



## Penultimate interpretation

Yair Neuman

Office for Interdisciplinary Research, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, P.O. Box 653, Beer-Sheva 84105, Israel – yneuman@bgu.ac.il

(Final version accepted 6 January 2010)

*Interpretation is at the center of psychoanalytic activity. However, interpretation is always challenged by that which is beyond our grasp, the ‘dark matter’ of our mind, what Bion describes as ‘O’. O is one of the most central and difficult concepts in Bion’s thought. In this paper, I explain the enigmatic nature of O as a high-dimensional mental space and point to the price one should pay for substituting the pre-symbolic lexicon of the emotion-laden and high-dimensional unconscious for a low-dimensional symbolic representation. This price is reification – objectifying lived experience and draining it of vitality and complexity. In order to address the difficulty of approaching O through symbolization, I introduce the term ‘Penultimate Interpretation’ – a form of interpretation that seeks ‘loopholes’ through which the analyst and the analysand may reciprocally save themselves from the curse of reification. Three guidelines for ‘Penultimate Interpretation’ are proposed and illustrated through an imaginary dialogue.*

**Keywords:** Bion, O, symbolization, loophole, interpretation, interdisciplinary studies

All my life I have been imprisoned, frustrated, dogged by common-sense, reason, memories, desires and – greatest bug-bear of all – understanding and being understood.

(Bion, 1991, p. 578)

*Q:* I am wondering if there is a psychoanalytic way to the truth.

*Bion:* None whatever.

(Bion, 2005, p. 87)

### 1. Introduction

Interpretation lies at the heart of the analytic practice. Raising the association of Joseph Conrad’s seminal work, one may say that it lies at the ‘Heart of Darkness’ as interpreting the unconscious involves the encounter with ‘O’ (Bion, 1965) – the ‘dark matter’ of our inner world (Grotstein, 1997), or the “dark spot that must be illuminated by blindness” (Bion, 1970, p. 88; Grotstein, 2007). What is the nature of the ‘dark matter’ that draws the limit line of our understanding? What is the price we pay when we attempt to extend our limit line into the heart of darkness? Is there a way in which we may travel into the heart of darkness without falling prey to its enigmatic nature? The aim of this paper is to address these questions by offering a modest integration of several ideas.

The paper is organized as follows. The first part of the paper explains the enigmatic nature of *O*. Following Bion and Matte-Blanco (1975), I explain *O* is a high-dimensional mental space that cannot be represented through the ‘language of substitution’ – the language of symbolic representation that aims to replace the ‘language of achievement’ – the presymbolic lexicon of the emotion-laden unconscious.<sup>1</sup> Exposing the difficulty of encountering *O* in terms of dimensionality, I move on to the second phase. It is argued that the problem of representing a high-dimensional space is a challenge facing psychoanalysis and mathematics and that in both fields a similar solution has been proposed. I introduce and explain this solution by emphasizing in the following phase the price one should pay for replacing a high-dimensional experience with a low-dimensional symbolic representation. The price is the price of *reification*, of turning a complex and lived experience into an abstract, stable and relatively simple *object*. In order to address the difficulty of approaching *O* through the language of substitution, I introduce the term ‘Penultimate Interpretation’ – a form of interpretation in which we seize our interpretation a moment before it is crystallized, at its penultimate paragraph, and seek for ‘loopholes’ through which the analyst and the analysand may reciprocally save themselves from reification. Three guidelines for ‘Penultimate Interpretation’ are proposed and illustrated through an imaginary dialogue. The paper concludes by discussing the way in which ‘Penultimate Interpretation’ may enrich the psychoanalytic field.

## 2. The enigmatic nature of *O*

Grotstein (2007, p. 31) correctly argues that: “One of the problems with *O*’s acceptability is its esoteric strangeness.” The aim of this section is to clarify the ‘esoteric strangeness’ of *O* through the concept of ‘dimensionality’.

