WILFRED BION

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## HIS LIFE AND WORKS
## 1897-1979

by Gérard Bléandonu

translated by Claire Pajaczkowska

OTHER PRESS

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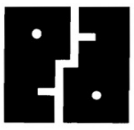
Foreword by R.D. Hinshelwood



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## WILFRED BION

This is the first full biography and the first comprehensive exposition of the most interesting and arguably the most influential figure in recent psychoanalysis. It is particularly welcome, since Bion's ideas are often found to be difficult of access. There is no substitute for immersing oneself in his writings, but an introduction is surely a useful beginning, something which no one has hitherto undertaken with respect to the complete works.

Bléandonu takes us through Bion's personal and intellectual explorations and gives clear expositions of his key concepts, including work groups and basic assumption groups; psychotic processes; the grid; epistemology; catastrophic change; abandonment of memory and desire; the mystic; ultimate truth. Finally, he guides the reader through the fantasy writings in the *Memoir of the Future*, the masterpiece that is Bion's autobiography and his final writings, including the posthumous *Cogitations*. The book is a *tour de force*.

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# FOREWORD

R.D. Hinshelwood

Bion's writing often intimidates; therefore we have a surprising hesitancy over interpreting his views. Only Leon Grinberg (with colleagues) and Donald Meltzer have gone into print in any prominent way. And that is in spite of Bion's enigmatic and ambiguous way of writing; it calls for interpretative secondary sources to develop it. The many ideas which he deliberately leaves half-formulated, the evocative and limping style of his fiction-writing (if it is fiction), and the often humorous kind of gestural asides to clinical material would seem to invite being filled up with flesh and blood and passion. And indeed they do. It is what Bion intended; he wanted to work his readers so that they produced their own responses, their own hard learning, instead of his. But the task that he seems to require of his readers is so personal and idiosyncratic that there is a sense of being in the closet with him in a private contemplation. It feels unseemly to fill out the ideas in one's own way for public consumption.

What Gérard Bléandonu has created is a sense of the corpus of Bion's work as a whole, and he has set it in an episodic sketch derived from Bion's autobiographical experience of his own life. We can see here just how much Bion's *oeuvre* transcends Freud and Klein before him, and the work of subsequent Kleinians after him. And this is because Bion was interested in the tangential task of the meaning of psychoanalysis itself in our culture, and especially within a philosophical tradition. Bléandonu has done us an important service in steering a way through the philosophical interests that influenced Bion, and the sources that he drew on. Bion the philosopher comes through strongly; he was a theory-builder, and only on the way a therapeutic psychoanalyst. That estimation contrasts with the overview we have cultivated, as practising psychoanalysts and psychotherapists, in order to exploit Bion's ideas in therapy. His work as a whole is balanced between the two, but leaves us bemused; too philosophical to draw together a clinical school of psychoanalysis, too clinical to make an impact on philosophers as he truly wished. Bléandonu manages to sit astride the two.

The book is structured simply: an initial review of Bion's childhood; a review of his work on groups, and during World War Two; the period of his work on psychotic patients; an epistemological phase; and a final and brief section on the late 'fictional' trilogy. The first section is tantalizingly sketchy, though evocative, as in fact are Bion's autobiographical texts. One day a fully researched biography will mould into a perceptible form those hesitant links we barely glimpse here: the one that peeps out occasionally from his Indian upbringing with his *ayah;* his psychoanalytic mysticism that involved abolishing memory and desire (surely inspired by his roots in the East); and his later entry into the 1970s culture of Los Angeles where he would once gain have encountered oriental religion and mysticism.

I suppose all biography linking formative influences and the later professional achievements is risky, especially when written for psychoanalysts; and especially, perhaps, about a psychoanalyst. Perhaps Bléandonu is right to leave that mostly aside – and to leave us to fill in our own surmises, just as Bion would have done. For this book stays with the achievement. The section on groups informs us of the relation between basic assumptions and the ideas of J.A. Hadfield, Bion's first therapist. Bion as a 'Hadfieldian' before he was a Kleinian is intriguing and important; but we are again left with all the questions open for us to fill in – what *was* all this social psychology that was around at the time for the Army and its psychiatrists to use? What really *is* the status now of these early ideas on groups after the redrawing of group life in Bion's return to groups in 1970, a much more psychoanalytic (and Bionian!) approach?

Bléandonu's discourse on Bion's ideas about psychosis rivets us to the texts; that *grid* is laid out carefully and explained meticulously, perhaps more explicitly than Bion does himself. How the idea of links, and attacks on them, emerges as the great nuclear idea for the rest of Bion's working life is given proper importance. Our nose, however, rarely lifts from the grindstone and we seldom have a moment to survey the surrounding context of work going on elsewhere; we have to call a check on our sense that Bion's developing ideas were a hermetically sealed process, without influence from outside. This intellectual biography follows Bion himself towards suppressing debate on the influences that pressed on him. For Bion appeared to present himself as being in isolation, generating his ideas *de novo* in a process of spontaneous generation; a guru linked in with 'truth' in a way that ordinary mortals are not. We know this to be untrue; psychoanalysts especially know it. Yet reputations are still made, and biographies written and sold on the basis of it.

The next section of the book does, in contrast, give more context. This, perhaps the most important section, describes Bion's attempt to create an extensive psychoanalytic epistemology. Here the background of logical positivism and British analytical philosophy is sketched in, and one gets the feeling that this is Bléandonu's greatest interest in Bion. It gave me, for the first time, a picture of Bion's vast ambition as a philosopher – as opposed to his identity as a psychoanalyst who had stumbled into philosophical territory, which is the way I might previously have described it to myself. This topic of Bion the epistemologist is surely a subject that longs for as extended an exploration as Bion the psychoanalyst.

The final section, unfortunately but not necessarily cursory, deals synoptically with the fictionalized version of psychoanalysis in Bion's trilogy of 'novels'. I suspect that Bléandonu has reacted as I do to them – with an irritation at their numbing density and wanton confusion. There must be a resistance to tackling them at the end of such an exhausting exposition of the previous phases of Bion's life. I can sympathize with this. After the challenging journey of Bion's professional and philosophical work, to take on something as remote as Joyce's *Ulysses* – and not written with half the wit, style or conviction – makes the reader wilt, let alone the biographer.

Most people take parts of Bion and develop their own views; then work, clinically or philosophically, with what they have produced from the bit they have taken away. In contrast, Gérard Bléandonu has made an extraordinarily inclusive attempt to cover the ground from the early work on groups (and even before), to the very last work on the fictionalization of psychoanalytic theory. It is, in a relatively short book, and with a glittering clarity of style, an impressive achievement.

Bléandonu's coverage is comprehensive and as valid as any, though the manuscript is written as if it were a definitive reading, which it cannot be. With such a standardizing text, Bléandonu has been faced with the paradox of making an exegesis of a work that trembles only for interpretation. His choice was between defining and explaining in the style of a standard secondary source, or free associating as Bion would have demanded. He has managed, as far as I believe it is possible, to take the side of straight exposition, of the 'telling it as it is' point of view. And a didactic text will be of great relief to many people (many students) who have struggled with Bion. But a Foreword is possibly the right place for a warning: do not be beguiled by Bléandonu's straightforward writing. After you have finished here go back to some of the real thing. Until then you

can really know nothing of Bion. We could have asked Bléandonu to contest the ideas more, we could have asked him to cloak the ideas in their surrounding psychoanalytic debate, raging through the 1940s to the sixties. Had Bléandonu discussed the possible alternative readings that could be made, that might have been made, then the impression of a definitive text would have been mellowed. But then we would have had solid academic porridge; we would have lost all the tantalizing, foggy potentiality of Bion – just the quality which attracts us and infuriates us, which limits Bion's work, but which extends our own imaginations.

Perhaps this reading is better for coming from the Continent, where philosophical occupations are more present in the culture and in professional life. In Bléandonu's presentation Bion sought for a grand and unifying theory of everything. Or is that just a continental reading of Bion in continental terms? Nevertheless, this is the first really good and comprehensive guide through the oscillating components of Bion's soaring intellectual and professional achievement, and his agonized and restless soul.

Even so, there is a curious quality to reading about a British psychoanalyst through a French-speaking author. It feels as though one of our own has been repatriated, rather like Bion's own return to this country to die, after his exile in Los Angeles. One can only regret the timidity of us British not being the first to make the effort to lay off the taboo of the sacred texts. This book is surely a formidable achievement; equally surely it forms the grounding for the next effort that will inevitably be made to ensnare such a free spirit.

# INTRODUCTION

Wilfred Ruprecht Bion ranks with Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein in the psychoanalytic tradition. His theory of groups remains as relevant today as when it was first conceived, at the end of the Second World War. Later, his outstanding clinical skills extended the analytic understanding of psychoses. Having developed his theories of thinking, Bion went on to reconceptualize psychoanalytic epistemology. Finally, towards the end of his life, he wrote an unusual autobiography and a trilogy of imaginative fiction. This innovative narrative form put the finishing touch to a lifetime's work entirely dedicated to psychoanalytic truth. His writing has been received with enthusiastic admiration and irritated rejection in equal measure; often judged on hearsay, as reading it demands effort and introspection. However, the investment of intellectual effort demanded of the reader is amply repaid with extraordinary insights and real intellectual pleasure.

Bion's style is a mixture of dazzling illuminations, provocative aphorisms and tiresome digressions. Underscored by contradiction, it obliges readers to choose either timid or risky interpretations, and does so in order to avoid oversimplification, and defy paraphrasing. It could be compared to an uncut diamond, and the reader, in search of the illumination of its refracted light, is drawn into a labyrinth of obscurity. Bion's writings create links between psychoanalysis and such diverse fields as philosophy, mathematics, physics, art and mysticism. To our contemporary age of narrow specialization, Bion brought back the ideal of the Renaissance man.

To those who met him, Bion seemed an extraordinary person, unlike others in his manner of speech, in his style of writing and in his behaviour. While he emerged as a leader of the Kleinian Group, he nevertheless remained fundamentally a solitary man. His own work has never been institutionalized as a school or group, unlike that of Freud and Klein. Bion's work was never written with the aim of establishing master-disciple relations; rather, it lives on in the

minds of creative readers.

It is not my aim to review the entirety of Bion's work – this would be a massive undertaking – but simply to set out some of its forms and contents. My objective is to reveal the meaning of given texts in relation to the development, the historical context and the internal economy of Bion's *oeuvre*. Such a triple perspective reveals the work's structural unity. Yet it is this very unity which constitutes the greatest impediment to the average reader, as it tends to produce the sense of a hermetic text. Bion's thought runs the risk of being reduced to a meaningless jargon of catchphrases: basic assumptions, alpha function, container-contained. This is precisely what Bion hoped to avoid; he always maintained that his writing should be forgotten in order that each reader might discover its meaning within themselves. This remains the task of the reader, however much books such as this one aim to facilitate the process of reading Bion.

