

MAPPING THE CAESURA

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In this article I outline the necessary conditions for viewing the caesura and demonstrate how viewing the model as a metaphor for the clinical encounter can be orienting in the attempt to transcend/penetrate the forces that resist change. Clinical examples illustrate penetration and transcendence in the caesural territory. I suggest that the caesura as a model is a unifying concept in Bion's work.

Keywords: caesura, psychic change, clinical encounter, transcendence, penetration, unifying concept

J'expose dans ce texte les conditions nécessaires pour appréhender la césure et je démontre comment le fait d'en voir le modèle comme une métaphore de la rencontre analytique peut guider la tentative de transcender/pénétrer les forces qui résistent au changement. Des exemples cliniques illustrent la pénétration et la transcendance sur le terrain de la césure. Je propose que la césure comme modèle est un concept unificateur du travail de Bion.

Mots clés: césure, changement psychique, rencontre clinique, transcendance, pénétration, concept unificateur

At the end of his treatment, a patient of mine, said, "I used to *be* my feelings. Now I am someone who *has* my feelings." He was describing a change from suffering ongoing intestinal upset, inability to think, and mental despair, to having an internal space for proto-emotions that could contain the confluence of contact with internal and external reality while having the ability to process that experience rather than to unthinkingly evacuate

the disparate pieces of bodily states with an unconscious fantasy of achieving permanent relief from anticipated pain. His statement referred to having undergone a change, made a transformative journey, and it spurred my wish for deeper understanding of the traverse from states in “body” to experiences in “mind.”

In this article I shall show how I understand Bion’s model of psychic change—the caesura. I shall outline the necessary conditions he gives under which the caesura may come into view. I shall consider how using the model as a metaphor for understanding the clinical encounter can be orienting in the pursuit of transcending/penetrating the forces that resist psychic change. That penetration is the event that determines whether the caesura will function as a closing sphincter that stops movement or a selectively permeable, breathing membrane that makes change possible. I shall give brief examples from my own clinical experience to illustrate how I orient in this caesural territory.

Using the much-quoted passage from Freud (1926, p. 138), “There is much more continuity between intra-uterine life and earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth would have us believe,” Bion suggests a model of viewing psychic movement and the analyst’s role in that process. The model addresses the traverse from prenatal to postnatal relating as the central aspect of the analytic coupling in the process of change. It can be used to understand the milestones in life like birth or death but also the less dramatic occasions that happen over and over again when we face the challenge to make distinctions and move from one state to another (Bion, 1977/1989). It can be used to reveal the minute components of psychic movement (the microscopic) as well as the totality of a lifelong developmental journey (the macroscopic). It enables us to note movement toward or away from the encounter with the object world in both the particular and the general.

Bion’s 1977 publication of “Caesura” is the culmination of his career-long focus on the process of psychic change. Up to this point he had published his work on groups (Bion, 1961), the schizophrenia papers (Bion, 1967), “A Theory of Thinking” (1962) where he addressed the fundamental question of how an emotion or a perception that is not yet psychic can come to be represented and how this process can be enhanced in analysis (Vermote, 2011). This was followed by *Elements of Psychoanalysis* (Bion, 1963), where he outlined the components of thinking. He categorized these components in the grid, which expanded Freud’s (1900) concept of a sense organ for the perception of consciousness. In this grid he followed the emergence of thought from its most elemental unit, which he called beta

element, and described how when it is faced with absence (frustration), which is experienced as a no-thing, it gives rise to thoughts and thinking. That process depends on a container-contained relationship with the object world. The grid outlines the emergence of a capacity to think as an emotional/cognitive oscillation between Klein's PS \leftrightarrow D positions, which Bion named T(K), K standing for knowledge, cognition. Each successful emergence increases the level of abstraction and thus distance from O, the thing-in-itself, which is psychic truth.