Informally, the dimension of a space is the minimum number of ‘coordinates’ we need in order to specify a point within it. For example, if we would like to specify the position of a fly in a room then we need three coordinates or dimensions: (1) height, (2) width, and (3) depth. The idea of specifying a point through coordinates is not limited to concrete spaces or objects and may be extended to the mental realm. For example, I can describe the taste of a certain wine by using one dimension – Interestingness – ranging from ‘0’ (not interesting at all) to ‘10’ (extremely interesting). If the wine is moderately interesting then I can grade it as ‘7’. In this case, a single coordinate/dimension (i.e. Interestingness) is used in order to specify the experience of wine-tasting as a point on a continuum ranging from ‘0’ to ‘10’. The use of a single dimension might be overly simplistic and we may want to describe the taste of a certain wine by adding a second dimension such as ‘Aroma’ or a third dimension such as ‘Softness’. Describing the taste of a certain wine through these independent dimensions is done by specifying a point residing in the space that is constructed by the three dimensions. See Figure 1 below, where the grey balloon signifies a point in a

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for proposing the definition of these two terms and allowed myself to use his own words.

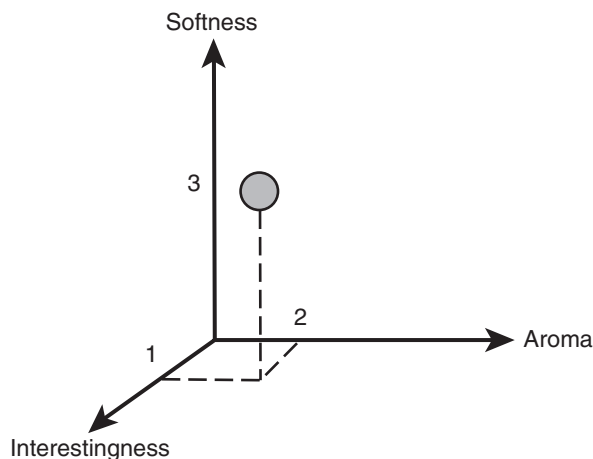


Fig. 1. The taste of a wine represented in a 3D space

3-dimensional space with the coordinates: Interestingness = 1, Aroma = 2, and Softness = 3:

We feel extremely comfortable working with low-dimensional spaces. Therefore, it is not surprising that our metaphors of understanding are embodied in our experience with objects in a three-dimensional space (Lakoff and Johnson, 1991). For example, knowing is seeing (e.g. ‘I *see* what you mean’) and understanding is grasping (e.g. ‘I’ve never been able to *grasp* Bion’s *O*’). However, when we encounter an experience characterized by high-dimensionality, our ability to visualize or imagine it is extremely limited. Let me illustrate this point. As I am writing this paper there is a bottle of Merlot in front of me. A sticker on the bottle poetically describes its unique character. Here is an illustrative excerpt of this description:

This wine is mostly composed of Merlot so that its character is governed by the \*roundness\* \*devotion\* and the \*seductive softness\* of the Merlot but also enjoys the \*compressed\* \*wild\* and \*youthful\* character of ...

This excerpt includes six dimensions of taste marked by asterisks and the whole poetic description of the wine includes twelve different dimensions. We cannot even imagine how to visualize the taste of this wine as a point in a 12-dimensional space. This is probably the reason why wine-tasting is considered by some people as a snobbish and empty pretension that is not grounded in our basic experience.

Now, try to think of a space with an infinite number of dimensions. This is precisely the way Bion and Matte-Blanco describe ‘*O*’. We may reduce this space to a space that is not infinite but extremely high-dimensional. This is the mental space that resides within us. It is a high-dimensional space in which our experiences reside and relate in a way that is beyond our ability to visualize and probably to fully understand. As argued by Bion: “Mental space is so vast compared with any realization of three-dimensional space that the patient’s capacity for emotion is felt to be lost because emo-

tion itself is felt to drain away and be lost in the immensity” (Bion, 1965, p. 12). In this space emotion is ‘lost’ precisely because it cannot be specified through a low-dimensional space; it cannot be specified as a point in a low-dimensional space.

