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Symmetric Frenzy and Catastrophic Change: A Consideration of Primitive Mental States in the Wake of Bion and Matte Blanco

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The author explores the connections between Matte Blanco's notion of symmetric frenzy, i.e. the turbulence characteristic of the deepest levels of mental functioning, and Bion's concept of catastrophic change. For Bion, mental links are retrieved from the formless darkness of infinity. With catastrophic change, emotional violence and the confining nature of representation come into conflict, leaving the subject prey to an explosiveness that paralyzes mental resources. Matte Blanco identifies indivisibility as the abyss in which all differentiation ceases; he bases his model on the conflict between symmetry and asymmetry. Infinity, he maintains, is where the first forms of mentalization develop. Both Bion and Matte Blanco emphasize the contrast between the immensity of mental space and the spatio-temporal order introduced by the activation of thinking functions. The author presents clinical material from the analysis of a psychotic patient, stressing the need to encourage both working through the defect of thinking (Bion) and 'unfolding' manifestations of symmetry (Matte Blanco) so as to foster the activation of the resources of thought, meanwhile postponing transference interpretation. He concludes with two later sessions, in which recognition of the analyst in the transference allows the analysand to develop his capacity for containment and asymmetric differentiation.

The attempt to translate the non-spatial and timeless aspects of human nature into space-time is essential to thinking but it is always a form of 'thinkating'.

(Matte Blanco, 1988, p. 316)

In this article I will be exploring several characteristics of primitive mental states in relation to some of the theories of Bion and Matte Blanco. It seems justified to weave together the perspectives of these two authors, given that each held the other in high esteem. Furthermore, Matte Blanco (1981) himself reflected on Bion's theories in relation to his own theory of the unconscious as infinite sets in an essay that was published in a *Festschrift* to celebrate Bion's 80th birthday. Clearly I will not be able to look at the whole of their work, as this would be an undertaking for a book, not a paper. Rather I will be focusing on some aspects of Bion's *catastrophic change* which have captured my attention, linking these to Matte Blanco's concept of *symmetric frenzy*. Introducing this idea, he writes:

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Here I think, it is essential to remember that as we go 'deeper' we begin to enter the strata where time and space relations are dissolving, where asymmetrical relations begin to decrease, and we find ourselves confronted with increasing proportions of symmetrical relations.

(Matte Blanco, 1988, p. 228)¹

Working within the length constraints of an article, I will aim to set clinical material and theoretical ideas alongside one another. It should be noted that both of these authors write in very abstract terms, referring frequently to philosophical issues and leaving it to the reader to consider and weigh up the clinical significance and implications of their ideas. This has led to what Parthenope Bion called the impossibility of saying that we are 'Bionian', as this signifies, first and foremost, being ourselves: "I have come to bury Caesar, not to praise him" as she used to say, quoting Shakespeare's Mark Antony, during the preparations for the conference for Bion's centenary (see Merciai, 2000). In the same way, Matte Blanco lays out a psychoanalytic epistemology based on bi-logic, without setting out the implications of his thought on technique, leaving ample room for personalized versions of his approach.

The approaches of Bion and Matte Blanco find a common focus of interest in the formal structures that organize thought. They also reconsider the functioning of the unconscious (Freud, 1900, 1915, 1940a) in current terms. Central to the analyst's interest is the conflict between the a-spatial and a-temporal nature of the unconscious (not to mention the a-dimensional abyss from which it is derived) and the organizing concepts of space and time. In particular, in the treatment of severe cases, this conflict can become the central core of the clinical work with the patient, as I hope to show later on.

I will start by presenting clinical material and will then consider the theoretical perspective, returning to the clinical context again at the end of the paper. Since my reflections mainly come from experience, I hope that by starting with clinical material I can help the reader to obtain a practical understanding of the ideas explored. Indeed, the terminology used by Bion and Matte Blanco can end up seeming obscure and hard to understand, due to the limitations imposed by the

nature of their subject: thought. Thought, by its nature, refers back to absence (Bion, 1962a); and is in its own essence inevitably obscure and ineffable (Bion, 1965).

The first part of the clinical material here examines the problems that the psychotic patient has with the capacity to think. As we will see more specifically in the theoretical part of the paper, the first section deals with the emergence of *the patient's relationship with himself, as well as the activation of mental phenomena which can begin to contain the emotional chaos* (Bion, 1962b; Freud, 1911). By contrast, the clinical section towards the end of the article shows a more advanced stage of the working-through with the same

¹ As his theories evolve, Matte Blanco begins to distinguish between a bi-logical frenzy and a bi-modal frenzy (1988, pp. 266-84). In the context of this piece I will not deal with this late distinction, seeking instead to develop the implications of this first, general definition which broadly captures the changes in the organization of the mind as one goes 'deeper'. However, the term which is most relevant in my paper is bi-logical frenzy.

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analysand, in which he begins to *recognize the analyst as a separate object that he cannot control*.

The separation of the clinical material into two sections has been done purposefully to highlight the two distinct levels of analytic work, and to emphasize the importance of switching to interpreting the transference during the more advanced phases of the analysis. These phases are marked by the reduction of emotional turmoil and the expansion of a mental space with a well-developed capacity to symbolize (see also Lombardi, 2002; Bria and Lombardi, 2008).

Confronting the breakdown of (normal perception of) space and time in the psychoanalysis of psychosis

Gerardo, a 25 year-old patient who is tall and athletic, is in his fourth year of analysis of four sessions a week. His childhood was characterized by schizoid and autistic periods. He suffered a first period of acute psychosis at the age of 16, but this subsided in the course of a few weeks following medical intervention. The seriousness of this episode was completely denied by his family: his parents even welcomed the rather strange suggestion of taking the boy swimming with dolphins in a tropical country, as an alleged therapy for his problem. The second phase of acute psychosis happened five years later, when Gerardo was 21. This time the danger signs were more pronounced; indeed the patient's state of insanity, his mental disturbance and suicidal tendencies lasted for over a year. The patient started in intensive psychoanalysis of four sessions per week immediately after the first appearance of the symptoms, when the confusion, madness and violence were still in their acute phase; the sessions continued without interruption even during very dramatic periods when it became necessary for the patient to be hospitalized. The analysis was accompanied by medication for the symptoms, administered by an analyst-psychiatrist, and a third colleague worked with the parents. During the years that followed, the patient gradually developed mental functioning and his behaviour and ability to relate improved, which enabled the more demanding analytic work to begin (see Lombardi, 2007, which deals with the progress of the analysis in its early stages).