Bion's next step was to examine transitions between elements by using the mathematical theory of transformation (Bion, 1965/1991b), with the hope of achieving less saturated descriptions. Although many believe that this exercise was a failure, Massicotte (2013) sees evidence that Bion himself did not see it as such but used it as a platform from which to expand his investigation of the unknowns, which he called "O," that had been exposed by these very equations. He found that it was impossible to determine the transformational origin of O using mathematics. With this move he added another vector to transformation in knowledge [T(K)], that of transformation in O [T(O)], which goes from the undifferentiated to the differentiated, from infinity to the finite. Bion was convinced that real change takes place in that realm.¹ So his research question changed from "How does something become represented" to "What happens at an unrepresented, undifferentiated level, and how can changes at this level be initiated" (Vermote, 2011).

Regarding the experiential journey along these vectors, T(K) involves oscillation between PS states and D anxieties, T(O) involves oscillation between patience during the psychic turmoil and the security experienced at emergence. Negotiating the tension between these vectors on the journey from the undifferentiated toward representation is accomplished in what Bion calls an act of faith (Bion, 1970), described as a scientific attitude during the analyst's radical openness to the unknown.

The transformations in K and O are connected. In T(K), psychic movement is seen as away from beta, which is the least processed (most primitive) element, while in T(O), movement through the caesura is related to approaching O, also the most elemental, producing what Grotstein (2000) calls a holographic relationship between the two vectors.

Shortly after Bion's death in 1980, Donald Meltzer wrote that Bion became familiar with caesuras from his own experience: "The quality that distinguished Bion and which marks his passing from us with such serious

1. He had also referred to it as the matrix (1961), the hallucinatory zone (1967), and the zone of the prenatales from *A Memoir of the Future* (Vermote, 1991).

consequences for psychoanalysis—perhaps for the world—was his capacity to tolerate caesura after caesura, to weather what he called ‘Catastrophic Change’” (Meltzer, 1981, p. 13). Catastrophic change, also referred to as turmoil, is the experience of sudden, violent, inescapable disaster when confronted with a situation for which there is no prior experience.

Having outlined the diagrammatic aspects of caesura with very broad strokes, I shall now follow rather closely Bion’s invitation to experience his model from the inside, so to speak. In “The Caesura” (Bion, 1977/1989, pp. 42–57) he outlined the necessary conditions for approaching what he called the transitive-intransitive mood of caesura.² He reiterated a number of his previous, and by now familiar, ideas and also added three new ones. He noted that development is not elastic but more like an onion with a number of resistant skins, which then need to be penetrated to allow for transcendence and psychic movement. It is movement toward each skin from in to out, the penetration—or not—and emergence on the other side that is the caesural journey.

He encouraged us to approach the analytic session eschewing memory, desire, and understanding, saying that they obscure access to the unknown; memory entraps us in the past, desire in the future, and understanding in preconceived ways of receiving what is emergent.

He emphasized that we are always concerned with searching for the psychic truth, even though we have no idea what is true and what is not.

He stressed the transitive nature of the analytic relationship, where the forces of projection are constantly at play between patient and analyst. This is consistent with Matte-Blanco’s (1975) theory of development of consciousness as a dialectic between symmetry and asymmetry. This transitive view also has implications for psychoanalytic supervision where hearing the analytic couple in each clinical presentation may give a fuller understanding of the ongoing projective (im-)balance in the relationship.

Bion went on to say that time in this transitive territory is the present. There is a tendency to relate to what the patient is talking about as if it happened in the past, but that ignores the fact that we exist in the present. So it is a mistake to think that we are dealing with the past.

His next point was that the limitation of time in life and in psychoanalysis confronts us with the need to make choices, and that means suppressing all other possibilities, while also knowing the connection between choice and chance. Pressure to say something by way of interpretation is

2. Most of these points were also presented in lecture recorded in Los Angeles in 1955, two years before publication of the book (Aguayo, 2013).

high, and knowing that there is much we do not know should not stop us from communicating what we do know or sense. It is not acceptable for us to suppose that we have no contribution to make.