Without a supporting theory, the above idea of a space with infinite or high dimensionality may sound like the wild imagination of a mystical psychoanalyst like Bion. Indeed, years ago, Grotstein (1978, p. 55) argued that: “We must have a theory which can help us conceptualize the space ... in which feelings and thoughts ... can be examined.” Today, we know that the abstract space discussed by Bion has been fully acknowledged in mathematics where it is described as the ‘*Manifold*’ (Novikov and Fomenko, 1987). Both mathematics and psychoanalysis realized that this space is incomprehensible because points on the manifold, representing, for example, high-dimensional experiences, cannot be specified. An intuitive notion of our limit in comprehending the manifold is evident when we experience the failure to describe a complex experience through words. There is always something missing in this description as it cannot restore the complexity of the experience it seeks to represent. For example, even if Bion had dared during his analysis with Klein to describe his horror in the battle field, even if he had dared to share with her the smell of a burning human flesh and the screams of wounded soldiers, it is almost certain that his description would have missed the essence of his experience. Interestingly, in both mathematics and psychoanalysis, a similar solution has been introduced in response to the need to represent a point or experience that resides in a high-dimensional space. This is the first argument that I would like to introduce.

In mathematics, a point on the manifold cannot be directly accessed as it lacks a system of coordinates to specify its location. It must be emphasized that what we lack is a general system of coordinates that may help us in specifying a point on the manifold. However, a point on the manifold (or an experience in *O*) is always accompanied by other points that constitute its *local neighborhood*. This local neighborhood may serve as a *limited space* through which we may represent the point (Novikov and Fomenko, 1987). Let me explain this idea by using a simple example (Novikov and Fomenko, 1987, p. 127).

If we want to draw a map of the earth’s surface, then we can represent points that exist on the 3-dimensional spherical surface of the globe on the 2-dimensional plane. Practically, it is impossible to make one-to-one mapping of the sphere to the plane, as reduction of dimensionality inevitably results in loss of information: some points that were separated on the 3-dimensional sphere may be condensed into the *same point* on the 2-dimensional plane.

At this point the reader may better understand both Freud and Matte-Blanco’s notion of condensation and many other related phenomena. For example, Isakower (1938, cited in Grotstein, 1978, p. 55) suggests that the dream must be explained as the projection on a screen surface. The dream, as a projection of a high-dimensional mental space onto the ‘surface’ of symbolic substitute, is characterized by condensation, which is *the inevitable result of dimensionality reduction*. It is now clear that Freud’s notion of con-

densation is deeply and scientifically grounded in the logic of dimensionality reduction. One clinical implication of this logic is that condensation of two separate ideas into a single symbol does not mean that the ideas are somehow linked, but, to the contrary, that in high dimensionality they are separated and were forced into the same point in an attempt to represent a high-dimensional and complex mental space. In other words, condensation is indicative of the *process* characterizing the mental space rather than of the *content* of the mental space. It is an indication that the *O* within us is seeking a communicative form in terms of symbolic representation. The more condensed the symbolic representation, the deeper (or higher in dimensional terms) is the mental space it tries to convey.

Let us return to our example. A pragmatic solution used by cartographers to represent the sphere on a plane is to cut the sphere into small pieces, each of which is projected *separately* onto part of a plane. The original sphere is therefore represented by gluing together these patches onto a single map of the globe.

Let us see the way in which the same process is evident in another field. The experience of tasting wine cannot be directly represented. In itself, it is beyond words, similar to the experience of being in love or having an orgasm. However, we can describe the taste of wine by using its local neighborhood through concepts such as ‘softness’, ‘aroma’ and ‘interestingness’. As we can see, natural language as the ultimate form of symbolic representation plays a crucial role in providing us with the coordinates or dimensions for representing the high-dimensional experience. Although the experience is beyond words, it is approximated by the ‘symbolic patches’ woven through natural language.

In sum, we do not have a direct access to our experience as it exists in *O* or in *O* as it is represented within us – what Neuman (2009a) describes as ‘ $I_O$ ’. Therefore, and as suggested by Bion, we must use the ‘language of substitution’ – the language of symbolic representation – in order to translate our experience from the ‘language of achievement’ – the intuitive pre-symbolic lexicon of the emotion-laden unconscious. This translation involves the use of ‘neighboring points’ represented through language that is a set of symbols through which I may locally approximate the experience. However, the experience in-itself can never be fully reconstructed. Therefore, the challenge facing the analyst is to approximate the basic experience of the analysand by weaving ‘patches’ of symbolic representations. Here we commence the second and the third arguments.