I am going to look at a particular phase of instability that occurred during the fourth year of the analysis, which triggered a fear of regression into madness. Up until this point, the sessions had been taking place with regularity; therefore I was quite worried when one day Gerardo did not arrive for his Monday session. After about ten minutes I received a telephone call from his mother, saying that Gerardo had suffered a rather strange breakdown a short distance from my consulting room, and was therefore being taken to hospital in an ambulance. I later discovered that Gerardo had been overcome by a panic attack; his breathing was laboured and he had needed an oxygen mask. However, he was discharged from hospital the same day, thanks to the psychiatric medication administered by our team.

The fact that Gerardo was unable to get to the consulting room, although he was only a few metres away, is a circumstance which can be considered in the light of one of the theories being discussed in this article, that is, *the*

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dismemberment of spatio-temporal coordinates and the patient's collapse into the black hole of formless infinity. Indeed, from the material which emerged during the following sessions, I discovered that, on this occasion, Gerardo's perception of space dissolved into infinity so that he experienced complete mental disorientation and a sense of total paralysis and collapse. The patient was unable to cover the short distance, rather like how, in the paradox of Zeno of Elea, Achilles is unable to defeat the tortoise. Indeed, when the phenomenon which Matte Blanco called 'symmetrization' gains the upper hand over asymmetrization, the *encounter with 'the indivisible'* can make it impossible to cover a distance which, in purely objective terms would seem trivial. For his part, Bion (1967, p. 136) emphasizes that for certain patients "measurements of time and space are based on psychic reality and not physical space or time". In the psychic reality of the patient, a realistic conception of space and time relies, for Bion, on having mental apparatus that is capable of discriminating. Such a capacity can by no means be taken for granted with more damaged patients. In the same way, for Matte Blanco, it is unlikely that such patients will be able to articulate asymmetries when faced with the symmetrizations of the unconscious.

In the context of the psychotic panic experienced by Gerardo during this episode, it was the relationship with me that was at stake, together with the *points* and the *lines* (as Bion would have said) that this relationship allowed him to construct in his mental space, in order to *work through the return after a separation*. This explicit emergence of otherness in the relationship will be treated in more depth in the second section of clinical material at the end of this article. Before examining this relational level, it was first necessary to deal with the re-surfacing of Gerardo's emotional turmoil and the fragility of his capacity for representation and thought. His emotions made themselves known through acting-out, as had been the case in the early stages of the analysis.

In the course of the subsequent sessions it therefore became necessary to work through this experience, 'unfolding' the infinity of the real emotion in terms of the main finite elements which constituted it (Matte Blanco, 1975). I will try to illustrate several aspects of this work.

I will start by describing an extremely difficult session, the first part of which was taken up with shouting and insults, threats to destroy the furniture in the room and animal-like cries of despair. Every attempt I made to try to find meaning in his actions seemed at first to fail. Towards the middle of the session, my work of containment seemed to show some effect and his rage started to subside. Still acting as if he were a wild beast in a cage, Gerardo said to me: "Inside me there is someone who is screaming in despair and I'm not able to handle him". As he was saying this, he made a shape with his hands to indicate on his tee-shirt an area on his thorax, which went from below his uvula to a little above his belly button, giving the idea of a kind of '*homunculus* [little man]' which was screaming at him inside. And after a pause he added uncomfortably: "I am mad".

I was very impressed by his spatial reference to the 'little man' inside his thorax: this was the first example of representation emerging from the chaos. It was a kind of picture which described a psychic space. In this

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development, the experience of despair which could not be thought seemed to place itself within an internal space, appearing as something like a part of himself. That is, it seemed that the state of despair and disintegration were now positioned in the context of a '*capacity to recognize a boundary or an asymmetry*' (Matte Blanco, 1975), or of a '*container/contained relationship*'. And this appeared to be an entirely new acquisition for the patient, in spite of the analysand's own confused interpretation of this as a sign of getting worse. His own view assimilated his current despair into his earlier madness, not recognizing the very different quality of his present experience in comparison with the earlier ones.

Therefore I said to him: "You are now able to recognize inside yourself the violence of your emotions, whereas before you did not see any difference between inside and outside. In fact, you are recognizing your own hatred, your own despair, your own fear of going mad, as things that are yours. But this is happening because you are now not mad. Now you are able to recognize your feelings and your anguish, whereas before you could not recognize anything, you only went to pieces."

The patient's response appeared to confirm my interpretation, because G immediately became calmer. I wanted, through my comments, to underline a difference—an a-symmetry—between G's current state and his previous condition, which was characterized by paranoia, in which it was others who saw him as 'bad' and hated him: a distinction, which, in its simplicity, had escaped G, threatening to make his suffering worse and to weaken his already fragile ego.

In the next session, G brought me one of his paintings which represented a face. It evoked Edvard Munch's famous painting *The Scream*—with a mouth that was wide open and screaming and concentric circles of dark and violent colours moving outwards from it. At the same time, G started to yell at me, insulting me, as he had done during the time of his serious illness. I said to him that now, when he cried out in a violent and desperate way, he was overlooking the fact that he had the capacity to represent and to think about what he was feeling, as the picture he had given me demonstrated. Almost amazed, G stopped yelling at me; he looked in my direction and said that when he had drawn that picture he didn't have any idea what was happening to him and only after drawing it did he realize. I had the impression that in so saying, G felt himself to be 'dreaming' (Bion, 1992) everything that was happening in the session between us, so that his capacity to represent through the drawing had started to exist in his mind only when this fact was highlighted by my saying so. Then I said to him that now he could see himself and think about himself, see his hatred and his despair, just as in his own time he had discovered himself to be capable of representing himself in the drawing, in order to manage his explosive feelings. Gerardo seemed to be able to take in my comments as, after this, the session no longer had the threatening and explosive quality that had been there at the beginning.

By referring to his earlier experience of having no idea of what was happening to him, G highlighted to me the tendency to hold oneself outside of consciousness and perception of self. This state had characterized the early

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part of his acute psychotic crisis, during which a sort of black cloud had engulfed him, *annihilating almost the whole of his capacity for self-recognition*. The picture, however, introduced to the session a capacity to represent feelings of despair and hatred: in the absence of this ability to represent there was nothing else for G to do but act out his emotions concretely, evacuating them from himself. It was therefore a turning point that I as the analyst verbalized to him the existence of these resources, transforming his act of giving me the picture *from the concrete to the realm of the abstract*

(Bion, 1962b; Freud, 1915) so that it became possible for him to think about himself. The activation of self-perception and abstraction saved him from relapsing into madness, which he felt as a very real threat.

