

THE INTERSECTION BETWEEN BIONIAN AND JUNGIAN VERTICES: A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a Jungian analyst's personal encounter with Bionian concepts through analysis, supervision, and reading. The paper is divided into three sections that deal with: a) some striking parallels between the ideas of Bion and Jung; b) the impact of Bion's psychology on the author's understanding of Jung as a psycho-analytic object; and c) the influence of Bion on the author's current clinical work. The author concludes that Bion's discussions of alpha function, container/contained, catastrophic anxiety, and bearing the unknown are especially valuable in helping her patients increase their capacity to bear the psychic pain necessary for transformation.

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago I had a dream that I was in my consulting room talking to a woman and Bion walked in the door. In the dream I was startled and awestruck, and I motioned to him that I was speaking with a patient. Bion said not to worry, that he would wait to talk to me until I was finished. At the time it was neither clear what Bion was doing in my office nor the meaning of the particular patient. What was most clear was that the dream-Bion had an important presence.

The woman I was speaking with is a colleague in my Institute, whom I see as tentative and avoidant of conflict, who has difficulty being truthful with authority figures. As I've had more contact with Bion's ideas, it seems to me that the pain of facing and telling the truth is central in his psychology. At the time of the dream there was still some resistance in me to a full encounter with this aspect of Bion's psychic reality.

At the time of the dream it was not clear where my experience with Bion's ideas was going to lead. I had been very immersed in Klein's ideas for several years after completing my Jungian training, and now here was Bion in my consulting room. My encounter with Klein's ideas through reading, analysis, and supervision had led to a synthesis with Jung's ideas on analysis. I've written previously that it gave me a more fine-tuned way of investigating what Jung called "personal shadow" (Culbert-Koehn, 1993). But now Bion's ideas were beginning to penetrate my psyche and I didn't know the outcome. Obviously, this was creating anxiety. I am still learning about Bion's ideas (and also still learning about Jung's), so that although anything I say feels tentative I do believe, on the occasion of this centennial of Bion's birth, that Bion's ideas have expanded my clinical work as a Jungian analyst and have also affected my perceptions of Jung as a man.

This paper will be divided into three parts: some striking parallels between Bion and Jung's ideas, the impact of Bion's psychology on my understanding of Jung, and Bion's role in my clinical work now as a Jungian analyst.

PARALLELS BETWEEN BION AND JUNG

One of the most striking parallels between Bion and Jung is that both made rather definitive statements about the effect of prenatal life on the adult personality. In fact, the only known meeting between Bion and Jung proved relevant to this topic. In London in 1935 Bion took Samuel Beckett to hear Jung's third Tavistock lecture. The story is recorded in Deidre Bair's biography of Beckett, who had been in analysis with Bion which, according to Bair, had reached an impasse. As a farewell to the analysis, Bion took Beckett out to dinner and to hear Jung speak. A casual comment by Jung during the question-and-answer period seemed to affect Beckett most deeply.

In response to a question about the dreams of children, Jung mentioned a ten-year-old girl who had been brought to him with what he called amazing mythological dreams. Jung could not tell the father what the

dreams signified because he sensed they contained an uncanny premonition of her early death. Indeed, she did die a year later. Jung said, "She had never been born entirely." (Bair, 1978, p. 209).

It was the phrase, "She had never been born entirely," which profoundly affected Beckett: Beckett seized upon this remark as the keystone of his entire analysis. It was just this statement he needed to hear. He was able to furnish detailed examples of his own "womb fixation," arguing forcefully that all his behavior, from the simple inclination to stay in bed to his deep-seated need to pay frequent visits to his mother, were all aspects of an improper birth. (Bair, 1978, p. 209).

Jung wrote in Symbols and Transformations that "Therapy must support the regression and continue to do so until the prenatal stage is reached" (1956, CW5, par. 508). Later (par. 654), he goes on to say, "The so-called Oedipus Complex with its famous incest tendency changes at this [prenatal] level into a Jonah-and-the-Whale Complex, which has a number of variants."

