

## THE ART OF FIELDING<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Bion created different theoretical tools to observe emotional transformations during a therapeutic session. In the relational field, these tools are particularly useful to observe how emotions create representations as steps in the transformation of further emotional experiences. Describing the complex unfolding of this process, Bion used the word “truth” to highlight the tension towards the unknown, the absolute unachievable named “O”.*

*The word ‘authenticity’ is close to the theoretical concept of ‘truth’, but it better describes and includes something pertaining to relational experience. Authenticity especially appears as a broader concept, which includes something about style and the ability to reach a sense of contentment and sharing together.*

*The author explores as authenticity goes through the form, not just the content, of language; a form capable of arousing surprise, wonder and transformation of the gaze. The optimal regulation of the intensity of feeling and the subjective quality of the words allow the latter to cross the relational field and to be received by the other subject. The goal for therapy that strives to reach the patient and allow a creative, subjective and full relational experience can be described (or summarized) with the word ‘authenticity’.*

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<sup>1</sup> The title is a citation of the novel by Chad Harbach published in 2011. In the novel the expression refers to a particular ability of the main character in the baseball game: an unusual gift for fielding, and at the demanding position of shortstop. In this paper it refers to the art of building a creative interaction between analyst and patient. The Italian translation of the title of this book is “L’arte di giocare in difesa” (The art of playing defence).

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### **Introduction**

An analytical field capable of producing transformations is the result of teamwork like that found in team sports, and of a figurative transformation of emotions into dreams, as in an art session.

A functioning group of two or more needs to avoid “basic assumption” and remain focused on a work assessment. A good work of art requires the ability of the artist to be himself/ herself, to use emotions with authenticity through a process that requires both faith and persistence.

During his youth, Bion played team sports and was so inspired by literature and art throughout his life, that, nearing his final years, he wrote theory in the form of a novel. In a way, he used his passions to help create a new view of psychoanalysis. Bion brought theoretical tools to manage emotions experienced during analytical sessions as turbulence generated by two or more subjects playing together with words and attempted to transform them into images, metaphors and stories. The analyst isn't engaged in tracing words back to an unconscious message, but instead in locating how conscious and unconscious emotions create representations as steps in the transformation of further emotional experiences. Describing the complex unfolding of this process and in particular its necessary basic quality, Bion used the word “truth” to highlight the tension towards the unknown, the absolute unachievable that he named “O”. Although he never used the word authenticity, it can be hypothesized that this word better describes something close to a subjective active tension towards emotional truth, but also something linked to relational experience. This latter allows the transformation of the experience of emotional truth into abilities that are useful in real life.

During the analytical dialogue, when an emotion becomes the inner part of a representation, it becomes trapped in a plot and immediately another idea, imbued with new feeling, pushes one to find another form. How can we know that the forms we are observing in quick succession are authentic forms reaching for the truth and able to push the creative dyadic process forward?

In other words, how can we capture how emotional experience is able to become an authentic communicative experience? In some ways, the same point of reference can be used to decide the value of a work of art, a complex issue that goes through the history of philosophy, with the further addition that, in the analytic field, the creative dialogue is the result of two subjects' creativity. The issue of how to recognize an authentic form in the psychoanalytic dialogue will be considered only in a limited aspect: the link between knowledge and aesthetic experience ( $K \leftrightarrow O$  in Bion's symbols).

One of the first philosophers to recognize the relationship between these two issues was Kant, who theorized that the faculties for aesthetic knowledge are the same ones that the subject uses to discover the world: imagination and intellect. In aesthetic knowledge, these tools aren't directed towards particular facts, but contribute to knowledge in a freer way, without a determined purpose.

Bion was inspired by Kant when he described the analytic method to research and explores the achievements of language in the session. He wrote that the two main tools are "speculative imagination" (wild or fantastic thoughts) and "speculative reason," a kind of discipline that we can apply to the first one (Bion, 1997). Through their combined use, the analyst and the patient choose the subject of their conversation, the "selected fact," in Bion's words. But how can the analyst understand how words are effective in feeling transformation?

Outside the field of psychoanalysis, the relationship between knowledge and aesthetic experience has evolved through different philosophers' theories over the last century. Dewey, an American intellectual, described the aesthetic experience as the fulfilment or the condition of each experience. In his opinion, whenever meanings that are contained in common experiences in a weak and fragmented way are clarified and focused, every time an experience is actually complete, we become faced with an aesthetic experience.

In Bion's thinking, two ways of discovering psychic reality are always present and in oscillation during the whole creative construction of analytic dialogue: K (knowledge) as a more cognitive experience and O as

a transcendental one; the aesthetic form contained in both is able not only to push the process forward toward the unknown, to new ideas and feelings, but also to represent a step in which the couple creates the reciprocal experience of fullness. Fullness may be considered part of an authentic way to build experience together, and at the crossroads of psychoanalysis and aesthetic experience, authenticity appears as a broader concept of emotional truth – it is a word that includes something about style and the ability to reach a sense of contentment and sharing together.

