

CHAPTER 3

WILFRED BION

A Peircean Semiotic Reading

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INTRODUCTION

Wilfred Bion was a British psychoanalyst in the Kleinian object relations tradition who has become quite influential in recent years for his innovative use of projective identification and his theory of nonverbal psychic development. His writings are dense, often aphoristic, and lend themselves to multiple interpretations. I will suggest that a semiotic reading of Bion will help us clear up some inconsistencies. In particular, I will focus on Bion's theory of thinking, which develops out of a primeval formlessness through a series of steps toward symbolic thinking. Peirce's triad of index, icon, and symbol will help us to order this progression. What is the nature of our most primitive thoughts? How do these primitive forms of thinking influence later behavior? Bion, in turn, will give a developmental theory to Peirce's semiotic theory. Interestingly, both men struggled with the question of how to conceive of a mind that understands finite sequences when semiotic series have no potential starting and ending points. This is the question of

pragmatics. How do we practically fit in a world of infinite possibilities and make finite choices? Peirce's discussion of infinite series of semiotics will help us to unpack Bion's concept of the infinite. I would emphasize that Bion and Peirce are writing in totally different domains. Bion is applying psychoanalytic theory to understand clinical phenomena and is loosely using theory from philosophy and theology as metaphors to illustrate his clinical points. Peirce is a philosopher of science and logic who developed a semiotic theory of signs and symbols as a means of communication. Communication, then, is the bridge between the two theorists, as Bion is trying to explain how the ability to communicate develops.

WILFRED BION

Bion (1897–1979) is, arguably, one of the most innovative psychoanalysts in the twentieth century. He was born in India but lived most of his life in England. Much like Charles Peirce, he was a true polymath, having extensive interests in mathematics, philosophy, logic, and theology. Like Charles Peirce, he tended to develop his own unique professional vocabulary, and his writings are dense and difficult. There is no evidence in his writing that Bion had any reading of Peirce or any of the other European semioticians.

His early training was in the British object relations of Melanie Klein. Projective identification was first formulated by Klein (1946) as a complex defense, where the infant fantasizes projecting a hated part of the self into another person and then fantasizes that the hated self-part, now embodied in the other person, is attacking and forcing itself back into the self. This preserves the internal feeling of goodness, while isolating badness outside in the other. The unconscious aim of the infant is to preserve itself from feared destruction. However, the infant is continuously threatened by potential attack from the hated external object, leading to a paranoid position.

The container–contained is a further development of projective identification. Bion thought that the projected self-part is actually felt by the recipient object, causing a reaction in the recipient. It moves the concept of projective identification from a one-person fantasy to a two-person interaction in the container–contained and serves as a model for unconscious communication. Projective identification in this sense is a normal aspect of the mother–infant relationship. The good enough mother can contain the hated projections, modify them to make them less toxic, and then feed them back to the infant at appropriate moments. Here Bion is adding to the Kleinian emphasis on internal fantasy with the actual interaction between infant and mother. There is also a pathological form of projective identification in which the infant must eject terrifying elements because they cannot be contained and transformed. Projective identification is not,

for Bion, a ubiquitous defense of early development but a defense triggered by failure to achieve language and thought. Language at this level is unavailable because the primitive elements are not transformable. He thinks of the Kleinian positions, the movement from the paranoid-schizoid position to the depressive position, not as fixed developmental stages, but as poles that continually oscillate throughout life. Bion sees an ongoing process of dividing and uniting in the oscillation between paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions.

This also serves as a model of therapeutic action in psychoanalysis. The analyst receives the projections as counter-transference (a form of communication), contains the projections, and uses them to make appropriate interpretations. These ideas have all been absorbed into the mainstream Kleinian theory. Greenberg and Mitchell (1983) argue, rightly in my opinion, that Klein makes a transition from the Freudian emphasis on drives to an emphasis on objects. For Klein, desire is always for something. What is important clinically are unconscious fantasies about our objects.

Bion's Theory of Thinking and Terminology

Bion (1962, 1963) is offering a radical shift in Freudian metapsychology. He wants to move away from a motivational system based on pleasure and pain and toward a motivational system based on the desire for truth and growth. It is growth in the ability to think. The acceptance of suffering does not involve a delay in the pleasure principle. Emotional growth has taken the place of the pleasure–pain principle. Freud believed that thinking served to reduce psychic tension, while Bion believed thinking was useful in managing tension (Symington & Symington, 1996). It is the ability to manage tensions through manipulation of symbols that is ultimately motivating and more useful than tension discharge. In the ability to think, we can form symbolic internal fantasy about our objects and thus are freed from concrete object ties.