### 3. Interpretation is translation is construction

The second argument is that the above theorization allows us to conceptualize interpretation as the translation taken place between the high-dimensional manifold, the experiences as they live in a high-dimensional presymbolic and emotion-laden unconscious, and the language of substitution. This is not a one-way translation but a process that takes place through symbolic mediation between the minds of the analyst and the analysand.

My third argument is that interpretation is both translation and construction. It is a process in which we both translate the experience from the language of achievement to the language of substitution and recursively ‘construct’ or ‘create’ the experience through the language of substitution. This is not a new argument but here it naturally derives from the above ‘Mathematical–Bionian’ theorization. Let me explain this argument. Each mental experience exists and does not exist at the same time: it exists as a primordial experience but not as an object. We experience it but we cannot manipulate or reflect on it. Only through its local neighborhood, and only through the language of substitution that provides us with the appropriate coordinates for representation, can we bring it light. For example, the experience of wine-tasting exists as a primordial, high-dimensional and undifferentiated experience. However, when we learn the appropriate vocabulary for describing the taste of wine, the experience is *enacted, elucidated, delimited* and *differentiated* as an *object* of reflection and contemplation.

Precisely the same process is evident in other forms of human experience. We may speculate, for example, that the infant’s emotionally laden experience is inaccessible to him and therefore cannot be managed and controlled. This is the reason why the infant cannot calm herself and why maternal reverie is critical for healthy development, as it translates primordial experience into a symbolic digestible form that may be used in later phases for self-comfort and relief of anxiety.

Let me give another example of the way the language of substitution represents experiences that exist on a high-dimensional mental space. The example concerns an elusive concept – the ‘Self’ – and its symbolic representation through the first person pronoun – ‘I’.

The Russian polymath, M. Bakhtin, made the insightful observation that, unlike other linguistic signs, *the sign ‘I’ has no clear reference*: The sign ‘tree’ indicates the concept of a tree, the sign ‘number’ corresponds to the object well defined by mathematicians, but what object does the sign ‘I’ indicate? As explained by Neuman (2009b, p. 17):

... the sign ‘I’ fulfills the mysterious function of associating the lived experience of the individual [i.e. Self] with a communicable and social form of expression. As beautifully explained by Bakhtin scholar Michael Holquist (1990: 28): “Much as Peter Pan’s shadow is sewn to his body, the ‘I’ is the needle that stitches the abstraction of language to the particularity of the lived experience.”

In other words, the ‘self’ is a basically elusive and fragmented bundle of experiences. Only by using the language of substitution do these experiences turn into an object of contemplation. The self is an object both translated and created through the language of substitution.

In sum, interpretation involves the paradoxical interplay of translation and construction. Without the mathematical metaphor presented above this paradoxical interplay might have been considered as intellectual sophism *per se*.

A clear practical implication of the above theorization is that the analyst must adopt a stance that is ‘*in between*’ translation and construction. On the one hand, he cannot pretend to remove the curtain that covers *O* simply by



translating it into a digestible form, a naïve position that characterized the early days of psychoanalysis. On the other hand, she cannot withdraw to the stance of pure construction ignoring the existence of ‘truth’. The dialectical tension between the ‘language of achievement’ and the ‘language of substitution’ is the one that constitutes the psychotherapeutic activity. When this tension is resolved it is probably a sign of stagnation, as realized by Bion, rather than a sign of success.

The language of substitution provides us with coordinates for representing the primordial experience. The price of this activity is in turning the experience into an object. That is the price of *reification*. The next section elaborates this issue by drawing on the work of Bakhtin.

#### 4. The curse of reification

Bion’s writings, specifically the later ones, are deeply aware of the tension between theorization, as epitomized by the language of substitution, and the recognition that this theorization is tragically destined to fail in describing the experience it struggles to contain. This tragedy is evident: (1) on the individual level where beta-elements are transformed into alpha-elements, (2) on the theoretical level where the theoretician’s personal experience is transformed into an abstract theory, and (3) in the analytical session where theory supposes to bridge the gap between “facts of analytic experience” and interpretation (Bion, 1965, p. 4). Bion’s concern can be elaborated through the work of Bakhtin, which is struggling with the same tension. Although Bakhtin’s writings are sometimes elusive one cannot ignore the insights they present to the reader.

