REGRESSION IN THE ANALYTIC FIELD²

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Abstract: *Bion hardly ever mentions the concept of regression in the classical sense. However, he uses it to understand whether the direction taken by the therapeutic relationship in the here and now of the session is towards psychic growth or rather in the opposite direction. Therefore, asking oneself what it represents for Bion implies inscribing the concept of regression in the framework of the grid, the kind of conceptual compass that he has built to map the possible evolutions of the unconscious emotional climate (O) that pervades the session at a given moment. The author then reports an entire session with a psychotic patient and illustrates the use that can be made of this notion, paired with that of progress, in the post-Bionian theory of the analytic field.*

Keywords: Bion, regression, progression, grid, analytic field, psychosis.

² This text is the invited lecture that was supposed to open the DPG (Deutsche Psychoanalytische Gesellschaft / German Psychoanalytical Society) Annual Congress in Marburg, Germany, “Zwischen Sehnsucht und Angst–Regressive Bewegungen im analytischen Feld”, on May 1st 2020, and which had to be cancelled due to the coronavirus pandemic. However, I would like to thank again DPG and its President, K. Grabska, for the kind invitation and for giving me the permission for publication.

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In a note in *Cogitations* (1992, p. 63) from 1960 and titled “Analytic technique”, Bion writes:

Winnicott says patients *need* to regress: Melanie Klein says they *must not*: I say they *are* regressed, and the regression should be observed and interpreted by the analyst without any need to compel the patient to become totally regressed before he can make the analyst observe and interpret the regression.

Later, in a seminar given in 1975 in Brasil, he comments:

It is difficult to say what constitutes progress. [...] I wish somebody would draw up a *map of the human mind* showing various directions analogous to *north, south, east and west*, but marked ‘*progress*’, ‘*regression*’, and so forth. You could mark the different kinds, like different instruments on *an orchestral score* – infantile, adult, or adolescent. So according to which one of those aspects of the score you were talking about, you could mark *whether there was progress or not*. The total picture would be one in which there would be *arrows* showing progress in one direction, and progress in the opposite direction elsewhere – minus progress. (Bion, 1987/1989, p. 91, my italics)

These two quotations give the alpha and omega of Bion’s thinking about regression. The first takes note of the fact that, in relation to this concept, there is the usual Babel of languages in psychoanalysis and adopts a position with regard to it. Patients come to analysis because they are already ‘regressed’, at least on some level, and should not be forced to regress further. As Ogden (2003) would

say, they have never been able to dream – that is, to give a personal meaning to experience – or else they are living a ‘nightmare’ and asking for help in getting out of it. On the other hand, we could say with Ferro (2002) that they are patients in whom the alpha function is insufficient, and so they cannot efficiently transform beta elements (primitive sensoriality) into alpha elements (images endowed with sense) or, if they can perform this operation, they fail when it comes to rounding up alpha elements into dream-thoughts.

The second quotation, which comes after the series of four great books from the 60s, is even more interesting. Indeed, it offers both precise indications about how Bion is rethinking this concept and, having redefined it, about what he believes may be helpful to do in order to pass from regression to something we may call ‘progress’. There are two metaphors at the centre of it: the map and the orchestra. Let’s examine them one at a time and see what principles of technique they correspond to.

Drawing maps

In the first instance, the analyst must draw a map of the analytic field, complete with compass points and arrows. But whenever we do this, what is the treasure waiting to be dug up?

Gregor S.

Let’s imagine a patient A. who begins a session by saying: “When I woke up this morning I’d been transformed into a beetle.”

The analyst can listen in various ways. He might think that A., as usual, *a*) is telling him a dream, *b*) is delusional, *c*) is lying, *d*) is using a metaphor to say how he feels, *e*) is identifying with the terrifying character from the *Letter to my/His Father* (which

constitutes the negative of Kafka's story), *f*) is acting as the spokesman for the dream which the analytic dyad is unconsciously dreaming in the session etc.

All the options except the last presuppose that the analyst and the patient are two separate subjects engaging in a relationship where they take turns to 'do' something to the other. In cases *b*), *c*) and *e*) – delusion, lie, and transference – the analyst could probably speculate that A.'s statement implies a certain degree of *regression*; not so for *a*) and *d*), dream and metaphor.