Thoughts then, or these primitive elements that are proto-thoughts, are bad, needed objects and to be got rid of because they are bad. They can be got rid of either by evasion or modification. The problem is solved by evacuation if the personality is dominated by the impulse to evade frustration and by thinking the objects if the personality is dominated by the impulse to modify the frustration. (Bion, p. 84)

Mental growth is dependent on whether frustration is evaded or faced. Bad objects are those events or persons perceived as frustrating, causing displeasure. The idea of primary and secondary process is replaced by beta (β) and alpha (α) elements. Growth is called alpha function, the development

of the ability to think, replacing the move from the pleasure principle to the reality principle. Instincts are replaced by linkages, love (L), hate (H) and knowledge (K). The unconscious is now seen as formless (the infinite) and consciousness as what is formed and linked (the finite) (Symington & Symington, 1996).

The Beta Space

The theory of alpha function and beta and alpha elements is first outlined in *Living from Experience* (Bion, 1962a). Bion postulates a second unconscious, grounding the dynamic unconsciousness. This unconscious is composed of the most primitive mental elements which Bion calls beta (β) elements. This second unconscious is what the infant is born with. It has no structure and no links. You can think of it as an empty space that starts to be filled up with sensory elements. Bion describes β -elements as “things in themselves . . . objects of sense” (Bion, 1962a, p. 6). Bion thinks of the β -elements as unstable. They either need to be processed via α -function into α -elements or they will be evacuated outside the self, leading to projective identification, “to rid the psyche of accretions of stimuli” (Bion, 1962a, p. 7). “If there are only beta-elements, which cannot be made unconscious [through α -function], there can be no repression, suppression, or learning” (Bion, 1962a, p. 8). All defenses are based on a management of excessive β -elements, by splitting, hyper-control, or phobicizing (Ferro, 2005).

Bion is unclear about the nature of β -elements. On the one hand, he appears to equate β -elements with pure sense impressions, calling them “undigested facts” (p. 7). Grotstein (2007) seems to take this first meaning of sense impressions; β -elements are “the impersonalness of Fate” (p. 61). In this sense, β -elements are physical sense impressions as opposed to mental events. On the other hand, β -elements can have an emotional valence. Bion goes onto say that β -elements can produce acting out or can be used in thinking that manipulates things in themselves. This seems to suggest that β -elements do have an emotional valence. Ferro (2006) describes β -elements as “emotional or sensory-perceptual proto-tensions” (p. 46). He goes onto postulate balpha-elements, which are a mixture of partly digested β -elements stored in lumps (Ferro, 2005).

Alpha Function

In normal development, β elements are transformed by alpha (α) function into α -elements. α -function is a description of the transformation of unformed mental elements into more organized mental elements. These organized mental elements, α -elements, start to take on symbolization. “alpha-elements . . . resemble(s), and may in fact be identical with, the visual images with which we are familiar in dreams” (Bion, 1962a, p. 7). They may consist of visual images, auditory patterns, or olfactory patterns. Ferro

(2006) describes α -elements as visual pictograms. If α -elements cannot be formed, the person is unable to dream. α -elements are storable and available for further processing in thinking, memory and learning. α -elements can only be known consciously in two narrow channels, a visual flash or through reverie (Ferro, 2006). Normally, α -elements go on to form narrative derivatives, dreams, unconscious fantasy, memories and conscious narrative structures (Ferro, 2006). Bion uses the labels α and β for two reasons: He wants to avoid any connotations with previous theory and he does not know the mechanism of these functions.

Regression of α -elements back into β -elements can be caused by attacks on α -function. For Bion, envy of the loved object and envy of third objects are ubiquitous. Envy aroused by the breast causes destruction of α -function. This destruction can attack the mental ability to symbolize or attack the symbols themselves. The visual pictograms can be de-linked and regress back into β -elements. In either case, the mind is left with an excess of β -elements. This obstruction then causes the infant guilt and fear of aggression. The fear of starvation causes a split between maternal and psychical satisfaction.