In order to give an overview of Bion's lifework we have divided it into four 'seasons' of production: first the period of group psychology, then the clinical work which centres on psychosis, then the writing on questions of epistemology, and finally his immersion into literary art. Bion's work forms a whole, and to some extent we have had to generalize its predominant themes in order to avoid too much repetition, or perhaps because we found no inspired method of homogenizing its complexity. There is some continuity between the four seasons of work and the equivalent periods of the lifespan they traverse. Bion came to psychoanalysis fairly late and, burning with an almost adolescent impatience, he made his way through at quite a pace. During these four periods of work he lived – or relived – the four seasons of a lifespan. Springtime began after a mid-life crisis, whereas winter was cut short by death.

The autobiography of a well-known psychoanalyst is a rare thing indeed. Bion, who had been rather constrained by a dry intellectualism throughout his career, chose, at the end, to pour out (almost) everything about his life. He sought clinical truth, grasped the final truth, and then began a search for aesthetic truth. Bion's life proved as rich, as varied, as spontaneously or wisely lived as his work. In both the life and the work we can perceive similar flaws, similar silences, similar mistakes, but also similar achievements, similar qualities and ultimately the same greatness. We have therefore sought to follow the thoughts of the contradictory, changing, immutable individual, as well as those of the more 'official' author of the books. 'This play of shadow or reflection which a person himself tends to project around himself out of defence or

bravado’ (Marguerite Yourcenar, *Mishima ou la vision du vide*. Paris: Gallimard, 1980). Nevertheless, our aim has been to find the core reality within the work that Bion chose to write and to publish.

# PART 1:

# THE YEARS OF APPRENTICESHIP

On setting out to write an account of Bion's life, we come up against a threefold problem. First of all, since no books and few articles, memoirs or testimonies have been published about him, we have had recourse to a single main source of information: his autobiography. And we are reminded of the limitations of this by the well-known principle of Roman law 'One witness is no witness', and the popular French adage 'Whoever hears only one bell hears only one sound'. Secondly, as Bion tended – perhaps because of his Kleinian training – to privilege psychic reality over other realities, we might be led to overlook the importance of social and cultural reality, especially since we are now some fifty years and hundreds of miles away from most of the original events and settings. Lastly, we render the account of thoughts written in the first person into a third-person narrative. In the preface to his autobiography Bion maintains that he wants to tell the truth, the whole truth, believing that he is writing a historical account of what 'really happened'. However, autobiography, as a genre, is based on identity; its interest and value lie in what it alone is capable of expressing. It need not necessarily bear any resemblance to historical reality.

# 1 Origins and Childhood

Readers who first encounter Bion's work through the autobiography will find, on the first page, the Bion family crest and motto. The motto, *Nisi dominus frustra*, indicates their faith: 'Without God there is no purpose' (the same motto was chosen by the city of Edinburgh). A verse from Psalm 127 underscores the theme: 'Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it; except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh but in vain.' Since Bion chose to represent himself historically in terms of his paternal ancestry (his autobiography was published after his death), it is all the more surprising that there is no discussion of the Bion family in the book. Only in some of the letters to his fiancée, written during the months of their engagement, do we find any information about them. In one letter Bion tells her that the family name can be traced back over several generations. The Bions served in India, in the police and in government. They were descendants of Huguenots who emigrated from the Cévennes to England via Switzerland (Saint Gall).[1] At least one thing seems clear: Bion happened to be born an Anglo-Indian and wished, to the very depths of his being, to remain one.

In the autobiography the adult narrates, organizes and controls the text. The adult describes the child's point of view, but does not give him the voice of a first-person narrator. Childhood re-emerges only through the framework of an adult's memory. The childhood spent in India is remembered by a highly educated man who had always maintained a great interest in social and economic affairs, a student of history who sought to apply his theory of group psychology in social terms. In the letters written to his children towards the end of his life, we find a man who is quite aware of contemporary events in Britain and the USA. When his love of India was rekindled, he augmented his memories and knowledge by reading Birkenhead's biography of Kipling, for example (Bion, 1985, p. 227). Finding out about life in India at the beginning of the twentieth

century, Bion traced the life of his father. His father was still alive, but Bion's identification with him had always been conflicted. The autobiography is our only source of information about Wilfred's childhood, but its narrative unfolds through the consciousness and cultural, social and political concerns of a wise old man.

Bion warned his fiancée that she was about to join an awful family; first, because 'they are all, as far as I am aware without exception, completely cracked! This is more difficult because they possess a sort of cunning that has kept them out of the loony bin' (1985, p. 79). Bion had not kept track of them all, so he concentrated on telling her about those who were particularly important to him. He began with his paternal grandfather, Robert Bion, who was 'some sort of missionary in India'. This grandfather had three, or maybe four, sons. Bion hardly knew one of his uncles, who worked for the Indian railways, as he disappeared abruptly and permanently from his life. The three remaining brothers married three sisters from the Kemp family, and each had several children. Bion knew little about his mother's family, except for the fact that they were 'probably missionary, or "off" missionary in the sense that builders and decorators talk about "off" white when they mean cream coloured'. This intermarriage was, according to Bion, proof of the family's complete madness. There were also another uncle and aunt, although young Wilfred had not met their children, his cousins, who also had the Bion surname but, strangely, were 'quite sane'.

The letters describe the oldest uncle as 'a horrid little man who was happily as incompetent in his meanness as he was in his work', who allowed a senseless piety to dominate his private life entirely. At the end of his life he had a temporary moment of sanity in which he understood that he had wasted his life, and following this realization he became 'so cross with everyone and everything' that he was 'shut up in a loony bin'. His wife is described simply as formidable and handsome. The two younger brothers, on the other hand, were, in their respective spheres, as brilliant as they were 'impossible'. The youngest was the only one of the three to 'become enormously wealthy by Bion standards' as an indigo planter. Despite his 'Anglo-Indian merchant's ignorance of culture and indifference towards everything except hard work and personal comfort', he seems to have been sympathetic to his nephew (1985, p. 87). Two of his sons were killed in action during the First World War, and this undoubtedly meant something to Bion, who had fought throughout the same war. Whatever their limitations, these families were able to mitigate to some extent the emotional

deprivation which the young Bion suffered in Britain.

Wilfred Ruprecht Bion was born on 8 September 1897 in Muttra in the Punjab. This province became a British colony in 1847 as part of the final colonial expansion. The Punjab, a very fertile region, had been the cradle of great Indian civilizations; it had also been the pathway of the majority of invasions of the Ganges plain. This province, in the north-west point of the Indian subcontinent, is crisscrossed by five rivers (from which it derives its name) which flow into the Indus. The monsoon affects the whole of India; in the Punjab, however, the rainfall is irregular, requiring extensive irrigation before the province could develop its important wheat production.

Colonialism can be roughly divided into two periods: a phase of imperialism from 1858 to 1905 and a phase of reform from 1905 to 1937. Wilfred Bion lived in India towards the end of the imperialist phase (corresponding, roughly, to the end of the Victorian era). Lord Curzon is considered to have been one of the greatest viceroys of India (1899–1905). His greatest fault, however, was his complete inability to acknowledge and recognize the development of new social movements. He poured scorn on the idea that the educated classes of the indigenous peoples might be entitled to have a say in the running of their own public affairs. Other high officials had welcomed the creation of the Indian National Congress, and had benefited from its advice. Curzon's strengths outweighed his faults. Every branch of his administration was affected by his policies, and at that time India enjoyed peace, prosperity, and a status which has never since been equalled. It was the acme of the British administration.

Bion's father, the fourth and youngest of the brothers, played a significant part in this period, working as a civil engineer in irrigation. His country's welfare was a matter close to his heart, and he worked part-time as secretary to the Indian Congress (Lyth, 1980, p. 269). His wife seems to have been a more ordinary person who devoted herself to the home. On arriving in Britain, Bion had the feeling of belonging to a family that was not very well off. Once, at school, he was chided by the matron for spoiling his shoes: 'Your parents are poor; they cannot afford to buy you new shoes every term!' Bion's response was to think: 'Who had said they were poor? They never told me.' Of course his parents did not live in opulence like the uncle on the plantation, but his father was one of the high-salaried engineers. Moreover, their position as part of the colonial class gave them significant advantages, and their standing as Big Game hunters conferred a certain status within Anglo-Indian society.

Bion's childhood was clearly marked by one event, the relatively close arrival of a baby sister, Edna. Wilfred and Edna proved to be the couple's only children. Bion's autobiography opens with a description of the brother and sister united in a shared fondness for their Indian *ayah*. He wonders even if they might not have been fonder of her than of their parents. He found their mother 'a little frightening', because of her unpredictable moods. Comfortably sitting on her lap, feeling warm and safe, he could suddenly feel cold and frightened: 'as it was many years later at the end of the school service when the doors were opened and a cold draught of night air seemed to sigh gently through the sermonically heated air'. In the evening they would gather round the harmonium while their mother picked out hymns. The young Bion seems to have lived in a world of marked contrasts: 'Intense light; intense black; nothing between; no twilight' (1982, p. 18).

His relationship to his father seems to have been characterized by a greater contrast still. The first memory of his father recounted in the autobiography describes Wilfred seeking admiration and approval, but eliciting the opposite reaction. From his earliest years the child Wilfred tended to ask question upon question. He remembers having completely spoiled his father's attempt to read him *Alice in Wonderland* because of his endless questions about it. Wilfred soon realized that his father was a 'sensitive' man, and discovered what could floor him or make him beside himself with rage. He wished he could rival or equal his father's powerful character. Bion devotes an entire chapter to the description of Big Game hunting in the bush. His father was renowned as a hunter. The boy's oedipal fantasies were activated by the intensity of the dramatic atmosphere; a tigress prowled the area for several nights in search of the tiger that had been killed in the hunt.

The boy yearned for more substantial and united parents: 'indeed made in a formidably robust and uncompromising mould' (1982, p. 15), to provide limits for his imagination. Young Bion's vivid imagination added vertiginous perspectives to the most mundane realities. He baffled his mother by inquiring about the 'simply city', which turned out to be his version of the 'simplicity' he heard about in his bedtime prayers. One birthday, his father had ordered an electric train from London, one of the first such toys to be marketed. At first he was delighted by his son's interest in electricity, thinking that it was a nascent interest in engineering. Unfortunately, the barrage of questions put to him by his son soon stupefied him. The boy was still pursuing his own original associative train of thought, and was trying to find out more about 'electric city'. Bion

remembers: ‘I made up my mind to keep my questions to myself’ (1982, p. 24). To a small boy, living in a house entirely lit by oil lamps, the concept must have seemed mysterious indeed.

The Bion parents had such absolute religious principles that they could not tolerate deception, or anything but the truth. Wilfred was often reproached for telling lies. The first chapter of the autobiography contains a recollection of a trivial quarrel with his sister. Who was lying? It was Wilfred who was spanked, across his father’s knees. The quarrels with Edna often became real conflicts requiring parental intervention. Bion considered his sister to be a ‘bitch’, identified her with all sorts of wild animals in his imagination, and took a wicked pleasure in attacking them. He was immediately overwhelmed with remorse and guilt, so that he often managed to get himself punished by his father. His father believed in corporal punishment – or, as Bion puts it, in the principle of *‘faire la sagesse entrer par le cul’*.[2]

Eventually Wilfred changed his tactics and developed a new strategy of imitating his enemy. He learned ‘how to curl himself into a tight ball of snowy innocence and launch himself, with a small piece of ice in the middle, at his foe’. Wilfred and Edna quarrelled for years. Finally he decided to keep his distance. This won him a double victory. Edna began to demand imperiously that he play with her, thereby giving him the power to frustrate her. At the same time he could thwart his father’s ambition for tenderness and loyalty between brother and sister. With hindsight Bion thought that their mother’s love was probably more authentic than that of their father; the latter loved only his image of his children, an image of his own making, whereas her love was not an ‘attitude’. Their mother could tolerate having to raise two nasty brats, while their father became ‘bitterly resentful of anything that imperilled his fiction’. The siblings managed to fool strangers whenever social contact was relatively superficial and brief. In retrospect Bion thought that they had become ‘an accomplished and unpleasant pair of liars, smooth and quick to see what our betters expected of us and to provide accordingly’ (1982, p. 28).