The tragedy of substitution is intensively discussed by Bakhtin in his earliest major work (1919–1921) and one of his lesser known essays, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (Bakhtin, 1999). Bakhtin’s opening sentence declares that: “Aesthetic activity [theorization or substitution] ... is powerless to take possession of that moment of Being which is constituted by the transitiveness and open event-ness of Being” (1999, p. 1) and hence “aesthetic contemplation as well is unable to grasp once-occurrent Being-as-event in its singularity” (p. 14). This is precisely Bion’s realization that the language of substitution fails to represent that which is beyond words and fixes the “open event-ness of Being” into stable and false representations. This is a tragedy because Bion believed truth is necessary for mental growth but realized that our major road to ‘truth’ is through the language of substitution that might lead to false knowledge (-K). Bakhtin argues that substitution is justified as “long as it does not go beyond its own bounds” (1999, p. 17). However, when it arrogantly pretends to see “once-occurrent Being in its event-ness” it is “doomed to passing off an abstractly isolated part as the actual whole” (p. 17). This failure perfectly resonates with Bion’s idea that the pride of using the symbolic subterfuge might turn into “self-intoxicating self-satisfaction” (Bion, 1991, p. 420).

What is the solution proposed by Bakhtin to this in-built problem of symbolization? The solution can be discussed under the title of ‘*no-alibi*’, which is one of Bakhtin’s most important concepts. According to Bakhtin, I have no-alibi in Being because I cannot observe my existence from a transcenden-

tal or a theoretical standpoint, but only from my own particular and singular place. In other words, our philosophical point of departure is in realizing the uniqueness, singularity, and inaccessibility of our subjective experience. As suggested by Bion in his *Memoir* (Bion, 1991, p. 429): “I admit responsibility for what I have experienced, but not for the distortions of scientific sense.” This is a clear existential stance. The source of our understanding is the singularity of the subjective experience.

As suggested by Bakhtin:

To affirm definitely the fact of my unique and irreplaceable participation in Being is to enter Being precisely where it does not coincide with itself: to enter the ongoing event of Being.

(Bakhtin, 1999, p. 42)

In other words, uniqueness and singularity are evident at points where the individual fails to ‘coincide’ with himself, points where the law of identity is inapplicable to the self (Neuman, 2009a), where my-self is not equal to myself. Where does the point of non-coincidence exist? Bakhtin answer this question in another place by saying:

When I contemplate a whole human being who is situated outside and over against me, our concrete, actually experienced horizons *do not coincide*. For at each given moment, regardless of the position and the proximity to me of this other human being whom I am contemplating, *I shall always see and know something that he, from his place outside and over against me, cannot see himself ...* As we gaze at each other, two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes.

(Bakhtin, 1990, pp. 22–3, my italics)

That is, the ultimate place where I can acknowledge the singularity of experience is in facing another human being, a situation where “two different worlds are reflected in the pupils of our eyes”. The human encounter is an interesting situation; on the one hand, it is a situation of reification where I and the other are objectified. For example, I may be reflected in his eyes as a ‘man’, ‘psychologist’, ‘Jew’, etc. On the other hand, the human encounter is a situation where reifications are *constantly* challenged. This point of non-coincidence, the ‘hole’ that exists between our “horizons”, as Bakhtin poetically writes, may turn into a *loophole* (Pechey, 2006) through which one may escape the tragedy of ‘becoming-as-such’, an object among objects. As Bakhtin (1990, p. 40) argues: “I always have a loophole, as it were, through which I can save myself from being no more than a natural given.” This loophole is: “The retention for oneself of the possibility of altering the ultimate, final meaning of one’s own words” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 233). “It creates a special type of fictive ultimate word about oneself ... obtrusively peering into the other’s eyes and demanding from the other a sincere refutation” (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 234). Why should one demand from the other a “sincere refutation”? The answer is that: “The loophole makes all the hero’s [subject’s] self-definitions unstable” (*ibid.*, p. 234) and therefore saves the subject from reification, from being an object among objects. In other words, one should demand from the other a ‘sincere refutation’ in order to challenge his self-definition and to save the lived experience of the ‘self’ from rigid schemes forced on it through symbolization. Using these philosophical insights, I move on to introduce the term: Penultimate Interpretation.