But for *f*) the question could be posed in entirely different terms. The analyst is not wondering what type of manipulation (lie), misunderstanding (transference), or attack on the capacity for thinking (delusion) is at work. Nor is he emphasizing for its own sake the patient's capacity for dreaming, telling dreams, or using metaphors for its own sake. He is instead focusing on which emotional function of the field the image-story of the 'beetle' may hypothetically denote. From this angle, it is not so important to ascertain if the patient is telling the truth or, in an extreme case, if he is lying, delusional, or recounting a dream etc. Instead, it is essential to intuit whether the vectorial sum of *the field's* emotional forces is moving towards *evolution, maturation, growth* – all equally synonymous with 'progress' – or towards disorder and regression (the latter being the case in my example: we know how *Metamorphosis* ends). We could imagine Bion's grid (Bion 1977a, 1977b,; Civitarese, 2013a), a kind of periodic table of psychic elements that shows the uses that can be made of them and the various stages of development of thought, as projected in 3D on the analytic field. In that way it becomes immediately intuitive the main direction that the analytic relationship is taking at a given moment.

Bion does not deny the importance of the viewpoints I listed schematically from other psychoanalysis models. He simply suspends

them. At least in the first instance, he believes they represent ‘noise’ (too much knowledge) compared with the possibility of finding the ‘treasure’ on the map. In his jargon, the treasure is the O of the session (Civitarese, 2019a): in other words, the unconscious emotional experience shared in the here and now.⁴ Bion is very rigorous about this. In his opinion, O is the only thing worthy of being investigated in analysis. There is nothing we can say about what is not before the eyes of both analyst and patient. The goal of analysis is to discover the unknown, not to shut ourselves behind the fence of the already known. Bion (1965) vigorously criticizes the tendency of analysts to use causal theories in order *not* to see. When the analyst speaks about ‘causes’ and not simply about ‘motives’ or ‘reasons’, she objectifies the patient. She looks ‘down from above’ (Bion, 1967, p. 162), so to speak, and assumes a position of superiority. In Bion’s opinion, such an attitude expresses a ‘moral’ view which obstructs the search for truth. This is why Bion prescribes listening not only without (voluntary) memory and without desire (to cure), but also without (intellectual) understanding. Let’s not deceive ourselves, however. Here understanding does not mean comprehension in general (or rather, not intuition), which is of course always our objective, but reasoning in terms of causes and effects.

In analytic field theory, which represents a development of Bion’s thought, the fundamental idea is to listen to virtually everything as if it were a dream, dreamed by two people, in order to have an idea of what is happening on the unconscious and symmetrical (intersubjective) level of the relationship. Saying that virtually every statement needs to be transformed into dream (Ferro, 2009), even if it belongs to concrete reality, has two meanings. The first is theoretical, retrieving Bion’s concepts: of the unconscious as a psychoanalytic

⁴ An emotion may be unconscious because it has an opposite polarity to what is being experienced, but also because it has been displaced onto the ‘wrong’ representation. More correctly, it would be this link that was unconscious, rather than the emotion itself.

function of the personality called up not to destroy, but to create meaning for the experience; of the waking dream-thought, or the fact that we are always dreaming, even during daytime; and of the alpha function, or a continuity between primary and secondary processes – what varies is the function of attention, itself tied to language (Vygotsky and Luria, 1934). The second meaning of transformation in a dream (or in a play) is to be a simple – but in my view, inspired – trick of technique for always reminding ourselves that we shouldn't make do with the naïve way we have of seeing reality, but that, as analysts, we must listen in a psychoanalytic way. If we imagine every utterance as a dream-text, and not necessarily coming from the patient, we immediately question the unconscious sense of the manifest text. Why? Because in this way we can hope to intuit something true about the O of the session.

One point of the utmost importance is that the analyst who listens to the session in this way *does not do so under compulsion, but is predisposed to let himself be surprised* by the work of the unconscious (Civitarese, 2008). Transformations in dream or, so to speak, in hallucinosis must bow to the primacy of involuntary memory (what Bion calls “evolution”). This is why, perhaps even more effectively than transformation in dream, the concept of transformation in hallucinosis (Civitarese, 2014; 2018a; 2018b) expresses the working of the oscillation between immersion and interactivity: as an alternation between moments of ‘abandonment’ (‘unconscious’/ ‘symmetrical’/ ‘intersubjective’) and moments of distancing (conscious/asymmetrical/ ‘subjective’). For this reason, it could acquire the status of a general principle on how intuition functions in psychoanalysis. As Reik puts it, the experience of surprise “emerges apparently immediate and unprepared [*unmittelbar oder unvorbereitet*], and that it is attended by a peculiar clarity [*besonderen Klarheit*]” (Reik, 1936, p.160). Both qualities are explained by the

decisive part the unconscious plays in them. In order to grasp whether something is true, it needs to be born every time in the very process of treatment; it must have its own evidence not detached from this.