Again, in this second clinical context, increasing the patient's capacity for asymmetric representation (Matte Blanco, 1975), or his ability to make significant mental links (Bion, 1957, 1970), is an important technique to create the conditions for containment and to establish the conditions for learning from experience which will act as a catalyst for mental growth.

At this point, I am going to refer to a brief episode earlier on in the analysis to enable us to observe the first explicit signs of the activation of mental functioning. On this occasion, G unexpectedly interrupted his confused discourse and, seated on the couch, he fixed his gaze on my eyes, saying: "We have never been to the cinema together!" Recovering from my surprise with some difficulty, I replied: "There is something that we can see together, like a mental cinema which represents what is going on for you inside". And Gerardo said: "I can see red cascading from the ceiling down the walls...it is blood which is running down the walls...it is all red". As the analysand was saying these words, I felt my blood freezing in my veins from blind terror. At the same time, almost paradoxically, I felt a sense of relief as though Gerardo's emotional haemorrhage was starting to find a boundary, containment within the walls of the consulting room, as if he was starting to find the capacity to represent. A scene from Bergman's *Cries and Whispers* came to mind, in which the black and white of the film is momentarily tinged with red.

To return to more recent events, other factors contributing to Gerardo's panic attack included: the break in the analysis coming up to the approach of the summer holidays, his parents' recent decision to sell the house where G grew up—which posed an imminent problem of working through the *mourning*—as well as a recent professional failure, as he had failed at the end of an important qualification. There were other factors too. This "amorphous mass of unconnected and undifferentiated elements" as Bion would have described it (1992, p. 46) needed to be processed by an *alpha-function* (Bion) or by a translation function (Matte Blanco). The lack of this caused G's perception of the space between my room and the place where he was, just a few steps away, to become exploded and fragmented. If the analysis had not been able to take care of working through these elements during the following sessions, the pressure they exerted would have mounted until it caused a new psychotic explosion, with dramatic consequences that can be imagined—on both the organizing structures of the mind and the course of the analysis.

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A change of direction in psychoanalysis: From the contents of the unconscious to the abyss of the infinite unknown

The clinical episode I have described may help to illuminate a passage in the latter pages of *Second Thoughts* in which Bion affirms that:

The idea of infinitude is prior to any idea of the finite. The finite is 'won from the dark and formless infinite'. Restating this more concretely the human personality is aware of infinity, the 'oceanic feeling'. It becomes aware of limitation, presumably through physical and mental experience of itself and the sense of frustration.

(1967, p. 165)

Citing "the dark and formless infinite" of which Milton speaks in *Paradise Lost*, Bion sees the birth of thought as the defining of 'finite' mental boundaries which emerge out of infinity. In another context, Bion wrote that mental links are elements that are won from the dark and amorphous infinite. In this way, in the a-systematic manner that struck him as being right, Bion redefined *the relationship between conscious and unconscious in terms of a relationship between infinite and finite*. Emerging from infinity coincides, for Bion, with the activation of a function for generating experience (the alpha-function). From this position, an inexhaustible production of unconscious happens, which in its turn plays a role in the process of mentalization and in the transformation of the mind from infinite to finite.

Bion's view of the unconscious should not be viewed in terms of Freud's repressed unconscious, but instead should be thought of as the unknown—Oedipus and the Sphinx, which we come up against when we try to achieve some form of experience. A decade after *Second Thoughts*, Bion wrote in the *Brazilian Lectures*:

Most of us think that psycho-analysis is important, not because it is good (we know that even the whole of existing psycho-analytic theory does not get much further than scratching the surface of our problem), but because if we are right in thinking that we have minds we shall have to do something about them.

(1974, p. 96)

An affirmation which seems to echo the key role of negative infinity for the development of knowledge, highlighted by renaissance philosophers such as Nicholas of Cusa.

Bion's interest in centring his thinking on the idea of an oscillation between the infinite and the finite puts him very close, theoretically, to the thinker who, more than any other psychoanalyst, has dedicated his research to the infinite: Ignacio Matte Blanco. Focusing his work on the infinite, Matte Blanco places Freud's revolution in the context of work by other revolutionary thinkers, such as Parmenides and Galileo (Matte Blanco, 2006). Thus he locates psychoanalysis

within a wider epistemology, which reveals the intimately existential, emotive and cognitive background to his subject matter.

For Matte Blanco, as for Bion, the Freudian conceptualization of the unconscious, typically categorized in terms of the repressed unconscious, was found to be insufficient. In particular this was felt to be the case with regard to the widening of the psychoanalytic undertaking to encompass

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patients with defects in their capacity to think. Thus, the unconscious is viewed more in terms of its structural aspects than its content. In fact the structuring of the mind involves the unconscious dimension, and not a particular part of its contents. This finding led Matte Blanco to say: "In truth we are on a raft. Our thought does not have foundations from which everything emerges" (quoted by Bria, 1981a). This is an affirmation which echoes Bion's above-mentioned comment that "The finite is 'won from the dark and formless infinite'".

This journey from the infinite to the finite raises the issue of the understanding of 'symmetric frenzy', where the mind is in greater contact with the sensory and formless world of the Id (Freud, 1923).

I will now introduce several fundamental concepts of Matte Blanco's thought, to ensure that even those with less familiarity with Matte Blanco have a good understanding of his theory. I will firstly be considering the roots of his thinking in Freudian theory. In fact, from the huge corpus of Freud's work, Matte Blanco chooses to focus on the key characteristics of the unconscious which make it different from the conscious mind. He makes a very specific and defined choice which, however, reflects Freud's own opinion that these particular discoveries were the most important and revolutionary of all his theories. Indeed, as Riolo has recently commented:

It is thanks to this description, to this detailed system of rules for logical, syntactical, temporal, spatial and linguistic transformation, that psychoanalysis could become a method for investigating unconscious psychic processes, and a clinical practice.

(2006, p. 585)

After having considered this theoretical panorama, I will then move on to looking at the relationship between catastrophic change in Bion's work and the 'deep world' dominated by symmetrization in Matte Blanco's theory.

Freud's logic of the unconscious and Matte Blanco's un-repressed unconscious

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud introduces for the first time the key characteristics of the system of logic of the unconscious, which are as follows: (1) the coexistence of contradictions, (2) the absence of logical connections and the disconnectedness of the 'order' of thought, (3) the coexistence of thought and 'non-thought', (4) the absence and presence of a concept of time, (5) the reproduction of a logical connection by simultaneity in time or by getting things mixed up, (6) the interchangeability of alternatives, (7) the interchangeability of and connection between opposites and contradictions, and (8) the use of resemblance to make links between things.