## 5. Penultimate interpretation

As argued by the Spanish philologist and philosopher, Ortega y Gasset (1959), every utterance is deficient (says less than it wishes) and exuberant (says more than it plans) at the same time. This wisdom is applied to any form of symbolization where the substitute is on the one hand deficient in representing the experience (e.g. No words can express my sorrow) but on the other hand exuberant, as it is a potential for avoiding final interpretation by opening a panorama of meanings (e.g. What do you mean by calling me a 'Man?'). In this context, the dialectical tension between the 'language of substitution' and the 'language of achievement' may constitute a different kind of interpretation: *penultimate interpretation*. The idea of 'penultimate interpretation' urges us to paradoxically suspend our judgment a moment before it was crystallized, to seek for points of non-coincidence in which emotions are experienced with non-alibi and to use these points of non-coincidence as loopholes for saving myself from the curse of reification. Therefore three guidelines for 'penultimate interpretation' are:

- Approach experience with 'no-alibi' a moment before it is crystallized through symbolization.
- Look for points of non-coincidence in which your translation or interpretation fails to represent the 'language of achievement' as it is experienced with no-alibi.
- Use these points of non-coincidence as loopholes through which the language of substitution may save you from the curse of reification.

These guidelines are general and instructive rather than concrete and algorithmic and the reader may seek for their application in her own work. The guidelines are illustrated through an imaginary dialogue between Bion and K (Klein? Knowledge?). This dialogue does not pretend to represent any real character or psychotherapeutic method although it is deeply grounded in Bion's war experiences.

## 6. An imaginary dialogue

*Bion:* Through all my analysis, we have never ever discussed my war experiences.

*K:* Yes?

*Bion:* I died in this war.

*K:* What do you mean?

*Bion:* For Christ's sake, I still smell the burning flesh of my incinerated comrades!

*K:* Today we know that such an experience is registered in the primitive parts of the brain and ...

*Bion:* Don't theorize me. Do you understand what it means to smell the burning flesh of a human being?

*K:* I'm sorry ... I try to imagine the smell of a burning flesh but...

*Bion:* What is the closest experience that you can imagine?

*K:* I'm shamed to admit that my only association is the smell of a barbeque.

*Bion:* This is a horrible association. I appreciate your sincerity. This is precisely a point of non-coincidence where our horizons do not coincide.

*K:* Indeed, this association is horrible as it clearly does not coincide with your experience.

*Bion:* It is however a potential loophole. It motivates me to think whether the smell of a burning human flesh is significantly different from the one of a barbeque. It is horrible to admit that the terror that I experienced in the war partially resides in the *similarity* rather than the *difference* between the two experiences: the smell of a human and a non-human flesh.

*K:* War is an act of cannibalism. I assume that this is the meaning of 'cannon fodder'. Did you feel like 'cannon fodder'?

*Bion:* The expression 'cannon fodder' is deficient and exuberant at the same time. It says less than it wishes and more than it plans. I see where you are heading to but I would like to suspend this interpretation a moment before it is crystallizing. Right now, what pops into my mind is an ancient Indian myth that appears in the Veda. Prajapati, the androgynous being and the primordial lord of creatures, felt an enormous emptiness when he gave birth to the world. This horrible emptiness caused her to re-unite with his offspring by swallowing the newborn. When the newborn saw the approaching empty mouth of his mother/father he shouted in horror.

*K:* Is this is the horror you felt? The horror of being devoured? The horror of being devoured like an animal?

*Bion:* How should a human being feel in the face of devour?

*K:* How did you feel?

*Bion:* I experienced something which is beyond words.

*K:* What did this experience smell like?

*Bion:* Like smelling my own burning flesh.