Like the concept of beauty, authenticity refers to a subjective experience, but at the same time it needs to be shared with an other. So it can be argued that authenticity isn't a concept, but rather an experience, fluctuating between action and receptivity, not strictly linked to niceness (Boccara et al., 2009). Considering authenticity in this manner passes through the form, not just the content, of language; a form capable of provoking surprise, wonder and transformation of the gaze.

Next we will explore the meaning of authenticity in the context of choosing words in the analytic dialogue.

### **Playing defence versus the art of building a creative field**

The Italian translation of the book title “The art of fielding” is “Playing defence”. Perhaps the reason for a non-literal translation is due to the low popularity of baseball and its rules in this country. In some way this fact allows consideration of how, during the session as a time of playing, the analyst and the patient can oscillate between building a true creative playing field or defending one's own position without living a real experience of creative playing and aesthetic experience.

In the co-creation of meaning and dreaming in the space of the session, language and the ‘body in the language’ (the tone, volume of the voice and pace of speech) is critical to and inseparable from the life of the ideas. In opposition to the objectivistic point of view, in which efficacy was a quality of the analyst's interpretation, in present thinking the key to efficacy is the subject's relationship with himself/herself, triggered by the relationship with the other. In contrast to the past, when the analyst paid careful attention not to

reveal anything personal, authentic subjectivity, useful for creating a generative field, requires a capacity to use language in a more open way. It is not like self-disclosure, but in some ways like an effort to recreate an aesthetic experience, such as reading poetry or listening to music together (Ogden, 1999). Ogden, in his article “On talking as dreaming”, clarified the implication of the change of perspective introduced by Bion and the specific operational consequences of his ideas on language in the session (Ogden, 2007). He rejected his original idea that the analyst’s interpretations are a view of one of the subjects on the other and came to the extreme conclusion that changing perspective and improving psychic health are the results of dreaming emotions together. Renouncing playing defence means freeing language from a unipersonal point of view and a medical one, and instead placing the motor for transformation in the middle. Dreaming together is like playing together with pleasure and, as Winnicott said, psychoanalysis developed as a highly specialised form of playing in the service of communication with oneself and with others (Winnicott, 1967, p. 41, Ferro, 2017). However, play is something more than dreaming because it includes real experience. So it can be said that, if dreaming is knowing oneself as directly triggered by relations with the other, playing is knowing oneself together with the other (LaFarge, 2008, Civitarese, 2015).

### **Learning to speak with authenticity and to create a playing field**

Going back to the main issue, the meaning of authenticity in analytic dialogue became clearer to me through the words of a patient, or more accurately, through my experience with this patient. The following short report contains some ideas of how to develop a style of efficacious interaction through the effort to be oneself.

#### **The starting point**

P: I dreamed that you and I were in this room sitting on the carpet. I show you the picture of my ex-boyfriend and you give me permission to hang it on the wall. Suddenly we are in my current boyfriend’s room.

I feel well near you, but, reflecting on the dream, I feel irritated because...  
You know what’s up?

A: No, what's up?

P: In therapy one falls in love with the therapist.

A: To overcome stereotypical ideas, we have to play together on the carpet.

P: Yes. But, if that is the goal, why do you continue to not use my first name instead the 'informal pronoun' with me? People in general need closer relationships.

A: It makes you feel that you are down and I'm up. Probably you are wondering whether I like you as an authentic experience, or whether we are trapped in a theoretical, rigid grid.

P: I am thinking that the previous boyfriend wasn't really in love with me. We got together and left each other a lot. And our bodies were not really intimate. He was older than me and I probably expected something more, but I don't know exactly what.

*[Brief silence]*

I remember that my teacher, one I appreciated a lot, said that during an oral examination a student shouldn't only repeat what he or she had studied in the book, but should add something of personal thoughts. Once I said that, in my opinion, Romans were more civilized than Greeks, and not a more primitive people as popular opinion would have it. The teacher shouted at me and said that I couldn't say something so stupid. She pushed you to say what you thought, but if it was different from her opinion, she humiliated you in public.

A: I never considered this possibility. I agree that Roman art is less idealized, sometimes a mix of beauty and brutality. I am thinking of a statue of Minerva I saw some time ago: she was represented as a beautiful woman but also with an angry expression. So she seems to me more human than god. I feel this is a closer representation than with other Greek statues in the museum.

Later, reflecting on this dialogue, I thought about how this patient considers the need for authenticity in a circular way, going step by step to the core of the matter. In the beginning she underlined her need to sit on the same level and to be in intimate contact. She talked about her desire for real love, but, at the same time, her fear of such a feeling. Through the description of her

previous relationship she realized how her expectations can be delusional, not only in the past but also in the session. In psychoanalysis, there's no experience of real bodily intimacy, and she described her delusion through the discussion of her past boyfriend and my use of language to keep distance between us. She asked herself and me how we can stay in the paradox of being in touch and at the same time so distant. So her mind moved towards emotional truth, fuelled by the hypocrisy of the teacher she criticized. Her mind had found a way to reduce idealization and to seek in the analyst a witness to her courage. Authenticity, in her mind, is saying what she really thinks, giving up the idea of asymmetric roles, not in the liability of the process, but in the analytical game.