Although the rules governing the functioning of the unconscious are at first identified for Freud with the mechanisms of dream-work, later on, in his essay *The unconscious* (Freud, 1915), he lays out, in a more concise manner, the five characteristics which make up unconscious functioning. Freud manages to identify the following five essential characteristics:

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- o *The absence of contradiction between instinctual impulses.* For Matte Blanco, as for Freud, the deepest levels of the unconscious are exempt from conflict. It should, however, be noted that, for Klein, conflict is present constantly, even at the deepest levels.
- o *Displacement.* This mechanism is at the root of all unconscious processes, such as/including symbolization, transference, projection, introjection and sublimation.
- o *Condensation.* Through this mechanism, spatial-temporal separation ceases: a classic example is in the dream about Irma, where the various people represented in the dream are always turned into Irma.
- o *The absence of time.* This characteristic involves confusion in the thought-order with the disappearance of the sequential markers of 'before' and 'after'. One of my patients observed that she felt as though she were 'Calimero' (a cartoon chicken, which is the only black one in a family of yellow chickens): small and black. This unconscious conviction involved the fantasy of being outside the ordinary limits of the realistic passage of time, and consequently involved a denial of growing up and an emptying of the resources of the ego.
- o *Substitution of external reality with psychic reality.* The idea of external reality presupposes the capacity to take in the notion of space, and to differentiate internal from external. The substitution of external reality with psychic reality, can, in extreme cases, lead to a delusion in which the external world has been 'annihilated', which is found in some cases of schizophrenia.

Matte Blanco views the characteristics of the unconscious that Freud formulated not as unconnected features, but rather as the expression of a unitary mode of functioning, or rather a structure, which tries to cancel out distinctions. Thus he arrives at the concept of the unrepressed unconscious, or structural unconscious: an unconscious which breaks the rules of space and time-perception as it is understood by the conscious mind. This unconscious requires what Matte Blanco calls a 'translation function', or better still, 'unfolding', in order to transform it into something 'thinkable'. Bria (2003) notes that the notion of unfolding is preferable to that of translation because it emphasizes passing from dimensions that are indistinct to a space-time conception that is compatible with conscious thought. In other words, for Matte Blanco the unconscious operates with a greater number of dimensions than conscious thought: in order to achieve conscious representation the material must be mediated through the three dimensions that govern conscious thinking.

Thus for Matte Blanco, Freud's great discovery was not so much in the various individual characteristics of the unconscious, but rather in the logic that governs it, which breaks away radically from the logic that we are used to. On the basis of this observation, he tries to look with fresh eyes at the distinguishing features of the unconscious, seeing it as a 'classifier' of the emotional events of the mind. The unconscious does not know individuals, only 'classes': for example, Mario, who is the father of Antonio, is known emotionally as belonging to the class of fathers — in terms of set theory. The

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two driving principles of this way of operating are the principle of generalization, by which an element is generalized into the class it belongs to, and the principle of symmetry, which, like a potent acid, annihilates differences. Although the principle of generalization does not violate Aristotelian logic, the principle of symmetry does something that is, according to Matte Blanco unique to the unconscious. That is, an element recognized as being part of a certain class is subjected to a treatment whereby every similar element is regarded as being identical to it, as if no distinction between these elements existed, and so on, up to the point at which the difference between the classes themselves is extinguished. Therefore, the unconscious is governed by symmetrization, whilst the activity of the conscious mind is to identify differences, and it functions through asymmetrization. The functioning of the mind is thus conceived of as a constant oscillation of symmetrization and asymmetrization. The levels of the mind that are nearest to the surface are taken up with simple symmetries, meaning Aristotelian logic, which is faithful to the principle of non-contradiction, whereas the deepest levels of the mind are those which are most submerged in symmetry and thus, at these levels, the phenomenon known as symmetric frenzy dominates.

A poem by the German poet Heinrich Heine — *'Die alten bösen Lieder'* from the cycle entitled *Dichterliebe* [*The Poet's Love*], which is very well-known also because of Schumann's setting of it as part of his song cycle *Dichterliebe*, Op. 48, for voice and piano lends itself well to demonstrating this deep conflict, which is by nature intrinsically psychotic. The great scale of the objects in the poem demonstrates the tendency of emotions to become infinite. Out of this circumstance arises a conflict between emotions and the rejection of emotional life, which is aggravated by the intensity of the emotions. The poet is seeking a coffin that is the size of a bridge over the Rhine and is so heavy that it can only be lifted by twelve giants. In the coffin he will bury his emotional life at the bottom of the sea, as it is intolerable.

Die alten, bösen Lieder,
die Träume böse und arg,
die laßt uns jetzt begraben,
holt einen großen Sarg.
Hinein leg' ich gar manches,
doch sag' ich noch nicht was.
Der Sarg muß seub noch größer,
wie's Heidelberger Faß.
Und holt eine Totenbahre,
von Bretter fest und dick;
auch muß sie sein noch länger,
als wie zu Mainz die Brück'.
Und holt mir auch zwölf Riesen,
die müssen noch stärker sein
als wie der starke Christoph
im Dom zu Köln am Rhein.

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Die sollen den Sarg fortragen,
und senken in's Meer hinab;
denn solchem großen Sarge
gebührt ein großes Grab.
Wißt ihr warum der Sarg wohl
so groß und schwer mag sein?
Ich senkt' auch meine Liebe
Und meinen Schmerz hinein.

Conflict and catastrophe at the origin of thought

The transformation of the instinctual drives into a format that can be represented is, for Bion, a function of the capacity to tolerate frustration. Such a transformation, however, is invested with conflicted content. "Since thought liberates the intuition there is conflict between the impulse to leave the intuition unexpressed and the impulse to express it. The restrictive element of representation therefore obtrudes in transformation T alpha → T beta of pre-verbal material" (Bion, 1970, p. 11).