Bion also cautioned us about the limitations of our human mind, saying it is dangerous to distort experience to make it fit our capacities: "The fact that it is incomprehensible now, because our minds are unsuitable or ill-fitted to grasp it, is not a reason for limiting the facts such as are actually available" (Bion 1977/1989, p. 53).

Now to the three new ideas Bion added in order to further shape our receptivity to the undifferentiated: what has not yet happened.

The first expands our previous definition of free association when he states that the patient's silence and non-verbal behaviour is to be understood as free association and forms its own communicative language. This makes good on a note he wrote on 15 July 1971, where he suggested that an extension of category C in the grid should include not only dream thoughts, dreams, and myths, but also visual or any other sensuous images (Bion, 1992, p. 325). This view opens the field of technique for the analyst's hunches and imaginative conjecture.

Bion's second idea addresses the pre- and postnatal dimension. He became interested in prenatal life some 40 years earlier when he analyzed Samuel Becket (1934–1936) (Bleandonu, 1994), whose problem he understood to have been his dread of and thus denial of being born. This interest in the prenatal was also reinforced by the current growing attention to infant observation and the consequent recognition of continuities, discontinuities, and transformations.

Bion's third proposition gives his views on splitting, which he describes occurring when the growing human being cannot grasp the total situation that confronts it. Each of the splits may not be wrong—it is incomplete. He says that the infant and child cannot really grasp the totality of the world they live in. They have to split it into different little packets. He believes that all splitting has been non-pathological at some time and concludes therefore that obstacles to growth should not necessarily be seen as pathological.

He quickly adds, however, that he does not turn his back on human destructiveness and makes allowance for the power of envy in its many expressions.

On how to reach the prenatal level of experience in psychoanalysis, Bion asks, "Can we detect in expressions of rational communications, conscious ideas and feelings, vestiges of something coming from an area of a person in the present, which is in fact physical and might once have existed simply primitively and in the realm of physical action" He wonders

if the fetus thinks, sees, feels, or hears, and if such experiences survive in postnatal life in the form of an “embryological intuition,” either visual or auditory. He wonders if any method of communication can be sufficiently “penetrating” to pass that caesura in the direction from postnatal conscious thought back to the pre-mental, in which thoughts and ideas have their counterpart in “times” or “levels” of mind where they are not thoughts or ideas. That penetration has to be as effective as a physical act and work in either direction. In other words, how can we recognize and put to good use the invariants that emerge through our intuition and how can we match them with conceptual statements

He then follows those questions with recommendations on technique. They consist of advice to the analyst to try to be at the point where the undifferentiated takes a finite form, a point in infinity (the infinite unknown) where he or she can see the thoughts as they emerge (Bion, 1970). He advises us to hold onto a multiple-vertices point of view and become accustomed to a transitive method of thinking. We need to reverse the either/or perspective in the patient, but without eliminating the ambiguity that results from awareness that more than one viewpoint exists and that these viewpoints cannot be reduced to one another. Their dual function of separating and uniting must be understood for transcendence to be possible.

The psychoanalyst’s role inevitably involves the use of transitive idea pointing to repetitions, which are evidence of a closed sphincter rather than a breathing caesura. Therefore in psychoanalysis recovery from being blocked is the activity.

It thus becomes clear that concepts of negative capability, binocular vision and dynamic splitting within the container/contained oscillations in the activity of transforming beta elements into alpha elements are all aspects of transcending the caesura.

As Bion ends the caesura chapter, “So . . . investigate the caesura, not the analyst, not the analysand; not the unconscious, not the conscious, not sanity; not insanity. But the caesura, the link, the synapse, the (counter-trans)-ference, the transitive-intransitive mood.” And he continues, “At this point I cannot proceed for lack of the very elements which have not yet been discovered or elaborated. It is typical of decision which has to serve the human at those junctures when knowledge is not there to be used” (Bion, 1977/1989, p. 57).