This split, enforced by starvation and fear of death through starvation on the one hand, and by love and the fear of associated murderous envy and hate on the other, produces a mental state in which the patient greedily pursues every form of material comfort; he is at once insatiable and implacable in his pursuit of satiation. (Bion, 1962a, p. 11)

There is a search for a lost object and increased dependence on the mother. The universe is felt to be full of inanimate objects. Here is another model of β -elements. The regressed α -elements retain their charge and are now elements of terror and violence. Grotstein (2007) thinks that degraded α -elements exist from the beginning and constitute the terrifying aspects of this unformed space.

The Contact Barrier

Another aspect of α -function is to form a contact barrier. The contact barrier forms the separation of conscious and unconscious processes. If there is a failure of α function, then a β -screen develops. The β -screen leads to confusion between conscious and unconscious. There is no capacity for linkages and there is no resistance of passage of elements from different zones. The normal semipermeable barrier does not exist. Since there is free discharge of β -elements, the analyst is burdened with a heavy countertransference, as the patient tries to manipulate the analyst via the evacuation of β -elements. Another aspect of the destruction of α -function is the formation of bizarre objects. These are composed of β -elements infused with ego and superego traces, making them appear even more dangerous.

Reverie

The infant's α -function develops in reverie. Bion (1962a) states:

[R]everie 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. (p. 36)

Later, he goes on to say:

In the situation where the β -element, say the fear that it is dying, is projected by the infant and received by the container in such a way that it is "detoxicated," that is, modified by the container so that the infant may take it back into its own personality in a tolerable form. The operation is analogous to that performed by α -function. The infant depends on the Mother to act as its α -function. (Bion, 1963, p. 24)

The infant's hateful and terrified β -elements are evacuated and placed in the feeding mother. If she, in her reverie, can tolerate and contain the infant's β -elements, she will use her own α -function to transform these elements and, at an appropriate time, feed them back to the infant as α -elements. Over time, the infant is able to gradually develop his or her own α -function. This forms a bidirectional unconscious communication system between infant and mother. This is called container/contained ($\varphi\delta$). Bion would regard this as a normal or regular use of projective identification and as the primitive basis for thinking. Failure of reverie results in increased frustration in the infant and possible breakdown.

Ferro (2006) defines reverie as the analyst's ability "to enter into contact with his waking dream thought and its compositional subunits—the α -elements—and to narrate these in words" (p. 100). In reverie, the analyst's mind must be semipermeable. If there are no cracks that allow β -elements to be projected, the analysis remains sterile and at an impasse. If the cracks are too wide, then the analyst is overwhelmed by psychotic transferences (Ferro, 2005). Container/contained, in the therapeutic situation, can become an important area of unconscious communication between analyst and patient. The analyst can contain what his patient has projected into him, often experienced as a pressure toward action, and "read" it as an indication of the patient's unconscious mental state (Ogden, 1997).

Bion's Infinite Series

In a set of later works, Bion (1962) develops an alternative way to understand the growth of thought. It is one of several attempts that Bion makes to explain the growth of thought. He classifies thoughts as preconceptions, conceptions, and concepts. He characterizes preconception as an "empty

thought” that exists as an inborn disposition. The conception is realized by a conjunction of a preconception with a realization. Thus, a priori knowledge meets up with experience to produce a thought. “Conceptions therefore will be expected to be constantly conjoined with an emotional experience of satisfaction” (1962b, pp. 306–307). The linkage of the expectation with the experience produces a more organized idea. The concept is a named and fixed thought. The preconception can also be understood as unsaturated (Bion, 1963). Unsaturated elements are states of expectation that, when supplied with a constant, become saturated. The saturated elements are enlarged and become unsaturated elements in more complex formations. This can also be understood as a container ♀ searching for a realization ♂. The result of the mating of ♀ and ♂ is a conception. When this mating occurs at any level, the conception becomes a preconception at the next level of thinking. This leads to an infinite series of the formation of conceptions and preconceptions, much as in Hegel’s dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977). We can see this as a general model of development. Thoughts, by grasping experience, become more complex and open to larger experiences, leading to a progressive series. This is a second model of the growth of thinking (Symington & Symington, 1996).

CHARLES SANDERS PEIRCE

Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914) was the son of Benjamin Peirce, a Harvard professor and the foremost mathematician of his day. Charles Peirce was a polymath, making original contributions in mathematical logic, the logic of relations, phenomenology, the philosophy of pragmatics, the philosophy of science, and the theory of signs. He was a true original, yet he never developed any systematic unity, was endlessly revising his ideas, and published many papers but never a philosophical book. He had a strong influence on William James’ and John Dewey’s development of pragmatism. His writings are digressive and filled with invented terms, making them difficult and inaccessible. In his personal life, he tended to get into fights and couldn’t hold onto academic positions. He was probably manic-depressive, suffered from painful trigeminal neuralgia, and addicted to various drugs (Brent, 2000). He was divorced and lived with his second wife before they were married, a scandal at the time. He ended his life impoverished and isolated.