The restrictive element of representation therefore constitutes for Bion a kind of claustro-agoraphobic conflict, whereby the subject feels almost suffocated as he or she approaches a thinking-transformation — in order for the subject to think it is necessary to enable the apparatus for making meaning and communicating from a virtually un-differentiated world of sensations and feelings. This type of conflict is particularly evident in the psychoanalysis of psychosis. "Thinking makes me feel trapped" affirmed one of my female analysands, while still very much in the grip of an acute phase of psychosis. In these contexts, the role of the analyst is firstly, on an emotional level, to share the patient's 'claustrophobic' suffering (*emotional reverie*), but also, at the same time, to operate a *cognitive reverie*, showing the patient, for example, that it is exactly the 'not-thinking' which leads him to fall into the trap of insanity (Lombardi, 2003). In this way the analytic *reverie* takes care of the patient's needs on a number of levels, and this acts as a catalyst for change. In work which uses the cognitive element of the *reverie* to address the needs of a patient with a defect of thought, interpretative work must be made a secondary priority. It is necessary to put the interpretation of the transference to one side in order to prioritize therapy that facilitates the development of the patient's 'mental structure'. In the absence of this mental structure, there is much less opportunity for the mind to grow and to have experiences.

As a counterpart to the conflict introduced by the restrictive element of representation, Bion underscores the potentially catastrophic role of very strong emotions in the context of the development of the mind. To do this, he uses the model of the stammer and of boredom, as alternative configurations which derive from an impairment of the container-contained relationship. The mental model of the stammer is characterized by an excess of feeling, while for boredom it is the reverse — there is an emptying of emotion from the analytic exchange. In both cases, the ability to learn from experience is paralysed. The task of the mind faced with very strong

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emotions is compared by Bion to the work of the general who attempts to 'contain' the enemy forces in a certain zone: a metaphor for the way in which the role of thought and words is to organize and contain the emotional chaos. Bion writes, following on from his military metaphor:

The words that should have represented the meaning the man wanted to express were fragmented by the emotional forces to which he wished to give only verbal expression; [...] the meaning is too powerful for the verbal formulation; the expression is lost in an 'explosion' in which the verbal formulation is destroyed.

(Bion, 1970, pp. 94-5)

Later on, Bion explores further the problems posed by the transformation of sensory events into thought experiences when he looks at the relationship between the subjective experience of mental space and the objective spatial-temporal order which is necessary for the organization of thought. When the organizing capacity of the mind is diminished or emotional forces overwhelm the resources of containment, the experience of space becomes fragmented and tends towards the infinite. Not even the immensity of astronomic space can help us to represent these experiences, because they cannot be represented at all.

"Mental space is so vast", writes Bion (1970, p. 12), "compared with any realization of three dimensional space that the patient's capacity for emotions is felt to be lost because emotion itself is felt to drain away and be lost in the immensity".

If it is true that an excess of emotion can lead to the paradoxical configuration of an apparent absence of emotional life, this fact could lead us to reflect on conceptualizations such as alexithymia, which attribute, in a self-evident manner, an absence of emotions to certain groups of analysands (Sifneos, 1967). In these conditions of psychotic panic, Bion writes (1970, p. 12) that: "The patient may bleed to death in his own tissues". However, this type of implosion is not equated with a lack, but rather an excess of emotion.

From the symmetrical to the asymmetrical

For Matte Blanco, the importance of drives as the origin of the unconscious is placed alongside the significance of the mechanisms of symmetrization in the impairment of the capacity for thinking. Also important is the affirmation of an emotional logic dominated by 'infinite' experiences and by infinite anguish and loss of boundaries, which are linked (Grotstein, 2000; Rayner, 1981).

In *Some elementary lessons in psycho-analysis*, Freud (1940b) affirmed that:

The unconscious is the truly physical... But none of this implies that the quality of being conscious has lost its importance for us. It remains the one light which illuminates our path and leads us through the darkness of mental life.

(p. 286)

If Freud compares the unconscious to the *shadow*, Matte Blanco translates the evocative nature of this image into the specificity of the function

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ing of the 'Principle of Symmetry', which leads to the cancelling out of distinctions, producing confusion and disorganization. Meanwhile, the asymmetrizing activity of the conscious mind brings perception and the ability to discriminate. The role of the conscious mind is accentuated by Matte Blanco. It is instrumental in terms of its relationship with the world of the emotions. This mode of thought anticipates the increased attention given to the conscious mind in contemporary psychoanalysis (Busch, 2004).

The symmetric-asymmetric oscillation is, for Matte Blanco, constantly involved in mental functioning. Phenomena of sensory saturation, linked to emotional intensity, lead the mind to a continuous slide towards infinitization of emotions, to the point of jeopardizing the work of the *unfolding function*. This function is adept at transforming phenomena which are largely 'symmetric' into phenomena that are largely 'asymmetric'. The work of leaving behind the symmetric and creating asymmetric functioning which is compatible with the spatial-temporal organization of the conscious mind involves for Matte Blanco the same kind of conflict highlighted by Bion in relation to restricted representation and explosive emotional chaos.

In Gerardo's case, we have seen some first attempts at visual representation that express a first moment of freedom from the experience of fragmentation in an 'empty and formless infinity'. This happened when the analysand coloured the walls of the consulting room with his emotions, and later when he managed to paint the watercolour that was reminiscent of Munch's painting, producing a self-portrait in which emotions were very much in evidence. In the first episode, the real walls of the consulting room remind one of the frame of containment offered by the analytic *reverie*, onto which the analysand can paint his own proto-experience of an emotional world which is still formless. This is an essential process of mediation to make the experience 'thinkable'. The next achievement, a separate representation of himself in the painting, shows how the various potential activities of the mind—from imaginative creation to intellectual and abstract thought—are forged out of the formless magma of emotional turbulence. As Matte Blanco would have said: "Emotion is the mother of thinking" (1975, p. 303).

Regarding catastrophic change in terms of the organization of the mind, Bion considers the role of the analysis when an upset of spatial and temporal perception happens: "The total analysis can be seen as a transformation in which an intense catastrophic emotional explosion *O* has occurred" (Bion, 1970, p. 14).

This conception of catastrophic change and the connected emphasis on the upsetting of the spatial-temporal order comes very close in meaning to Matte Blanco's description of the deep layers of the mind, where symmetric frenzy dominates. In this region of the psyche:

the amount of symmetrization is so great that thinking, which requires asymmetrical relations, is greatly impaired. The conceptual end is the pure indivisible mode, where everything is everything else, and where the relations between things are all theoretically contained in any single thing which the intellect can grasp.

The endless

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number of things tends to become, mysteriously, only one thing.

(Matte Blanco, 1988, p. 54, my italics)

The experience of indissoluble unity within variety which Bion calls 'O' — "ultimate reality, absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the-thing-in-itself" is for Matte Blanco the *one thing* which the *indivisible mode of being* tends towards in *its pure state*. Both authors underscore the conflicted nature of the most primitive parts of the mind, those parts which involve, for Bion, 'a losing of the self in immensity' and, for Matte Blanco, a tendency towards indivisibility and difficulty in maintaining the vital dialectic of symmetric-asymmetric in the face of powerful emotional forces.

