

The Names of O: is Bion a mystic?¹

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You are asking me to suppose that there is a «thing-in-itself», noumenon, Godhead, which, using Kant's terminology for my purposes, becomes manifest as a phenomenon; «God» as contrasted with 'Godhead'; «finitude» as contrasted with «infinity»

(Bion, 1975, 179-180)

THE NAMES OF O

In Bion, the concept of O is first found in *Transformations* (1965). In this text his thinking takes a major change of direction. For some, he crosses the Rubicon into madness and senility, while for others he becomes a mystical writer, and for yet others he makes an inspired leap forward which will have its ideal and final completion in the long, protracted dream of *Memoir of the Future* (Bion, 1975). I am inclined to dismiss both the first two hypotheses. And yet the concept of O is problematic. In a recent little book of aphorisms (Civitarese, 2017a) I myself wrote that perhaps analysts should agree not to talk about it for a few years. However, if we read his late books, we realize with some frustration that we cannot let ourselves avoid a kind of struggle to understand what he means when he uses terms such as *transformation*, *O*, *invariant*, or *grid*, since he talks about them on every page and there is no escaping them. The essential point to grasp is that on the one hand O attains its significance from being the focal point of a network of concepts, each of which refers to the others in an incessant to and fro, while on the other hand it is itself an interweaving of concepts (which is why I have used the plural in my title).

Bion gives O many names and it is not easy to carve out a path that might bring order to this chaos. If we try listing them, we have: *thing-in-itself*, *emotional experi-*

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ence of the session, beta element, truth, God, godhead, real, ultimate reality, formless and infinite void, language, noumenon, Platonic form, unknown, unconscious, infinite, the One, Person-in-himself. A careful rereading of his pages would surely bring up several more – for example, *darkness, zero, origin, awe, vagina* (according to Bléandonu, 1990, 168n, via an association with Dominique Aury’s novel *Histoire d’O*), *passionate love* (Bion, 1975, 183), *oh!* (*ibid.*, 36), etc. – but for now I will confine myself to the first list.

So, with the concept of O, Bion introduces us to an enigmatic object and then displays from myriad viewpoints so as to try and strip away its secret. If we were to put this into a visual image, we could locate the nature of O in the dense texture of lines drawn between the corners of a geometrical figure with at least sixteen sides. From time to time its meaning will oscillate more towards one side or another, but it will always be composed by a complex play of forces. Matters are complicated by the fact that, temperamentally and stylistically, Bion draws heavily on his knowledge of literature, mathematics, philosophy, and mysticism, but with O this stance becomes hyperbolic. The reason may be that he wishes to tell us about a very special principle of his theory, a principle which is of the greatest importance to him, absolutely indispensable; and that he does this not only by enunciating a theoretical viewpoint but also by dragging us into the direct experience of what he is referring to: the experience of the simultaneous presence of multiple vertices, the object’s threatening nature and opacity, but also the aesthetic pleasure of being able to achieve a safe distance from which to contemplate it. Putting it more precisely, I would say that everything revolves around the difference between transformation in K and transformation in O: in other words, between *knowing* and *becoming*.

To simplify, we can regroup all the names in the list into three main categories: (a) O as thing-in-itself or real, (b) as an unconscious (proto-)emotional experience shared in the session, and (c) as unconscious, infinite, and godhead. Albeit in summary, let us try to see how Bion articulates the three groups and whether, by following the thread provided by the chapters of *Transformations*, we can organize the various names of O into a coherent argument

O AS THING-IN-ITSELF

The starting point has to be the definition of O as thing in itself.² Adopting Kant’s concept, Bion explicitly proclaims the enormous debt he has to Kant’s thought and takes an immediate stand in relation to it. Indeed, Kant’s so-called Copernican revolu-

² Compared to the many philosophers whom Bion cites without much bothering to bend them creatively to his own purposes, Kant is the one who exercises an absolutely pervasive – and, in my opinion, wholly unrecognized – influence over his thought (but see Sandler, 2006). The key point of his discourse is that «the facts of the analysis», that is «O [correspond to the] experience (thing-in-itself)» (1970, 4) or are like what Kant means by the same concept: something which cannot be known directly but only in its derived properties.

tion lies in his having placed at the centre of this theory of knowledge, not the reality of the object but the investigation of the subject's cognitive faculties: so-called transcendentalism. In Bion, this means no longer paying attention primarily to the repressed *contents* but developing the psychic *container*. At the same time, just as Kant postulates that it is only possible for the subject to know phenomena and never (in an unmediated way) the thing in itself or noumenon, so Bion, taking a stand against our naïve realism, makes a similar principle of systematic doubt and essentially renames the phenomena by calling them *transformations*.

Thus far there are similarities, but then there is a sharp divergence in the two paths. Neither man abandons the possibility of reaching a universal form of knowledge, but when it comes to answering the inevitable question about what guarantees we can have for arriving at the truth, they give different responses. For Bion, unlike Kant, the concept of truth is essential as a concrete clinical element because it is the only drive – in the definition which Grotstein gives it as «truth drive» (2004) – that really interests him; this is because he calls the truth «food for the mind» and, for him, treatment means providing this food.

Put in more detail, for Bion the problem of truth is posed in these terms: how do we know if the analyst's transformations of O are intercepting the patient's transformations of O? It is in order to answer this question that he introduces the concept of *invariance*. The invariant would be the common element in the two transformations. And yet it is a hard task to identify such an element. In some passages of *Transformations* he seems to suggest that it may reside in some extrinsic and easily recognizable factor, as when he gives the example of the red pigment common to fields of poppies and the painted canvas which portrays them. But it is immediately apparent that this path will lead us straight into an aporia: what would be the subject of a quartet by Elgar or a painting by Rothko, and what invariant would they have in common? Thinking about colour would bring us back to the «pre-Kantian» area of investigating the external, real object and no longer to the search for the 'transcendental' conditions of the experience. So, what do we do now?