With that he sends us into the undifferentiated territory where we hope to be used as instruments for transformation, all the while relying on our hunches and our forgotten but nevertheless background theoretical maps to locate what beckons to be discovered. He invites us to enter the caesura

using his model, emphasizing that we accept his invitation at our own peril (Bion, 1970).

In T(K) the interpreting analyst passes through the paranoid/schizoid position to the depressive position to arrive at an interpretation. Now Bion makes it clear that in order to facilitate T(O), our thinking mind and resulting interpretative activity will have to be wrestled from our own contact with catastrophic change.

I shall now outline the caesura in terms of time space and directionality.

In terms of space, or dimensionality, movement can be seen and measured between fetal no-space, two-dimensional, and three-dimensional space. Matte-Blanco (1975), in his theory of bi-logic, traces the development of psychic space. Grotstein (2000), thus inspired, outlines four dimensions of psychic space, which he relates to movement toward whole object relations. He approaches dimensionality from studies of infant development, holding that a sense of space grows from physical and emotional sensation of a holding surface, a growing skin that functions as a boundary and a container that allows for growth.

In terms of time, Bion makes it clear that T(O) happens in the present. The caesural time can then be noted in terms of distance from the emotional present, thus from the potential for T(O).

The capacity to tolerate frustration determines what is born and what is not in a way that relates to time and space and therefore the proximity to T(O). If the patient's frustration tolerance is limited and if there is no conception of a containing function to receive one's projections, frustration turns into pain, and the accumulated violent power relates to the velocity of the projections which then is experienced as an explosion into destructive (versus containing) space, where frustration and pain transform the material meant for the container into shapeless debris. This is a place where realization is not possible and the effort to find representation results in immense fear or psychotic panic. The potentially transformative moment in time becomes destroyed in negative space (Bion, 1970).

Bion increasingly represented the undifferentiated realm as a subterranean flow, which emerges at times and is separated from the differentiated world by a kind of caesura (Bion, 1980, 1994) where dreams are seen as communication between the two zones, a reflection of what happens in the unknown, undifferentiated zone (Bion, 1991a).

What now comes into view is a movement from resistant skin to resistant skin as we see convergences that may result in sphincter action where pain is transformed into pseudo-morality, right and wrong, either/or, or it becomes like a breathing mind capable of growing. Bion's notion of a language

of achievement is related to the latter in that the direction of movement proceeds from left to right on the grid..

Viewed in terms of *directionality*, movement toward or way from T(O) can be seen along several dimensions.

- *In terms of space*, toward or away from the third dimension, which has depth and a containing internal world.
- *In terms of time*, toward or away from being in the present moment in the transference-counter-transference space.
- *In terms of K and O*, toward or away from the unknown. Here enduring movement toward what we do not know is consistent with approaching T(O).
- *Toward or away along the unconscious to conscious dimension*. Here openness to and submission to the fact of an unconscious that is beyond control is related to approaching T(O). Bion makes a distinction here that something becoming conscious is not equivalent to T(O). I believe the reason for that distinction is that the transformation in question may be a T(K) and therefore does not satisfy the third requirement of a penetrating experience, the domain of passion where one of the dimensions of love (L), hate (H), or K is present.³

Directionality can also be seen along the symmetry/asymmetry dimension where toward asymmetry is consistent with approaching T(O).

There is also direction to be noted in the realm of multiple vertices, in movement between certainty and doubt, between being moved by realization and being confused by ambiguity.

A charming example of inducing confusion and a sense of ambiguity comes from Michael de M'Usan, who describes a female patient of his who has been in analysis with him for several years. She began one session saying in a somewhat embarrassed voice,

P: I don't know what color your hair is.

A: Which hair?

P: Well, the hair you have on your head.

3. In order for those interpretations to have the power to penetrate, they must satisfy three conditions:

- Extension in the domain of sense, related to alpha function
- Extension in the domain of myth, related to category, myth, etc.
- Extension in the domain of passion with at least one of the dimensions of L, H, or K

Passion is evidence that two minds are linked and that there cannot be fewer than two minds of passion is present. Passion must be clearly distinguished from counter-transference, the latter being evidence of repression.

