

## VIOLENCE AT THE CAESURA

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*Bion's concept of caesura offers transformation via differentiation from an unknowable undifferentiated reality: within bounded mental space attentiveness, receptivity, tolerance, and patience give shape and depth to our human experience while holding the paradox of bridging these differing realities. But these generative capacities and their transformations are themselves subject to violence from the constant pull toward undifferentiation, the pull from the animate to the inanimate, whether it be the allure of "knowing it all," the spectre of "infinite humiliation," or the intolerance of the pain and effort of maintaining reflective thought. At vulnerable times we experience violence at the caesura, which may lead to our plunging back into the undifferentiated realm in order to escape the uncertainty and frustration that accompany the awareness of our fragile humanity and to avoid the tensions that accompany our openness to ambiguity and paradox.*

*Keywords: caesura, violence, transformation, reverie*

*Le concept de césure chez Bion propose l'idée de transformation via la différenciation d'une réalité indifférenciée inconnaissable: à l'intérieur d'un espace mental lié, la prévenance, la réceptivité, la tolérance et la patience donnent forme et profondeur à notre expérience humaine tout en maintenant le paradoxe de rapprocher des réalités distinctes. Toutefois, ces capacités génératives et leurs transformations sont elles-mêmes sujettes à la violence exercée par l'attraction vers l'indifférenciation, l'attraction de l'animé vers l'inanimé, qu'il s'agisse de l'attrait du « tout savoir », du spectre de « l'humiliation infinie », ou de l'intolérance face à la douleur et l'effort requis pour soutenir une pensée réflexive. Dans des périodes de plus grande vulnérabilité,*

*nous ressentons de la violence contre la césure, ce qui est susceptible de nous replonger dans le magma de l'indifférencié afin d'échapper à l'incertitude et la frustration inhérentes à la prise de conscience de la fragilité de notre humanité et d'éviter les tensions accompagnant notre ouverture à l'ambiguïté et au paradoxe.*

*Mots clés: césure, violence, transformation, rêverie*

Concern for reality and truth, as noted by Bion and others (Godwin, 1991; Civitaresse, 2008), involves inevitable paradoxes, one being that ultimate reality, which may be envisioned as undifferentiated energy fields, is basically incomprehensible to us. Indeed our human way of investigating any kind of reality is through differentiation, by creating ripples in those energy fields, as it were. This notation of differences includes establishing categories to demarcate and spaces to contain those differences. But such compartmentalization, so vital to our human sorting out of the world, may ironically be seen as *creating* the terrain we recognize as part of reality: thus “the caesura of birth,” referring to that boundary between the pre- and postnatal world makes sense to our ordinary minds as a demarcation. Also the separation between conscious and unconscious, inside and outside, past and future—these caesuras, to use Bion’s term, seem to demarcate but also to bridge opposing realities according to our human perception and experience. Each domain deserves protection so that its contents may be clarified and elaborated, but we can easily lose sight of the fact that these domains or “realities,” created by humanizing functions, are *constructions* based upon our capacities and ways of experiencing and learning about the world. Still it is important to realize that our pursuit of wider and deeper understanding, which may lead to ongoing learning about various realities, involves attempts to transcend these domains, while utilizing the human capacities at hand. These transcendent capacities may be envisioned as those embraced within Bion’s multi-faceted concept of the caesura.

When viewed from various levels, not only does the caesura separate seemingly different realities, be they states of being or states of mind, it also provides a space for the embracing of these differences, and space for a uniting link between them, a link that fosters transcendent learning. The bounded yet flexible functioning of the mother’s mind in reverie illustrates this creative potential.

The *reverie function* referred to here is that open-minded attentiveness of the mother who lovingly receives the tensions of her baby. This involves

her patiently bearing the pain of her baby's distress while allowing the time and space necessary in order to get to know about it, that is to allow meaning about the distress to accrue according to her own experience. Her thought and ministrations then convey that meaning back to her distressed infant, offering him a transformative experience: at first the baby may dimly sense that its pain is made better, but in time he will not only sense the distress to be soothed, labelled, and managed as, say, hunger, but as well that his mother's mind makes his previously unbearable tension into something bearable and eventually knowable. This template of transformation lays the groundwork for the baby's hope of getting to know about himself and his world.

