

A BION GLOSSARY

by Meg Harris Williams

I: The growth of thoughts

II: Enemies of growth

III: The psychoanalyst at work

I – THE GROWTH OF THOUGHTS

Aesthetic – mysterious indication of alignment with O (truth).

Alpha function = symbol-formation. Develops feelings into thoughts via unconscious reverie (the thought does not need to be verbalised). Digests emotional distress to create meaning.

Becoming (Platonic) *vs.* ‘learning about’ (or: knowing via introjection, *vs.* knowing about). Link with deity or O.

Caesuras and meetings: receiving-screen or obscuring-screen? (eg, birth and pre- or post-natal parts; psyche and soma; sleeping and waking states; conscious and unconscious).

Catastrophic change. Means death to the existing state of mind – its many ‘rebirths’ constitute the process of growth. Set in motion when different parts/feelings/vertices try to link up.

Common sense – senses congregate across barriers or caesuras and interpenetrate (Meltzer compares Sullivan’s ‘consensuality’).

Container–contained necessary for growth: male–female symbols represent the fundamental linkage. Relevant to multiple spheres.

Curiosity (originally, Oedipus): necessity of epistemophilic instinct; equivalent to life-force. May show in ‘repetition compulsion’ in the sense that the Answer may still be open.

Endoskeleton – allows mind to expand as more thoughts are accommodated; contrasts with exoskeleton or shell (of basic assumptions, etc.).

Genomene – psychic counterpart of phenomene, the originating germ of a thought.

Growth *vs.* correctness – true ethics. Room for growth. Occurs through link with object (initially breast/ maternal reverie).

Knowing (intimately) *vs.* knowing about. (Both needed: knowing about is not necessarily Negative Grid). Religious and scientific vertices.

Psyche-lodgement. The germ of an idea lodges in the mind in the gaps between knowledge, provided the surface of the knowledge is not too ‘smooth’ (too closed-off).

Myth and metaphor for categorising emotional cruxes; characterised by ‘invariance’, the ‘basic feature’ of a situation that is recognisable as a constant, even when translated into different media. Some examples: Oedipus (curiosity); Helen of Troy (absolute beauty, not describable); Palinurus (hidden latent turbulence); spiral nebula in astronomy (break-through); Monet’s poppy-field; the sculpture trapping light; mathematical ‘conjugate complex’ points; the Grid; polyvalency (chemical analogy) implies openness to linking; river Alpheus and tracking of the idea. Sometimes called ‘transformations’ from one mode of expression into another.

Learning from experience (knowing *vs.* knowing about) – being and becoming. Both necessary. Intimate knowing means ‘becoming’.

LHK (Love, Hate, Knowledge). Turbulent emotions held in dramatic tension = ‘passion’. Awe or dread accompanies the K link, intimations of O (the unknown). (Meltzer develops as ‘aesthetic conflict’.)

Mind – an apparatus for receiving and digesting thoughts, anticipated by the glandular system. A new evolutionary development for the mammal. Synonymous with ‘personality’ or ‘self’ and includes both pre- and post-natal aspects.

Negative capability (Keats) – capacity to tolerate uncertainty; results in ‘language of achievement’.

O = ultimate reality (unknowable); godlike ineffable object; origin; breast-shape as in point and circle. In Kleinian terms, an extension of the idea of the restored mother. Not just containment but identification with an evolving mind – with capacities and functions of object (see Money-Kyrle). Nearest analogy is ‘passionate love’, the LHK tension.

Object: the growth-promoting object is the analysis, not the analyst (Meltzer clarifies: the psychoanalytic process as aesthetic object). Created by a link between the 'pair' modelled on container–contained and maternal reverie.

Preconception – awaits linking with an 'other' or external feature that matches/fulfils/completes it, resulting in a conception/thought. Can be mismatched with a memory, pre-empting its fulfilment.

Pre-natal and post-natal parts of self need to meet and communicate across the mental caesura left over from birth. This unconscious link can catch the germ of an idea and allow it to develop. Prenatal life features: body-ego, id, rhythm, sense of smell, also light and sound.

Projective identification can be primitive communication (basis of reverie) rather than evacuation or intrusion. (See Meltzer for clarified distinction between communicative and intrusive projective identification.) Must be understood as part of an oscillation between paranoid-schizoid and depressive orientations (Ps↔D).

Ps↔D in continuous oscillation constitutes mind's normal condition. On the spectrum between uncertainty (stressful, suffering state) and aesthetic (momentary) harmony.

Realisation – expresses an achieved link between internal and external reality, a preconception and something that matches, confirms, and develops it.

Reverie (initially via the thinking breast). Unconscious processing of projected feelings, as in mother–baby relationship; verbalisation not necessary.

Self = psyche *and* soma, post and pre-natal personalities.

Turbulence is hated by the self and unless curiosity is strong enough, will be avoided: 'Kill it or find out about it' (that is, investigate its source and origin via intent observation). Uncomfortable state that heralds the presence of an idea and potential catastrophic change, i.e. growth.

Vertices of art, science, religion (also others). Each have own truth: need to find a tension not too slack, not too taut. Polyvalency is open to linkage.