A: So I have hair on my head.

P: Oh, I don't know now. (de M'Uzan, 2009/2011, p. 205)

De M'Uzan calls this a destabilizing intervention used to provoke an economic scandal in the higher psychic systems in order to get the psychic energy flowing again after it had become immobilized. He and others⁴ join Bion in emphasizing the importance of linking up with the point of uncertainty in the patient which they believe to be an essential activity of a growing mind.

The state of between being moved and being confused leads me also to consider the effect of interpretation. Bion points out that each interpretation represents a change in the situation. He asks, "How quickly can we become aware of the changed situation and how quickly can we see what good use could be made of that change even though adverse" (Bion, 1977/1989). Only when this is possible does the shifting play of caesuras become equivalent to the respiration of the mind (Bion, 1977, 1989).

A description of the very moment of T(O) would show a simultaneous, threefold, progressive evolutionary process that at once enters into opposition, annuls such opposition as it elevates itself over its previous moment, and at the same time preserves such opposition within its internal structure (Tuckett, 2010).

Another description comes from Galatzer-Levy (2009)⁵ and deals with the question of how to move from a point inside a circle to a point outside it. If you consider the two-dimensional (either/or) surface as embedded in a three-dimensional space, you can jump over the circle and reach the other point without ever crossing the circle.

To further aid the analyst in the caesural territory, Paul (1981) has suggested markers that can provide an orienting map for the analyst along the journey toward (or away) from emergence. They relate to signs of mental pressure that inevitably increases when approaching T(O) and are relieved at emergence.⁶

4. Grotstein (2000), LaPlanche (1992), Botella & Botella (1995/2011), Ferro (2005).

5. It is interesting to note that in 2009 Galatzer-Levy presented a model for the action of psychoanalysis based on concepts from non-linear dynamics of chaos theory and complexity theory. He conceives of coupled oscillators in reverberation in a mutual oscillation phase.

6. They include among others:

- Bodily sensations such as headaches
- Speech that conveys the experience of unending repetitious circular pounding
- Experience of sudden change in temperature—hot to cold or vice versa
- Patterns of breathing in and out or intermittent pauses

Now I want to add some very brief vignettes to illustrate how I use my understanding of caesura to navigate clinical material. Two of the vignettes are from infant observation (Robinson, 2013). They show, with touching clarity, the babies' undifferentiated sensual states of relating to the outside object world. One involves vision and the other involves hearing.

I shall then present a series of transformations in an adult patient showing how sight and audition as invariables interweave in the process of differentiation within the analytic relationship (Robinson, 2010).

First an observation of Baby S at two weeks. After greeting me, Mother handed Baby S to me. As we exchanged her, I noticed that her body did not react, but her eyes widened and she stared at me. I held her on my lap facing me in a half-sitting position, our bodies forming an obtuse angle (135 degrees). I saw that she would focus on something with her eyes, and her body would simultaneously move towards that object as if taking it in or joining with it. Her eyes focused on my blouse, and immediately her stomach muscles contracted, her head moved forward, and she actually "power curled" herself from a half-reclining position away from me and fell into my chest. She did that three times. I was amazed how her eyes seemed to "pull" her body into the object they focused on. Her attaching eye activity, together with her muscle reaction, seemed to enact a pull toward physical unity. In her undifferentiated state her eyes were not used for looking, but her sight seemed to function as an extension of her physical body.

Next an observation of Baby J at 10 days with both parents present. At one point Baby J was naked on the changing table while being diapered and dressed. Suddenly the experience became too much, and her movements became jerky, and she started whimpering. Both parents leaned closer and began cooing and talking soothingly to her. Just as suddenly her distress disappeared, and she slowly undulated her tiny body as if to expose as much of her surface (skin) as possible to what was coming her way—the sound of her parents' cooing voices seemingly experienced by her as a holding touch on her physical skin. In her undifferentiated state she listened, not only with her ears but with her skin.