Peirce’s Development of Semiotics

The term “semiotic” (he spells it “semeiotics”) is probably taken from Locke (1959), who proclaimed in his essay a “new doctrine of signs.” Among

signs, Locke included both words and ideas. The concept of signs goes back to pre-Socratic philosophy. Both Plato and Aristotle spoke of thoughts as an internal language. Aristotle made the point that words symbolize thoughts. Augustine was the first to incorporate both natural events (i.e., where there is smoke, there is fire) and words under signs. Peirce's theory of signs came more directly from Kant's theory of knowledge. Ideas (*Vorstellung*) or presentations are a general term for any mental content. Semiotics for Peirce developed out of Kant's doctrine that objects not constituted by thought are unknowable. Peirce developed the idea that all thinking is done via signs, mostly words but other images as well. If thought is essentially verbal and words are signs, then thoughts are signs. Thought depends on words having meaning. All thinking is dialogic and inherently communicational. Thinking is not a succession of individual thoughts, as Locke thought, but a development of external and internal signs. Cognition consists of the manipulation of signs (Skagestad, 2000). Peirce understood that sense experience is continuous, in opposition to Kant, who held that separate impressions must be combined in synthesis. It is through thinking that the whole is broken up into parts, as analysis or explanation (Short, 2007).

Peirce in America was roughly contemporary with Ferdinand de Saussure in France, but there is no evidence that either of them was aware of the other. Peirce's theory of signs and Saussure's theory of signs are actually quite different. Saussure's concept of signifier and signified is largely synchronic and privileges verbal symbols (*language*) and their interconnectedness through convention. Saussure does not account for how language is about the world. De Saussure had a strong influence on European philosophy and can be found in Lacan's theory of psychoanalysis. Peirce enlarges the concept of sign to include natural signs, images, feelings, and actions. The Peircean account is diachronic and emphasizes process over time. The Peircean account also includes natural signs, thus extending it beyond the human context (Short, 2007).

The Theory of Signs

In his early writings, Peirce thought of ideas as representations or signs. Peirce defined a sign as "anything which determines something else (its *interpretant*) to refer to an object to which itself refers (its *object*) in the same way, the interpretant becoming in turn a sign, and so on *ad infinitum*" (Peirce, 1991, p. 239). The sign or representamen is the form that the sign takes. It can be physical or not. It is roughly similar to Saussure's signifier. The object is what the sign stands for. It too can be physical or not. The object determines the sign by the placing of constraints or conditions on successful signification by the object, rather than the object causing or

generating the sign. Peirce thought that the sign–object relationship was not able to sustain an account of representation. It needed a third component, interpretation. An interpretant is the sense made of the sign, similar to Saussure’s signified. The pragmatic use of symbols is the effect caused in the interpreter’s mind. Its consequences can be thought or action. In this sense, interpretants are dynamic. There is no agreement about the relationship among the triad’s components. The sign’s meaning may be the object, emphasizing the sign’s semantic properties relating signified and signifier. Or the sign’s meaning may be the interpretant, stressing the sign’s pragmatic properties linking sign-object to its interpretive effect. It is quite possible to see both positions in a fluid and shifting relationship (Moorjani, 2000). “The entire intellectual purport of any symbol consists in the total of all general modes of rational conduct which, conditionally upon all the possible different circumstances and desires, would ensue upon the acceptance of the symbol” (Peirce, quoted in Misak, 2000, p. 9).

In actual use, the subject may be the sign, the object, or an interpretant. In a dyad, each subject will communicate signs that refer to the other person, but at the same time, refer to himself as an object or provide interpretation. Any of these roles can reverse or change at any time (Phillips, 2000). As an example, take a stop sign. We have a sign and an action in response to the sign (the object), stopping. Between the sign and the action, there are numerous interpretants. I may ignore or misread the sign and not stop. The sign points to where I should stop. I can think there is danger in not stopping, I could hit a pedestrian or by another car. I can decide to slow down or completely stop. And so on.

Indexes, Icons, and Symbols

Peirce had a number of logical typologies of signs. One of his basic classifications has been widely accepted. He regarded it as the most fundamental division of signs. This is the division of signs into symbol, icon, and index.