So, the 'beetle' is the character-hologram in that it belongs to a story written unconsciously by two people that speaks hypothetically about a dramatic situation in which there is no emotional attunement /mirroring/ recognition. Such discordance provokes emotional turbulences which, if they are not contained, may lead to a psychic regression of an extreme kind. From this perspective, the analyst therefore listens to the 'beetle' as a character in search of an author: in other words, the protagonist of a story or micro-story or myth or narrative derivative of *the couple's* waking dream-thought. In this model, the meaning of the character or story is to make us intuit the *unconscious emotional function* that is activated at a given moment, and its polarity, positive or negative: i.e., whether it is *progressive* or *regressive*. This preliminary knowledge is essential because it prepares the way to interpretation. However, I could use another metaphor and say that we need to consult the weather forecast, something along the lines of 'if the weather is nasty, we need to take cover.' Let's re-read the lovely passage in which Winnicott (1971, p. 113) uses this same metaphor:

Some babies, tantalized by this type of relative maternal failure, study the variable maternal visage in an attempt to predict the mother's mood, just exactly as we all study the weather. The baby quickly learns to make a forecast: 'Just now it is safe to forget the mother's mood and to be spontaneous, but any minute the mother's face will become fixed or her mood will dominate, and my own personal needs must then be withdrawn otherwise my central self may suffer insult.'

So, the O of the session is the emotional air that one breathes in a certain environment. And it can be pure mountain air or polluted city air. It is surprising how here Winnicott uses the metaphor of a sudden climatic change: “*Just now* [when the mother is there and so can be forgotten]... but *any minute* the mother’s face will become fixed [in other words, she will become a mother who is physically there but not really there].” In his usual poetic and disarming way, Winnicott makes us really understand why, in order to become human beings, it is so important to understand ‘what the weather is like’ from one moment to the next.

The same thing is expressed by Bion’s concept of basic assumption (Bion, 1961). The group always functions under the banner of a basic assumption. A basic assumption is an unconscious, shared mental state. It is formed ‘automatically’ out of the phantasies of the various individuals who – as in chemistry – function reciprocally according to their ‘valency’ when they come into contact with each other. The result of this is an emotional climate that impregnates the group and conditions its behaviour. The basic assumption can be dependency, attack/flight, or coupling. Against this, Bion sets the basic assumption - work, which is a more conscious one, oriented to a goal. Thus, there are basic assumptions that foster the fulfilment of a task and the growth of the group, and others which obstruct it instead (in fact, we will always find ourselves faced with more or less functional mixtures of the various basic assumptions). *The analytic couple’s group of two functions in the same manner*. So, the analyst’s task every time is to intuit what this functioning may be and to try and realign the couple’s conscious (rational) intentionality and their unconscious intentionality. For this reason, the analyst must identify the basic assumption at work and, if it is regressive, try to change its polarity.

For Bion, the investigation of the session’s emotional ‘meteorology’ is all the more precise the more rigorous it is from the

phenomenological viewpoint; that is to say, the more the analyst avoids interferences which might alter his receptivity to the unconscious. I am using the term ‘phenomenological’ in Husserl’s sense. Like the philosopher from Freiburg, what Bion wants to do is ‘go back to the things themselves’. The intention is to find a new theory of observation in psychoanalysis. Phenomenological method means I am obliged to describe a cat *as if* I am seeing one for the first time. I am doing so, I am not denying that I know a lot of things about cats in general, both the fictional and the real. How could I not superimpose onto the image-concept of some individual cat, the image of the cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, Puss in Boots, the Cat Sylvester, the neighbour’s cat that Snoopy is always talking about and so on? Or how could I forget the summer a few years ago when our pet cat turned up every morning on my work table, exactly where I put my notebooks, and when she finally seduced me – in other words, when I had gotten used to finding her there and expecting her to say hello – she suddenly lost interest in me?