Meanwhile, Wilfred’s imagination was gaining the upper hand. He began to talk to ‘Arf Arfer’. Through this onomatopoeic transformation of ‘Our Father’ he created an imaginary respondent for himself. ‘Arf’ began to turn up, unbidden, in his thoughts, daydreams and nightmares. He was present on all important occasions. He was loosely related to the Jesus of hymns, but also derived from the incomprehensible laughter of grown-ups: ‘Arf Arf Arf!’. ‘Arf Arfer’s’ power

began to wane around the time when young Bion started school, about four years of age, at which point he met boys of his own age and came across rules other than those of his own family. With school Wilfred's life began, for the first time, to include something of a twilight as well as the intense contrasts of chiaroscuro that fired his imagination: it was the dawning of intelligence. However, another mysterious threat began to loom on the horizon: he discovered that in four years' time he was to go to school in England.

The following two years seemed to drag: nothing happened. His mother seemed sad, and although Wilfred questioned her anxiously, she replied, 'Why should I be sad?'. Nevertheless, he knew: 'But she was'. Wilfred also knew that he was not brave. Nor, perhaps, could he be as brave as the courageous Big Game hunter who had married his mother. The previous year his parents had made him a gift of an air rifle of his own. The loading mechanism entailed opening the rifle and folding it in two. Once, while it was being loaded, the two halves snapped shut on his thumb, and there was blood everywhere. His mother rescued him, and he was given a 'real bandage like a real soldier'. Seventy years later Bion gazed at the scar and could not recall having been anything but a sissy.

It was not only Jesus, 'Arf Arfer' and wild tigers that populated Wilfred's imagination. Coming home from school with his *ayah* one day, he glimpsed two girls playing an erotic game with their tongues and, had he been allowed to, he would have been pleased to watch. One day he discovered the 'pleasure of masturbation by lying on my stomach on the floor and wiggling'. Once again his sister disappointed him – she could not share the game, nor the pleasure. He next tried to communicate the importance of his discovery to his mother. But she 'sneaked' to her husband, and the couple came to catch him out. 'I felt horribly guilty.' Wilfred was surprised, however, by their quiet tenderness. He soon returned to his 'wiggling', and was again caught out. This time he was given a therapeutic bath. This was repeated on the following two days, whereupon he became a thoroughly cleansed Christian.[3]

India made an indelible impression on the young Bion. He was never to return, but he maintained a passionate interest in the country throughout his life. A man who was usually so intellectual and so reserved records an open sensuality at that time: the blazing sun, the intense blue of the sky, the fullness of the monsoon, the midday silence of the siesta, the piercing cries of the birds, the great trees with their hanging leaves. Within this exotic nature the boy discovered the delight of playing trains. The intense heat produced a fine white

dust; one nonchalant kick was rewarded with a cloud rising in the air. A few kicks and clouds of ‘steam’ rose from the locomotive (a ‘real’ one rather than the ‘electric city’ of father’s toy train).

When he woke at night, frightened by ‘Arf Arfer’, his mother told him to go back to sleep and forget him. These days were coming to an end. One day he saw the son of family friends, desolate and afraid because he was leaving for England, and understood that his days in India were numbered. His life so far had taught him that it was better to keep his mouth shut. His father took him on a visit to the fortress home of an Indian ruler in Gwalior, south of New Delhi, a long way from the Punjab. Train journeys were slow, and the boy had time to develop an intimacy with his father. During the visit Wilfred felt he had a premonition of the future. They came across a trap for catching tigers, which used a live kid as bait. Wilfred was horrified, and thought how awful it would be to be the kid, and once again discovered that he was a crybaby. He was mortified at being such a disappointment to the Big Game hunter who had hunted with famous people such as King George V. How could his parents have produced such a coward? Was it something to do with ‘wiggling?

# 2 The Schoolboy Exile

The mores of the class system of middle and upper class families and in the civil service of the empire were such that children, particularly boys, were sent off quite early to “public school”. Wilfred Bion was one of the many victims of this now questionable custom, and was accordingly sent off on his own to England at the age of eight’ (Grotstein, 1981, p. 2). There can be no doubt that this was a terribly painful experience which affected him for the rest of his life.

His mother made the long journey with him. They set off by train, interrupting the journey to visit Delhi and New Delhi. Crossing the steep slopes of the Ghats, they eventually arrived at the railway terminus, Bombay. A long sea crossing brought them to Britain. Another train journey and Wilfred was left, alone, in the playground of Bishop’s Stortford College prep school. He immediately felt that he was powerless before the boys, whose natural cruelty was activated by the arrival of a new boy from India. As an old man Bion evokes the horror of this experience by his frequent use of adjectives such as ‘ghastly’ and ‘gloomy’. The awful first day of exile seemed to go on for ever. As soon as he was in bed, he broke into sobs. One of the boys in the dormitory asked him why he was crying. Bion did not know what to say. He finally accepted the solution that it was ‘homesickness’.

Every weekend seemed endless, aggravating his feelings of isolation and abandonment. As a schoolboy Bion felt that he was dying. Every Sunday the boys would go to church wearing Eton suits, and mortarboards with bright blue tassels. The sermon gave him brief respite from his tormentors, although the same could not be said of the Holy Scriptures when, compared to daily life, the Word of God seemed ‘worse than useless’. Sunday lunch was not bad, but it was ruined by anticipation of the rituals of bullying that followed. In the gymnasium, where the tuck boxes were kept, the smaller boys (of whom Bion was one ‘for an age’) were made to crawl from one end of a high horizontal pole to the other. He

could not bear to see the eager faces of the boys below watching and waiting for a faltering move.

Another feature of Sundays was the walk. Led by the taciturn headmaster, they walked the same three miles each week. To deter stragglers, a punishment of doing sums had been instituted. The thought of having to start the week by doing sums could bring a second wind to the weariest of boys. Bion learned to imagine that he owned a little railway that ran alongside the walk, which could just hold his friends. He, of course, was the engine driver. The fantasies of ‘Arf Arfer’ gave way to a more socialized fantasy life. His imagination was also fired in chapel, where they sang military hymns with the music master on Sunday evenings.

Before bedtime, prayers had to be said, kneeling at the bedside. One day, as he and his friend Freddie arrived late for nightly prayers, Freddie made him see the funny side of the whole ritual, and they dissolved in laughter. Seventy years later Bion still wondered whether it was immanent justice that struck down the unrepentant sinner. He recalls the punishment that followed this hilarity: Freddie was carried off by an undiagnosed appendicitis. From then on it was impossible to forget Freddie, ‘punished for ever in the cemetery nearby’.

Alone in his bed Bion felt disappointment, frustration, bitterness and feelings of abandonment resurfacing in him. If the bed was not too squeaky, he would abandon himself to a session of ‘wiggling’. This was so delightful that he could have laughed. One day a master caught him ‘wiggling’ in class – he dealt with the matter kindly, simply telling the boy that it might cause him to be ‘sent away’.

Religion tormented the young Bion, because it made him fear worse punishments for ‘wiggling’. On one occasion something unusual happened in chapel. After the service, the headmaster began to preach about a conspiracy of silence: ‘If you knew that one of you, however esteemed he was for his games and work, was putting poison in the food of another boy, you would go to one of the masters and tell him. Yet when a boy is poisoning the mind of another, you say nothing.’ As soon as the sermon was over, Bion tried to find out about this poisoning: he learned nothing except that he was a ‘chump’ in his ignorance. Later he found out that a boy from the senior school next door had been expelled. As the same punishment had been served on Adam and Eve, it must be something to do with ‘wiggling’. Expulsion from the Garden of Eden meant death to this boy. He was convinced that it was his sin that had cast him from the

Eden of India.

The young Bion used several activities to fight against feelings of loneliness and the despair of homesickness. The ‘awful’ weather made him yearn to hear the hymn ‘Summer suns are glowing’. His schoolmates could not understand why he kept requesting this hymn while it was pouring with rain. But for Bion, who was yearning for the intensity of the monsoon, the murky dampness of the English drizzle was not rain. If only it *would* rain ‘like when you heard it coming, roaring and hissing, and moaning and sighing over the trees and the grass in the distance till suddenly there it was’. The rain would burst and be followed by real sun. From time to time the boy received a brief visit from his mother. Was he unhappy? He shook his head. Did he like it there? He nodded. But when she gave him gifts, the special treats he had enjoyed in India, he absolutely refused to take them back to school.[4]

Until the age of twelve Bion was a boarder at the prep school annexed to the senior school. As he turned twelve he anticipated the new departure of starting at the main school. Soon he would be one of the big boys. Looking back, it seemed that one aspect of the playground game of trains that summer was symptomatic of this anticipated change. The boys, who had a craze for this game, organized themselves into two railway lines. ‘Impelled by some memory of glorious dust’, Bion tentatively joined in. He discovered at once that he had ‘outstanding gifts as a locomotive’. Suddenly, wanted by both teams, he emerged from the hitherto well-preserved anonymity of the Sunday-walk game. The glory went to his head, and he was accused of ‘showing off and swanking’. The glory had no sooner arrived than it was gone, and the boy returned to his private world of insignificance and obedience. ‘But I had tasted what it was to be wanted – almost famous and loved’ (1982, p. 49). He was to rediscover this pleasure when he become a captain of team sports, and eventually a leader within his chosen profession.

Another incident, from around the same time, convinced the young Bion that a real change was in the air. He joined a group of a dozen or so boys who, much to everyone’s surprise, suddenly attacked the two team heads of the train game. Not only were the leaders deposed, but there was no retaliation, as feared and anticipated. One of the boys was promoted to the main school ‘because he was judged too big – that is, too big a bully – to remain in the prep’.

Another source of help in making the transition from junior to senior school was Bion’s friendships with two particular boys. He was often welcomed by

their families over the holidays. It is interesting that in his autobiography Bion devotes as many chapters to memories of time spent with these boys and their families as he does to school life. Moreover, the atmosphere and mood of the text changes – it is more relaxed, the horizons expand, the prose becomes more complex and almost lyrical. Although it is often controlled by humour, the tone occasionally attains a relaxed confidence. Bion openly expresses gratitude to the kind people who offered him material comfort, sympathy, even a certain affection, and enabled him to have experiences that helped his maturation. ‘Mrs Hamilton and Mrs Rhodes, both in their different ways, helped to make my last year at prep school one in which I began to break through what I see in retrospect to have been an intolerable exo-skeleton of misery’ (1982, p. 54).