The only remaining option is to make «invariance» a synonym of *consensuality*: that is, to grasp the possibility of invariance in the subject's mind or, rather, *in the minds of the subjects* engaged in transforming the same fact O of the analysis. For the function which it fulfils within his theoretical construction, we may say the invariant is for Bion what *a priori* form is for Kant. Broadly speaking, what needs to be explained is this capacity for mutual understanding which human beings seem to make use of, and which Freud pondered in the *Project* (1895). We know it is also the conclusion reached by some contemporary anthropologists, such as Tomasello (2014), who maintains that what differentiates human and non-human beings is the capacity for «cooperative intentionality». We could call this the capacity for activating a function of mutual attunement aimed at common action. This is indeed where Bion starts from. Unlike

Freud, who has an individualistic view of human nature, he is motivated *from the outset* by a relational or collective view. This is why, in order to theorize the nature of the invariant or the conditions in which it is possible, he makes an in-depth study of the mother-child relationship and makes it the most pregnant and heuristically most effective model of the therapeutic relationship.

Like Kant in his own milieu, Bion addresses the problem of the mind, *but this time it is the mind of a group of two*: that which presents itself first as the problem of the knowledge of an object perceived in space and time. I am convinced that, for Bion, theorizing «transformation» as a psychoanalytic concept is only a tactical move enabling him to assert the centrality of the *intersubjective* mechanism of *at-one-ment*. The moment of unison³ becomes the key concept for defining a theory of truth (invariance) as the essential factor for psychic growth and therefore of treatment. Psychic growth coincides with the enlargement of intersubjectivity, of the other in me and of me in the other. The binomial of a radically social theory of subjectivity and, incidentally, of the technique which responds to it coherently, becomes the test case for deciding which psychoanalytic model can be called authentically intersubjective.

AT-ONE-MENT

When we look at the mother-child relationship, the thing that needs explaining is how they can achieve agreement – in other words, find the invariant of their reciprocal transformations – when the child cannot yet use language. Bion's answer – which is later the move with which he gives psychoanalysis a new basis and guides it towards a new paradigm which, in opposition to the archaeological-detective one, we can call aesthetic-intersubjective – is to put emotion at the centre of the process as, so to speak, a form of *primordial abstraction*, a kind of «habit». What do I mean by this? That Bion anticipates the previously mentioned concept of cooperative intentionality by developing the theme of being in unison, or *at-one-ment*. It is by virtue of this capacity that images are generated from the most primitive sensations (beta elements), images that already have the character of representations and will later become thoughts and concepts. We realize that *we have moved from O as thing-in-itself to O as the emotional experience shared by mother and child (or by analyst and patient)*. Emotional unison is the event which signals an individual's entry into the sociality of a *common foundation of sense* as the product of an understanding that is pre-verbal in nature, though we must never forget what is fundamental to the concept: that at least one of the two elements of the couple is already endowed with self-consciousness.

At its most fundamental level the invariant can only be thought of in terms of emotion, or rather as the spacings which give sense to the world in the form of repeated

³ «Unison» is perhaps a more convenient and familiar way to render the essential idea of at-one-ment.

experiences of *emotional unison* («I see what you see, I feel what you feel»). The O that is relevant to analysis therefore becomes the couple's unconscious emotional experience. However, the transformation of this O into words is always partial since, whatever else it may be, it is always (and remains) to some extent an unknown (O). Why? The reason is that (a) there is always an *entirely* implicit, bodily translation: i.e., into «procedural» and non-linguistic schemata, and (b) even what is explicit (verbal) can never be detached from the material plane which is an integrative part of the process of signification.

In connection with this, Bion makes a very timely evocation of the aesthetic: «*healthy mental growth seems to depend on truth as the living organism depends on food*. If it is lacking or deficient the personality deteriorates. I cannot support this conviction by evidence regarded as scientific. It may be that the formulation belongs to the domain of Aesthetic» (1965, 38, my italics). We may conclude that the theoretical elaboration of the role of this domain is precisely represented by that concept of emotional unison (*at-one-ment*): a dialectical process of reciprocal negation-elevation between mother and child played out in the field of the symbolic, but at the start almost exclusively in the area of sense (understood here as a form of «aesthetic» knowledge in that it is based on sensations) and not yet in the area of meaning.

It may seem paradoxical but, when all is said and done, it is on this unison, specifically on the timing of which mother and infant are capable in the dance of their early relationship, that what later appear as the infallible certainties of science are founded. For Bion, «truth» promotes growth because it is a fragment of symbolization, of creating sense, of increasing order. Every «happy» attribution of sense and meaning constitutes an element of the «contact barrier» which differentiates unconscious and conscious functioning. It is clear how investigating unison and invariance also helps to dismiss what could be a naïve conception of *lógos* and consensuality: in other words, as if it were a matter of an exclusively discursive-rational negotiation between two individuals.

So, the moment of truth which feeds the mind coincides with the feeling of being two individuals clasped together like two trapeze artistes, one of whom is kept from falling – in our case, into the void of non-sense – by the wires tied to the trapeze. But let's ask ourselves: why should this be the way to make a mind, to achieve the capacity for using concepts and hence for thinking, and why, therefore, should it be seen as the essential therapeutic factor in analysis? What more precise idea can we give ourselves of this unison and its effects, especially when words are not yet available and it cannot therefore pass on into an explicit accord?

Just as there can be no private language, so the ego, which originates from language, is always a *we*, and two individuals would not be enough to make a *we* as a social subject, a social rationality. To make a mind needs another mind. Throughout his work, Bion expresses the imperative of passing *from I to we*, from the intra- to the

inter-psychoic. This is again why unison, which is the outcome of what is in essence an expression of reciprocal affective investment, is not a simple fusion which annuls two individualities, but on the contrary a positive balance between identity and difference. Indeed, subjective and intersubjective are not opposed as two elements in a dichotomy but only as dialectical elements. One gives life to the other and vice versa. We should reflect on this fact when we complain about the «disappearance» of the subject in psychoanalysis.

In the dialectic of unison there is always a negativity at work. It is not by chance that Bion hyphenates *at-one-ment* which, without hyphens, means «expiation» (a sacrifice in reparation for an offence). Unison is the concept which catches the dawning of thought as it is transformed from concrete into abstract, the datum being «idealized» or negated in its particular determinations and affirmed in the universal. The same *work* is subsequently applied to thoughts previously «refined» (*abs-tracted*). This is why Bion puts transformations at the centre of his reflections. Not because he wants to imitate the philosophers and make his own attempt at a critique of metaphysics, but because he wants to grasp as precisely as possible the point at which *mind-is-made*, when thinking is manifested in its essence as experience of O/other (intersubjectivity), and not so much, for example, as the presence of psychic contents in subjects taken in isolation. The aim which moves him to speak of transformations is not that of developing an abstract theory of knowledge, but of more fully specifying the factors that are involved in treatment and the process of change.