As it applies to our analytic work, this reverie function may be thought of in terms of Bion's suggestion that we need to bear with patience the tensions and doubts that inevitably arise when trying to embrace and appreciate the unknown. Such spaciousness involves resisting the saturating seductions of memory, desire, and knowledge in our tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity. Civitarese (2008) and others suggest that when we can employ such restraint, a dialectical to and fro may ensue between these ambiguities that allows for a mingling and coherence toward new configurations of sense, thought, and learning. For me, this non-judgmental dialectic describes the goings on within the reverie or symbolizing function.

Several analytic authors have viewed the function of *metaphor* similarly. Summarizing a significant body of literature, Modell (2009) suggests that sensory and motor patterns organize to form bodily presentations of experience, which then, through human interaction, form representations of experience, establishing a template for "an unconscious metaphoric process analogous to dreaming." He suggests that "metaphor is central to the communication and interpretation of unconscious meaning . . . [that it] evokes the construction of imagined possibilities" (p. 6). As well, André Green (2004) succinctly states, "It is an illusion to believe that one can grasp the nature of the psyche in all its facets without . . . [the concept of thirdness], which carries with it an inevitably metaphoric dimension" (p. 134).

Bion and others (De Masi, 2000) might then suggest that the mechanism that enlivens this reverie or metaphoric function within the psyche is the attentive functioning of the receiving mind that actively appreciates and differentiates unconscious emotion. They might suggest that such *attentiveness internalized* is at the heart of this unconscious metaphoric function. We might then consider the products of reverie, symbolization, and metaphor to illustrate transformations at the caesura.

**COMING ALIVE: THE HUMANIZING AND STRUCTURING FUNCTION  
EMBRACED BY THE CAESURA**

Coming alive psychically, then, seems to require the mediating or metaphorizing function of the mothering mind that shapes and differentiates her baby's inchoate emotion into human form. Her rhythms and ministrations settle him into his body and define for the baby the animate world he is emerging into. Her emotional containment envelops and introduces the baby to this human dimension of postnatal reality. Ordinary mothering usually secures this potential for change within the baby, but if there is failure of this attentiveness, especially in the early stages of emotional unfolding, the vulnerable self may feel exposed once again to the de-differentiating sweep back into the inchoate, that impersonal real.

Part of what may go awry here may involve the structuring function of this responsiveness: besides its absorbing and sheltering function, the mother's attention also likely demarcates the conscious from unconscious regions in terms of setting in place the permeable membrane (described by Bion as a contact barrier), which acts, as does her attentiveness, to both retain as inchoate the (beta) elements she does not attend to and to admit toward meaningful *human* reality those elements she does pay attention to. This may be how the reality that we can relate to is shaped, if not created, for the infant, and how the demarcating barrier, the caesura, between conscious and unconscious regions is established. The atmosphere of care and concern relieves and softens the potential jarring violence of the sweep of undifferentiated emotion. But when the intensity of the unmediated aspects of reality overwhelms the receiving mind, or her attentiveness wanes, or the protective function of the caesura collapses, the nascent psyche is left unshielded from the sweep of the impersonal real.

**VIOLENCE AT THE CAESURA: THE REVERSION FROM THE ANIMATE TO  
THE INANIMATE**

Such an exposure to these unprocessed elements (beta elements) may be experienced as a jarring onslaught which is "too hard, too bright . . . too much." Without the protective shield, that caesura of mother's mind, the vulnerable ego feels exposed to the brutality of unfiltered reality. One defensive response to this overwhelming may be to erect a wall, to rigidify the potential dialectic into frozen polarized, non-communicating positions: instead of a dialectical interchange, absolute differences appear, and polar opposites and convictions freeze into place (Civitarese, 2008). Differences that nourished now become divisive and dangerous. Discourse and interchange will not be able to occur again until a softening, mediating

receptiveness can be re-established. Ambiguities seem to emerge only when there can be the safe recognition of differences. *The caesura then acting as a kind of cell membrane, with its framing function of embracing and separating realities, and as the space between the opposing realities of the animate and the inanimate, exists only when the softening and bridging function of attentiveness, reverie, or metaphor is more or less intact.*