Bion acknowledges that school-age boys can achieve ‘only a rudimentary form of love’, and so it was for Heaton Rhodes, Dudley Hamilton and himself. The two boys were very different, as were their respective families. This contrast and complementarity proved an enriching experience for Bion, in his final prep school year. The Rhodes family belonged to a very prosperous rural bourgeoisie; both parents could trace their ancestors back through three or four centuries of Yorkshire history. The family lived at Archer Hall, a large farmhouse on a hilltop surrounded by fields. The little village nearby was populated entirely by Rhodes employees. It must have been painful for the boy when his hosts asked after his parents. He had managed to forget them in order to avoid the pangs of homesickness that overwhelmed him whenever he thought of them. He bitterly resented the ritual of writing the weekly letter home. His defensive forgetting was facilitated by the ‘ruthless and austere’ character of his hosts’ lifestyle, which was reminiscent of his life with his parents. At Heaton’s, however, there was an abundant variety of food never encountered at school. He also had a share of the affection that Mrs Rhodes generously bestowed upon her numerous children. Like Mrs Bion, she played harmonium while the children sang hymns. The family attended the parish church every Sunday.

Bion did not try to conceal the fact that he identified more with the Hamiltons than with the Rhodes family. They also ran a farm, but on a larger and more lucrative scale. Their wealth – embodied, for Bion, in their magnificent Bollet automobile, which rivalled the magnificence of the locomotives of his imagination – introduced him to a different world, one that ‘literally and metaphorically stank’ with money. Young Bion admired Mr Hamilton’s perspicacity, business sense and keen, alert manner. The boy would burst out laughing, in genuine mirth, at his jokes and stories. He was also falling in love

with Mrs Hamilton. Idealization always glows through happy memories: ‘I must have felt Mrs Hamilton’s personality as spring to my prep school winter’ (1982, p. 54). The boy very much enjoyed being in this huge house, full of beautiful things. The children usually played outdoors in the garden, with its large lawns and huge cedar.

Wilfred and his friend Dudley were reaching the awkward age where parents’ patience and affection is sorely tested. The two accomplices found that their games were not without malice. They tried to catch birds using bird lime. They almost set fire to the house playing war games with toy soldiers, miniature cannons and real gunpowder. Another pastime was to chase the cat, lure her under a large earthenware flowerpot, then smash the pot with a croquet mallet, releasing a terrified animal. On one occasion the boys decided to replace the cat with Dudley’s youngest brother Colin, but fortunately for them, Colin would not play. These games were eventually brought to an end because the gardener complained about his flowerpots. Mrs Hamilton thought them cruel.

The last straw was when the boys built an ‘aeroplane’ from the gardener’s bamboo canes. Again the parents intervened in the nick of time, as the boys were about to hurl themselves from the roof into a thirty-foot drop to the garden below. As he listened to Mrs Hamilton talking tenderly to Dudley, Wilfred realized that they might have seriously injured or even killed themselves. Only after he had become a parent himself did Bion realize what a responsibility he must have been for his hosts.

‘Living with the Hamiltons typified luxury, warmth, almost sybaritic pleasure’ (1982, p. 75). One night in bed, waiting for Dudley to come to bed, Bion saw Dudley suddenly discard the towel he had round his waist. He straddled Wilfred as if challenging him to wrestle. Bion remembers that he had no physical response, only a sense of boredom and anticlimax. These feelings communicated themselves to Dudley, who soon gave up trying to provoke a struggle. With the hindsight of an old man Bion explained that in this incident as a boy he was experiencing a deep and silent fear of the changes that were taking place within him. It was only much later that he, like the other schoolboys, realized that he was going through the changes of puberty. The autobiography assures us that the pre-adolescent boy had not understood what was happening with Dudley, even if his analyst, years later, insisted that he had known. Bion simply experienced fear, guilt, frustration and furtiveness – what he termed the contributors to ‘an absolute hatred and loathing of sexuality in any form’. Wilfred and Dudley gradually avoided their friendly tussles. Never again was he intimate with

Heaton.

That September Bion was once again a new boy, but this time he was with his friends at the main school nearby. This was at the beginning of the twentieth century, and Bishop's Stortford College was one of the public schools that went back to the Victorian era, a time when the middle classes had sufficiently large incomes to maintain such schools, to form a homogeneous, coherent elite known as 'the Establishment'. (Bion later accords the Establishment a significant place in his intuitive understanding of groups.) At the beginning of the twentieth century the Establishment already constituted a dominant minority, recognizable through its traditions, education and social behaviour. It controlled the future of the nation. Education maintained this tradition through inculcating a social apprenticeship in the public schools. Children of the middle classes could hope to join the Establishment if they made their way through one of these exclusive institutions. It was with this hope in mind that the Bions had sent their son to such a school. Being a boarder at Bishop's Stortford, as at any other public school, meant conforming to strict discipline. It was this authoritarian education that Great Britain imposed on its colonial empire.

In the nineteenth century public schools aimed to produce practising Christians, but by the twentieth these links with the Church had begun to loosen. It may be that many children had a happy emotional experience there, but certain practices and certain moments could be particularly unpleasant: fagging, bullying, gossip, 'jokes' and pranks, the pressure to conform, the obsession with sports and games. Above all, the homesickness of young children separated from home, and the massive repression of sexuality, have been amply documented as negative experiences (Gathorne-Hardy, 1977).

At the threshold of adolescence Bion started at the main school, anxious about once again becoming a new boy. He tells his readers how he was chosen to fag for two sixth-formers, on the basis of his friendship with Rhodes, because the latter had the push and drive necessary in a competent fag. Bion had grown into a large, dreamy boy with a deep voice. He remembers that at the time he was incapable of making toast without burning it, or of making sure there was enough milk for the sixth-formers' breakfasts. Therefore he frequently had to borrow cans of evaporated 'Swiss' milk from other boys, and was duly nicknamed 'Swizz'. After two terms the sixth-formers could stand it no longer: 'To my great relief I was sacked and returned to the obscurity of the school common room. I was *no good* – a failure for which I was profoundly thankful' (1982, p. 76). In this passage Bion gives us an insight into the depth and

complexity of his personality. He was grateful to be able to merge back into the obscurity of the mass of schoolboys. He had experienced something similar a few months earlier, when he was stopped from being the locomotive in the train game. However, the use of the verb ‘sacked’ perhaps connotes the feeling of loss of self-esteem at the return from distinction to anonymity. It is a verb that Bion uses to describe the frustrations and setbacks in his military career in the medical service in the Second World War.

Bishop’s Stortford College had a reputation for being less traditional than other public schools. Once Bion had become an eminent psychoanalyst, he maintained that the school was ‘enlightened and ahead of its time’. First, sex *was* sometimes mentioned. The headmaster considered the school ‘intact as a kind of gigantic sexual pressure cooker’, and kept it under the vigilance of two or three masters of unimpeachable integrity. These professionals, aided by a system of boys of similar outlook – albeit less established – formed a network of ‘honourable spying’. They detected any steam that escaped from the pressure cooker, and reported it at once to the appropriate authority. ‘At this point the big guns came into action, although loosing off only small-arm ammunition in the form of a cosy sexual talk.’ Bion was to have direct experience of this when he too, much to his surprise, was invited to ‘have a cup of tea’ with one of the masters.

At the beginning of the century, religion still played a significant part in the daily routine of school life. The sensitive adolescent blew hot and cold about religion, oscillating between the celestial beatitudes of the elect believers and the darkness of Hell, the threatening yet exciting world of the outcast. Gradually Bion developed a hatred of religion which was not only ineffectual but also seemed to create obstacles to sexual pleasure. His ambivalence verged on duplicity, as every Sunday afternoon he went to the voluntarily organized prayer meeting. Bion was impressed by the sincerity of the boys who prayed so hard to God. He wanted to be like them – not least because the most important among them were also the best athletes in the sixth form. Maybe a good religious vow, Celestial Selection Committee willing, would guarantee membership of the water-polo team! In any case, a few Sundays later he was selected for the polo team, as he had wished.

The public schools had enthusiastically encouraged sports and team games for decades. Bion felt that he instinctively turned to physical activity as an outlet for sexual energy: ‘Games were substituted for sex’ (1982, p. 92). By the time he arrived at the main school he was already proficient at all games except cricket.

He trained hard, and soon became first-class at everything. This was a significant gratification of his self-esteem, and brought him the respect of his peers. Furthermore, his abilities reassured him that ‘wiggling’ had not damaged him. Bion liked swimming and water polo. It was soon evident that he was as adept at rugby. He came nearer to playing for the sake of the game than he did to working for the sake of school work.

In 1914 Bion was seventeen, and had been at the same school for eight years. He did not seem to be in any hurry to leave. Secretly, he wished he could become an international sportsman at Oxford or Cambridge. The usual continuation of public-school education was a move to one of the prestigious universities. Academic work was one of Bion’s weak spots. Sadly, he thought of his finances: he would have to win a scholarship. He decided on history. Finally he wrote to his parents, but received the negative reply he had anticipated. He did go to Oxford to sit the scholarship exams, but his knowledge did not match his desire. Neither was his family poor enough for him to be entitled to an exhibition.

Soon talk of war began to seep through the protective doors of the public school. The masters seemed to think that the events in Agadir and Germany were more important than the syllabus. The question ‘Do you think there will be a war, sir?’ became more and more frequent. At the beginning of the second term of the 1914–15 academic year, the war was not only a question of talk. The exciting sounds of an army band drew the boys to the gates. For the first time they saw a division of the Territorial Army march by in columns. From that point on Bion found it even more difficult to concentrate on his school work, even though he was a prefect. His dreams of glory soon turned to ashes. Of what use was being captain of the First XV at rugby and captain of the swimming team, when the heart had gone out of inter-school contests? His final year at school ended in an anticlimax – it was an angry, unhappy young man who left Bishop’s Stortford College.

Nevertheless, Bion retained a very good opinion of his school. The main school was ‘well disciplined and extremely enlightened. It can stand comparison with any other known to me since. It was lively intellectually and emotionally’ (1982, p. 85). The school had furnished the child, then the adolescent, with a competence in general knowledge. Bion made good use of this in his later work. It also provided him with an excellent education of the type that enabled him to recognize other members of the ‘Establishment’ at a glance. The school had refined his language and his accent. As he embarked for England, his mother had

advised him to remember to pronounce his H's, to distinguish himself from 'badly educated' people. At public school Bion had noticed the absence of swearing. He often asked his family's or his friends' parents' advice on correct pronunciation. Correct pronunciation was thought to be an indispensable component of good manners, those of a 'gentleman'. Bion had rubbed shoulders with wealthy intellectuals of the upper middle classes and had adopted their tastes, aspirations and mores.

# 3 The Great War

No sooner was school over than Bion took the train to London, where he was met by his parents. Although he was slightly afraid of the doors closing behind him, he yearned for freedom. His parents were happy to see their son again, yet the prospect of mobilization for war loomed ominously over their reunion. Bion admitted that military music had the power to move him – its sonorous violence simultaneously stimulated and soothed him. The following morning he went to the Territorial Army recruiting office, and was devastated at being rejected.