It is worth insisting on this point because it is a frequent source of misunderstandings. Unison, which can be interpreted as the hallmark of a living bond of love, is not without *struggle* and *separateness* because, even when the conciliatory aspect (*at-one-ment*) predominates, it contains moments of opposition/dialectic (the hyphens!). Otherwise Bion would not have derived his term from *atonement* which, as «expiation», implies «sin» as its necessary complement. In fact, the concept of *at-one-ment* is by its nature a uniting of opposites. It is not a singular entity which annuls the gap of difference. A vital tension marks the relationship between the universalism of the concept and the concreteness of the sensible, of the experience of life and of its fulfilment. If we did not pass through the conflict between different physical and spiritual perspectives and different affectivities, how would we ever achieve a (relative) unification – an increase of order over time?⁴ There would be no tension, but nor would there be the growth deriving from the establishment and widening of a social space thanks to the success of reciprocal processes of recognition. An authentic reconciliation needs to pass through opposition, through splitting, through the negative of a mutual and partial negation of the other and of the self (the darkness which envelops the encounters of Cupid and Psyche in the fable by Apuleius?). Only in this way can a syn-

⁴ See Civitarese 2019.

thesis be achieved which is not coloured by submission and domination and therefore inauthentic. From this perspective, emotions seem like sensitive seismographs which record the movements of what flows into us from sociality like a source of life.

SHARED MEANING

The very fact of needing a reconciliation with «God» makes us take the decisive step towards understanding the third group of names of O (unconscious, godhead, infinite) and to see how the Bionian theory of the subjectivation process is completed. Obviously, by «godhead» we do not mean any kind of metaphysical entity. But what then? If we cannot talk about God in a theological sense, what God or godhead is under discussion? This is the most delicate crux to resolve, and it is where we get the impression that Bion is slipping into mysticism. My hypothesis is that reconciling oneself with God is an allegorical expression of the ever-recurring need for the individual to be reconciled with the *we*. This apparently «lofty» and abstract problem has to do with an absolutely clinical matter: the *we* of the mother-child or analyst-patient couple must bear within it the seal of the *we* of the broadest sociality. Recognition cannot be their private business, so to speak – this would risk creating a *folie à deux* – but must always entail a harmonization with the broadest scope of the unwritten rules and laws of society. This, I repeat, is why Bion exploits the ambiguity of the word unison, *at-one-ment*, *atonement*, expiation, and reconciliation with the godhead.

Indeed, when looking for a collective sense for shared experience, what does the analyst do if not remedy the patient's deficits in transforming O and *attracting* him into a dimension of greater consensuality? Does the analyst not perhaps act as a means of access to the forums of society/the group; that is, of the «divine»? Indeed, the goal of the analyst's transformations is to provide meaning – a *plus* of sense and meaning as the result of a certain way of engaging in relationship – in order to develop the patient's capacity for learning from experience: the *plus* is at bottom a *plus* of humanity. To achieve this goal, «the psycho-analyst tries to help the patient to transform that part of an emotional experience of which he is unconscious into an emotional experience of which he is conscious» (1965, 32). There is the idea, in other words, of a gradual progression towards the development of self-consciousness; an area which, nevertheless, as we have said, is not confined to un/conscious experience, but extends to the bodily and sensory forms of knowledge.

My thesis is that Bion uses these other names of O – which seem to problematic to us, being linked to discourse of philosophers and mystics – because, on the one hand, he is curious about the abstract striving of the former towards truth, and on the other hand, about the claims of the latter to be able to put themselves *directly*, following an aesthetic path (the emotion of ecstasy), in contact with godhead (or, for him, with O). Consequently, he is interested in their language, as he states explicitly,

so as to bring it into his own sphere and turn it to his own ends, ends which are always concerned with the efficacy of treatment. This is why, when we read terms like God and godhead, we must de-theologize them and give them a psychological and speculative interpretation; we must put them in inverted commas. Essentially, Bion finds them helpful as allegories. In the end it always comes down to this: how to be maximally receptive, over three hundred and sixty degrees, to the discourse of the unconscious.

It's true. To weave the thread from O as thing-in-itself to O as the unconscious emotional experience of the session, and from this to O as godhead, Bion performs quite a perilous operation. But also courageous. What does it consist in? At a certain point, to the reader's despair, he introduces the concept of *Platonic form* (εἶδος, ἰδέα) as the umpteenth name he uses for O in order to build a bridge between O as Kant's thing-in-itself and, as we will immediately see, O as divine (still *him*) so as to arrive at what I would call an intersubjective and pragmatic theory of truth. A long quotation from *Transformations* is necessary, otherwise it would be difficult to follow Bion's reasoning:

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, the Kleinian internal object, the inborn anticipation. Melanie Klein objected in conversation with me to the idea that the infant had an inborn pre-conception of the breast, but though it may be difficult to produce evidence for the existence of a realization that approximates to this theory, the theory itself seems to me to be useful as a contribution to a vertex I want to establish. Phenomena, the term being used as Kant might use it, are transformed into representations, Tβ. Tβ may then be regarded as a representation of the individual's experience O, but the significance of O derives from and inheres in the Platonic Form (1965, 138, my italics).

It is not very easy to understand what Bion means in this paragraph, but in any case we can say that:

- a) in at least two distinct places he expresses the principle of a method;
- b) he identifies form with Klein's internal object and his own concept of pre-conception;
- c) he uses the Kantian concept of phenomenon, but in reference to Plato's theory of forms, and in some ways reads the former by means of the other.