I introduced the Minerva's character to follow the need of the patient of be into a different relation from the teacher's one; through my telling about Minerva's statue I appreciated her improving thinking and her effort to keep together angry and comfort.

After this session, the idea of my grasping at theory and the need to continue to research new ways to speak more authentically lingered in my mind. I focused my attention particularly on the fact, suggested by the patient, that the enemy of aesthetic experience is neither theory nor practice, but submission to conventions. In her references to the love transference and my use of 'formal pronoun,' I heard the invitation to follow her in the construction of an experience in which emotion isn't only in the words but in the experience, an aesthetic experience, as I tried to say in the last sentence. Transcribed above, in which in the figure of Minerva contained anger both anger and beauty.

The patient seems to suggest that the psychoanalytic experience is sometimes like a Greek statue: an idealized form of beauty. Roman art, in her opinion, is actually closer to reality, a mix of beauty and hard emotions. In the analytic setting, the importance lies not in her artistic opinion, but in the emotional truth contained in the sentence.

So, at the beginning of the session, I heard her make a request to be on the same level. The emotional work, like a magnet, attracts material if it is on the on the same level as the patient and this is determinant for the construction of an effective experience of sharing. So my response wasn't only a way to agree with her, but a way to put myself on the same human level.

This was the starting point of my learning from experience, and after this analytic session I tried to change the quality of my language to prioritize the creation of an emotional connection over the interpretation of content.

The way to create emotional connection is nearer to artistic than logic process: the analytical language should be in the same time a normal daily language and a poetic one. Probably the best way to try to reach this goal is follow the patient and his/her pointing the distance from the subjective emotional need and the emotional level of the intersubjective field.

### **Recently with another patient**

P: Before starting, I would like to ask your opinion about a patient I saw this morning.

The mother, a very aggressive woman, wants me to do clinical exams because she thinks that her son may have brain cancer. The child was in perfect health and I refused to order examinations. So the mother said that she will choose another doctor.

What do you think?

A: (*I feel the huge anger of the patient, but I need time to understand*). You may not believe it, but I had a very similar case. Sometimes the family members don't have knowledge of scientific theory and don't feel understood if you use science to explain your point of view; but a doctor also feels bad if she is forced to do something she thinks is wrong.

*[Long silence]*

P: I was thinking about the message I sent you yesterday.

A: I was thinking the same, as if our minds were speaking in silence.

P: (*showing happiness*) the previous session, I wanted to ask you how your holidays went, but I talked a lot.

A: Well, thank you. But now I am not so well, because I was thinking that I didn't answer your message. When I read it I smiled and then, like a child, I reacted as if you had magically seen my expression. It wasn't a message that needs a real answer, but when we don't receive an answer, we became angry.

P: Don't worry, it doesn't need an answer.



Now that my boyfriend is more open with me, I am calmer, but I'm afraid of going back. He doesn't want to speak openly about himself and seems to forget the past. He says that, in this way, he is a lucky boy. Sometimes I feel that I have to chew thoughts for him.

A: "To chew thoughts" ... a nice saying. I agree with you; it is different to digest and to remove emotions.

P: I think he loves me for this and I love him because he appreciates my body. I wasn't seen by my parents and so I feel like my body is the wrong part of myself. Now I find myself without anxiety, like in the eye of a storm.

The patient was searching for a conscious point of contact with me (in the beginning, she declared that she had decided to start therapy with me because I am not only a psychoanalyst, but also a paediatrician), old points of contact in our relationship and inside herself to allow her to speak about an emotive crack that threatened to grow in the mind like a cancer.

When I try to understand and describe the fact from different points of view, I am also describing how our different points of view can produce anger in me and in her because both were suffering the experience to be forced. I hypothesize that this first connection allowed her to speak about the real emotional crack. Now, after a little hint at our separation during vacation and her not caring about me, she can say openly how I have not taken care of her message.

After this first part of the dialogue, in which both of our infantile parts of the self are working through the experience of emotional turbulence, we enter into an exposé on the character of a more open boyfriend; a character through which the patient described her new capacity to chew thoughts and to be in contact both with her boyfriend and the analyst. I want to underline that before transformation, analyst and patient are on the same human level, struggling each with personal memory and emotions and only after this experience they may stop to play in defence and enter in a creative process of building a creative and transformative field.

The surprising fact is that, in the words of the patient, the deepest part of the self is in her body and so, through our common occupation as paediatricians, the starting point of the session appears to be an effective creative opening for our personal dialogue.

## Conclusion

Like in a novel or in a piece of art, the analyst strives to create a situation in which emotions are contained in the experience, rather than in words. The quantity of emotions in the field has to be optimally regulated: too much overwhelms the capacity to play, while too little makes the relationship arid. The optimal regulation of the intensity of feeling and the subjective quality of the words allow the latter to cross the relational field and to be received, or “caught”, by the other subject. The goal for therapy to reach the patient and allow a creative, subjective and full relational experience can be described (or summarized) with the word “authenticity”. So, in short, we can say that asentence is authentic when at its end there is an other.

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