References to prenatal life and its impact on later development occur in many places in Bion's writing -- his essay on caesura, the New York and Sao Paulo lectures, and A Memoir of the Future, to mention a few. In an elegant statement written in 1976, Bion says:

It seems to me that from a very early stage the relation between the germplasm and its environment operates. I don't see why it should not leave some kind of trace, even after "the impressive caesura of birth." After all, if anatomists can say that they detect a vestigial tail, if surgeons likewise say they can detect tumours which derive from the branchial cleft, then why should there not be what we would call mental vestiges, or archaic elements, which are operative in a way that is alarming and disturbing because it breaks through the beautiful calm surface we ordinarily think of as rational, sane behavior? (Bion, 1976, p. 236)

The observation that analysis with certain patients may need to go back not only to pre-oedipal levels but to prenatal life is one of many parallels in the work of Bion and Jung. Both men emphasize pre-birth influences. For example, there is a similarity in Bion's use of preconception with Jung's use of archetype. A preconception is looking to mate with a realization; an archetype is looking for a specific human experience to manifest. Intrinsic to both Jung and Bion was a highly intuitive or mystic part in their personalities which they struggled to integrate with a strong and gifted scientific observing capacity. Both men speak of transformation of psychic energy and both have a grid. Jung's work on alchemy can be seen as a kind of grid organizing the imagery of psychic change. In both Jung's and Bion's psychology myth serves an important psychic function. Both men describe the importance in analysis of looking not only backward but forward psychologically. Jung encourages the analyst to see the prospective function in dreams and symptoms. Bion speaks of the language of achievement. Bion's concept of "O" bears resemblance to several of Jung's usages of the Self. Grindberg defines "O" as "ultimate reality, absolute truth, or unknowable psychic reality in the Kantian sense which can only be known through its transformations" (Samuels, 1985, p. 131). Jung also insists on the Self as ultimately irrepresentable, observable only via its manifestations. Bion's conviction and passion to know "O" as closely as possible is similar to Jung's individuation instinct.

Bion's writing has often been quoted in the Journal of Analytical Psychology which is published in London, and references to Bion are found increasingly in Jungian journals in the United States as well. The keynote address by Jef Dehing on the transcendent function at the 1992 International Meeting of Jungian analysts in Chicago included major references to Bion. A pioneering course, designed by London-trained analyst Mara Sidoli, is based on combining the ideas of Jung, Klein, and Bion on transference and countertransference. Taught in Santa Fe, New Mexico, for the past six years as an adjunct to formal Jungian training, this course attracts participants from all over the U. S.

In 1994, at the National Conference of Jungian Analysts at Lake Tahoe, California, I was asked, as a member of the younger generation of Jungian analysts, to present my images of Jung. I realized as I wrote the paper that my image of Jung had moved from using him as a spiritual father to seeing him also as a containing mother, and that Bion's ideas, particularly his concepts of alpha function and container/contained, had helped me understand my relationship to Jung in a more expansive context. My understanding of Bion's concepts

changed the way I saw my relationship to Jung as a man. My presentation in Tahoe was titled, "Jung as a Man of Passion and Integrity: Spiritual Father and Containing Mother."

BION'S IMPACT ON MY UNDERSTANDING OF JUNG

My introduction to Jungian psychology came when I read his autobiography, Memories, Dreams, Reflections (1963). The passage that affected me most describes Jung's struggle to avoid a particular painful thought. At the time of this struggle Jung was a pre-adolescent in Basel, Switzerland, where his father was a parson in the local church. Although I could not have articulated my reaction when I first read the following often-quoted passage in my early twenties, I realize now that I was probably impacted by the fact that a young boy could bear such immense conflict and psychic pain. Bion called this capacity alpha function. Jung (1963) describes his boyhood experience as follows:

One fine summer day I came out of school at noon and went to the cathedral square. The sky was blue, the day one of radiant sunshine. The roof of the cathedral glittered, the sun sparkling from the new, brightly glazed tiles. I was overwhelmed by the beauty of the sight, and thought: "The world is beautiful and the church is beautiful, and God made all this and sits above it far away in the blue sky on a golden throne and..." Here came a great hole in my thoughts, and a choking sensation. I felt numbed, and knew only: "Don't go on thinking now! Something terrible is coming, something I dare not even approach."