But what is the point of all this? My hypothesis is that, on the one hand, Plato allows Bion to mention two types of form, or schema, which configure the subject's experience, but as such transcend it: the form *a priori* and the Platonic form. The first of these reconnects him to O as thing-in-itself, while the second clears the way for the concept of O as *divine*. Let's fasten our seatbelts and see what he goes on to say: «The object represented by the term Platonic Form may also be represented in mystical terms such as "One is one and all alone and ever more shall be so", and those of canto xxxiii of the Paradiso (Barbara Reynolds's translation):

"Eternal Light, that in Thyself alone
Dwelling, alone dost know Thyself, and smile
On Thy self-love, so knowing and so known!"» (1965, *ibid.*)

Once again, Bion throws down the theoretical gauntlet by drawing on philosophy – please note: *he* does; not *we*, not *I* – but that's not all: in a highly condensed sentence he brings mysticism and poetry (!) into play and, as usual, leaves us racking our brains and wondering if all this makes any sense.

However, if we carefully read this almost unbelievably concentrated sentence, I think we can say that it is as if, after a long and contorted discussion, Bion is finally showing his cards. In what sense? Because he makes clear (in his usual «deliberately and *precisely* obscure» way; 1975, 191) that he is considering these different concepts (Platonic form, the One, the divine, godhead – but do we want to rule out a «deconstructive» reading which might seize the offer of an encrypted sense for the first term in the sentence, «object»?) *not*, of course, as *identical*, but surely as *equivalent*. Indeed, in the first part of the quotation we have *Kantian form = Platonic form*, and in the second we have *Platonic form = One/divine*. There are at least two points in *Transformations* where Bion clearly uses Platonic form as equivalent to godhead: «O, in its "caused" dimension, as in all others, may be located in the Platonic Form, of which people and things are "reminders"; in a deity, of which people and things are "incarnations"» (152); and later, «I shall reconsider O with the help of (ξ), Platonic Forms and their "*reminders*" (phenomena); "godhead", "god" and «his» incarnations; Ultimate Reality or Truth and the phenomena which are all that human beings can know of the thing-in-itself: all three *possess a similar configuration*» (162, my italics).

Now, the question is: in what way can the definition of O as Platonic idea can be used to overcome the aporias intrinsic to the Kantian conception of knowledge; that is, the impossibility of explaining the genesis of the concept? How can we integrate the theory of the *genetic* primacy of emotion in the dual process of recognition which leads to the construction of the subject? What does it mean that the Platonic form is like the One?

As we know, Plato hypothesizes that there are essences, eternal and immutable *ideas* or forms which precede the way in which man can know reality, and that the beauty of objects is such in that it recalls a beauty (a happy rhythm) and a goodness previously known and then forgotten. And so, whereas Kant emphasizes the role of the subject in the process of knowledge, Plato – *if only in the use that Bion seems to make of him* – paradoxically underlines that of «sociality». In Platonic discourse, which Bion makes his own in his concepts of «thought without a thinker» and, fundamentally, of group mind or «proto-mental system», we glimpse between the lines the idea of the single being's intersubjective and trans-individual constitution. Indeed, with regard to the way we are made and function materially, while the phenomena in the Kantian sense are transformations of the experience of O in the individual, Bion nevertheless suggests that «the significance of O derives from and inheres in the Platonic Form» (1965, 138). And here his thinking turns to pre-conceptions that are organic (the biology of the senses) and cultural (the pre-comprehension of the world which parents transmit to the infant).

In fact, the reference to the concept of form in Plato seems simply to be Bion's interpretation, according to which the Greek philosopher could have theorized in his own way the *medium* of the *spirit* or *shared meaning* by which, while continuing to belong to it, the individual detaches himself in his singularity in the same way as a vortex does in its gaseous or liquid medium (Civitarese, 2016).

Where would we gain the reward (the clear and distinct idea) from this «confusion»? Bionishly speaking, I would say first of all, from the fact of being able to capitalise on the «penumbra of associations» related to each of the names of O. In Bion's game of mirrors (and I am not using the word «game» by chance: let's remember the meta-theoretical significance of *Memoir of the Future*⁵) it is as if something were emerging, little by little, from the deep: an intuition, a new form, the «hologram» of a concept, a sense. The mist clears and we see things as if for the first time. If we look closely at the order in which he introduces the names of O in *Transformations*, we realize that, in offering a series of terms rhetorically linked by a metonymic bond – that is, by repeated «transferences» of sense and significance – it is as if he was, step by step, «interpreting» the concept of O as thing-in-itself and ultimate reality by using that of O as Platonic form, which is then interpreted by using that of O as godhead. Having highlighted the *fil rouge* which leads from O as thing-in-itself to O as godhead and the One of the mystics, it now remains for us to understand what we might *more precisely* mean by divine or One. Let's begin with the quotation from Dante.

The lines express the inadequacy (powerlessness) of man to comprehend the Godhead. It would obviously also be possible to make an entirely secular reading of

⁵ See Civitarese (2017b).

the lines as simply the profound expression of an outburst of passion for the object. We know that love is in itself ineffable. Hence the rhetorical figure, used vertiginously here, of the polyptoton – the repetition of a word in quick succession with very slight variations – because certain things can only be said insistently or by tautology. However, the literal and theological gloss of the lines is as follows: «O eternal light, which dwell solely in yourself, you alone are able to comprehend (understand) yourself (and as such are the Father) and be understood by yourself (and as such are the Son) and, comprehending yourself, love and smile upon yourself (and as such are the Holy Spirit)» (Zolesi, 2004, 844). An interpretation of this kind has the advantage for us of recalling the concept of the paternal symbolic function or third as the fundamental factor in symbolization. This gloss of Dante's tercet provides us with a reference to the third, father, language, spirit, etc. However, in order to explore this nexus more deeply, I here propose to read Bion via Hegel. But first, an introductory remark.

When highlighting the lineage of this way of seeing the object of interest from many viewpoints in order to make it true and real, in the end it does not much matter if Bion is correctly reading Kant, Plato, Eckhart, etc. Bion does not so much set himself the problem as state it explicitly. Equally, what matters to us is to try and follow in his footsteps, use his vertex and also his method for *our own* ends, and not attempt abstract speculation: at least not without having the necessary skills. But then, in order to adhere to his method, will we let ourselves be reined in – as he did *not* – by the vestals of the academy and the gatekeepers of our discipline? Or will we dare, like Grotstein (1991), disturb the universe (a little)? Or, like Bion (1997), will we even allow ourselves some «wild» thoughts?