Turning to clinical examples of these vulnerabilities, Suzanne Maiello (2000), following Bion, suggests that when unbearable and thus discharged distress is received and attended to, the inborn expectations (preconceptions) having been met (positive realization), the infant's mind develops the capacities to tolerate separation and disappointment. But that same early self, experiencing a *non*-receiving mind, or the failure of reverie, may collapse or implode in having its inborn expectation *not* met. If the unreceived self feels that the link with the receiving mind has *not* been entirely broken, it may mount a protest by rage, hostility, or other heated emotion, still having hope for the link to be repaired. But if the unmet expectation has been experienced as catastrophically crushed, such as in the sense of abject rejection, the nascent personality may experience a kind of cold collapse or implosion, as if the potential mental space has been forever obliterated or indeed as if it has never existed.

The product of such despair, a cold encapsulated violence, may be expressed only when a receiving mind then comes on the scene or when meaningless violent acts are perpetrated. As illustration, Maiello mentions a case in Italy a few decades ago where a gang of brothers and cousins was apprehended for their random throwing of large rocks from highway bridges, which had resulted in several deaths to the occupants in the cars below. Maiello mentions how flat, cold, and impassive to any consequences of their action these boys seemed to be, but also how apparently concrete and indifferent they seemed to be in general, as if no warmth nor emotional concern had ever existed in their inner world. Authorities advised prison terms of up to 30 years for these teenage perpetrators, perhaps as expressions of the nation's outrage, but perhaps also out of an intuitive sense of how dangerous the stony, dead vacuousness might be if it was not securely contained.

Maiello also mentions another case of a young boy born at 26 weeks' gestation with some disabilities due to prematurity who, for a number of reasons, felt abjectly dropped physically and emotionally by his seemingly implacable, denial-ridden parents. It is moving to read the author's notation of the steadfastness of the therapist in lending his receptive mind that allowed the emergence of this crippled child's unspeakable despair; the

reader gains a clear sense of how the little boy, once he felt that his unbearable pain could be heard and responded to, could then begin to experience and to integrate his shattered physical and emotional self, thus establishing links to self and others that had been severely stunted.

Another informing way to perceive the emotional interplay between the animate and inanimate realities is suggested by Matte-Blanco (1988) in his considerations of symmetric (infinite) and asymmetric (finite) functioning. The sweep of “unspeakable despair” of the just-mentioned case might illustrate the undifferentiated region of grim “infinities” to which the uncontained, “born too soon” self may feel consigned. Untempered by the asymmetric humanizing function that differentiates the “too muchness” by sensitive labelling and accompaniment, the “dropped too soon” self feels plunged prematurely into a seemingly harsh postnatal world. This formulation comes very close to the notion of the “abject” that Kristeva (1982) describes as the once but no longer human sense of the de-animated outcast, and that Tustin (1991) describes as the ripped-away-too-soon prematurity.

This cluster of thoughts suggests to me that the state of anticipated human care (the pre-concept of containment) that is then subjected to crushing disappointment may give rise to a brutal negative realization (the deadly stony missile), which may be the expression of the deadening conviction of being cast amidst the infinities of inanimate space. This violent symmetry, being swept back from the animate into the infinity of the inanimate, may be close to that level of violence that perpetrates the meaningless deadly acts of the highway rock throwers, or possibly the Newtown school shooter. It is a degree of violence that is difficult for the contained or the containing mind to contemplate.

**FURTHER CLINICAL ILLUSTRATION OF VIOLENCE AT THE CAESURA  
THE TRAUMA ACCOMPANYING INADEQUATE FUNCTIONING OF THE  
CAESURA**

A patient of mine was born into a troubled, chaotic family where there was little, if any, emotional containment or reflective thought. She thus had little access to a metabolizing mind that could label and make sense of her distress. She was metaphorically and in reality left alone in the dark, as she recalls, to wander into the spaces of her vivid, chaotic, inner experience, feeling overwhelmed by fear and excitement engendered by her thrills and terrors about being in the dark, and then becoming part of the dark, and then finally feeling that she *was* the dark, existing without limits and thus both contemptuous of any limits but also lost in space. This combination

of defiance and utter despair went unrecognized until she came to therapy in her late 20s. During much of our more than 20 years of work I experienced massive erasure of my attempts to label and to bring any understanding. "Chaos as freedom" has been one of her mantras. Another has been the immediate erasure of my well-meant but apparently paltry efforts to contain by labelling and thinking about her plight. What I took early in our work as her narcissistic insistence that I agree with her reality might have been better understood then as her having lived so long in the undifferentiated world of "all is her, she is all" that any difference, such as my attempts to bring thought, was felt as an alien presence trying to take over, and thus something that had to be destroyed.

