.) is associated with the doctrine of transcendent Forms, according to which we live in a dualistic reality. The world of phenomena is defective and filled with error. Behind this world are the Forms, eternal, changeless, perfect. Forms are patterns of perfection that particulars endeavor to reproduce. Among these abstract ideas are Goodness, Beauty, Equality, Likeness, etc. All learning is a recollection of things that the soul already knows. To secure knowledge, one must complete the *anamnesis*, a dialectic between empirical beliefs and "working out the reason" of the Forms. Knowledge is the full, clear, and stable understanding of the Forms.
8. Throughout this article, the word "pre-conception" will be spelled with a hyphen when it refers to an innate idea and without a hyphen when it refers to experience.
9. Whereas transcendentals in medieval philosophy are attributes of being such as unity, truth, goodness, and beauty, for Kant they are forms of our knowledge of objects (Caygill 1995).
10. This echoes Wittgenstein's position in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921), "*The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen: in it no value exists—and if it did exist, it would have no value. If there is any value that does have value, it must lie outside the whole sphere of what happens and is the cause. . . . It must lie outside the world*" (6.41).
11. For a wonderful early work on surprise, see Theodore Reik (1936).
12. Although Loewald does refer to Klein, I can find no evidence that he read Bion.
13. On hermeneutics, see the work of Gadamer (1960), a student of Heidegger, who understood texts to be subject to interpretation and in dialogue with differing cultural and historical eras.

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