Here is one. And I can say straightaway that I find it helpful.

While we stayed on the speculative (and thus rational, logical) plane, we were following the twists and turns of Bion's discourse about O – always staying somewhere between the cautious and the sceptical, but nevertheless admiring his theoretical boldness. But how are we to understand the abrupt and disorienting lurch towards the mystical? Since I have been struck by the very beautiful and very difficult quotation from Dante, and still more by the similarity, which I find extraordinary, with a quotation from Hegel («the eternal Idea, the Idea that is in and for itself, eternally remains active, engenders and enjoys itself as absolute mind»: §577; 2007, 276), here is the «wild» idea: can we use this intertextual resonance, at least on the face of it, and on a merely associative level, as we did a little while ago with the fable of Apuleius, to try and give birth to an intuition? I think we can. Otherwise, why, as so many claim, and as Ogden (2012) authoritatively does in psychoanalysis, would we say that the reader not only reads, but «writes» as well? However, we need to pair this first quotation with another famous passage from Hegel, but this time from the *Phenomenology*, in which he explains why the naïve realist perspective is (more or less literally) for asses: because

someone thinks there may exist a (human) perception without the mediation of language or speech⁶, without its magical ability (he says «divine», obviously not in a metaphysical sense) to make any object *universal*, whether it is concrete or ideal.

And so, what would this intuition be? The following: that Bion is in some way giving us to understand that *when he says «divine» or «godhead» what he has in mind is language*. The two quotations from Hegel could therefore help us to «dream» Bion's theoretical proposition. If it doesn't seem too pie-in-the-sky – but do we recall Freud's recommendation of «fantasizing, interpreting, and guessing» (Freud, 1887-1904, 129)? – we have enough material to close the «circle». As I anticipated, we could hypothesize that when Bion uses God and godhead as names for O (which initially is thing-in-itself or unknowable real), he expresses the need to anchor the consensuality of the couple to the wider consensuality of the social and of language. We could then grasp the meaning of the quotation from Dante. In the original Italian («*O luce eterna...*») the upper-case letter O comes straight away, as if Bion had discovered a perfect definition in the *Commedia* of what he means by O and identified it with this indomitable, non-declarative sense-horizon which is nevertheless «divine» in that it is rational (human).

Entering into contact with this divine which *alone dost know Thyself, and smile/ On Thy self-love* has the sense of entering into contact with the symbolic universe (being admitted into it) thanks to the mediation of the object. Bion (1965, 139-140) writes that O «is not good or evil; it cannot be known, loved or hated. It can be repre-

⁶ See Hegel (2003, 62) «speech... has the divine nature of directly turning the mere "meaning" right round about, making it into something else, and so not letting it ever come to the length of words at all – by pointing out this bit of paper, then I get the experience of what is, in point of fact, the real truth of sense-certainty. I point it out as a Here, which is a Here of other Heres, or is in itself simply many Heres together, i.e. is a universal. I take it up then, as in truth it is; and instead of knowing something immediate, I "take" something "truly", *I per-ceive (wahrnehme, percipio)*». This passage comes from the introduction to the Phenomenology which discusses sense-certainty. Hegel's aim is to argue that there can be no perception that is not mediated by language. As we see, it is by no means a question of language or speech having a literally divine nature, but only of its normal functions. For the most part we do not notice them, but these functions are extraordinary. Language is "divine" because it grasps the perceived object only thanks to concepts and hence universalises them: «we may answer those who thus insist on the truth and certainty of the reality of objects of sense, by saying that they had better be sent back to the most elementary school of wisdom... They "mean" this bit of paper I am writing on, or rather have written on: but they do not say what they "mean". If they really wanted to say this bit of paper which they "mean", and they wanted to say so, that is impossible, because the This of sense, which is "meant", cannot be reached by language, which belongs to consciousness, i.e. to what is inherently universal» (*ibid.*, 61). The clearest and most authoritative comment on this page of Hegel's that I know can be read in Heidegger: «language allows us to experience that intention means nothing and to experience what really is true according to sense certainty. Language forces things into their opposites, sublates [*hebt auf*] them, raises them to genuine truth. Language is in itself mediating; it prevents us from sinking into that which has the character of the this – that which is totally one-sided, relative, and abstract... Hegel says that language has "the divine nature of immediately perverting the intention..." Language is divine because... language detaches us from one-sidedness and allows us to state what is universal and true... This furthest externalisation exists only in the nearest internalisation [Erinnerung, memory] of language» (1988, 64). Now, to return to Bion, even though he makes no explicit reference to it, I think we may attach the highest value to this extraordinary page, if only to guide our intuition of what Bion may mean when he refers to O in terms of the «divine»: not the eye of God as a supernatural entity who contemplates the thing-in-itself, but the (very human) concept which lifts itself above the manifold and makes it possible. We would thus be following his own example: «The penumbra of associations is intended to help those who look for my meaning» (1970, 87).

sented by terms such as ultimate reality or truth. The most, and the least that the individual person can do is to be it».⁷ And again: «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)» (*ibid.*, 139). What does he mean? That Bion’s entirely secular preoccupation is with theorizing the pre-reflective, pre-categorical, properly *aesthetic* background from which subjectivity emerges, and with the importance of not severing the roots that are deeply set in this terrain. The whole theory of O is concerned with this collective/ social/ proto-mental system out of which the subject later appears as a separate individual facing up to her awareness of the limits of experience.

But in the final analysis – and this is really where the circle closes because we return to the O we began with, O as ultimate reality – does language not also send down its roots into O understood as ultimate reality? Is language itself not an expression of O? After Saussure we have become used to thinking of meanings as in themselves arbitrary, but from another viewpoint this notion should be corrected or made more complete. It is true that to refer to the animal *cat*, we can say «cat», «gatto», or «chat», but it is also true that for some reason *these* names and not others are the ones we have set ourselves to use.⁸ In other words, an obscure knowledge has been laid down in language like a kind of survival kit. What matters is whether or not the single individual submits to this knowledge and accepts it, lives in consensuality, even when she finds herself in conflict with a part of the social group. Consensuality as a product of the intersubjective encounter must be understood as bound to the real, albeit with ties that we cannot translate into words and concepts. From this perspective any form of pathology, and not only psychosis, could be seen as a crisis in the contract of consensuality. Naturally, if the subject ceased to nourish itself with truth, if it were not open to the new – which is a requirement imposed by the always dynamic and changeable character of ultimate truth (O) – it would dry up in the anonymity of the group. It would be condemned to inauthenticity or illness.