To sum up, I don’t delete the things I already know; I just put them as far as possible in the background. In this way I come to know many things I would otherwise not notice. This is what artists do when they take an everyday object and display it in a gallery. Both Husserl and Bion set out to challenge the Cartesian idea of the subject. Husserl does it by developing the concepts of eidetic reduction and intersubjectivity; Bion through the concepts of negative capability / faith (Civitarese, 2019b) and group; Ferro with that of transformation in dream and play; Yours Truly with transformation in hallucinosis.

More precisely, if I listen to the dialogue as if it were the text of a dream, what do I gain? A better grasp of the (unconscious) intersubjective plane of analytic communication. I therefore have more instruments available to me in order to understand whether the ‘air’ is favourable to psychic growth or regression. I receive a constant (hypothetical) update about the state of the analytic field: whether it is

expanding or contracting, if it is evolving towards what Ogden (1994) would call an *intersubjective analytic third*, or what interpersonalist would see as a negative function, a type of *enactment*. This is a significant point because, just as for the infant in the intimate relationship with the mother, there are optimal emotional conditions that foster the growth of the psyche in the therapeutic relationship.

Tuning the orchestra

Constructing narrative maps of the analytic field tells us whether the orchestra sounds good or not. If on 23rd August 2010 we hear Kirill Petrenko conducting the Ninth, we enjoy the show. If the scene is Fellini's film *Orchestra Rehearsal*, 'we have a situation', as the Americans say. Our mind is made of a great many interwoven threads of moments in which we have intersubjectively generated a meaning. Whatever tears these threads inflicts a wound on the psychic skin and produces regression/ de-differentiation. The situations of disconnection can be infinitesimally small or hyperbolic. Minor or serious, they are like being startled; like being in an aeroplane entering an area of turbulence and losing altitude for a fraction of a second.

So, what we are called upon to do is urgently restore an essential harmony between minds. Every time, the field must rediscover a sufficient capacity for containing the inevitable emotional tsunamis that disturb it. Now, according to Bion's theory of thinking, in order to grow the accord inherent in the internal group of different entities which constitute a mind, we need to promote moments of unison, or *at-one-ment* or intersubjective accord with the O/other. Written like this, 'O/other' means the concrete other who is my closest neighbour and also the 'infinite', and therefore unconscious, medium of language. It is the only way that the subject can be enriched with new simultaneously open perspectives on things and thus feel alive and real.

Intersubjectivity (Is) and subjectivity (S) are like two sides of the same coin: they are inseparable - one cannot be without the other. If the figure on one side wears away and fades, the same happens to the figure on the opposite side. These are valid equations: $\uparrow Is = \uparrow S$ and $\downarrow Is = \downarrow S$. One possible objection could be made regarding the inauthentic life and conformism (subjection to the impersonal 'is done' or 'is said'), but in reality it is someone who lives lost in a group, who is a poor subject, and not the other way round. If he had many threads of Is, he would have more points of view at his disposal and would withdraw from an adhesive identification with the mass.

Indeed, as Bion ([1967] 1992, p. 289) specifies, "'progress' will be measured by the increased number and variety of moods, ideas, and attitudes seen in any given session": "in any given moment," i.e. in the here and now. Elsewhere he calls progress the patient's psychic 'maturation', a stage that he calls the capacity to take responsibility.

For the analyst, 'tuning the orchestra' very often simply means keeping silent. What matters is that he listens as an analyst and lets himself be surprised every time by the magic of the session as a dream. When this happens, his emotional and cognitive attitude is transformed at a deep level and exercises profound effects on the analytic field, which are transmitted to the patient. Every time the analyst rediscovers that he himself is a character in the *pièce* he is performing as a subject, his emotional resonance increases, and he cannot fail to re-cathect the analysis, the patient, and the psychoanalytic method.

For the most part, however, 'tuning the orchestra' means interpreting. Interpretation is the classic instrument of therapy. We would say this is still the case today, but we have a different view of it.

Interpretation does not stand alone, but is always seen in relation to a principle of sustainability. For this reason, we speak of 'unsaturated' interpretation. The adjective indicates that it is a kind of interpretation that respects this principle. If we go back to hypothesis *f*) about the example inspired by Kafka, we have the following

possibilities: the analyst could stay silent (**S**); echo the patient's sentence – act as a Greek chorus (**C**); say something that emerges out of a reverie (**R**) in the form of an image or sensation or action; map the emotion (**E**) which the patient is probably feeling; draw attention to the transformation in hallucinosis (**A**); suggest a simile or metaphor (**M**) in return.