Primitive mental states and symmetric transference

As previously indicated, Matte Blanco's concept of infinite sets and Bion's catastrophic change refer to the early experience of feeling—a chaos of indistinct physical sensations—and also to the experience of thinking in its nascent state. This is a dialectic which seems particularly important when considering the boundary between mind and body.

This relationship between catastrophic experience/symmetric frenzy and the origins of thinking from the body's sensory matrix is important because it shows that the phenomena considered here are not only relevant to experiences of acute psychosis but are actually common dynamics in analytic practice. Such phenomena are relevant in all situations where emotion comes to the fore, or where emotion has overwhelmed the patient to the point of impairing the faculties of thought and experience—a widespread occurrence even in less damaged patients.

Various writers have developed Matte Blanco's contribution with different emphases: Bria (1981a, 1981b, 1999), Di Benedetto (2000), Lombardi (2000, 2006, 2009a, 2009b) and Ginzburg (2004). All these have highlighted the conflict and at the same time the creative possibilities that arise from combining the world of sensation and the world of thought.

They have pointed out the existence of a correspondence between body and mind, whereby the bodily foundations of emotion become the empirical origin of the infinite, or indeed of the infinite sets which constitute the unconscious from Matte Blanco's perspective.

In this interpretation of Matte Blanco's ideas, the body's feeling of infinitude is put in parallel with the incongruence between thinking and feeling, which marks the human animal as a kind of *ontological conflict*. This same fact has been emphasized on the philosophical front by Emilio Garroni (1992), who reformulated the epistemological problems posed by Thomas Nagel (1981) in *What is it like to be a bat?* Garroni considers the conflict between feeling and thinking as a constant in the development of Western philosophy and ethics. This is the same conflict that in *Thinking, Feeling and Being* Matte Blanco (1988) placed at the root of his own conception of the *fundamental antinomy* between the two modes of being, divisible and indivisible

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ible, which recall thinking and feeling. It is a contradiction which summarizes Matte Blanco's point of view on the philosophical and epistemological implications of Freud's discoveries about the unconscious. It is also, in part, found in Bion's reading of the phenomena which constitute catastrophic change.

Whilst focusing on the importance of the conflict between thought and feeling, infinite and finite, non-thinking and thinking, it is important not to neglect certain aspects of analytic technique. The bi-personal nature of the meeting requires a joint commitment of analyst and analysand in order to maintain a profitable link with the emotions; it is necessary to maintain care of the patient alongside the verbal transformation of the experiences that are taking place. The urgent need to organize the mind for the purpose of thinking and the continuing risk of a collapse of the container require the analyst's work to be something other than a systematic interpretation of the transference. Rather, it should be thought of in terms of the ability to maintain some kind of unity when confronted with the deep emotional dynamics of the patient. In Matte Blanco's terms, we can say that at these deep levels we are essentially faced with phenomena of symmetric transference — to handle this, the analyst functions mainly as the patient's 'imaginary twin' (Bion, 1950), contributing a constant support as the thinking function for these transference elements. Little by little, the flood of symmetries begins to subside, as the analysand's mental growth progresses with the strengthening of mental resources for asymmetric differentiation. As this happens, the analytic work can address more consistently relational dynamics and a separation of identity takes place in the context of the analytic couple. An example of this journey will be presented in the last part of this paper.

By accepting the symmetric transference and avoiding a precocious introduction of the recognition of the other, the analyst can facilitate the analysand's encounter with himself as the first interlocutor of his mental functioning. Bion seems to affirm this need to prioritize the relationship of the subject with himself when he states:

The oracle of Delphi was supposed to have carved into the stone, 'Know thyself'. So the idea that it is useful and helpful to 'know thyself' is not new. In that sense we are trying to say, 'I will help you to know yourself. If you tell me something, I will tell it back again to you in a way in which you may be able to see yourself. I am trying to be a mirror which doesn't tell you who I am — that is of no importance whatsoever — but who *you* are'.

(Bion, 1988, p. 239)

This view is consistent with the emphasis introduced by Bion on the function of the analyst's *reverie* as a catalyst towards new experiences and understanding for the analysand. The analyst problematizes the patient's utterings and stimulates a continuous enlargement of mental space, valuing in particular the routes into new and un-thought depictions. As Bion affirms:

Any one of many facets of the patient's statements may be noticed rather than any other. It can be considered as a statement or as a transformation; as multi-dimen-

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sional or multi-faceted; it could be represented by a visual image of a figure in which many planes meet or lines pass through a common point. I can represent it to myself by a visual image of a geometric solid *with an infinite number of surfaces*.

(1970, p. 8, my italics)

Thus the analyst becomes, in Bion's view as well as in Matte Blanco's, a sort of surveyor of the infinite, or, as Paul Valéry said, with an expression that emphasizes poetically the meeting of opposites: "un algébriste, au service d'un rêveur affiné" [an algebraist, in the service of a subtle dreamer].

Otherness as a source of asymmetry and containment

I am now going to return to Gerardo's story, to consider some developments that followed concerning the recognition of otherness as a source of containment for catastrophic symmetrizations encountered in primitive states.

With just over two weeks to go until the summer break, G presented himself at the penultimate session of the week with a serious and professional air, dressed in dark colours, giving me the impression that he had unexpectedly made

progress. He told me that he had that day had a job interview and was now awaiting a response. After a few minutes he received a phone call during the session, to let him know that he had been accepted for a trial period. Processing this news, G commented straight away: "It's responsibility that I can't handle. I don't know if I'd manage to stay in a building without running away."

I felt that recognition of his competence — as he had just been considered capable of working — caused an edgy and claustrophobic reaction from the omnipotent psychotic parts of himself, which were anxious to keep him far away from reality. Therefore I said to him: "When you are approved of, a reality is introduced, which has limits. At this point, you feel hatred and attack your responsibility and its links with reality — you run away. But in so doing you are brought close to madness."

I saw that G reacted with an expression of worry on his face and he said: "I no longer want to be attached to my mother, but then I feel that there's a void ...". And he went on, making a sign with his hand as though his brain was falling out of his head. I noted that G had passed from feeling claustrophobia of an enclosed space to agoraphobia of the void, introducing the theme of anxiety about separation from his mother and, in parallel, from me, in the maternal transference. This theme seemed to be perceived in very concrete terms, given that G felt that the separation meant an abyss of nothingness, not for a moment considering the possibility of using his mental resources, or of representing his experience of separation in space and time.