We have come to realize that she often felt lost in a space where there were no limits and no words, only a sense of being steeped in almost unimaginable isolation. She felt no protective barrier or differentiation from parents, an experience that likely contributed to her being at one with the violent terrifying brothers from her childhood, brothers who probably had projected their envy, hatred, and terror into this baby sister. She could find thrill in becoming the violent one, feeling filled with excitement as one way to deal with the excruciating emptiness and loneliness. But in addition, with no ongoing access to a bounded space such as a containing mind, she could not find protection or solace from these past dreads; everything from her painful past seemed to flood the present; and when she heard about violence such as school massacres she "became" the shooter, not only because of the excitement and violence, but also out of realizing she could not feel for the lost children. Having no way to think about her experience of not having been held warmly as a child, she could feel only the cold, stony missiles of annihilating hatred and envy toward the innocent children, another "proof" to her of her murderousness. These were tragic consequences of my patient's having no protective barrier, no caesura in place to manage such crushing emotion. Indeed at these points I had to meticulously describe as one would to a very small child what had happened in the external tragedy, but also why she could not separate out her inner tragedy, her terrifying, tumultuous convictions of being at one with the killer. I tried to provide a translating function to help her separate out her own experience from the killer's, and this might last for awhile, but it also was easily eradicated when the next tsunami of brutal emotion came along.

Not surprisingly, my patient could not utilize the trial action of thought; she had to "think by doing," as she would describe it. She could make a decision only by trial action. And yet in non-conflictual areas my patient

was a very competent think-by-doing worker. She was apparently quite skilled at carpentry, electrical wiring, and other hands-on building skills, all learned by her own doing while she could not learn from others, nor follow schemas or written directions.

**THE DAWNING RECOGNITION OF MORE THAN ONE REALITY: GROWTH AT THE CAESURA**

While my patient fought against my offering bounded thought she also hungered for my attention. One thought I had of her pain on the weekends was as envy and jealousy of my separate life, but it became clear that a more accurate understanding during that early time was how overwhelmed and isolated, taken right back to her childhood she felt at the weekend, there *being* (not “seeming” but “being”) no difference in her current experience from her past. The brutal past was the present for her during weekend breaks, and she felt once again abandoned forever, another example of the symmetric sweep into the impersonal real in the absence of the boundaries offered by a receptive, differentiating mind.

Slowly, she could begin to hold in mind the stark reality of her past rather than just “be in it.” Symbolic functioning began to be available to her. But now the pain and ambiguity of discrepant realities became apparent. She told me that envy now really did plague her: my being away on weekends was evidence that we were not fused, that I was not under her control, and indeed that I might have others in my life; such possibilities triggered the rage and agony of separation. At times her increasing symbolic thought held sway, but often the pain of envy and separateness would trigger her violently throwing herself back into the chaos that could sweep through and lay waste to the insight and discernment achievable in our sessions. We came to think of these times as the triumph of her internal “wild one,” who could erase the pesky limits and boundaries of our work, or who could attack the fragile thinking apparatus as too alien and too burdensome to protect and to maintain amidst the pain of separation.

But still during this time she was also silently identifying with my thinking function, taking it in and getting to know her own emotional reactions, and indeed her own discerning thought, again quietly, but more steadily. There still remained, however, a constant physical pain, most noteworthy recently as a degenerating hip. We discerned that this pain offered a sense of continuity and constancy, a sense of the “her” that she could relate to, even as she gained in her capacity for more discrete feeling and thought. It was hard mental work to keep all these levels of pain in mind, and when I lapsed in recognition of the constant physical pain, she would complain,



rightly, that I was bypassing the ongoing pain she always carried, as if I did not care (but more accurately that I could not always bear) to recognize it as a very significant part of her identity.