That was easier said than done. On my long walk home I tried to think all sorts of other things, but found my thoughts returning again and again to the beautiful cathedral which I loved so much, and to God sitting on the throne -- and then my thoughts would fly off again as if they had received a powerful electric shock. I kept repeating to myself: "Don't think of it, just don't think of it." I reached home in a pretty worked-up state. My mother noticed that something was wrong and asked, "What is the matter with you? Has something happened at school?" I was able to assure her, without lying, that nothing had happened at school.

That night I slept badly; again and again the forbidden thought... which I did not yet know, tried to break out, and I struggled desperately to fend it off! The next two days were sheer torture, and my mother was convinced that I was ill. But I resisted the temptation to confess, aided by the thought that it would cause my parents intense sorrow.

On the third night, however, the torment became so unbearable that I no longer knew what to do. I awoke from a restless sleep just in time to catch myself thinking again about the cathedral and God. I almost continued the thought! I felt my resistance weakening. Sweating with fear, I sat up in bed to shake off sleep. "Now it is coming, now it's serious! I must think" (1963, pp. 36-37).

Finally Jung comes to the conclusion, after reviewing his family history and the family of humans going back to Adam and Eve, that it is God's intention that they should sin -- and that, as painful as it may be, God wants him to have this thought.

I gathered all my courage, as though I were about to leap forthwith into hell-fire, and let the thought come. I saw before me the cathedral, the blue sky. God sits on His gold throne, high above the world -- and from under the throne an enormous turd falls upon the sparkling new roof, shatters it, and breaks the walls of the cathedral asunder... (1963, p. 39).

This remarkable memory of Jung's lends itself to many levels of interpretation. On a personal level, we could analyze the memory in relation to Jung's parents. His father was a parson and Jung had hostile feelings toward his father's theology. Jung's intuition told him that his father's ideas weren't working. His father was hardly invigorated or animated by his faith! Was the turd, then, anger at his father's hypocrisy? Did the church represent the body of his mother, who recently had brought forth a baby sister? Did it symbolize both parents, possibly?

As an adult, Jung took this memory beyond the personal realm to the level of the collective unconscious, and

he saw the shattering of the church walls as depicting the end of the Christian era, the collapse of the Christian myth. Jung believed that the collapse of established religious structures -- Nietzsche's "God is dead" -- would heavily influence psychic development in the years ahead. Humankind would be without an orienting myth.

What resonates for me now in this passage is Jung's capacity to tolerate acute psychic pain and confusion, even in pre-adolescence, and then to accept its meaning. Both Jungians and Bionians agree that the psyche grows when the individual can tolerate and then integrate the symbolic communications that are presented in dreams. Sadly, it is not unusual to have a patient who brings dreams regularly to sessions but does not have the psychic "muscle" required for integration. In Ego and Archetype (1972), the American Jungian Edward Edinger tells of a patient who consults with him following a suicide attempt and two-and-a-half years before the patient's death in his late fifties from a cerebral vascular accident. Edinger reports that this man's dreams were rich in symbolism -- indeed, they were veritable lessons in metaphysics. Nevertheless, Edinger states that the sessions could hardly be called analysis because the patient lacked the objective, self-critical capacity to assimilate interpretations that would lead to an awareness of what Jung called shadow, by which he meant, "the thing a person has no wish to be" (Jung, 1954, CW 16, par. 470). When the capacity to assimilate shadow qualities is lacking there is often an inability to tolerate the psychic pain of facing one's own destructiveness and its effects on others.

What I find hopeful in Bion is the idea that analysis can expand the capacity for alpha function. It was Bion's notion of alpha function that helped me see that Jung had the capacity to bear ongoing psychic pain at an early age. Once I began to think of Jung as having a well-developed alpha function, I could understand why I had been attracted to him in my early twenties as a man of passion and integrity. If passion means to suffer, as the etymology of the word suggests, then Jung did indeed demonstrate this quality at an early age. For me, passion is the capacity to endure intense emotional attachments to ideas or persons; passion is the ability to suffer the pain inherent in intense emotional attachments, and in this regard both Jung and Bion revealed themselves to be men of passion.