In their simplicity, all the hypothetical 'unsaturated' interventions indicated here – which could be conveniently summed up in the acronym SCREMA⁵ – could help in attaining the goal of mutual recognition. The analyst is like a doctor standing by to lower the patient's temperature every time her fever reaches a critical level, or an engineer who opens drainage channels in order to avoid a disastrous flood. At the opposite pole, using a different image, it can happen with seriously ill patients, if the emotional situation is severely desertified, then *the analyst must do/perform a rain dance!*

Regression of the patient or of the analytic field?

When I give an interpretation as an analyst, whether it be saturated or unsaturated, I cannot know in advance what effect it will have. I cannot cognitively grasp, instantly and with certainty, what the atmosphere of the field may be in any given moment, *after* the interpretation. In order to have an idea of the success or failure of the attempt at emotional attunement with the patient, the most valuable indication would lie in the *unconscious* response 'of the field' – which thus also includes the analyst's thoughts, images, or sensations – to the intervention that is *consciously* aimed at changing the emotional atmosphere. So, I must undertake a new mapping of the analytic field. The cycle is repeated. If things go well, it moves in a spiral.

⁵ Figuratively speaking, the verb '*scremare*' in the Italian language also means "distinguishing that which is to be judged valid and praiseworthy from what seems useless and out of date" (De Mauro, 2000, p. 2372).

Absence-silence

Patient S. is punctual, kindly, serious, with an intense gaze. He moves a bit mechanically, like a robot. The expression on his face always has something about it which suggests disapproval of me, even though he seems to value his sessions and has often hinted at general 'improvements'. He would be capable of spending the whole session in the most absolute silence. If I do manage to engage him in a few snatches of conversation, the rhythm is always awkward. The barrier of silence is always quickly restored. I picture the patient to myself as being enclosed in a mute and painful resentment or, alternatively, as spent, devitalised.

[5 minutes silence; I have the fantasy of needing to resuscitate S.; or of having to keep him awake to stop him falling into a coma].

A. How are we doing?

P. A bit better. I was having a problem of nervous hunger. I seem to have managed to control it a bit. Then, yesterday afternoon, I decided to sort out my VAT [*tax obligations: in Italy, the relevant Agency is easily experienced as chaotic and capriciously persecutory: weak towards the strong and strong towards the weak*], bureaucratic stuff, on the computer... something positive... a small step forward...

A. The rules are more complicated all the time... going by what I read in the papers. [C]

P. There's more bureaucracy all the time, especially in construction and VAT...

A. VAT... it's enough to drive you crazy... electronic invoices; not for doctors anymore, but for payments from abroad, yes...

P. Yes, you have to listen to your accountant.

A. Have you got a good one?

P. Yes, and he's very helpful. I get along well with him... So yesterday felt a bit more positive.

A. You felt lightened. [E]

P. Yes, more useful, more involved.

A. It makes you feel better to get moving again. [E]

P. Exactly...just like that... even if just on and off... but... a positive feeling.

A. It's true that on the internet you find all the information you need to get started.

P. Well, yes.

[5 minutes of silence. I wonder if my last comment may have sounded too much like a sign of 'detachment', given that the rather obvious play on internet/insight sounds a bit studied. So, I let a bit of time pass and pick up again from where we were still 'connected'.].

A. You were saying that things are complicated in construction too. It was the same for me when I had to wait for months to get permission from the Planning Office to repair a landing. [SD]

P. Did you need the Planning Office? Months go by while you wait for their absence-silence.

A. Or they give their decision at the last minute.

P. Yes, exactly. [*Is he being ironic? Is he making fun of me?*]

A. It is quite exasperating. [E]

P. [*Smiles*] Still, for a technician, when they give the go-ahead, it's really satisfying... like anything you have to sweat for... really good... but you have to explain that there is a timetable.

A. We'd like to have it all right now. You'll have found yourself in my situation... being asked by a client to have all the authorisations necessary straightaway for a restructuring...