There is nothing trivial about conceptualising the intersection of subjective and intersubjective. We can say that, as the subject grows, it differentiates itself and makes itself positively «finite» (it lives as the agent of its own thoughts and actions, with a physical and psychic skin which marks its boundaries) as being capable of accepting

⁷ In Latin, *persona* means ‘mask’, and so its use to mean «person» indicates with great precision the social negotiation being forever enacted in every personality.

⁸ As Kirchmayr writes, «la relation saussurienne entre le signifiant et le signifié implique un ancrage au monde naturel et ne peut donc pas être déniée comme complètement arbitraire. En effet, dans la perspective de Merleau-Ponty, la thèse de l’arbitraire du signe limiterait la prise en compte de la langue à l’aspect institutionnel seulement, c’est à dire à la langue comme code et système (langue), perdant de vue l’usage concret qui en est fait (parole) [the Saussurian relation between signifier and signified entails an anchoring to the natural world and cannot be denied as completely arbitrary. Indeed, from Merleau-Ponty’s perspective, the thesis of the arbitrariness of the sign would limit the consideration of language to its institutional element: in other words, to language as code and system (language), losing sight of the concrete use which is made of it (word)» (2009, 119)].

ever more of this «infinite» (another of the names of O) of language (humanity) which passes through and alienates it. It is as if it were translating the contents into its own terms and so doing, in the *gap* of translation, it had the opportunity to be born as a subject and hence to make itself in turn an emitter of messages directed to others. And yet, this infinite, that which we customarily call the Other, flees from it: on the «horizontal» plane through its extension (no one can dominate/contain in himself an entire language or all languages) and through its uncontrollable expansion within the subject itself, given by the incessant and unstoppable play of all the possible meanings; and on the «vertical», because any translation of the Other is inscribed in the self, transcending the semantic plane and rooting itself from the beginning in the dimension of the semiotic⁹, the dimension that is concerned with the body, with the body of words and affectivity, and is by definition not sayable in words.

Put another way, the subject is spoken, as we habitually say, by language (by the un/conscious, by the Other...) because it is inhabited by something which both plucks it from its isolation and refuses to be controlled (except minimally) because it proliferates *of itself* and through continual exchanges with other individuals. The technical corollary of this discourse is that if we also always know reality in a semiotic sense, then we must have a concept of how to perform transformations that are not only in K (rational, logical) but are also the fruit of lived experience: in other words, in O (but every T→O is always also a T→K because it presupposes an observing I capable of realizing that something has happened).

So, I propose to translate Godhead as consensuality, sociality, language: as what makes us human, but with the proviso that we do not forget that language is not only the transparency of meaning but also the opacity of sense, and that transparency is therefore always the *illusion* of transparency. In my opinion, this is the most coherent theoretical and «clinical» meaning we can attribute to the concept of O. The («mystical») «contact» with the Godhead would then stand for contact with the object through unison and «metonymically» with all sociality. And yet, even this is not enough of a basis for a theory of knowledge and truth because the same problem arises on an infinitely larger scale: who can say that even the broadest of communities is not delusional? The only possible answer to this, in my opinion, is to be aware that no shared, inter-human sense is ever detached from the terrain of the real. This terrain is the tribunal of last resort which guarantees truth, even if we cannot consult its verdicts¹⁰. Those who crit-

⁹ By «semiotic» I mean, in opposition to the semantic, the participation of the body and therefore also of the body of words, in the processes of constructing meaning. It is the level to which I have referred throughout this paper using the concept of «sense». Poetry, dance, and music are its paradigmatic expressions. The «semiotic chora» (Kristeva, 1984) – that is, the space organized by the object which receives the child at birth – is made of rhythms, sounds, shapes, kinaesthetic impressions, proprioceptions, sensations, gestures, etc. Semiotic and semantic are always simultaneously at work in discourse and both belong to the widest sphere of the symbolic.

¹⁰ For the brilliant definition of this «terrain» as «groundless ground», see Braver (2014).

icize so-called epistemological relativism, sometimes in an inspired vein, like those who assign themselves the task of preserving a sacred value, do not grasp this essential point. They reveal themselves as believing that, since we cannot expound upon them, the bonds which reality imposes on the activity of cognition do not exist.

On a superficial examination, all Bion's trafficking with the thing-in-itself, the Platonic ideas, and the other concepts borrowed from philosophy, mysticism, literature, etc., can seem incongruous, gratuitous, and illegitimate. It is with good reason that they cause irritation, annoyance, and dismay. However, we may now maintain that they in fact arise from an authentically psychoanalytic, theoretical, and practical-technical demand to found subjectivity on the safe terrain of consensuality; (b) to remove such consensuality from the suspicion of arbitrariness; (c) to point out (or rather, in Bion's case, «prescribe») principles of technique coherent with points (a) and (b).

O IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

So then, what are the most important technical principles which derive from the theorizations of the concepts of O (or rather, of O, *transformation*, and invariant)? We could indicate them in (a) the centrality of the concept of *at-one-ment* as the individual's flight at the level of sublimation by means of continual negotiation of the emotional truth of the relationship; correlatively (b) in Bion's absolute emphasis on the *here and now* of the session; lastly (c) in the («mystical») concept of «Faith» in the oneiric-transformative capacity of the unconscious/ mind of the analytic dyad. To sum up, in Bion's thought the concept of O fulfils the *functions* of founding psychoanalysis – I repeat – on a pragmatic or intersubjective theory of truth; redefining the unconscious as the infinite of language and hence, in the finite of the individual, as the psychoanalytic function of the historically determined personality; re-founding the principles of psychoanalytic observation on experience and on a kind of (in a broad sense) «phenomenological» reduction, which is expressed particularly in the emphasis on the concept of «transformation in O» as opposed to transformation in K.