Now I want to introduce M, a woman in her late 40s with a history of psychiatric hospitalizations and continuous treatment since her college years. One of her early symptoms was a fear that she would tear her eyes out while sleeping. Her early way of relating with me was dominated

However, such markers are unsuitable for direct interpretation but nevertheless important for suggesting location along the way.

by adhesive identification. Her first dream in analysis was that her father invited her to sing, but when she did, her mother exploded the world.

Some of the transformational sequences I include here span several years. I chose to start with a session when M had begun to register her reaction to discontinuities in our relationship.

During the first session after a vacation of mine she said, "I was so sad when you were gone. If this were a song it would be a very low note. I really felt the depth of where that part of me is, and I want to say something about that. Like if I were singing I have to go down to a really low note, and it is hard to get there and to be bound in there, and that's emotionally gravelly. I would rasp along there in the physical body vibration."

I said I believed she was expressing something that resonates between us very deeply and has to do with coming together after the break.

She said, "Yes! And now I am thinking about elephants' making low-range sounds that we can't hear. It must be somehow related."

I believe this to be a moment of psychic reconnecting (transcendence) inside M. Using sound, she was joining the body memory of prenatal touch/sound with the postnatal experience of containing relationship, where the singing communicated both the concrete and symbolic repair of a broken connection.

After this, M's transformational sequences diverge into interweaving strands of vision, touch, and hearing.

Regarding vision, she had a series of dreams about a beautiful mountain that was overwhelmingly bright. She couldn't even look at it. Over time she realized that others could look at the mountain and enjoy it, and eventually she was able to take a peek. She said, "Then someone was singing to me and talking about how much pain I had endured. Tears were streaming down my face." Here is transformation from not being able to see to increased ability to see as well as was ability to hear, reflecting, not undifferentiation but confirming differentiation with resulting common sense and three-dimensional depth in her internal world.

Regarding touch, after a period of interpreting M's adhesive relationship with me in terms of her fear of having a separate mind, M had a dream where she was swimming and could see fins in the water. She found herself in the midst of a pod of orcas and was swimming with them. She said, "I could feel their bodies against mine on either side. Air bubbles between our skins were bubbling up against me. I wondered, 'Are these killer whales Will they eat me' When I reached the beach I talked with others and wondered if the bubbles are their echolocation."

I understand this dream to finally give realization to the dynamics of M's adhesion to me and her fear that if we separated, she would be attacked by hunger from inside and, in this transitive environment its projected form, from the outside. Again this is transformation of physical touch as the only avenue of connectedness to allowing echolocation, an emotional locating device for staying connected to a containing mind.

Regarding hearing she dreamed, "a woman behind me helped me by singing, and I was given an instrument to play." It seemed that the emotional music between us could be taken in and used as her instrument.

There were times when the caesura became a sphincter. She said, "If I hear one more thing I will splinter," and "I will explode from eating," and "Someone fell and cracked their head and back and needed a helmet-brace." These statements convey the intensity of her frustration and sense of not enough mental space between us. When she continued "in the dream I was exposed and vulnerable and the authority failed to protect me," I could hear her distance from T(O) and that that our mutual space had closed because I had not protected her from exceeding the frustration threshold.

I conclude hoping that these vignettes throw light on the usefulness of caesura, not only as a fascinating—maybe mysterious—theoretical model of Bion's but as an overarching, useful concept of psychic change. It satisfies the definition of a unifying concept, because it releases elements from the combinations in which they are held and from the particularity that adheres to them. It addresses the *analytic interaction* and therefore emphasizes *that* as the key rather than the concrete structures in which it is imbedded. That leaves it to be filled with the content of the mind to be understood, using all Bion's epistemological work. In that sense I believe it would be accurate to say that caesura is one unifying concept of all of Bion's work.

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