P. Yes, but it takes time...

A. Have you ever gotten into difficulties because of a long wait, or because the decision was negative? [E]

P. Yes, but you have to explain that it takes time. Fortunately, I have always had sensible clients. I've always worked hard to get things done as quickly as possible... but there've been bureaucratic delays.

[Silence. Did he feel 'pressed' to get well? Am I setting myself up as an analytic Planning Officer-Supervisor-Superego? I ask for clarification...].

A. What was your experience like with the Planning Office? Strict? Severe? Permissive?

P. Somewhere in the middle. There's this restrictive part, but it's collaborative too. They put some barriers in your way, but the rest is pretty free.

A. You can work together.

P. Yes, in my experience. Some practices are more complicated than normal, but we manage to collaborate.

[I feel relief, since I had left the previous session with the fantasy/anxiety that he might take his own life].

[About 10 minutes of silence. I have the impression that it may be more of an absence-silence].

A. How are you feeling? [E]

P. Well... I wouldn't know how to describe it. I've always had ups and downs. Alternations of positive and negative moments. Pretty much all right, just now.

A. I don't know why, but that makes me think of the English climate [R and/or a speaking-as-dreaming perhaps suggested by the first morning mists?].

P. Yes, just like that.

A. It would be quite a problem if you didn't have a rainproof jacket on... [M] Metaphors apart, I don't know what it would take to face mood swings better. Maybe, as we've said, it could be the same as for planning permissions: knowing that it takes as long as it takes. This helps us to get through moments of discomfort and tension.

P. Yes.

[Silence until the end of the session: a 'absence-silence', I wonder? Or rather a dissent-silence, since the tone is rather dry and 'final'?].

A session like this might wrongly be classed as non-analytic or ‘psychotherapeutic’. Indeed, it seems to be played out entirely on the plane of reality. Zero translation from unconscious to conscious. The analyst interprets neither the transference nor the unconscious fantasies, or even the possible enactments. In fact, apart from the reference to his profession, it is not even based on the reality of the patient’s more delicate biographical experiences. The dialogue has the air of a conversation in a bar (Bolognini, 2005).

However, I think that what helps S. is using the phatic function of conversation. This is the function we all perform without thinking about it when we speak to someone, in establishing or keeping open a channel of communication, using expressions like “Did you get that?”, “Hello! Can you hear me?”, “Are you there?” and so on. It’s like checking that the microphone is working in the hall, when we say “Ready!”, “Testing”, “One, two, three...”, “Can you hear me?” This operation then allows the development of a minimal capacity to alphabetize simple proto-emotions and proto-sensations, the way children who are learning to write spell out A for ‘apple’, S for ‘sun’, M for ‘mouse’ etc. In this phase of the analysis, S. only tolerates minimal elements of difference. Too much difference would make his own identity feel painfully thrown into crisis.

This is why I regard what we have read as a real analytic session. Because the listening *is* ‘psychoanalytic’. Although it remains unspoken, S. and I are unexpectedly able to construct some stories that are by no means futile. On the contrary, *if read in the correct light* they are highly meaningful. The correct light is the light of the concept of the unconscious. We have some main characters: the Revenue Agency, the Accountant, the Cultural Heritage Agency, Absence-Silence, the rainproof jacket, Dissent-Silence etc. Each of these *characters* (**P**) in search of an author performs an *action* (**A**) and each action refers back

to an underlying *emotion* (E). In this order, for example: driving mad or persecuting, giving technical replies, issuing building permits, being able to tolerate frustration, taking shelter from sudden changes in the weather, signalling a sudden increase in distance and so on.

If the analyst then uses what Bion calls “group of transformations” (T) – that is, his theories – he can *interpret* each emotion as the function that is activated at a given moment in the analytic field. The theories of psychoanalysis enable him to bring the emotion-functions back to their true author. From a Bionian vertex, a radically intersubjective and oneiric one, as a general rule *their author can only be the field, the analytic third, the group mind of the analytic dyad*. The point is to see what polarity this function has. It may be regressive if it activates persecution and does not weave threads of intersubjectivity together, and therefore representing the “threat of chaos” caused by the lack of responsiveness from the object (Winnicott, 1971, p. 192); or *progressive* if it activates trust and recognition, builds links etc. At this point, the analyst will be able to decide what to do (which may include doing nothing) in order to *transform* (I)⁶ the climate of the session in a progressive direction.