And so recently, during the past year or so of this treatment, following her beginning to spontaneously take note of her dreams and her increasingly insightful musings, I suggested that she also write down her troublesome fears in the night, and the obsessions and terrors she can succumb to. I hoped her writings could offer more containment, that function of the caesura. From this activity she has described more precisely to me how she can at times *choose* to plunge into what she calls mental illness, that chaotic wild swirl of undifferentiated emotion, giving in to the frustration of holding the tension and pain, especially over weekends or breaks. Interestingly as well, her dreams have been increasingly detailed and eloquent about her inner dilemmas, and I often feel they are trying to speak across the chaos to me as another advocate for her differentiation and containment.

Also more evident is her exquisite sensitivity to my recognition of her growth, because her traumatized, entrapped self feels that my recognition must be speaking about someone else, perhaps even mocking her ongoing struggle. Recently when I commented on how remarkable some of her late night insights were, she quipped sharply that I must be lying, that I was only out to take her money. My response to this verbal slap was to pause in commenting on her increasing insight, feeling a bit confused about what was going on. And with this pause she ceased to recall her dreams or to write at night in that clarifying manner.

Through pain and tearfulness she clarified her perception of what had occurred to close things down: she noted how she attacked something she so valued, my offering praise about her “remarkable” insights, by saying I must be lying. She said that the part of her that craved and felt validated for her growth came into conflict with her old, familiar confusion; the newness of clarity and its being noticed by me triggered an attack from the old loyalty to chaos; she noted with sincere grief how her attack had silenced me. We both could then appreciate the pain of this conflict and how important it is for us both to stay aware of the many sides of her dilemma about growth. With this realization on both of our parts, her dreaming resumed, as did her mid-night writing and our mutual work in this area. It seemed that the dialectic needed for her continuing growth had been re-established.

Most recently she is allowing herself to become more aware of how identified she is with her image of a violent father and brothers, and how frightened she can become about “becoming the killer.” As well, when

she has felt the burden of caring for a neighbour's pet, she has been able to feel empathy for a father who really felt burdened by having children. Increasing awareness of her identification with her father, her capacity to hold these different views of him and to think about them, has broadened her view of his humanity and lessened the conviction of his and thus her monstrosity. Her own attraction to the chaos and being lost in the dark has also diminished, but admittedly this whole enterprise remains a work in progress.

### SUMMARY REFLECTIONS

My hope is that the thoughts and experiences presented here may illustrate several aspects of the levels of reality and the pivotal function of the caesura in terms of these realities:

- The vast inanimate reality likely comprising undifferentiated levels of energy is basically incomprehensible to us, but it may still register in our experience of being “swept away,” into the gulf of undifferentiated emotion or into the inchoate terror of being lost in space.
- The differentiating capacity of the receptive mind offers a humanizing function: within bounded mental space attentiveness, receptivity, tolerance, and patience transform aspects of undifferentiated, inanimate reality into what defines and organizes our humanity. The labelling, bridging, dialectic functions that foster such transformation, enhancing our learning, and giving shape and depth to our humanity, are those embraced within Bion's concept of the caesura. These same qualities comprise the metaphorizing function as it relates to mental growth.
- But these generative capacities and their transformations are themselves subject to violence from different sources, one being the jarring discrepancy between symmetric, sensory-based reality and that mediated by thought. To the self steeped in the sensory, any hint of another realm (such as thought or a thoughtful mind) shatters the conviction of “knowing or being it all,” and the violence of this shattered conviction may be in part the basis of that “infinity of humiliation” that haunts our pre-thinking selves. The narcissistic realm of experience, including its sweeping emotions, may be closely linked with symmetric functioning.
- Even when thought and the realizations of humanity—these achievements at the caesura—are available, they operate more quietly and with far less intensity than does the sweep of the sensory. Whether it is the allure of the impulse, fatigue, or the intolerance of the pain

and effort of maintaining reflective thought, at vulnerable times we may plunge back into the undifferentiated realm in order to escape the uncertainty and frustration that accompany the awareness of our fragile humanity and to avoid the tensions that accompany our openness to ambiguity and paradox.

Perhaps these tipping points between the realities of the differentiated human experience, with its multiple vulnerabilities and the cosmic realm of the undifferentiated, exemplify the crucial role played by and within the caesura in the universes of our habitation.

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