Emotional unison is consensuality (the invariant) at zero degrees, or at its *aesthetic* level (Civitarese, 2018b). It is located at the level of bodily knowledge and hence of the «inaccessible» unconscious (Bion, 1997) if we think of it in terms of representations, but still always «social» in that even the unconscious that is not made of representations but of procedural or implicit schemes of action is modelled by culture. We realize that we are here in the presence of a social theory of the genesis of the concept and therefore of the truth. We also understand why Bion attaches little or no value to all that is not inherent in shared lived experience: because primacy goes to current emotion, which is what determines whether the encounter does or does not happen, and not to the intellectual comprehension of events that do not *directly* concern the therapeutic relationship, although these can also produce intense emotional reactions.

Overall, the analytic couple is seen as continually engaged in a process of mutual recognition, or rather, of subjectivation; in other words, in a process of negotiating their reciprocal status as *persons*. This is what is specific to the field of analysis. The role of emotion is strongly asserted as an emotional-sensory (en)gram or pictogram of such essential facts as the self-construction of the subject and the feeling of being oneself, the feeling of *vitality*. Clinical experience confirms it because it tells us that what our patients are suffering from is the inability to contain (transform) excessively violent emotions. *So, the unknown of O is the emotional position occupied by the patient and the analyst on the map which represents the vicissitudes of the relationship.* According to Bion, only this really merits investigation in analysis, and everything should be directed towards the goal of the emotional encounter. This is why, in his opinion, only what is under the eyes of analyst and patient can be known: «In psycho-analysis any O not *common* [to the attention of both and then shared] to analyst and analysand alike, and not available therefore for transformation by both, may be ignored as irrelevant to psycho-analysis. Any O not common to both is incapable of psycho-analytic investigation; *any appearance to the contrary depends on a failure to understand the nature of psycho-analytic interpretation*» (1965, 48-9, my italics).

This precept of Bion's is the one most widely disregarded in clinical practice, often even by those who draw on his theories. Indeed, many select from Bion *à la carte*, choosing what makes them feel most comfortable, also because there is an early, largely Kleinian Bion who lends himself easily to this operation. Now, I am not saying his ideas should be taken *en bloc*, but neither can we ignore its principles, at least not the essential ones. If we do that, it is because the urge to keep a firm hold on the concreteness of reality, whether historical or present, is too strong. Bion's claim is resolute, like an armoured car in its tone («tankish»; Souter, 2009), not unlike the tone he uses when he maintains that:

Psychoanalytic observation is concerned neither with what has happened nor with what is going to happen, but with what is happening. Furthermore, it is not concerned with sense impressions or objects of sense.... Do not remember past sessions.... No crisis should be allowed to breach this rule.... These rules must be obeyed all the time and not simply during the sessions» (Bion, 1992, 288-290).

So, the essential thing is not to inhibit the evolution of the session, the evolution or emergence of O, where by «evolution» Bion means the possibility of intuiting through experience *where* the patient is (what she is really experiencing). Another obvious meaning of this theoretical and clinical disposition, which finds an original development in the theory of the analytic field, is that the analyst's *direct* and *continual* emotional involvement which is produced every time he leads his interventions towards

the dream of the session¹¹, and hence to the therapeutic relationship, makes some hyper-amplified signals available to him for mapping their respective positions. If, for example, a patient recounts a memory from childhood or even from her present life, the analyst can only have an indirect knowledge of it and try to empathize with her, even resorting to a conscious identification. If, however, he reads this same memory as an unconscious communication relating to the living emotions of the *present* relationship, he has a *direct*, indeed lived, cognizance of it, less tilted towards K and more towards O. And that is not all. As in any unconscious transformation, he takes a truer, more «real» perspective from it than any that is confined to conscious experience. To his surprise he rediscovers himself each time as one of the principal actors of the *pièce* being performed in analysis. As a result, he is led to re-invest the patient, the relationship, and the method. I wouldn't know how else to convey the idea that what matters fundamentally is that – by some means other than spontaneously – we come to *love* the patient. It is not that the analyst cannot know anything of the patient by valuing the historic content or reality of what he says. It is rather that, *for the purposes of the analysis*, based on the reasoning set out so far, the second way of knowing, activated by referring everything to the here and now, is more pertinent. In other words, as the scalpel is for the surgeon, so the principal tool for the analyst is a radical notion about the unconscious functioning of the minds in the present moment of the session.

Privileging the internal history of the relationship may appear to mean neglecting the patient's previous history but, in my opinion, this is by no means the case. The past is and remains important. *But the point is that, for Bion, the present is even more so.* In what sense? In the sense that he also sees the act of re-signifying the past as an intimately intersubjective process of seeking the truth; a truth, be it noted, understood in the dual character of sense and meaning. What matters is therefore the creation of a *shared* truth about this past (or about the patient's concrete reality). Therefore, in the listening of the analyst who is receptive to the unconscious dimension of the discourse, the truth of emotional unison (*at-one-ment*) comes before the content relating to the reconstruction of the past. If we prioritise the past per se rather than the negotiation of our mutual status as persons and the dialectic of recognition in which analysis consists, we risk prioritising content regardless of what may be regarded as «true» or tolerable for both members of the analytic couple.

¹¹ Expressions like dream of the session/ shared/ co-created lend themselves to misunderstanding. There are those who think they describe an excessively relaxed climate in the session, a situation in which patient and analyst do nothing but exchange vague flights of fancy. Much can be said about that kind of caricatured representation. Here we need only recall that that for Bion the unconscious is a function of the personality, that «dreaming» is synonymous with symbolizing (which can only happen intersubjectively), and that therefore «one dreams» by day as well. Thus, we are simply talking about a working style in which we take seriously and as systematically as possible, not only the patient's subjectivity but also the analyst's, and their unconscious functioning as a couple. In other words, the dream and the unconscious are at the centre of analysis: what programme could be more Freudian in spirit than this? Instead, this vertex deconstructs the naively empathist stances governed by the uncritical lack of discrimination noted earlier and the presumed datum of reality or concrete «fact» (for which, see n5 above).