## 7. Summary and conclusions

In an attempt to address the difficulty of encountering *O*, Bion suggested to the analyst to dream (Bion, 1992). The analyst must abandon memory and desire, the derivative of sensation, so as not to be misled by images or symbols of the object, which, though they represent the object, *are not the object*. In one of his poems, Tom Waits illustrates this idea when writing: "You're innocent when you dream". In fact, all of us are pseudo-legally

innocent when we dream as dreaming provides us with the ultimate alibi for encountering the unconscious through symbolic mediation. Dreaming, on the one hand, allows us to avoid the limits of natural language and interpretation. On the other hand, dreaming is a symbolic activity and therefore provides us with filters for processing *O*. Dreaming, however, cannot replace interpretation as the major tool for translating the language of achievements into the language of substitution. Interpretation is necessary. There are different psychoanalytic conceptions and strategies of interpretation (Paniagua, 2003), but they seldom focus on the dialectical tension between the two languages and the way this dialectical tension may be constructively used. In this paper, I have tried to propose a different kind of interpretation which is faithful to Bion's theory but, at the same time, introduces a more structural and practical way of interpretation and of constructively exploiting the dialectical tension between the language of achievement and the language of substitution. Whether Bion would have accepted the idea of penultimate interpretation is a question that cannot be answered and probably should not be asked. Therefore, the paper has no pretensions except for introducing a loophole and inviting the reader for non-coincident dialogues.

### Translations of summary

**Die vorletzte Deutung.** Die Deutung steht im Zentrum der psychoanalytischen Arbeit. Sie wird jedoch ständig durch das hinausgefordert, was sich unserem Verstehen entzieht, den „dunklen Seiten“ unserer Psyche, die Bion als „*O*“ beschrieb. *O* ist eines der zentralen und schwierigsten Konzepte in Bions Denken. In diesem Beitrag erkläre ich den rätselhaften Charakter von *O* als einen hoch-dimensionalen psychischen Raum und erläutere den Preis, den man für die Ersetzung einer niedrig-dimensionalen symbolischen Repräsentation durch das prä-symbolische Lexikon des emotional besetzten und hoch-dimensionalen Unbewussten zahlt. Dieser Preis besteht in der Reifizierung – der Objektivierung gelebter Erfahrung, die ihrer Vitalität und Komplexität entleert wird. Um die Schwierigkeit der durch Symbolisierung erfolgenden Annäherung an *O* zu untersuchen, führe ich den Begriff „vorletzte Deutung“ ein – eine Form der Deutung, die nach „Schlupflöchern“ sucht, durch die Analytiker und Analysand einander vor dem Fluch der Reifizierung retten können. Drei Leitlinien für die „vorletzte Deutung“ werden formuliert und durch einen imaginären Dialog illustriert.

**La interpretación penúltima.** La interpretación es el centro de la actividad psicoanalítica. Sin embargo, la interpretación es desafiada siempre por aquello que está más allá de nuestro alcance, la ‘materia oscura’ de nuestra mente, lo que Bion describe como ‘*O*’. *O* es uno de los conceptos centrales y más difíciles del pensamiento de Bion. En este trabajo, el autor explica la naturaleza enigmática de *O* como un espacio mental altamente dimensional, y señala el precio que se debe pagar por sustituir el lexicon presimbólico del inconsciente altamente dimensional y sesgado a la emoción por una representación simbólica de baja dimensionalidad. Este precio es la reificación: la objetivación de la experiencia vivida y el drenaje de su vitalidad y complejidad. A fin de abordar la dificultad de aproximarse a *O* mediante la simbolización, el autor introduce el término ‘interpretación penúltima’, una forma de interpretación que busca un resquicio a través del cual el analista y el analisando pueden salvarse recíprocamente de la maldición de la reificación. Se proponen tres pautas para la ‘interpretación penúltima’ y se ilustran mediante un diálogo imaginario.