As an *icon*, the representamen resembles or imitates the object physically, possesses some of its qualities. The icon represents its object mainly by similarity or likeness. Every picture and diagram is an icon. There is no dynamic connection with the object. A pure icon is independent of any purpose. Icons can be used as examples, likenesses, and samples. Most semioticians agree that there are no pure icons; there is always an element of cultural convention involved. They are seen as more natural, a monadic relationship either by resemblance or by exemplification.

As an *index*, the representamen is physically or causally connected to the object, either observed or inferred. Indexes are also called *semes* and are least conventional. It indicates something. Index and object are connected as a matter of fact, a real connection, like a fragment torn away from the object. There is a dynamic connection between object and sign. They are not based

on resemblances but focus the attention. Metonymic relationships, contiguity or closeness are indexes. Indexes can be thought of as dyadic, with minimal interpretation. The role of the index is to set us in a certain direction.

As a *symbol*, the representamen is fundamentally arbitrary and conventional. There is no physical relationship between the representamen and the object. Symbols are also called tokens and are most conventional. A sign refers to the object by an association of ideas. They are constituted as such merely by understanding. All words and sentences are symbols. A symbol is a sign of an object that is assigned to it by a rule of interpretation. Symbols can only signify types, not individuals. Symbols are always a triadic relationship.

We can use a map as a sign system. The map as a sign could have a number of objects. An object might be a particular place or feature of the landscape depicted on the map. The interpretant is locating a particular position; that is, *X*. Then *X* becomes a sign for another interpretant. An object might be me traveling in the landscape depicted by the map. I see I am here or I need to go there. An object might be a certain feeling I have about a town located on the map. I had a bad meal in *X*. An object might be my inability to communicate with the inhabitants of the landscape of the map. I do not speak the language of this place. A sign can be a symbol, icon, index, or any combination. A map is indexical in pointing to locations, iconic in its scaling directions and distances, and symbolic in its use of conventional symbols and names. None is mutually exclusive. It is often thought that the three modes will coexist in a hierarchy in which one mode will dominate, to be determined by context. Which mode is dominant will depend on how the sign is used. Signs may shift over time.

Infinite Semiosis

However, an interpretant is itself a sign in the mind, equivalent or more developed. It is best thought of as the understanding that we have of the sign/object relation. An interpretant can be a feeling, a thought, or an action. This makes the interpretant central to the content of the sign, in that the meaning of a sign is manifest in the interpretation that it generates in sign users. The interpretant may be a different person, may be a communication, may be an internal dialogue, or need not involve minds at all: a formal logic. The interpretant is a second signifier of the object, now mental. Since any sign must determine an interpretant in order to count as a sign, and interpretants are themselves signs, infinite chains of signs seem to become conceptually necessary. This is called infinite semiosis.

In 1868–1869, Peirce attacked Cartesian objective certainty,¹ where we have truth in what we can introspect. Rather, if thoughts are signs and every thought produces another thought, then we have an infinite progress toward meaning and regress toward reference. Every thought is both a sign and an interpretant. There is no such thing as an intuition, a foundational object thought, a thing-in-itself. All thinking is inductive and signs are always

arbitrary. It implies that meaning is only an endless substitution of one symbol for another. This does not allow for individual thoughts. How does one account for one thinker to approach a truth but never completely? The task was to identify how signs could signify individual objects. By 1885, Peirce found the answer in indexical reference. Indexical is always a particular connection to a particular object at a particular time and space. “The index asserts nothing: it only says ‘There!’ It takes hold of our eyes, as it were, and forcibly directs them to a particular object, and there it stops. Demonstrative and relative pronouns are nearly pure indices, because they denote things without describing them” (Peirce, quoted in Short, 2007, p. 49).

This is later described as a “perceptual judgment,” a hypothesis, subject to later correction. Anything that compels attention in a particular direction is an index. This leads to the inclusion of natural signs as indexes. Icons were recognized as something that signifies by resemblance. Peirce added both actions and emotions as possible interpretants. By 1903, Peirce suggested that an interpretant, which he had always maintained was another sign, could also be potential. “It is not necessary that the Interpretant should actually exist. A being *in futuro* will suffice” (Peirce, quoted in Short, 2007, p. 54). Signs may be interpreted infinitely but their actually being interpreted is not necessary for their having significance. Finally, in 1907, he came to the view that there must be final interpretants. While explanation and meaning are inexhaustible, it is the practical aspect of purposeful action, understood to its fullest, that counts.