We can conclude therefore that Bion's supposed mysticism is simply a social (non-positivist) theory of truth and a conception of treatment as the radical and rigorous practice of receptiveness to what is produced by the unconscious of the analytic couple. It is like saying that interpretation is more a matter of listening than of what one does or does not say to the patient, and that this approach is decisively opposed to any form of empathism. According to Bion, by avoiding recollections, desires, and the operations of memory, the analyst can come close to the field of hallucinosis; to the only tools with which to enter into unison with the hallucinations of his patients and, as a result, learn from experience. An attitude of this kind is proper to an analyst who has «faith» (another term imported from mysticism but turned by Bion to a technical use) in the possibility of putting the unconscious to work.

As usual, we are not dealing here with a religious concept but, through the associations it prompts, with using a term which lends itself to indicating by analogy what may be, in opposition to logical-rational thought, the advisable mental state for developing the capacity for intuition. The concept of negative capability (Civitarese, 2018b) could then be reformulated as excluding *intentional* acts of perception from the pole of sensibility and excluding those of comprehension from the pole of intellect, in order to achieve the most intense possible production of emotional pictograms and images. Due to their unsaturated, open, ambiguous nature, and the *oscillatory* (dialectical) functioning of the imagination or dreaming thought, this is the «middle realm» where we see things from many points of view and thus as a whole, emotionally and conceptually. This is why they seem true to us, and we ourselves with them.

ABSTRACTS AND KEY WORDS

The concept of O is one of Bion's most problematic and therefore at the origin of misleading interpretations; on the other hand, it cannot be easily set aside, because in his work it has an essential theoretical and clinical meaning. The fact is that O is not to be considered in isolation, but always as part of a triad of concepts, along with those of invariance and transformation. The role it plays from time to time therefore arises from the dialectical game it plays with them. But not only that. O's peculiarity is that he himself received many names by Bion. There is therefore to be considered a second dialectical plan inherent to O in itself, in which all these names relate to each other. Among these, some arouse mistrust because they make us think that Bion turned towards the mystic (God, divinity, the One, Person in Himself). This is why it is important to remember that Bion openly declares that of the terms borrowed from other disciplines what interests him is to make use of the penumbra of associations that surrounds them but always and only for his own purposes.

KEY WORDS: Bion, intersubjectivity, invariance, mysticism, O, transformations.

LES NOMS DE O: BION EST UN MYSTIQUE? Le concept de O est l'un des plus problématiques de Bion et, pour cette raison, il est à l'origine de créatives interprétations; il ne peut pas non plus être facilement écarté car, dans son travail, il a une signification théorique et clinique essentielle. Le fait est que O ne doit pas être considéré isolément, mais toujours comme une composante d'une triade de concepts, avec ceux de l'invariant et de la transformation. Le rôle qu'il joue de temps en temps découle donc du jeu dialectique qu'il a avec eux. Mais pas seulement. La particularité de O est qu'il a reçu de nombreux noms de Bion même. Il faut donc considérer un deuxième plan dialectique imbriqué dans le O lui-même, où tous ces noms se rapportent les uns aux autres. Parmi ceux-ci, certains suscitent de

la suspicion car ils suggèrent que Bion se soit tourné vers le mysticisme (Dieu, la divinité, l'Un, Personne en soi). C'est pourquoi il est important de rappeler que Bion déclare ouvertement que, par rapport aux termes empruntés d'autres disciplines, ce qui l'intéresse c'est d'utiliser la pénombre d'associations qui les entourent, mais toujours et uniquement à ses propres fins.

MOTS-CLÉS: Bion, intersubjectivité, invariance, mysticisme, O, transformations.

LOS NOMBRES DE O: BION ES UN MÍSTICO? El concepto de O es uno de los más problemáticos de Bion y por este motivo está al origen de interpretaciones fantasiosas, por otra parte, no se puede fácilmente dejar de lado porque en su obra posee un significado teórico y clínico esencial. El hecho es que no puede ser considerado aisladamente sino siempre como integrante de una tríada de conceptos junto al de invariante y al de transformación. El rol que posee nace por lo tanto del juego dialéctico que ocurre entre ellos. Pero no solo. La peculiaridad de O es de haber recibido del mismo Bion nombres distintos. Hay que considerar un segundo plano dialéctico relativo a O en sí mismo, en el que todos estos nombres se relacionan entre ellos. Algunos de éstos generan desconfianza porque hacen pensar que Bion haya virado hacia la mística (Dios, divinidad, el Uno, Persona en sí misma). Por esto es importante recordar que Bion declara abiertamente que de los términos tomados en préstamo de otras disciplinas lo que le interesa es hacer uso de la penumbra de asociaciones que los circundan, pero siempre y solo para objetivos propios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Bion, intersubjetividad, invariancia, misticismo, O, transformaciones.

OS NAMEN: IST BION EIN MYSTIKER? Das Konzept von O ist eines von Bions problematischsten und daher Ausgangspunkt irreführender Deutungen; es kann jedoch auch nicht einfach beiseitegeschoben werden, da es in seinem Werk eine grundlegende theoretische und praktische Bedeutung innehat. Tatsächlich darf O nicht isoliert betrachtet werden, sondern immer als Teil einer Triade von Konzepten, gemeinsam mit denen der Invarianz und der Transformation. Die Rolle, die es jeweils einnimmt, entspringt also dem dialektischen Spiel, welches es mit diesen unterhält. Doch nicht nur dies. Die Eigentümlichkeit Os ist es, selbst von Bion viele Namen erhalten zu haben. Es muss also eine zweite, O an sich inhärente dialektische Ebene berücksichtigt werden, auf der sich all diese Namen zueinander in Beziehung setzen. Einige von ihnen erregen Misstrauen, da sie den Anschein erwecken, Bion habe sich der Mystik zugewandt (Gott, Göttlichkeit, das Eine, Person an sich). Aus diesem Grund ist es wichtig daran zu erinnern, dass Bion offen erklärt, dass das, was ihn bezüglich der aus anderen Disziplinen entlehnten Begriffe interessiert, der Gebrauch des Zwielflichts der Assoziationen ist, das sie umgibt, aber immer und ausschließlich für seine eigenen Zwecke.

SCHLÜSSELWÖRTER: Bion, Intersubjektivität, Invarianz, Mystizismus, O, Transformationen.

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