Wisdom – distinct from intelligence. Acquired when the mind learns from experience; can apply to any phase in life even prenatal.

II – ENEMIES OF GROWTH

Attacks on linking (minus LHK) where ‘link’ may include speech itself or the psychoanalytic method.

Basic assumption mentality (three types: fight-flight, pairing/messianic, dependency). Exists in everyone both in group life and internally. Contrasts with work-group. Mindless *vs.* thinking orientation.

Beta-elements and beta-screen: unprocessed by alpha-function so do not lead to transformation via reverie into thoughts. Sometimes refers to undigested sense-impressions; sometimes alpha-elements that have been reversed (the mind’s rubbish, for excretion).

Bizarre elements – way of dismantling elements of thinking.

Envy is essentially of ‘the growth-promoting objects’ and entails retreat to minus K (envious breast removes the will to live – this is how it deals with fear of dying).

Frustration – can be evaded (anti-growth), or alternatively, modified (growth – via link to the object).

Intelligence *vs.* wisdom – knowledge ‘too thick’ for wisdom.

Lies – defence against glimpse of the truth, covering it over with a substitute invented by the self. Can be systematised into ‘morality’, a rigidification of basic assumptions.

Language of substitution *vs.* language of achievement. Invented by the self rather than learned by alignment with O.

Memory and desire (*vs.* ‘remembering’) interpose preconceived pictures of the state the person wishes to attain; so blocks evolution from within.

Mindlessness (Meltzer’s term, originally ‘protomental’) refers to a non-mental level which exists in everyone including sophisticated adults; one direction taken is childhood autism.

Nameless dread (Meltzer’s ‘terror’) is less of death than of madness, the delusional system.

Negative Grid – not developed by Bion but according to Meltzer would be drawn up from Column 2 (lies): all the anti-thinking forces.

Pain and pleasure – two sides of one spectrum. Evasion of pain contrasts with ‘modification’ by the object. ‘Suffering’ means tolerating the pain until it is understood (through alpha function).

Paramnesias (after Freud) fill space of our ignorance; theories ‘rush to the head’ when thinking is too stressful.

Preconception instead of finding a realisation, can mate with a memory to prevent catastrophic change, blocking reception of the new idea. A negative linkage.

Protomental level: all non-thinking mentality (but not necessarily anti-thought).

Psychosis: may show evidence of primitive or thwarted undeveloped thought with glimpses of insight, turned awry.

III – THE PSYCHOANALYTIC PAIR

Aesthetic: a feeling of harmony or rightness that indicates truth is present.

Aim to introduce the patient to himself: ‘a marriage that will last as long as he lives’.

At-one-ment = in line with O (sometimes ‘alignment’). Intersects with the psychoanalytic pair. (Dislikes term ‘countertransference’.) Overtones of religious atonement (Kleinian reparation; depressive position.)

Consciousness (after Freud) as organ of perception for psychic qualities (even at night, turned inward). A tool for focusing. Verbal formulation comes afterwards.

Container–contained: the personality has a container–contained relationship with *psychoanalysis* (rather than analyst): mutual modifying, shift in values.

Facts of feeling – basis of method.

Interpretations: can be ‘rush of theories to the head’ or can be genuine attempt to formulate what is observed. Beware pseudo-knowledge.

Language of achievement – speaking truly rather than speaking poetically. Although the definition is based on admiration for poets’ foreshadowing of the future – embodying ideas realised only centuries later. Contrasts with ‘language of substitution’ (failure to observe truly what is going on – substituting with jargon, familiar ideas etc). Analyst must evolve own mode of expression, authentic rather than poetic.

Observation – the key to the psychoanalytic method. Theories are worthless by comparison with present observed phenomena. Problem of how to translate into articulate speech.

Mind – that which is being observed and changes through the act of observing. ‘Our minds are made up for us by forces about which we know nothing.’ The individual mind is a group not a single entity.

Noise (of jargon, previous knowledge etc) interferes with observing or hearing the idea present in the session.

Ps↔D oscillates between patience (toleration of not-knowing) and security (momentary sense of truth and harmony).

Psychoanalysis: distinctive method for germinating thoughts via a work-group of two (or more, if you include the ‘third party’ etc). Both people are supported by the method. Not immune from harm or danger.

Reality-testing: distinguishing between evasion and modification of pain requires reality-testing – what is true, what is a lie. Reality is internal as well as external.

Remembering is essential owing to links with primordial traces. Like Platonic remembering (*anamnesis*) a glimpse of reality brought into the present moment. The opposite of memory and desire, which indulge preconceptions and block contact with present reality.

Reverie is based on mother–baby and container–contained; the analyst relies on the analytic setting to be the container.

Speculative imagination/reason. No progress without it, even in natural sciences – still more when dealing with ‘facts of feeling’.

Third party in a psychoanalytic setup: the analyser of the analyst. ‘At least’ three psychic parties even if only two bodies in the room.

Underlying pattern emerges as a result of patient observation.

Work group – the basis for thinking (the mental level). Entails toleration of individuality and difference. Contrasts with basic assumption groups (the non-mental level of existence). Can capture and track ideas.