At the hotel with his parents the atmosphere left much to be desired. Wilfred suspected his parents of reproaching him for being hostile, resentful and selfish. His father made it clear that he could not understand how his son could be rejected by a nation at war, and contacted a family friend ‘with connections’. An opulent dinner was followed by successful intervention on his son’s behalf. On 4 January 1916 Bion joined the armed forces. He had joined up with an awareness of the probability of dying, as he returned to school that very afternoon to share out his books and belongings among friends. He was convinced that he would never need them again (Pines [ed.] 1985, p. 387). Bion’s uniform was ‘baggy, itchy and hot’, although his mother was proud to see him in it. The comparative comfort of the Officers’ Training Unit was much appreciated. Thanks to his sporting abilities, he did very well and had no difficulty in passing his exams at the end of the course.

Bion described himself as ‘hard-headed, timid, gloomy and revolting’, adding that he felt alienated from his fellow training officers by his ‘immaturity, queerness, nonconformity; drawn to them by the same difference’ (1982, p. 112). He then went to the Tank Battalion, via Bisley transit camp. The schoolboy who played at locomotives had become the driver of armoured vehicles. The mood became serious; most of the men in the camp had already been in active service at the front. Bion had the right to one weekend pass. He spent the weekend

visiting his mother in London. It was horribly evocative of the prep school weekends. She was preoccupied with him as a child, while he wished only to be seen as a soldier.

Bion was commissioned and posted to the 5th Tank Battalion at Bovingdon, Wool. He had opted for adventure in choosing to work with a new weapon that was still shrouded in secrecy. The term *tank*, meaning reservoir, had been used by the British to confuse German spies. The first British tank, the Mark 1, was brought into service on 1 February 1916. It was an impressive 40-ton mass, although its bullet-proof armouring was vulnerable to shrapnel and shells. Its mobility left much to be desired; the 105 horsepower vehicle could reach two or three miles an hour on roads, but no more than one mile an hour across land. The range of action was limited to seven miles. At first sight the tanks reminded him of nothing more than the primitive machinery of the tiger traps near Gwalior that had frightened him as a child. He felt that this camp presaged something ominously real, unlike the 'ramshackle, temporary and amateur' quality of his previous camps. At Bovingdon, even a fresh sublieutenant like himself was expected to become an officer. One day the great news was announced: the battalion was being sent overseas. 'How I wished my mother could see us as we marched down to Wool station' (1982, p. 116). His mother had followed him down to Wool, and was staying in a rented cottage in the village.

The embarkation for Le Havre took place on a lovely sunny day, and the mood was euphoric. Gradually the euphoria was replaced by a dull, anxious routine. How could he envisage a destination as mysterious as 'the front'? The not knowing was unbearable; stories and rumours were circulated. Already an extraordinary transformation had taken place. Bion, the inveterate inquirer, had caught the passive resignation of his peers: 'we did not ask questions requiring answers. It was wiser to sleep'. Bion grew acutely aware of the gulf that separated the officers from the men. The latter travelled in different-class train compartments. He was also aware of the difference between the believers and the non-believers. Bion and four others were believers: 'In the view of other members of our company we were "pi" or just plain humbug'. Yet they were all heading for the front. No sooner had they disembarked than everyone waited for something to happen. 'We had not even begun to realize that nothing happens in war, or – which comes to much the same – nobody knows what happens' (1982, p. 120).

The troops would have to tolerate the cold and the wet for a long time to come. They would often have to throw themselves into wet mud to protect

themselves from shell fire. The prospect of imminent action had created deep and relentless fear. Most of them began to wonder how it was possible to survive exposure to such hell. One day it was the turn of Bion's section to go into action. The tanks were being sent in to help an infantry division by 'clearing up' a couple of German pillboxes. The ruins of a town were sighted; it could only be Ypres. They were stationed in Belgian Flanders on the famous 'Salient' where, between 1914 and 1918, so many battles were fought and so many lives lost. Their orders were to carry gas masks in case of an alert. Writing his autobiography, the veteran mourned the fact that names such as the Salient and the canal (from the Yser to the Lys) were only islands in the mists of the memories of a few people, when they had meant so much during the Great War.

Nightfall brought the first reconnaissance mission to an end. There were many yet to come, and the next morning Bion set off again with an officer, Quainton, another 'pi' and a good friend. The terrain was unrecognizable, bearing no resemblance to the map: there was nothing to be seen; no trenches, redoubts, fortifications or machines. Bion noticed that his hands were trembling, and was annoyed to find that he could not control them. The sound of a sudden explosion made them dive into the muddy earth, until they realized that the explosion was a hundred yards or so away, and therefore of no immediate danger to them. Bion blushed with humiliation – he was so obsessed with the fear of being thought a coward. He tried to walk away with as much casualness as he could muster. A new anxiety grew as they tried to find their objective, the Steenbeck, those notorious fortifications that had been such an obstacle to the British troops.

Despite returning empty-handed, the officers brought the two tanks to the rendezvous detailed for the attack. They arrived at the appointed hour, and the column of eight tanks set off immediately. Sixty years later, the details of the events of that night were still etched clearly in Bion's memory. He found himself in his familiar nightmare. As tank leader he was positioned in front, outside, signalling to the driver through his front flap: 'The tank commander's private fear now possessed me – that I would fall wounded, unobserved by the crew and so be driven over by the tank' (1982, p. 130).

How was he to locate on the map the mudbath in which his tank and its crew were wallowing? Bion was convinced that he and all or part of his crew were going to die. The tank hit an obstacle and tried to override it. The transmission went, and the engine was freewheeling. The whole crew tumbled into the mud. The sergeant pulled Bion out of the way just in time to avoid a bullet in the head. Under the shock of intolerable emotion, Bion had the sensation of floating about

four feet above his body. This depersonalization automatically gave him a sense of security. The potential danger of this kind of security was that one could remain unaware of imminent death. Bion followed his training instructions and ordered the formation of a ‘strongpoint’ between the tank and the enemy. There, with their equipment, ammunition and Lewis guns, they stayed from morning to dusk. They were relieved when they recognized some British soldiers retreating. An officer gave them orders to withdraw to company headquarters.

Bion was worried about his indifference to death. Writing about his experiences, he found that fragments of exact actions, intonations, events, all seemed indelibly etched on his memory. The verb ‘etch’ should be taken literally, as Bion had always had an unusually visual memory. Scenes of the war were retained in his memory with the same clarity as the dispatches of a war correspondent writing for a readership. Then everything seemed to vanish, in a matter of days after the events themselves. It was as if nothing outside the ‘here and now’ of his continuing life could exist. The emotions returned with great intensity as he wrote his autobiography and recollected the memories. Writing provided a way of absorbing the surplus emotions that had been preserved intact.

One day the tank division was posted to a landscape of chalky hills. In the train they discovered that their destination was Cambrai. The great railway junction there was a nerve centre of the German Army’s communications network.

At Cambrai British command sent into action practically all of the Royal Tank Corps, supported by 300 planes and eight infantry divisions. The battleground seemed to Bion to resemble a diagram. The tanks were so perfectly complemented by the infantry’s artillery that the whole might have been a commanding officer’s dream. The Germans, struggling painfully to hold the front, were in a state of confusion. The only resistance point was the village of Flesquières, and it was to this village that Bion aimed his tank at top speed – four miles an hour. The exhilaration came to an abrupt end when an explosion sounded from the rear of the tank. It stopped.

The tank had been hit by a shell. It had narrowly missed igniting ninety gallons of petrol. An NCO reported to Bion that there were no officers left, asking him to take command of the infantry. Bion accepted but, aware that he knew nothing about infantry fighting, he asked the NCO to stay with him as adviser. They managed to hold their positions, although some of the infantry had to yield some ground. They lit their marker flares when British reconnaissance

planes flew over. That was the end of Bion's part in the battle of Cambrai.

The following day Bion discovered that the battle was over. He gave an account of the troops' actions, was congratulated, and the Major said he was going to recommend him for the Military Cross. His colleagues congratulated him and were surprised at his dismay. Bion found it difficult to be publicly distinguished from the group, even when he had done everything to deserve it. In his heart of hearts he was afraid of being thought an impostor, especially as a rumour was circulating that one British officer had been firing at the Highlander troops from the roof of his tank. The Major informed him that a report from the 51st Infantry Division confirmed his own account, and that he was being put in for the Victoria Cross. Bion felt guilt and embarrassment as he glimpsed the envious and disgruntled glances of his peers, as if every officer was wondering: 'Why him? Why not me?'. His embarrassment was even greater when he faced his own tank crew, who had shared the danger with him. The junior officer was to undergo a further interview with the General before being recognized for 'valour'.

As the battalion had no more tanks, it was withdrawn to winter quarters to be re-equipped. Bion was made section leader. For him the winter of 1917 was 'horrible' – as, indeed, it was for so many others. The camp had a sordid atmosphere, and it was dilapidated. Bion was the only officer to have retained some of his men, who had been with him from the start. Where were the others now? The 5th Battalion, to which he had been so attached in England, was now almost entirely restaffed. Since Cambrai, something had changed irreversibly. The officers calculated that they had lost over a third of their men and officers in each action.

Overwhelmed by an unbearable tension that seemed to be pulling him towards death more than life, Bion had, instinctively, strengthened his attachments to his old comrades, his crew and the 'pi' group. But every attachment brought with it the experience of being torn apart and having to make new attachments: 'we were swallowed up amongst so many new boys that we hardly existed' (1982, p. 182). Bion clung on to the few friendships that fate, impenetrable and obscure, permitted him. Quainton, a lively and brilliant man, who was a Quaker, enabled him to maintain a difficult relationship with God. It was with Quainton that he went to the services at the chapel hut at the bottom of the camp. One day Quainton went on leave, and never returned. In a letter to the battalion he wrote that he had ended up in a 'loony bin' following a car accident. He had been diagnosed as suffering from 'shell shock'. Some of the men assumed that this

was shrewd malingering, although Bion knew that Quainton was not a fraudulent man. This news greatly increased Bion's anxiety, as since his school days he had been afraid that he might lose his mind. Throughout the war there had been no question of masturbation or sexual desire, as all reserves of energy were expended in physical activity.

The early months of 1918 dragged by. Nothing was happening. Locked into a war of positions, the 5th Battalion prepared to dig trenches in the frozen ground. It was amid this gloom and despair that Bion received the news: he was given leave to return to London to receive the Distinguished Service Order. Bion had to admit he was happy: 'I could hardly believe it…Second Lieutenants with DSO's were rare birds anyway' (1982, p. 188). About sixty men and officers received decorations during that investiture at Buckingham Palace. Bion was by far the youngest officer there. As soon as the ceremony was over, the young officer avoided the reporters and press photographers to greet his mother, who was waiting outside. 'It seemed a shame that she had not been allowed in to see and share the glorious moment which was in fact so much hers and so little mine' (p. 190).

As before, the leave for which he had so ardently wished left him with nothing but fierce unhappiness. Faced with her son's morose taciturnity, his mother felt defeated and helpless. Bion, too, was embarrassed by his own hostile silence. The only relief came when she was able to express her misery, and cry openly. Luckily or unluckily, the newspaper headlines announced a Great New German Attack: all soldiers to be recalled.

