

## **Bion, “O” and the Question of Psychic Change: Report on the Second Pre-EBOR 2014 Reverie**

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In anticipation of the Evolving British Object Relations conference “From Reverie to Interpretation” taking place in October, NPSI is sponsoring a series of six pre-conference meetings designed to provide opportunities for reverie about reverie. Marianne Robinson led the second of these meetings on January 22, 2014. Its focus was on Bion's late writings, centering on his notion of “O,” the unknown, thought by some to be a slippage into wild thinking and by others to be an important breakthrough into the question of psychic change.

A set of papers in the “Psychoanalytic Controversies” section of the *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* (IJP 92:5, 2011) written by Belgian analyst Rudi Vermote and London Kleinian David Taylor provided the explicit framework for our discussion. Marianne began the meeting with a definition of reverie as “a state of mind which is open to the reception of any objects from the loved object.” She went on to summarize key points from the papers and provided a list of questions to seed our thinking and conversation. Here I give a far briefer summary of the points that helped to focus our discussion.

Rudi Vermote spoke of Bion's notion that “O,” the dimension of the unknown, the undifferentiated and non-represented, the infinite a-sensuous reality, is where psychic change originates. The analyst, at some points in an analysis, may make contact with the “ineffable essence” of the patient there, with reverie being the vehicle for this contact. At the same time, Vermote proposed a “dual track” theory of psychic change, involving both transformations in “O” from contact with “O” and transformations in K or knowledge (Bion's terms). In his response to Vermote's paper, David Taylor expressed concern that the focus on contacting “O” and the extraordinary openness it involves on the analyst's part might come at the expense of understanding. He pointed out the need for careful empirical observation of the analyst's workings if the analytic community were to feel they could arrive at valid proof of psychic change through evidence.

Vermote's paper provided two clinical examples. In one, a word that came into his mind and which he finally uttered after holding it for some time—the Dutch word “trezebees” (the analysis was conducted in Dutch)—seemed to initiate a profound change in the patient, unfolding in varying forms of transference manifestations, dreams and experiences in the patient's external life. Taylor, who considered the analyst's utterance of the word in that context an enactment, noted the variety of other interpretations that the analyst could have made but apparently did not. This exchange between the authors helped to flesh out their differing perspectives.

Seed questions offered by Marianne underlined crucial dimensions of the disagreement between Vermote and Taylor: Is there indeed such a dimension as this “O,” the unknown? And if so, is it the analyst's job to get in contact with it? If it is, does that come at the expense of understanding? Finally, how can one tell whether an intuitive intervention that seems to be making contact with “O” is a wild leap of imagination or is actually well founded?

The ensuing discussion was lively and far-ranging, as one might expect. Here I will simply note some of the comments and questions raised by the participants:

Reverie in this sense, and the idea of possible contact with the non-represented, are not the exclusive property of Bionians. In fact, the issue of the unrepresented occupies much of contemporary analytic thinking, for example, French psychoanalysts’ interest in the “actual” and its role in the analytic process.

How can we understand “O” in terms of the sensuous/nonsensuous, material/nonmaterial dichotomy if it is beyond, or prior to, representation (as symbolization in the psyche) and it involves a movement from the sensuous to the nonsensuous (or the nonsensuous to the sensuous)?

The talk of “O” and the ineffable has religious or mystical overtones for some people and perhaps they are quite appropriate, reflecting the existence of a primordial ground of some kind. At the same time, psychic change involves great emotional turbulence and in fact we may be most likely to come into contact with “O” at points of painful impasse. Is this a contradiction?

Clearly the analyst cannot intentionally contact “O” but must simply make him- or herself available for contact through reverie. How often might this happen? Vermote suggests only once or twice in an analysis. Perhaps it is more frequent than that, but analysts hesitate to speak of it, perhaps not knowing how to articulate their experiences or fearing a response along the lines of Taylor's to Vermote.

How indeed does the analyst experience reverie and the nearness of “O”? For one analyst, it might be a state of drowsiness, for another a heightened awareness, and for others...?

The dimension of the analytic relationship may be more important than noted by Vermote or by Taylor. For instance, it may not have been the content of the word “trezebees” that initiated change in Vermote's patient so much as the state of the relationship at that time. Perhaps another word would have done just as well!

Keeping Vermote's notion of a dual track in mind, it was noted that in Vermote's clinical vignette the word “trezebees” had been preceded by more familiar analytic work and could well have been followed by interpretations of the kind Taylor suggests, initiating transformations in K as well as transformations in “O.” This may then be a question of technique—allowing room for contact with “O” and the attendant experience of surprise,

but also being able to shift to a focus on knowledge. At the same time, as Vermote suggests, we may not understand transformations in K as well as we imagine we do!

How can we know whether what we experience as a contact with “O” that initiates psychic change is really that? It may be that Taylor's insistence on evidence and certainty are inappropriate for the analytic process, at least as stated in such a positivist form. At the same time, if no such certainty is possible, we need to accept that we take risks in working along these lines, one of which may be the risk of finding meaninglessness.

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