Development of Signs

Although Peirce did not elaborate much in this area, one can construct a developmental theory of signs. Indexes would be the most primitive and concrete of signs. Out of indexes develop icons, which are not part of the object but depict it transparently. Most developed and abstract would be symbols and verbal thinking. Peirce generally prioritized symbolic thinking and thought that sign-systems evolved toward the symbolic. Iconicity is the default mode of signification, “the most primitive, simple, and original of the categories.” In the evolution of languages, there is a tendency to evolve from indexical and iconic forms toward the symbolic. Many of the early Western languages were pictographs, ideographs, and hieroglyphs.

Peirce’s Theory of Perception

Perception is not something just there but involves an interpretive creativity by the perceiver (Rosenthal, 2000). The percept is a sensory element presented in sensory awareness. The percept instigates the formation of a perceptual judgment, a creative interpretation of what the content is. The percept as interpreted is what we are immediately aware of. A perception is already a sign of something else² (Moorjani, 2000). What Peirce calls the

“percipuum” in the wider sense is the flow of experience and in the narrow sense as interpreted. Sensory content is grasped as repeated content. It is a possibility of repetition, that activates a habit. As Peirce says: “the percipuum is a recognition of the character of what is past” (Peirce, quoted in Rosenthal, 2000, p. 196). It contains no reference to future experience. Appearance always incorporates meaning, the percept as a recognized content. What is “given” is in fact a “taken.” Experience then is a unity of interaction between human understanding and the facticity of the external world. The external world is real and independent from mind, yet is partially dependent on the noetic act of grasping. A “this” is an object selected by a subject from a continuum of possibility. Truth, for Peirce, is a convergence theory, what is workable, what conforms with what we ask, what is perspectival.

Peirce too has a theory of the unconscious (Moorjani, 2000). The unconscious is composed of habits of mind, unconscious social beliefs, and can be brought into consciousness by need and desire. Logical interpretants mediate between the unconscious and conscious aspects of mind and work through association of index and icon. Peirce states: “belief is . . . a habit of mind essentially enduring for some time, and mostly (at least) unconscious” (quoted in Moorjani, 2000, p. 105).

DISCUSSION

A Peircean Reading of Perception

Bion shares Peirce’s view that thoughts must be symbolized to be knowable. In Bion’s view, the mind is originally composed of β -elements. β -elements are never knowable in themselves. It is unclear if β -elements represent a passive representation of sensory elements or it already contains emotional valances. When Bion refers to β -elements as “undigested facts” or “things-in-themselves,” he seems to imply pure sensory experience. In Peircean language, β -elements are objects. Later commentators of Bion have tried to account for an emotional valance by postulating a mixture of β and α -elements, such as balpha-elements or degraded α -elements. Yet we know from Peirce that objects do not exist in the mind by themselves; they are always accompanied by signs and interpretants. Perception is not a passive affair but always involves signs in the mind and an interpretation. The percipuum is always grasped as a repetition of the past. I believe β -elements are best thought of as indexes. They are signs that directly point to objects in an interpretation that is based on past experience. There is a dynamic connection between object and sign. β -elements, then, are directly connected to what is perceived but involves an interpretation of that perception. For Bion, early experience is always conditioned by the defense of splitting. Thus, β -elements are either felt as bad and terrifying experiences or

as idealized experiences. If β -elements cannot be transformed, they maintain an indexical relationship to real terrifying events, which must be gotten rid of by projection or evacuation. We can see how Peirce's triad is much more useful to psychoanalysis than de Saussure's dyad of signified and signifier. β -elements can only be accounted for if there are a relationship between object and sign. Moreover, β -elements involve use of natural signs, emotions and actions.

A Peircean Reading of Development

The α -function, then, can be understood as a symbolization process. It is the transformation of an index into an icon. At the index level, there is no emotional distance; what is pointed to is here-and-now. If α -elements are visual pictograms and dream thoughts, then the resulting sign is iconic. Remember that the icon represents its object mainly by similarity or likeness. The icon is less physically connected to its objects and has a higher degree of organization. It is not immediately present. We have moved from a pointing operation to a representing operation. There is also a move from more highly charged to less highly charged emotions. Reverie is an interpersonal form of α -function, where the β -elements reside in one person while the transforming function resides in another person. α -elements can now be stored in the mind in their iconic forms but are not yet suitable for thinking. The Freudian theory of primary process or latent dream thoughts would roughly correspond to Bion's α space. There is a further transformation of iconic thinking into symbolic thinking, primarily in words, in narratives, in fantasy. These transformations are subject to repressive defensive functions and result in the manifest dream and the dynamic unconscious.