At the age of nineteen, nobody could bear the prospect of a return to Hell. Bion felt that he and his mother were behaving like automata. By eight in the evening neither could stand any more, and they each withdrew to their hotel room. The following morning they did not talk; each had withdrawn. He went alone to join a crowd of soldiers in uniform.

Bion was dismayed to find that his battalion was to be made into a reserve force for the French infantry. In the next few months he had plenty of time for self-reflection, and was more inclined to introspection than to conversation. He had idealist goals of being a perfect officer. He could not always achieve such ideals, as his training had been in the armoured division and he was now working with infantrymen. Every inadequacy, imaginary or perceived, gave rise to self-accusations of being only a decorated schoolboy in uniform. At least he no longer yearned to prove himself brave; he wanted only not to disgrace

himself. As a section commander he discovered the problems of loneliness and isolation. Peering into the no-man's-land before him, he had the disorientating experience of isolation, living in waking reality what had been familiar to him in childhood nightmares. Bion and his men stayed in their trench positions for three weeks. When they were relieved, the lieutenant was amazed to find fifteen out of the twenty still alive. It was the first time the losses had been so low.

We have selected these war memories for several reasons. First, Bion was unlucky enough to belong to one of the generations decimated by the Great War; the war so named after the scale of destruction and number of lives it claimed. The participation of the United States of America made it the first world war in history. In the course of its four years, some sixty-five million men faced battle, and the British Empire mobilized some nine million soldiers, of whom 90,000 were killed in action. Bion remained profoundly affected by this terrifying and cruel ordeal for the rest of his life. Its effect on his life is evident in the autobiography, which is largely centred on his experiences of this war. Secondly, the memories provide much more than the 'retro' mood of compelling or tragic narratives. In later years Bion used his psychoanalytic talents to explore the extreme, the unbearable, and also the rich emotions of this time. In the light of these experiences, his theses on the relationship between thinking and action, on the container and the contained, his thoughts on claustrophobia and on lying, his enigmatic concepts of 'the terror without name' and 'reversal of the alpha function', acquire extraordinary reality and depth. Finally, Bion never wrote better than when he was recollecting lived experience, either his own or that of his patients. Totally without pretension, he writes in a lively, funny, precise, evocative, dense, elliptical prose style: in other words, this is *real* writing.

After their infantry experience the armoured division were sent to billets in one of the villages close to the central workshops. It was a comfortable billet. Bion was now a lieutenant, the top of his rank at the age of twenty-one. This entitled him to a room of his own, with clean sheets. He had a new uniform, which fitted him well. He was also entitled to new underclothes, which meant that for the first time he was free from making the agonizing choice between being warm and itching with lice or being 'free of bites and blue with cold'. The comfort of the clothing and the civilian housing greatly improved morale. A pleasant routine was re-created.

Eventually General Foch took over command of the Allied forces, and he launched the 'second battle of the Marne' on 18 July. British troops joined the offensive in August, under direction from General Haig. Once again in the

armoured division, Bion had to put up with the fact that the infantry were not making much use of this new weapon. As the operation was top secret, the manoeuvres began at night. Officers were instructed that the operation was on a large scale, located at Amiens. Bion volunteered to accompany the officer on reconnaissance mission. The two of them set out on a beautiful clear, hot afternoon. Bion began to take bearings with his compass ‘as my way of keeping fear at bay and giving myself something to do’. The very numerous compass bearings also proved useful later for the manoeuvres of the tank division.

Bion’s imagination constructed scenarios of what might happen. His fantasies were abruptly interrupted as he heard the first engine starting up, and he was gripped by an acute fear. ‘Sooner or later my parents would be bound to have the telegram announcing my death; the war had only to go on long enough. Already I had exhausted my quota of chances of survival’ (1982, p. 247). The tanks had left their departure point and Bion found himself with two men, brothers, in a shell hole. How were they going to reach the agreed rallying point now that the enemy had unleashed a barrage of fire? One of the brothers disappeared in the fog; the other had half his chest blasted away. Bion could not make out his bearings. Suddenly the bombardment ceased, and the night and fog were replaced by daylight and sunshine. It was a marvellous day, ‘just the day for a battle’ – the ground was suitable for tanks. Bion made his way to the rendezvous point in the nick of time. All the objectives were reached. For the first time the British had achieved a victory without losing more than a third of their men. It was the first time since disembarking at Le Havre that Bion saw troops marching in columns. They were walking towards the valley of the Luce.

Throughout the war Bion had encountered lies. The propaganda of governments trying to shield the population from the actual situation; half-truths, euphemisms or distortions from commanders seeking to avoid losing face or status; pious lies, too, addressed to the families of those killed. So much unbearable truth to be avoided. Bion was questioning the attitude of some of his superiors, as it was said that they were more concerned with personal kudos than with the safety of their troops.

A little later Bion was overjoyed to be in London, on leave, in a Turkish bath. He was listening to two old fellows discussing the war news in the evening paper. Bion hoped that the Turkish bath would cleanse him of all the filth and grime accumulated during the war. As he fell asleep there, he was plagued by all the repressed feelings and memories swirling in his mind. Try as he might to keep a comfortable distance from his disturbing inner world, he seemed to have

become a mortuary for all the dead of his battalion. They haunted him with reminders of his obligations: ‘The old ghosts never die. They don’t even fade away; they preserve their youth wonderfully’ (1982, p. 264). These ghosts were becoming vampires, draining his entire life’s blood. With only the outward appearance of life left, Bion was convinced: ‘I? Oh yes, I died – on August 8th 1918’ (1982, p. 265).

Bion went to Cheltenham, where his mother was staying in order to be near his sister at school. He thought that both the school concert and the town were very nice. But he felt withdrawn, able to maintain only a superficial contact with the people there: ‘Relations with anyone I respected were intolerable, notably with my mother; I wanted nothing except to get back to the Front just to get away from England and from her’ (1982, p. 266). Leaning out of the train window to say goodbye to his mother, he warned her that the door was filthy. His mother, close to tears, again replied: ‘Everything is dreadful…I mean nothing is really cleared up nowadays.’ And on that note they parted. This goodbye at the station later became evocative, for Bion, of the final separation from his mother. She died a few months before the outbreak of the Second World War. It was as if, that day, Bion had taken his final leave of her.

Bion rejoined his battalion at Blangy. The war situation had altered profoundly in favour of the Allied forces, and victory rather than defeat seemed likely. But having been so repeatedly disappointed, they did not dare trust in the hope that the end of the war might be in sight. Bion seemed to relax for the first time since his recruitment. He liked and respected both his colonel and his company commanders: ‘regular soldiers, efficient, quiet, unspectacular’ (1982, p. 279). He could identify with them. He was now a captain, and a bright red ribbon was added to the DSO as he was awarded the Legion of Honour by the French government for his part in the action of 8 August.

The end of the war was imminent, but Bion was in the action literally until the last minute. All the officers had been notified that the ceasefire would take place at eleven o’clock, on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. He watched incredulously as the Germans spent the last five minutes firing all the ammunition they had left. The British replied with a ‘proper barrage’, and it was like the Somme again. How many lives were lost in that last ‘little joke’? Fate then let fly the Parthian shot to the young man who wished to be liked by his troops and to have the respect of his superiors. The troops were close to mutiny because the rations were bad. Bion explained that the shortages would not last long, as they were due to the army giving up part of its rations to feed the

civilian population. A little later Captain Bion was informed by his Sergeant Major that the troops were refusing to go on parade. Bion managed to get them on parade only by ordering the Lewis gun crews to turn their sights on the barracks. When they paraded he could see their glances of ‘anger, resentment, humiliation’.

Christmas 1918 reaffirmed Bion’s conviction that people will use ‘anything to hold at bay the dark and sombre world of thought’. Demobilization followed shortly after the festivities. The train that took them back to London had no lights. Someone protested: ‘Ruddy heroes when you’re wanted; so much muck when it’s finished’. When he left the army, Bion began to realize that the war had imposed responsibilities that were beyond his capacities, his training and his education. ‘Though we did not realize it, we were men who had grown from insignificance to irrelevance in the passage of a few short years’ (1982, p. 286).

# 4 The Years of Training

Bion wasted no time – the day after demobilization he went to Oxford University. He did not find it difficult to gain admission. He mentioned his sporting achievements and his two military decorations, and was offered a place. He chose to read history. From the outset he was overwhelmed by the aura of intellectual brilliance with which Oxford was surrounded, and undermined by a feeling of inferiority. Other students had come from schools with more famous names, from homes with a university tradition. It was the opposite for him. His sense of inferiority exaggerated the esteem in which he held the university: 'Oxford was kind and tolerant…Oxford was marvellous'. It was close to this *alma mater* that he came to die at the end of a long life.

One tragedy of the aftermath of war is that the men who return to civilian life often feel alienated. Although Bion liked university, he suffered from isolation and demoralization. 'Peace time was no time for me. I did know, however many pretty ribbons I put on a wartime uniform, wartime also was no time for me. I was twenty-four; no good for war, no good for peace and too old to change' (1985, p. 16). The terror of realization would often burst out in sleep as a nightmare. Night after night he dreamed he was flattened on his stomach, clinging by his nails to a slippery slope. A raging torrent flowed at the foot of the slope: the muddy stream of the Steenbeck (the impassable German fortress). It was towards this that he was slipping. He would wake covered in sweat. Daylight barely dissipated the terrifying darkness of his subterranean world. 'Was I going crazy? Perhaps I *was* crazy.'

From 1919 onwards Bion read history at Queen's College. There he met H.J. Paton, a professor of philosophy through whom he became interested in the work of Kant. This encounter with philosophy was to have a lasting impact, particularly evident in the psychoanalytic epistemology he formulated in his fifties. Alongside his studies Bion continued to devote himself to sport; he

reached a high level of competence. As captain of the Oxford University swimming team he led them to second place in the annual list of prizewinners. He also played for the rugby team, which topped the inter-university league in 1919, winning a blue. For the rest of his life he regretted not having been able to play in the varsity match because of a torn cartilage in his knee.

Bion was awarded his degree in 1921. He seems to have been quite proud of it, as he added he letters BA to the initials of his military decorations whenever he used his full name and title. Beause of the war he had entered university halfway through the year, and had thus completed his studies short of the usual three years. He was therefore not entitled to the honours degree he had hoped for, in order to be able to follow an academic career. Later, however, he told his friends that he had no regrets over not having pursued an academic career. Bion decided to improve his knowledge of French language and literature, and spent 1921–2 at Poitiers University. Although he read French fluently, he did not consider himself capable of speaking it. He maintained his admiration of French literature, and his later writings are studded with quotations in the original French. He later cited his year at university in France as a preparation for writing his book *The Dream* (see Lyth, 1980, p. 231). Since he had to earn a living, Bion decided to become a schoolteacher after all. He returned, as a teacher, to his old school at Bishop's Stortford.

His arrival there in 1922 had quite an impact – as the boys met a young man (barely twenty-five years old), built like an ox, decorated with military and sporting honours. His impassivity and brusque speech initially caused some intimidation, which was soon transformed into considerable respect and admiration – for some it even became adulation. Bion wanted to share his cultural interests, and maintained a reputation as a polymath. His skill at providing abundant and apt quotations was impressive. His status increased still further as he trained the swimming team to success. Invitations to Sunday afternoons at his home were much sought after. Despite this apparent success, Bion felt himself less and less suited to teaching. From the early 1920s onwards he and his old school friends had an annual Boxing Day reunion at Happisburgh. On New Year's Day they would swim in the North Sea. These reunions were of the mind as well as the body, and were occasions for stimulating intellectual discussions. It was on one of these occasions that Bion first read Freud in a book brought by one of his friends.