I responded: "There is no void, nor a loss of your brain, if you use your mind to recognize that you are separate from your mother, as you are also from me, here in analysis". At this point, G stopped roaming about the room and seated himself on the couch. I saw that he was suffering a great deal as he said to me: "I am afraid of sitting down. If I sit I fear I am sink

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ing, I feel like I'm falling, it's a terrible feeling." I noticed that G had shed his protective armour and was in contact with his feelings of falling and loss. In this way he seemed to be experiencing what we had just said about separation, but he was falling into a kind of primary agony (Winnicott, 1974) linked to his difficulty in articulating feeling and thinking.

I said to him: "If you are able to recognize your feelings of loss, you can also bear them, as you are doing now. 'Feeling as though you are falling' is the expression of the capacity of your mind to have feelings, such as the feeling of sadness about a separation — it is not an actual fall." Saying this, I was trying to stimulate an asymmetrization between concrete and abstract, whereas for him the 'feeling of falling' was symmetrically confused (Matte Blanco, 1975) with a concrete falling.

After I had spoken, G appeared more settled, he turned towards me, looked at me and said straight at me: "There are only ten sessions left". I did a quick calculation and realized that there were indeed ten sessions until the break. I was struck by his return to reality and at the precision of his statement. It seemed to me that this discrete number was the constructive response that G was giving to the risk of sliding back into the abyss of undifferentiated immensity. This response was therefore the outcome of a capacity to recognize separation and otherness. I said to him: "There are indeed ten left. And this is an example of how you can be capable of accepting separation from me and the feelings that go with it." And G immediately replied: "I don't want to think about it because I feel as though then too much hatred overcomes me and I can't bear that". Saying this, G spoke to me of his terror of not managing his feelings of hate, but also of his defect of thought (Bion, 1962b) linked to an idea that 'non-thinking' seemed to offer a better solution than 'thinking'.

I replied: "We have seen at other times that you are capable of bearing your hatred: furthermore, thinking allows you to put boundaries on our separation, both in terms of how many sessions are left, and in terms of when we will see each other again in September. In this way you will be able to recognize me mentally even when I am not there." Thus I was describing to him how thinking gave him boundaries to help guard against sinking into the abyss, leading him to consider the real space and time in which he could position his experience of an absent object (Bion, 1962a).

G appeared satisfied and he finished the session in a particularly calm mood, stopping to rearrange the couch carefully after he got up to go; this too was another sign of his capacity to accept separation.

In the last session of the week, too, the atmosphere in the consulting room seemed collaborative. But let us look at the start of the following week, where we can see the provision G had made for the experience of separation. "Do you know Martignano Lake?" G asked me, whilst walking around the room, without yet settling on a place to sit down. "It's a small lake, near Bracciano Lake, which is a volcanic lake. It seems that Martignano is a secondary crater. I went there at the weekend; there were lots of people."

My attention was caught by the reference to a geographical phenomenon in which there was a link between elements that were similar and different

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at the same time. In G's image, what had once been explosive volcanoes were now fresh and welcoming lakes. This appeared to me to be a constructive communication, an indication that, in spite of the limits imposed by narcissism, he was recognizing the relationship with me in an explicit way. Therefore I said to him: "You seem to be able to recognize a continuity of the link with me even when we are apart, accepting yourself and me as separate people, as we are separate,

but also as associated, like the lakes of Martignano and Bracciano. Having recognized your volcanic, explosive hatred for the separation from me, now your tears have cooled, giving way to a calmer mood.”

G stopped walking, sat down on the couch and said to me, in a simple and wise tone: “I feel that I have explored the abyss of my emotions. I feel that I have been to the very bottom of this void. I am no longer afraid of falling into the abyss: it is as if I had touched the bottom.”

I appreciated his response, so coherent and transparent, but I also had the impression that he was still leaving out the containing role played by recognition of our relationship; therefore I replied: “Now you recognize that there is an edge to the abyss, because you are able to recognize that a limit exists, rather than making it disappear by not thinking. But this boundary is also the fact of recognizing me as your travelling companion through the volcano of your emotions. Even if I am a companion that you feel you cannot control, and from whom you must accept separation”. This comment, too, was received well by G, showing that the analytic work was moving towards addressing separation with a knowledge of the duality between us, which had not stood out as clearly, or been as acceptable as it was now, before this moment in the analysis.

I hope that these two later fragments provide insight into the gradual mental growth of G from a very undifferentiated and inchoate condition which echoes the formless abyss to which Bion and Matte Blanco refer, to a condition marked by a development of asymmetric logic and links between thought, feelings and human relationships. G's mind passes from an uncertain and confused conceptualization of space and time, exposing him to claustrophobic and agoraphobic suffering and the re-emergence of the panic of the abyss, to a recognition of separation and otherness in a relationship. This is accompanied by a gradual detoxification of the emotions, which move from volcanic explosiveness verging on madness to a more peaceful form. An intersubjective relationship impregnated with realism has formed. The analyst's interventions accompany the internal movements of the analy-sand, pointing out the attacks on linking and the destructive fascination of non-thinking (Bion, 1959), correcting the cognitive distortions (Bion, 1962b) and the non-viable symmetrizations (Matte Blanco, 1988), to facilitate the processing of feelings and a more explicit role for the relationship.

The set of clinical fragments seem to me to show the *many levels on which the analytic process operates* (Gabbard, 2007). Work on the conditions of ‘containment’ and on the defect of thought (Bion, 1962b) — which aims to enable the patient to think about the infinite and unconscious space of the internal world — happens, at a certain point in the process, through the appearance of a relational other. In this way, the transference-countertrans

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ference aspect of the analytic relationship interweaves itself with the multidimensional of the deep layers of the mind. This allows us to put the *work of processing the transference into a context of greater complexity, which is called for with a clinical condition in which the thinking function and the patient's relationship with himself can never be taken entirely for granted.*

In this piece I have attempted to demonstrate my own personal way of relating to the work of Bion and Matte Blanco — authors who invite one to conceive of psychoanalysis as an experience which, through the tolerance of doubt and the unknown, can put boundaries of space and time around the dark and amorphous immensity that the analysand encounters in the most primitive areas of his mental functioning.