Clinical Example

A patient reports that he has been very anxious, like a crazy man. The hour centers on his mixed feelings about my "help." He has seen me for many years and I haven't helped him. Yet I have pushed "too deep" and it will "tear him apart." He thinks of seeing someone else who is more "supportive" but he can't imagine not seeing me. He likes to hear my opinions, but it came out that he doesn't really listen to the content but much more to the emotional tone. He likes that I am honest, that I have stuck with him, and that I take him seriously. He cannot believe that I could like him. He would prefer to keep the relationship intellectual. When I draw his attention to depending on me, he switches to an angry rejection and the feeling that I am no good. Then in another spontaneous switch, his voice changes and he sounds childlike. He is no good. His wife and son would be better

off without him. He is a failure. Work was his life and then he was fired. He will kill himself if he can't work. His wife and son are bonded and he is left out. Now he is full of sadness. I point out that he may be reacting to my being away in the next week. He says it is like going from full speed to nothing. He returns to the need of something more supportive. When I say we have to stop, he immediately becomes angry and brings up the idea of suing me because I didn't call him back the other night.

Here is a patient who is largely residing in a β space. When he becomes emotionally involved with me, he is terrified. He perceives me as either tearing him apart or abandoning him. He is the little child, unprotected and vulnerable to rejection and abandonment. He is connected to me as the bad object. Yet he can quickly switch into an idealizing mode, in which I provide great understanding and support. Let us see how this could be understood as a semiotic series. In the first sequence, he takes me (in the transference) as the object. He interprets me as pushing too deep and represents the interpretation as the feeling of being torn apart. Now he is the torn apart person. He now interprets me as unsupportive and sees himself as alone and unsupported. But in his alone state, he can interpret me as sticking with him. Now he is supported. Then I introduce the interpretation of his depending on me. Now I am the object again and he is not supported, hated, a failure. The series continues.

What I do in actuality, end the session or not call him back, takes on an indexical function. It immediately points to attack, hate, and action. He believes that I hate him and want to get rid of him. Action on my part can only be met with a counteraction on his part. There is an absence of any higher symbolizing functions. His β -elements of hate and abandonment are evacuated into me. I feel that I must be the worst therapist in the world to not call him back or to fail to help him feel better. It is also hard to me at this point to symbolize, to gain some emotional distance, to remember other points of view. So I too feel pulled into an indexical relationship with him. There is a notable absence of iconic or symbolic functioning. We are tied together by indexing. There is no emotional distance provided by symbolizing work and whatever I feel is read by him as terrifyingly real.

A Bionian Reading of Development

Bion fills in a theory of development of thinking that Peirce only alludes to. Bion's theory is one of identification. When the infant is born, she has no symbolizing function. Following the Kleinian position, all "bad" perceptions are ejected and all "good" perceptions are accumulated inside the mind. The mother has the capability to sooth the child by containing and keeping whatever "bad" projections she feels, uses her own α -function to

detoxify them and gives them back to the infant in a formula she can digest, as α -elements. The infant gradually can internalize her own α -function and take over its function. The infant bit by bit learns to symbolize. Bion is silent on a concurring inner maturation of inherent functioning, but this would easily fit into his schema. Under stress, α -function can always be lost, so that the individual is always gaining and losing her capacity to symbolize.

Nachträglichkeit

Neither Bion nor Peirce use Freud's concept of *nachträglichkeit*, yet it is a concept embedded in both their theories. In a letter to Fliess, Freud (1896) writes: "I am working on the assumption that our psychical mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory-traces being subjected from time to time to a *re-arrangement* in accordance with fresh circumstances—to a *re-transcription*" (p. 233).

Strachey, in the *Standard Edition*, translates *nachträglichkeit* as deferred action. The term appears infrequently in Freud's earlier works. For example, in the case of the Wolfman, the primal scene witnessed at age one is reinterpreted retrospectively at age 4 through oedipal eyes (Freud, 1918). The French translate *nachträglichkeit* as *après-coup*.³ We see two steps. There is something already there but excluded, which has a meaning. We anticipate a meaning that is not quite there. In the second step, separated in time, a retrospective meaning is assigned to what is already there. Faimberg (2007) proposed an enlarged meaning to *après-coup* that is closer to what I propose here. She suggests that a meaning is given for the first time to something already there but which has nonaccessible traces, something that has no original meaning because it is unformed. Only in the *après-coup* can the something there take on meaning.