**Interprétation pénultième.** L'interprétation est au cœur de la pratique analytique. Cependant, l'interprétation est toujours mise en question par ce qui demeure insaisissable, ‘la matière obscure’ de notre psychisme, ce que Bion nomme ‘*O*’. *O* est l'un des principaux et plus complexes concepts de la pensée de Bion. L'auteur de cet article tente d'expliquer la nature énigmatique de *O* qu'il conçoit comme un espace de grande dimension. Il attire l'attention sur le prix à payer lorsque l'on substitue au lexique pré-symbolique des émotions et de l'inconscient à grande dimension une représentation symbolique à petite dimension. Ce prix correspond à une réification – une objectivation de l'expérience vécue qui assèche sa vitalité et sa complexité. Afin d'affronter la difficulté que constitue l'abord de *O* via la symbolisation, l'auteur introduit le terme d' ‘interprétation pénultième’ – une forme d'interprétation qui cherche à trouver un

'point d'accès' permettant à l'analyste et à l'analysant d'échapper à la malédiction de la réification. Trois lignes directrices sont proposées et illustrées à travers un dialogue imaginaire.

**La penultima interpretazione.** L'interpretazione è al centro dell'attività psicanalitica. Tuttavia, l'interpretazione è sempre messa in discussione da ciò che si trova fuori dalla nostra portata, la 'materia oscura' della nostra mente, e che Bion definisce 'O'. O è uno dei concetti più importanti e difficili del pensiero di Bion. In questo saggio definisco la natura enigmatica di O come uno spazio mentale di vaste dimensioni e sottolineo il prezzo da pagare nel sostituire il lessico pre-simbolico di un inconscio ampio e carico di emozioni con una rappresentazione simbolica di basse dimensioni. Questo prezzo è la reificazione – cioè l'oggettivazione dell'esperienza vissuta e il suo prosciugamento di vitalità e complessità. Al fine di affrontare la difficoltà di accostarsi a O attraverso la simbolizzazione, introduco la definizione 'Penultima Interpretazione' – una forma di interpretazione che cerca delle 'fessure' attraverso le quali l'analista e il paziente possono salvarsi reciprocamente dalla maledizione della reificazione. Attraverso un dialogo immaginario vengono proposte e illustrate tre linee guida di 'Penultima Interpretazione'.

## References

- Bakhtin MM (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*, Emerson C, editor and translator. Minneapolis, MN: U Minnesota Press.
- Bakhtin MM (1990). *Art and answerability*, Holquist M, Liapunov V, translators. Austin, TX: U Texas Press.
- Bakhtin MM (1999). *Toward a philosophy of the act*, Liapunov V, translator. Austin, TX: U Texas Press.
- Bion WR (1965). *Transformations*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Bion WR (1970). *Attention and interpretation*. London: Tavistock.
- Bion WR (1991). *A memoir of the future*. London: Karnac.
- Bion WR (1992). *Cogitations*. London: Karnac.
- Bion WR (2005). *The Tavistock seminars*. London: Karnac.
- Grotstein JS (1978). Inner space: Its dimension and its coordinates. *Int J Psychoanal* **59**:55–61.
- Grotstein JS (1997). Bion's 'transformation' in O and the concept of the 'transcendent position'. Available from: <http://www.sicap.it/~merciai/bion/papers/grots.htm>
- Grotstein JS (2007). *A beam of intense darkness: Wilfred Bion's legacy to psychoanalysis*. London: Karnac.
- Lakoff G, Johnson M (1991). *Philosophy in the flesh*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Matte-Blanco I (1975). *The unconscious as infinite sets: An essay in bi-logic*. London: Duckworth.
- Neuman Y (2009a). On love, hate and knowledge. *Int J Psychoanal* **90**:697–712.
- Neuman Y (2009b). Peter Pan's shadow and the relational matrix of the 'I'. *Semiotica* **176**:15–27.
- Novikov SP, Fomenko AT (1987). *Basic elements of differential geometry and topology*. New York, NY: Kluwer.
- Ortega y Gasset J (1959). The difficulty of reading. *Diogenes* **28**:1–17.
- Paniagua C (2003). Problems with the concept 'interpretation'. *Int J Psychoanal* **84**:1105–23.
- Pechey G (2006). Penultimate words: The life of the 'loophole' in Mikhail Bakhtin. *Literature and Theology* **20**:269–85.