A surprising event concluded Bion's teaching career. He was friends with one of his students, an intelligent and athletic boy whom he had invited from time to

time to have tea at his house. Bion thought this boy must have a very attractive mother or sister, and suggested that he might bring his mother with him to tea. The mother arrived by herself, and was far from being the beauty he had imagined. He found a large, gaunt, flushed, shifty and uncommunicative woman who seemed to be hostile towards him. Although tea was convivial enough, the next morning Bion was summoned by the headmaster, who had been notified by the mother that her son had been the victim of sexual advances from his teacher. Despite his protests, Bion was asked to resign on the spot. When the meeting was over he found it difficult to master the situation, and became preoccupied with the whole affair. He acknowledged that he had had enough of teaching, and wished he had the nerve to pack it all in. But that was a long way from the reality of being sacked. Bion knew also that he had never been at ease on the stormy seas of sexuality. All the guilty fantasies of his school days rose to the surface of his consciousness. This confusion prevented him from taking legal advice and undertaking an action for damages.

Bion left Bishop's Stortford School with the aim of starting a medical training and becoming a psychoanalyst. He was afraid that he might not be admitted, as his results from Oxford were mediocre. Sympathetic tutors attributed his 'blockhead' nature to the effects of war. In any case, his military and sporting track record was very much in his favour. He was offered a place at University College London, and passed his first-year preliminary exams without difficulty. Oxford had given him the opportunity to meet a range of people who changed his life and with whom he developed friendships. He felt at home at University College; he worked hard and achieved his personal ambitions. All his lecturers were competent and some of them were famous – such as Elliott-Smith, whose course on the physiology of the brain Bion valued highly. He was fortunate enough to be invited by Sir Jack Drummond to his club and to his home. Bion remembered discussions and conversations between the famous people he met there. His morale was revived.

Bion tended to judge himself and his life somewhat harshly, motivated by a narcissistic preoccupation tinged with guilt. In the early days he foresaw his future as doomed to frustration, with fate against him. His sporting career, he felt, had been frustrated by a torn cartilage the day before his team won a blue; his military career has been spoiled because he had not been a fearless and blameless officer; his university career had been botched by his failure to obtain an honours degree. He did not appear to be a failure to his old school friends (Anon., in Pines [ed.] 1985, p. 388). He was remembered as a young man who

had a successful higher education, played rugby for the prestigious Harlequins team, and topped this by winning the gold medal for surgery.

Bion began his housemanship at University College Hospital, and was pleased to find himself working with ‘a truly remarkable staff’. One man, however, made a particular impression: Wilfred Trotter, who became surgeon to King George V. Bion, one of his attendant dressers, was happy to be able to work in close collaboration with a man of such technical expertise and character. In Trotter’s maturity and integrity Bion found one of the father figures he was to value throughout his life. Yet these father figures found it hard not to become fallen idols, so critical was Bion’s searching gaze. Towards the end of his life Bion acknowledged that Trotter had remained a role model for him throughout his professional career. Even compared to another surgeon of greater renown, Trotter won the young man’s loyalty: ‘Trotter, on the other hand, listened with unassumed interest, as if the patient’s contributions flowed from the fount of knowledge itself…His undisturbed friendly interest had the effect of eliciting further evidence from the patient; the fount of knowledge did not dry up’ (1985, p. 38). His ethical superiority, based on personal integrity, had the added advantage of greater professional efficiency. When other surgeons carried out a skin graft, it might not take; Trotter’s grafts, in contrast, were never rejected by the body. (With this anecdote we should note the importance that Bion accorded all matters concerning the ‘psychic envelope’ of the skin, a preoccupation which led him eventually to develop his theory of the psychic ‘container’.)

Identifying with Trotter and his self-confidence helped Bion to modify his severe super-ego. He could tolerate making mistakes, as even a past master like Trotter could sometimes be wrong. Despite his temper, Trotter accepted his limitations, and those of others. Even though he was not as brilliant a lecturer as others, he ‘spoke with an authority, a mastery of the subject which was unmistakable’. In his autobiography Bion does not mention that Trotter was the first to turn his mind to the problem of the psychology of group behaviour. From 1908 onwards he began to publish on the ‘herd instinct’, and his writings had introduced a wide readership to his concepts. His well-known book *Instincts of the Herd in Peace and War* was written during the First World War, and he had kept abreast of the advances in social psychology brought about by the war years. His book was studied by all who sought to prevent the outbreak of future wars, to find means of controlling the group instinct’s tendency to find violent expression.

Bion had duped his friends and acquaintances. Despite success and social

adaptation, he suffered from deep dissatisfaction. It was in the course of his medical studies, at around the age of thirty, that he suffered a serious emotional crisis and, for the first time, sought therapeutic help. He experienced moods of rage and despair following an encounter with a Miss Hall, the sister of a friend who had offered him hospitality after his resignation from Bishop's Stortford. Bion's autobiography dwells at some length on his immaturity. His experiences with his sister had left him with the conviction that all girls were 'selfish bitches', trying to create trouble by telling tales. He was still smarting from the episode with his pupil's mother, who had, as it seemed to him, been hypocritical enough to accept his hospitality and then immediately demanded his resignation from the headmaster. His medical studies had given him some knowledge of the female body, culled from anatomy texts. With difficulty he had acquired this knowledge by excluding the medium of pleasure: 'My intimidating conscience would not allow me to learn, or even allow an attractive young woman to teach me'. As a result, he had not thought about marriage for many years. Everything to do with sex he associated with 'ideas of temptation (nice feelings), madness, purity and high ideals'. It is not difficult to understand why such a romantic young man should have been so profoundly affected by receiving a box of freshly gathered wild roses by post: 'At that time they were inseparable from romance, innocence and love'.

Bion was ready to be consumed with passion. He wrote to the young woman. He saw her again often, as she had come to London to train as a physiotherapist. One evening in St James's Park Bion proposed to her, and she accepted his offer of marriage. He was overwhelmed with pride at the thought of having such an 'extremely beautiful' fiancée. None of her other characteristics is mentioned; we learn only that he was fascinated by such beauty. However, Bion was also anxious about his future. He had not finished his medical training, he had no money or possibilities of earning any in the near future. She had no money either, and her family was against the marriage. A few weeks later, when his fiancée wrote to break off their engagement, he went, literally, into shock.

Fifty years later, Bion had still not fully worked through the pain: 'It was not funny: it hurt. It still does' (1985, p. 26). His autobiography returns four times, in three brief chapters, to the memory of the wild roses. Although he must have gone over the events in his mind dozens of times, he still blamed the young woman, considering her to be an irresponsible seductress. He remained convinced that she had deliberately tried to poison the wound to prevent it from healing. He had heard of her comments about her engagement to him: 'Even

from the first I felt my engagement to Wilfred was a mistake; even while I was engaged I was in love with Pat.' Later, during a weekend at the seaside, Bion met the couple unexpectedly. He chose to cut short his stay: 'If I had had my service revolver with me, I would have shot him. Then I would have shot her through the knee in such a way that the joint could not be repaired, and she would have had a rigid leg to explain to her future lovers' (1985, p. 30). He then reassures his readers that even in the unlikely event of having gun and ammunition, he would have been deterred at the last minute from enacting his murderous fantasies: it had been enough for him simply to fantasize about revenge. It would have been unworthy, shameful, to attack the unarmed couple, just as he found it intolerable that a British general massacred an unarmed Indian crowd with machine guns.

There was another person who proved to be of immense importance to Bion during the course of his medical studies: his psychotherapist. We are told even less about his identity than about that of the beautiful fiancée. Bion consulted him initially because of the anxiety he had suffered following what he had experienced as academic and sporting failures. His psychotherapist, whom he refers to as an 'analyst' in inverted commas, informed him that twelve sessions should be enough.

Initially Bion used an army gratuity to pay for his therapy, but the treatment did not end as predicted. He had to borrow £30 from a colleague who had been his teacher at one time. To his previous failures he had added his dismissal from his job and his fiancée's rejection. His analyst (in the autobiography the inverted commas are removed) kindly agreed to allow him credit, and Bion found himself £100 in debt – a considerable sum for an impoverished student at that time.

With his typical sense of humour, Bion explains the reasons for terminating his therapy: 'in contrast to my finances, the acquisition of a fund of failure seemed inexhaustible'. His therapist referred him a client, the son of a general. We deduce that his therapy must have lasted for seven or eight years, and was terminated only when Bion set up a private practice of his own.

Bion gained his medical and surgical qualifications in 1930. He added LRCP (Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians) to the DSO and the BA after his name. He had taken six years, the average length of a medical training. Despite all these initials, so impressive to the layman, Bion did not aim to acquire any post-university qualifications. He launched himself straight into psychiatric practice.

Bion, somewhat ironically, dubs his analyst 'Mr Feel-it-in-the-past', because

he seemed to use this phrase whenever his patient complained of some unpleasant occurrence. The theory was that there must have been some traumatic event in the patient's past that had been 'repressed'. Therefore, the unpleasantness experienced in the present was linked to past traumas, not to the present being lived. Bion did not appreciate this 'mad logic' (however psychoanalytic it actually was) when he told his analyst how his fiancée had run off with a rival. When he wrote his autobiography Bion was still settling scores with this psychotherapist, who is referred to as Mr FiP. The therapist, Bion felt, was trying to make him understand that after being abandoned by his fiancée it was time to 'fall back on myself'. Bion had little confidence in his self – even less than he had in God, who had also proved something of a disappointment. His adequacy as a human being was called into question as he had, until then, 'admired, adored and worshipped' people who were unable or unwilling to play the parts which he wanted to assign them. Bion concluded that he lacked the qualities required to enable him to make people play these parts, and also, no doubt, that his therapist had not been up to scratch.

Bion's only entry in the *Medical Dictionary* of the time is his home address in Nottingham Place. He was probably surviving on a small private practice and some hospital fees. He had been shocked to discover that fee-splitting was being practised, albeit in a covert way, while it was very much disapproved of on medical grounds. An established consultant would refer patients to a colleague in exchange for a percentage of the patient's fees. Bion rebelled against this lucrative practice, which meant that patients were being referred not to the practitioners most likely to be of the greatest help to them, but to those most likely to offer remuneration to the consultant. Bion was further shocked when Dr FiP calmly proposed to refer him patients on this basis. Naively and indiscreetly, Bion asked him whether or not this was the practice of fee-splitting. The therapist denied it and proceeded to explain that this was 'not so'. Bion probably needed only one such reason to break off a relationship which, from that point on, became increasingly awkward. He had severed his relationship with a psychotherapist who was far from unknown or unimportant.