I then began to see that alpha function was related not only to passion but to integrity. In his book Integrity in Depth (1992), John Beebe notes that the quality of integrity is an interpersonal self-consistency which, though highly valued, is elusive, hard to define, even mysterious. Though integrity is expressed in the outer world in terms of individual, discrete actions, it is experienced internally (and sensed by others) as a pervasive, ever-present state of being. There is a quality of continuity to it, an ongoingness that perhaps could be described as "organic." There is something very continuous about the struggle for meaning and integration in Jung's life, starting in his youth, which also seems to be true of Bion.

From the beginning of my training as a Jungian analyst, I had experienced Jung as a spiritual father, as do most Jungian analysts. It was not until I finished training and read Bion that I realized I had begun to use Jung as a containing mother as well. As London Jungian Andrew Samuels (1985) has pointed out, Jung's writing on the infant-mother bond is rarely emphasized. Jung wrote that the mother-child relationship is the deepest and most poignant one we know and says further that "It is the absolute experience of our species, an organic truth" (1960, CW 8, par. 723). Jung recognized the extraordinary intensity of a relationship that instinctively impels the child to cling to its mother, and he wrote about the vicissitudes of separation from the mother at both the personal and archetypal levels: "With the passing of the years the man grows naturally away from the mother... but he does not outgrow the archetype in the same natural way" (1960, CW 8, par. 723). Samuels (1985) tells us that Jung saw the infant as having certain archetypal expectations. If personal experience fails to bring about a humanizing of the archetype there are severe consequences for personality development. Samuels theorizes:

Thus, if bad experiences predominate in infancy over good, then the "bad" mother pole of the range of expectations is activated and there is no counterbalance. The individual may be said to be "possessed" by the image of the bad mother. Similarly, an idealized image of the mother-infant relationship can lead to only the "good" end of the spectrum being experienced and the individual will never come to terms with the disappointments or realities of life (1985, p. 150).

Jung's ideas on the effect of archetypal images on infant states of mind have some resonance with Bion's concepts of infant development. Bion sees the baby as entering the world with what he called preconceptions, which are then mated with realizations. The process by which the baby's preconceptions find realizations in the human world has a dramatic effect on the future course of personality development.

I think Bion is more specific about the mental functions of the mother than Jung. Bion describes the importance of the mother in helping the infant metabolize unmanageable painful feelings and early terrors. Bion's idea is that the mother takes in, or mentally digests, what the baby cannot handle. She sorts through what the baby has discharged and feeds it back to the baby in manageable amounts by her response in feeling, voice, and gesture. The mother's task is to accept the baby's "beta element projections" and metabolize them, turning them into what Bion called "alpha elements" -- that is, psychic contents available for mentalization. If the beta elements, or undigestible mental contents, are not taken in by the mother they may be violently projected into the environment or lodged in the body. Bion describes this unavailability of a mother to receive the projective identification from her infant as a "psychological catastrophe."

Although Jung, like Bion, emphasized containment, he does not link it to the mother's state of mind as Bion does. In 1925 Jung wrote an essay in which he conceptualized marriage as a psychological relationship between the contained and the container (1954, CW 17). The container is also emphasized in Jung's writing on alchemical processes in the image of the relationship between analyst and patient, described as a sealed vessel. The container must be strong enough to withstand the transformation process. In his writing on the therapeutic value of abreaction, Jung suggests that the presence of an "other" -- in this case the analyst's ego strength -- is necessary in order to integrate painful emotions and traumatic memories (1954, CW 16). In his writings on the transference Jung indicates that the analyst's unconscious, not just the ego, participates in the process of assimilating unconscious contents.

Although Jung's writing on contained/container predates Bion's, what Bion made explicit was the connection between the contained/container relationship and the process of reverie between the mother and her baby. Bion's writing helped me recognize and give clinical application to some of Jung's ideas to which I had already been exposed.