Translations of summary

Symmetrische Verrücktheit und Katastrophische Veränderung: Eine Untersuchung Primitiver mentaler Zustände auf den Spuren von Bion und Matte Blanco. Der Autor untersucht die Zusammenhänge zwischen Matte Blancos Begriff der “symmetrischen Verrücktheit”, d.h. dem Aufruhr, der für das niedrigste Niveau mentaler Funktionen charakteristisch ist, und Bions Konzept der katastrophischen Veränderung. Für Bion entstammen mentale Verknüpfungen der formlosen Dunkelheit der Unendlichkeit. Bei katastrophischer Veränderung kommen emotionale Gewalt und die beschränkende Natur der Repräsentation miteinander in Konflikt und machen das Subjekt zum Opfer einer Explosivität, die die mentalen Ressourcen lähmt. Matte Blanco bestimmt die Unteilbarkeit als den Abgrund, in dem jegliche Differenzierung aufhört; sein Modell baut er auf dem Konflikt zwischen Symmetrie und Asymmetrie auf. Unendlichkeit, so behauptet er, findet sich dort, wo sich die ersten Formen der Mentalisierung entwickeln. Sowohl Bion als auch Matte Blanco betonen den Gegensatz zwischen der Unermesslichkeit des mentalen Raums und der raum-zeitlichen Ordnung, die durch den Beginn der Denkfunktionen eingeführt wird. Der Autor stellt klinisches Material aus der Analyse eines psychotischen Patienten dar, anhand dessen er die Notwendigkeit betont, sowohl die Durcharbeitung des Mangels des Denkens (Bion) anzuregen als auch die “Entfaltung” der Manifestationen der Symmetrie (Matte Blanco), um damit die Aktivierung der Quellen des Denkens zu fördern. Unterdessen sei die Deutung der Übertragung zurückzustellen. Er beendet seine Ausführungen mit der Darstellung zweier späterer Sitzungen, in denen das Erkennen des Analytikers in der Übertragung dem Analysanden ermöglicht, seine Fähigkeit zum “Containment” und zu asymmetrischer Differenzierung zu entwickeln.

Frenesí simétrico y cambio catastrófico: Una exploración de estados mentales primitivos en la estela de Bion y Matte Blanco. El autor explora las conexiones entre la noción de frenesí simétrico, es decir, la turbulencia característica de los niveles más profundos del funcionamiento mental, acuñada por Matte Blanco, y el concepto de Bion de cambio catastrófico. Bion sostiene que los vínculos mentales son sustraídos de la informe oscuridad del infinito. En el cambio catastrófico, la violencia emocional y el carácter restrictivo de la representación entran en conflicto, dejando al sujeto a

merced de una explosividad que paraliza sus recursos mentales. Matte Blanco identifica la indivisibilidad como el abismo en el que cesa toda diferenciación, y centra su modelo en el conflicto entre simetría y asimetría. El infinito es concebido como el lugar donde se desarrollan las primeras formas de mentalización. Tanto Bion como Matte Blanco subrayan el contraste entre la inmensidad del espacio mental y el orden espacio-temporal introducido por la activación de las funciones pensantes. El autor presenta material clínico del análisis de un paciente psicótico, subrayando la necesidad de fomentar tanto la elaboración del defecto de pensamiento (Bion) como un unfolding de las manifestaciones simétricas (Matte Blanco) para emerger del torbellino del infinito. De este modo, se favorece la activación de los recursos de pensamiento, y las interpretaciones de la transferencia pasan a un segundo plano. El ensayo concluye con una secuencia posterior del trabajo analítico donde el reconocimiento del analista en la transferencia lleva al progreso de la capacidad de contención y de diferenciación asimétrica.

Turbulence symétrique et changement catastrophique: Une investigation des états psychiques primitifs dans le sillage de Bion et Matte Blanco. L'auteur explore les connexions entre la notion de turbulence ou frénésie symétrique de Matte Blanco, qui caractérise les niveaux les plus profonds du fonctionnement psychique, et le concept de changement catastrophique de Bion. Pour ce dernier, les liens psychiques sont extraits de l'obscurité informe de l'infini. Dans le changement catastrophique, la violence émotionnelle et la nature restrictive de la représentation en viennent à entrer en conflit, ce qui produit

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une explosion qui paralyse les ressources du psychisme. Matte Blanco associe l'indivisibilité à un abîme où toute différenciation cesserait d'exister; il axe son modèle sur le conflit entre symétrie et asymétrie. L'infini est, selon lui, le lieu où se développent les premières formes de mentalisation. Bion et Matte Blanco mettent tous deux l'accent sur le contraste existant entre l'immensité de l'espace psychique et l'ordre spatio-temporel introduit par la mise en œuvre des processus de pensée. L'auteur présente du matériel clinique extrait de l'analyse d'un patient psychotique, soulignant la nécessité de favoriser et l'élaboration du défaut de pensée (Bion) et le déploiement des manifestations de symétrie (Matte Blanco), afin de sortir du gouffre de l'infini et permettre la mise en œuvre des processus de pensée; ce faisant, l'interprétation du transfert passe au second plan. En conclusion, l'auteur présente une séquence postérieure de la cure où la reconnaissance de l'analyste dans le transfert permet au patient de développer sa capacité de contenance et de différenciation asymétrique.

Frenesia simmetrica e cambiamento catastrofico: Una considerazione degli stati mentali primitivi nella prospettiva di Bion e Matte Blanco. L'autore esplora le connessioni tra la concezione di Matte Blanco della turbolenza che caratterizza i livelli profondi del funzionamento mentale, la frenesia simmetrica, e la concezione di Bion del cambiamento catastrofico. Bion sottolinea che i legami mentali sono sottratti al buio ed informe infinito. Nel cambiamento catastrofico la violenza emozionale e il carattere restrittivo della rappresentazione si scontrano in maniera conflittuale, esponendo ad una esplosività che paralizzava le risorse mentali. Matte Blanco identifica nell'indivisibilità il baratro dove si annulla ogni differenziazione e centra il suo modello sul conflitto tra simmetria e asimmetria. L'infinito è concepito come l'area dove si organizzano le prime forme di mentalizzazione. Sia Bion che Matte Blanco enfatizzano il contrasto tra l'immensità dello spazio mentale e l'ordine spazio-temporale introdotto dall'attivazione delle funzioni pensanti. L'autore presenta materiale clinico dall'analisi di un paziente psicotico sottolineando la necessità di favorire una elaborazione del difetto di pensiero (Bion) e un unfolding delle manifestazioni simmetriche (Matte Blanco) per emergere dal gorgo dell'infinito e favorire una attivazione delle risorse pensanti, mettendo in secondo piano l'interpretazione del transfert. Egli conclude con una sequenza posteriore di lavoro analitico, in cui il riconoscimento dell'analista nel transfert permette un progresso nelle capacità di contenimento e discriminazione asimmetrica.

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