When S. and I discuss concrete things from his experience of everyday life, I am generally aware that I am speaking in metaphor or allegory or allusion. In order to highlight this aspect, I have marked some of my interventions with the letters of our acronym (obviously a simplification, but a helpful one). It is as if I were giving ‘oblique’ interpretations (Civitarese, 2020). I am following Emily Dickinson’s (1976, p. 758) exhortation to tell the truth, but tell it slant. So-called ‘metanarrative’ texts, which display their fictional nature, are mostly disappointing because they are cerebral. By contrast, if I don’t turn up the house lights, the show going on in the theatre of the analysis

⁶ For teaching or mnemonic purposes, the letters (P→A→E→T→I) can be rearranged into another acronym ‘PIETÀ’, which in Italian means ‘compassion’.

remains alive and engrossing. The play is not interrupted. And nothing that we do is more serious than ‘playing’. Playing means learning to symbolize. Above all, I do not let the field emit a differential voltage that is beyond the patient’s tolerance (Civitarese, 2013b). I do not confront him with stimuli that could provoke feelings of inadequacy in him and hence rage.

How do I choose a correct voltage? I let myself be guided by signals which come from the analytic field. I myself represent a place in it. The essential aim is to experience a situation in which each one *feels* that the other *knows* how he feels. The content may even be painful, but when that happens a kind of ‘eu-phoria’ is experienced, like two people dancing lightly and rapturously. Paraphrasing Winnicott (1971), we could say that each is mirrored *in* the other, rather than limiting ourselves to looking at the mirror. This is the most therapeutic thing there can be because it is more along the lines of *becoming* and *being* than *knowing* and *understanding*. The fact is that we are putting the epistemological paradigm behind us and are moving towards an ontological paradigm (Ogden, 2019) or an aesthetic-intersubjective one (Civitarese, 2017; 2018c). We are shifting from Freud and Klein to Winnicott and Bion.

It’s not that I’m forgetting the patient’s past and recent history. I know very well that S. has had psychotic symptoms, that he spent a long time in a psychiatric hospital, and that he is taking medication etc. But I put all this information in brackets. I consider that what we are able to experience together in the here and now does indeed depend on the *asymmetry* of the respective roles we consciously perform, but also on the *symmetrical* communication being carried out on the unconscious level of the relationship. On the unconscious level, how could I say that a cruel Superego function taking possession of the field at a certain moment – for example in the vignette about the Revenue Agency – is solely his or solely mine? If I explain a regressive function

of the analysis on the basis of the patient's history and diagnosis, I am using an objectifying perspective; I stop asking myself about my own conscious and unconscious contribution in determining what happens. For Bion, the only kind of causality that makes sense in analysis must relate to facts that concern both. It must respect a criterion of 'immediacy' (Civitarese, 2016). Here too is an obvious phenomenological principle: there is a causality in play which, like the O of the session, is right before the eyes of both analysand and analyst.

Thus, between highs and lows, between words and silences, it seems to me that the session with S. unfolds quite tranquilly in an anti-regressive direction. Some silences could be read as reveries in action (therefore not as silences of S. alone) which express the need not only to speak about how important time is as a factor, but to show it concretely (absence-silences). At other moments they could be regressive and disorganized moments (dissent-silences) that follow excessive pressure on my part (but more correctly, on the unconscious level, I should say 'our part'). Sometimes the only 'difference' the patient tolerates is the totally silent presence of the analyst. The same thing could be expressed by certain monosyllabic or acquiescent responses of S., apparently 'positive' yet, in fact, 'dissociated'. While having the atmosphere of a chat in a bar, this session can be read from another point of view as a powerful meditation on time and temporality, on time standing still, being on time, allowing time, giving oneself time and so forth.

The concept of regression in a new paradigm

We are so accustomed to a psychoanalytic thinking aimed at investigating the weight of the past in the patient, and to the idea that this past must be remembered by means of repetition and reconstructed, that we struggle to grasp the impact of the Copernican