This is, in essence, a description of a sign theory of psychic meaning. The retranscription is the use of new interpretants of a sign-object relationship. In development, we see a complex movement of gradual accruing meaning and symbolization in α -function. In the analytic process, what we experience can be more discontinuous, when a series of mysterious mental states suddenly take on meaning and can be spoken of.

Infinite Series

As we have seen, Peirce struggled with the intellectual question of an infinite series of semiotics, one triad becoming the foundation for the next triad, and so on. Bion, too, has a concept of the infinite and a similar series. To start with the Freudian unconscious, Freud spoke of primary process as timeless and not ordered temporally or spatially. Contents are only ordered by their

strength of pleasure and pain (Freud, 1915). Bion postulated a different kind of unconscious. He was fond of quoting Milton (*Paradise Lost*, Book III):

The rising world of waters dark and deep
won from the void and formless infinite.

Rather than stressing conscious and unconscious, he had a dichotomy between finite and infinite. By infinite, he meant unformed, unknowable, undifferentiated, uncountable. The unformed also lacks the ordering of time and space, and contains emotional valences (the β -elements). To make finite means “to become,” to take on form. “Confronted with the unknown, ‘the void and formless infinite,’ the personality of whatever age fills the void (saturates the element), provides a form (names and binds a constant conjunction) and gives boundaries to the infinite (number and position)” (Bion, 1965, p. 171). In Bion’s terms, objects become saturated—that is, take on specific meanings.

Bion also has a triad of the development of thinking: preconception, conception, and realization. This, too, has the potential for an infinite series. Like Peirce, the realization, the product of the mating of a preconception with a conception, serves as a preconception for the next series of the triad. Theoretically, *nachträglichkeit* is an infinite process. We can think of an infinite chain of associations within the mind. Freud thought of psychoanalysis as interminable (Freud, 1937). Both Peirce and Bion faced the same intellectual puzzle. If an infinite series of thoughts is theoretically possible, how does one find a beginning and an ending? How does such a series become temporal and finite? Bion, too, finds a pragmatic solution. Thinking begins with innate elements, inborn preconceptions. This solution is not without controversy. For example, Bion states that the knowledge of the oedipal situation is inborn, an assertion most psychoanalysts could not accept. However, it does seem possible to postulate inborn personality tendencies or instinctual strengths that could serve as basic building blocks of thinking. Similar to Peirce, the most basic beta elements are indexical, the most physical and concrete of signs. Bion does not directly address how this series can be terminated. I think he would be quite comfortable with Peirce’s solution that while an infinite series is possible, there are pragmatic and finite limits to thinking. Ultimate truths can be approached but never reached. We face these issues everyday in our analytic work. Is the interpretation good enough? If I interpret one conflict, I am inevitably missing another conflict. I am inherently limited by my own subjectivity and am blind to certain aspects in my patients. Have we done enough work to terminate the analysis? Both Peirce and Bion see a progression from unformed to formed thinking. What Bion develops is a theory of development, something Peirce alludes to but does not develop.

CONCLUSIONS

Bion has developed a theory of thinking in psychoanalytic terms. Applying Pierce's semiotic series to Bion's theory clears up some inconsistencies in his work. Perception, what Bion calls β -elements, from the beginning, is a synthesis of sensory input and mental anticipation. What we see and hear already has an emotional valence. Due to primitive emotions of hate and envy, β -elements are often filled with terror and have to be expelled. Yet because they function as indexical, they remain tied to the self, even when expelled. This is the concept of projective identification. In the growth from the indexical function to fully symbolized, how can we conceive of the movement from the infinite unconscious to the finite conscious? Pierce points to pragmatic solutions. We start with a concrete point of index: this points to that. We continue to have infinite possibilities, but we pragmatically find a good-enough ending point, a best fit. This becomes a model for psychoanalytic interpretation. There is no final truth, just what best fits the evidence now.

NOTES

1. See "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man," "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities," and "Grounds of Validity of the Laws of Logic" (Peirce, 1991).
2. Similar to the forms of judgment of Kant
3. Lacan first drew attention to the importance of *après-coup* in the Wolfman and then in Laplanche and Pontalis (1983).

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