BION'S CLINICAL ROLE

There are three major areas where Bion's writing has helped me to expand my clinical work as a Jungian analyst. The first is his description of alpha function and its importance in psychic integration. The second is his concept of catastrophic anxiety and its relationship to birth and change. The third is Bion's idea that as consciousness expands the proportion of the unknown to the known increases.

Alpha Function. Three years after my certification as a Jungian analyst I began consulting with a supervisor who had been in analysis with Bion. I had several cases who were in what is called "classical Jungian analysis," where, despite dreams being brought into the analysis and talked about, and despite a cooperative, "insightful" attitude on the part of the analysand, there was considerable somatization, and the insights from dreams did not seem to bring about further integration or forward movement, either inner or outer. Increasing the number of sessions and learning to take things up more actively in the transference was helpful, but I think it was the idea that alpha function could be expanded through the analytic relationship that made the work hopeful. It felt as if the inability of the patients I was concerned about to metabolize certain painful feeling states was leading to the somatization and the difficulty with psychic integration.

Catastrophic Anxiety. From my Jungian training I had familiarity with psychic death and rebirth as a part of a transformation process in analysis, but I was not aware of the subtle ways that psychological birth can be felt at almost any time of transition or growth. I also did not understand how catastrophic the anxiety around psychic birth can feel, whether it is the birth of a new idea or an important life transition. Furthermore, I was not sufficiently aware of the anti-change forces; that is, the way that fear of catastrophic anxiety is intensely defended against and therefore blocks change. I was relatively unconscious of the hatred which new birth can arouse internally and in the environment from the anti-change elements in the unconscious. Bion's writing and my experience of these ideas, conveyed to me through analysis and supervision, helped free up my own life in this area and profoundly affected the way I practice.

Bearing the Unknown. Although as a Jungian analyst I was taught to respect the unknown in the form of the mystery of the unconscious and to respect the autonomous forces in the unknown, the pain of bearing the unknown and the inherent anxiety and loss of omnipotence was rarely spoken of. Jung's psychology places special emphasis on the individuation psychology of the second half of life. His idea is that, having emerged from the unconscious and hopefully established a life's work and significant relationships, one would spend considerable time in later years forming a relationship with the unconscious in which parts of the personality that had been left behind or unbirthed could be integrated in a movement towards psychic wholeness before death. What Bion makes explicit is that the proportion of the unknown to the known expands as consciousness expands. Bion's vision makes it clear that the capacity to bear the pain of not knowing must increase if consciousness is to increase, and that a failure in this regard can be a barrier in later years. If one continues to grow as one ages, one must bear seeing in the unconscious potentials that are unknown and not yet born, even as the life span is diminishing.

Bion wrote in Attention and Interpretation:

The domain of personality is so extensive that it cannot be investigated with thoroughness. The power of psycho-analysis demonstrates to any practicing psycho-analyst that adjectives like "complete" or "full" have no place in qualifying "analysis." The more nearly thorough the investigation, the clearer it becomes that however prolonged a psycho-analysis may be it represents only the start of an investigation. It stimulates growth of the domain it investigates (1970, p. 69).

CONCLUSION

For both Jung and Bion the psyche was mysterious, complex, and infinite. Jung wrote, "The psyche, as a reflection of the world and man, is a thing of such infinite complexity that it can be observed and studied from a great many sides" (1960, CW 8, par. 139). Bion would have said "multiple vertices." It is in the spirit of looking from multiple perspectives that I, as a Jungian analyst, wish to honor the centennial of Bion's birth. In June of 1996 I had the pleasure of participating in the first conference of Jungians and Freudians in the United States, sponsored by the Journal of Analytical Psychology. It became clear that many Jungians in the U. S. have an interest in re-examining the Jung-Freud split and in a closer reading of the ideas of Freudians, including Klein and Bion.

I believe that the emphasis of Jung, Klein, and Bion on integrating the innate destructive aspects of the psyche is of critical importance as we move into the twenty-first century. I believe Klein's ideas can help Jungians elucidate the shadow in the transference/countertransference relationship within the here-and-now of the analytic relationship. Bion's ideas help us understand the pain of change and how to help a patient increase the capacity to bear the psychic pain necessary for transformation.

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