revolution brought about by Bion when he decides that analysis concerns unconscious emotional experience at work in the here and now (O) and nothing else. Whatever the patient (or the analyst) says, she is transforming O in order to achieve the intersubjective production of those nourishing elements of truth which make the mind grow (the psyche's amino acids and proteins) and keep it functioning efficiently. If we concern ourselves with this, we are best placed to directly help the patient expand her capacity for thinking. This means that whatever is said in the here and now is a transformation of O: that is, of the unconscious shared emotional experience currently at work. The focus of the analysis is on what is alive in the present. The goal is to bring it about so that the patient can feel herself to be alive by being reflected in the other's life-giving – because curious, passionate, attentive – gaze. It is as if the analyst were attentive not so much to the content *per se* (the *thing*) of what the patient says to him, as to the use (the *how*) she makes of it, being a place in or mouthpiece of the analytic field, in order to indicate 'what the emotional weather is like'. Essentially, he should be careful to understand in what direction the field is travelling in at any given moment (if the interaction is developmental or not developmental now!); how the 'whats' (facts, speeches, events etc.) are *used* in order to bring about closeness or separation.

It is not that the orientation on the past cannot in itself 'make a mind'. However, Bion sets up a hierarchy in which respect for the container-mind comes before the explanation 'at any cost' of content that is deemed to be true. This is why he gives priority to the *here and now*, the only dimension in which the state of the container can be observed. It is why he holds that the *there and then* may obstruct such an observation. For this reason, Bion puts regression into brackets, on the one hand as a state which prompts the patient to come for therapy, so that it does not induce causal thinking and act as a screen against

the O of the session; and on the other hand, he makes no reference to the libidinal states of development postulated by Freud and to the related concept of fixation, and therefore does not use the concept of therapeutic regression. As a result, Bion hardly ever speaks about regression, although, as we have seen, we can find it more or less in two places in his theory, just as we can in the theory of the analytic field:

- a) along with the concept of ‘progress’ as a measure of the dynamic functioning of the analytic field. The Freudian idea of transference neurosis as repetition of infantile neurosis and the Winnicottian idea of therapeutic regression, that the patient must relive his trauma in the analytic setting, are supplanted by attention to the macro- and micro-traumas which, in the here and now, may block the weaving in real time of the psyche’s fabric in real time. If the analysis is conducted in the here and now, what matters is having a compass to indicate (at virtually every moment) if the process is moving in a progressive or regressive direction.
- b) as the analyst’s *technical stance* called on to foster the intuition of O, as when he says that the ideal condition for the analyst is (to *regress* – we can say – to the state) like that of someone who is about to hallucinate: “to appreciate hallucination the analyst must participate in the state of hallucinosis.... eschewing memories, desires, and the operations of memory he can approach the domain of hallucinosis and of the ‘acts of faith’ by which alone he can become at one with his patients’ hallucinations and so effect transformations $O \rightarrow K$.” (Bion, 1970, p. 36). In short, Bion asks us to suspend external reality as far as possible in order to enhance our perception of internal reality; in other words, to indirectly increase the hallucinosis of external reality: that is, unconsciously to see external reality

with the greatest possible subjectivity, to give ourselves a way of most easily intuiting the current emotional reality of the relationship. “The ideal state for intuiting psychoanalytic realizations may be compared to situations which have arisen in the moment in which one is about to have a hallucination. The hallucinator is one who has sensory experiences with no context in sensory reality: in the same way the analyst must be capable of intuiting a psychic reality bereft of any prior sensory realization” (Bion, 1967, p. 248).

In order to understand all this we must never forget the two key points of his theory: the social or radically intersubjective view of the mind and the reformulation of the theory of dreaming and of the concept of the unconscious. The way had been opened up earlier by Klein. We owe to her the idea that analysis consists in the interpretation of unconscious fantasy in the here and now, that for children dreaming means playing and that by playing one learns to give sense to the world (a note of caution here: play always involves two people and is always a matter of fiction). All Bion does is return from playing to dreaming but making use of Klein’s conceptualisation of it. In this way he reinterprets the meaning of dream-work (which no longer functions on the basis of a principle of *distortion* but of *transformation*) and with it the very concept of the unconscious. At this point, as Ogden (2009, p. 104) writes, dreaming becomes “the most free, the most inclusive, and most deeply penetrating form of psychological work of which human beings are capable... the principal medium through which we achieve human consciousness, psychological growth, and the capacity to create personal, symbolic meaning from our lived experience.” Therefore, the polarity of the hallucinatory that, *when waking is added to it*, forms part of dream-thought (dream, reverie, hallucinosis, oneiric flash etc.)

is reversed, no longer being a psychic activity which hides, distorts, destroys meaning, but instead one that creates it.

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