The only person with a psychodynamic orientation working in a British university was at University College, where Bion studied medicine: Dr J.A. Hadfield. Hadfield's vocation was more academic than clinical. He was a great supporter of psychoanalytic psychotherapy, especially in his books, which included: *Psychology and Morals* (1923), *Psychology and Modern Problems* (1935), *Dreams* (1954), and *Childhood and Adolescence* (1962).[5]

Bion joined the staff of the Tavistock Clinic in 1932. He was employed initially as an assistant doctor, as he had not yet had sufficient experience in psychiatry or psychoanalysis. At this time Hadfìeld had considerable influence at the Tavistock Clinic. It had been set up in 1920 as one of the first out-patient clinics to make psychoanalytic psychotherapy available to people who could not pay the fees for private treatment. The clinic had been conceived of and set up by Hugh Crichton-Miller, its first director. Along with Crichton-Miller, Hadfìeld had been one of the seven doctors on the original staff. They wanted the public to benefit from the knowledge acquired in the First World War from the treatment of ‘shell shock’. From the outset the clinic held an independent position halfway between official psychiatric medicine on the one hand and orthodox psychoanalysis on the other. The financial base was mostly private, helped by donations and public subscription, and with modest contributions from the patients.

In 1932 the clinic left the premises in Tavistock Square (from which it derived its name) for new, larger premises near the university in Malet Street. There was one powerful group within the clinic composed of those people who had been ‘analytically’ trained by Hadfield. Bion belonged to this group. The Tavistock grew rapidly between 1932 and 1939; research became a significant activity alongside treatment, training and being an information centre. Therapeutic technique became more systematic following Hadfield’s influential views on training, backed by the influence of medical directors who had already been trained with him.

At this time, ‘reductive’ analysis was in vogue. The goal of treatment was to discover the dynamic links between a symptom and its origins in the past. Free association and dream analysis were used to bring to light what Hadfield called ‘nuclear incidents’. These were not necessarily traumatic events but specific crises in the inner life of the child. Hadfield hypothesized the existence of a triad of drives: the sexual libido, the aggressive or self-preservative drive, and the drive towards dependence. Here we can note, in passing, the similarity between Hadfield’s theory and the three ‘basic assumption groups’ proposed by Bion. The more advanced ‘Hadfieldians’ were critical of his ‘deliberate and reasoned rejection of the significance of the transference’. Hadfield considered transference to be merely a transient phenomenon in the uncovering of infantile behaviour and material. This, according to patients, gave a slight unreality and artificiality to a procedure described by one as ‘forced fantasy’ (H.V. Dicks, 1970, p. 67). Several of his students, including Bion, ended by rejecting the

process and went to complete their training at the Institute of Psycho-Analysis.

During these years Bion lived very much as the other doctors at the Tavistock did. The clinic could offer psychotherapy to people on low incomes only if its staff earned a living primarily through private practice. That was one motivation for finding a practice near central London, and if possible near Harley Street. Bion made up his income through part-time work. First he worked at the Maida Vale Hospital for Epilepsy and Paralysis (which was to become the Maida Vale Hospital for Nervous Diseases). In 1935 he concluded his neurological work at the hospital in order to work at the Institute for the Scientific Treatment of Delinquency. The Tavistock Clinic had begun to receive a growing number of clients with behavioural problems, including delinquency. It became clear that there was a need for a specialist treatment centre, and the Tavistock joined with the Institute of Psycho-Analysis to organize it. The new establishment was the Portman Clinic, set up under the aegis of the National Health Service. Bion was still working there when he was called up, once again, to join the armed forces in 1940.

The autobiography is discreetly silent on the two years Bion spent working with the man who was to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. Towards the end of 1933 Samuel Beckett, who had been suffering from recurrent health problems, had been persuaded by a doctor friend that his problems might be of psychosomatic origin. He managed to leave Ireland, and his mother, to live in London. He decided to leave both because of his physical symptoms and the anxiety they caused him, sapping his strength, and because the literary world had discovered psychoanalysis, partly through the Surrealist poets. On his friend’s advice, Beckett went to the Tavistock Clinic early in 1934. As chance would have it, he began psychotherapy with a trainee who was to become one of the leading lights of psychoanalysis: Wilfred Bion. The experience was of great importance to both men, even though neither mentioned it in his publications. Each probably provided the other with the image of an ‘imaginary twin’, as Didier Anzieu (1986) suggested, on discovering a plausible series of analogies between the lives and problems of the two men. Their ancestors were French Huguenots who fled to Britain to escape religious persecution. They both had narcissistic and schizoid characteristics, and both had turned to culture to contain this psychotic part of themselves. Furthermore, Anzieu suggests that Beckett transposed the structure and experience of psychotherapy into his literature, although the writer himself considered that this suggestion was ‘psychoanalytic fantasies’.

The therapy enabled Beckett to understand himself differently; it pushed him to reveal more of himself in his writings of that period, although he was one of the most reserved writers of his time. He even acknowledged that his night-time panic attacks were caused by his ‘neurosis’. His therapist soon had his work cut out, as he found himself faced with a negative therapeutic reaction. Beckett could not progress until he could acknowledge his ‘addictive’ relationship to his mother. Nine years older than Beckett, Bion, who was still in therapy with Hadfield, became, in the transference, the writer’s older brother Frank (it was in his bed that ‘Sam’ sought refuge from his nocturnal panic attacks before coming to London). The two men shared many intellectual interests, especially literature. At times they discussed, even argued about, the nature of the creative process. According to Beckett, the ‘analysis’ was limping along. The patient suggested to his therapist that the cost-effect ratio was leaning towards termination, and that whatever his intellectual interests might be, he could not make a choice between Bion and his mother. His body somatized, producing boils, tremors and an anal abscess. Beckett announced his intention of stopping at the end of 1935.

Bion suggested to Beckett that he should go to the Tavistock Clinic to hear a lecture by Jung (the third in a series of five lectures). The clinic had a policy of building a public profile by inviting famous lecturers to speak. Beckett remained very impressed by Jung’s ideas – he soon saw their relevance to his own work in progress. His therapy ended at Christmas. Bion had expressed reservations, as he doubted that the relationship to his mother would improve in the way his patient wished to believe. He was proved right in the long run. Nevertheless, Beckett finished his first novel, *Murphy*, not long afterwards.

Beckett was critical of his therapy in much the same way as Bion was to be critical of his analysis with Melanie Klein. Nevertheless, the writer maintained a lasting interest in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. In 1960 he questioned his nephew, a psychiatrist, on the differences between Freudian and Kleinian psychoanalysis. It is not impossible that he was aware of Bion’s resounding success in his work. Bion, for his part, certainly remembered the person he had treated at the Tavistock who was nominated for the Nobel Prize each successive year from 1964. Beckett was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1969. It was in the 1970s that the inspirational flow was reversed. Bion, in the last period of his lifework, was oscillating between literature and psychoanalysis. He too wanted to transcend the literary style of James Joyce, in order to create a language in which to describe the reality of intrauterine life. Had he been asked ‘Why are you writing?’ he would no doubt have replied, like Beckett: ‘Bon qu’à ça!’

[loosely: ‘The only thing I can do!’].

Bion’s apprenticeship ended with an encounter with another memorable man: John Rickman. As he had felt the need to work on his tolerable but tormented inner life, Bion approached one of the most prominent psychoanalysts. As it turned out, like had been drawn to like. Rickman was only a few years older than Bion, but he had been practising medicine, then psychoanalysis, at least one generation earlier. He was a Quaker, descended from a long line of Quakers, and from an early age he demonstrated the intellectual and moral qualities characteristic of this community: altruism, social responsibility, organizational responsibility, and intellectual openness.

He finished his medical studies in 1916, in the middle of the First World War. He immediately volunteered to be part of an ambulance team to help the war wounded in Russia (his pacifism obliged him to pursue a non-military role). On his return from Russia, Rickman specialized in psychiatry, rapidly developing an interest in psychoanalysis. In 1920 he went to Vienna to to be analysed by Freud. When he returned in 1924 he joined the group of analysts led by Ernest Jones: the British Psycho-Analytical Society. He rapidly became a prominent member and a leading organizer of the Society. Rickman reserved part of his energy for editorial work on professional journals, writing articles (notably on groups and on psychoses) and reviewing books (he reviewed one of Hadfield’s). He worked consistently to build the public status of the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, and to maintain links between psychoanalysis and other therapies. To this end he offered his services to the medical section of the British Psychological Society (later, in 1947, Bion was to become president of this same section).

Rickman was interested in the lectures on child analysis given by Melanie Klein in London in 1925. In 1928 he decided to undergo another analysis, this time with Sándor Ferenczi; he had to resign from his post at the Institute in order to complete this. In 1934 Rickman again undertook an analysis – with Melanie Klein. He remained in analysis with her until 1941. For many years he considered himself a Kleinian, although his allegiance remained dubious in the eyes of the leader herself, who seemed to demand total and unconditional adherence to her theories. And Rickman, writing a preface to Klein’s article ‘On weaning’ in 1936, insisted on the fact that the father was crucial in children’s lives. He had even gone so far as to write: ‘In his fantasies, the child accords equal attention to the figures of the father and the mother’.

Bion met Rickman in 1937, and was analysed by him until September 1939.

Although Rickman was convinced of the validity and importance of Klein's theories, he retained his independence of thought and his own convictions. Bion, having been part of a group of 'believing' officers in the Great War, had chosen a 'pi' analyst. At the International Psycho-Analytic Congress in 1938 Rickman gave a paper, 'The need for belief in God', in which he discussed Quaker faith in the light of Klein's concept of early object relations.

Bion slowly separated himself from Hadfield. Rickman's interpretations, rather than playing intellectual games, fanned the embers dormant in the ashes of the past. Bion was evidently as attached to Rickman as he became to Klein. In his autobiography he unburdens himself of his relationship to his analyst by attributing an overpositive countertransference to him: 'I thought Rickman liked me…But there was some kind of emotional turbulence, with its high and low pressure areas, which extinguished the analysis…It stopped; though not before it had also extinguished in me any spark of respect that might have been entertained for me by my pre-psychoanalytic colleagues, and before I had penetrated enough to be independent' (1985, p. 46). Bion's dense prose seems to indicate an extraordinary ambivalence on his part, but historical events led reality to bolster his ambivalence as the outbreak of the Second World War terminated this analysis prematurely, and brought patient and analyst together as colleagues in a pioneering clinical project. All things considered, Rickman had worked well with Bion, and his work enabled Bion to make use of a long analysis with Klein. Rickman lived long enough to witness the positive outcome of this work, and the second analysis, as he died only a few weeks after Bion's second marriage.

At times Bion writes with an intense dissociation which interrupts the reader's associative links. In the first volume of the autobiography he briefly alludes to the death of his mother. Eventually the reader, with some confusion, realizes that his mother died a few months before the outbreak of the Second World War, when Bion was still in analysis with Rickman. As the war interrupted this analysis, he was not able fully to work through this painful and difficult mourning. Her death is evoked in four poignant sentences, concluding a significant chapter in which Bion tells us of his own 'death' on 8 August 1918 (1982, p. 266).

# PART 2:
# THE GROUP PERIOD

In the narratives of myths we often come across the metamorphosis of deities into strange new forms. In biology we find that in some species the adult form is reached by a metamorphosis following an extended period of latency. An actor may completely alter his character and appearance in the course of a play. It is also said that love can work miracles. During the Second World War, when Klein's work was at its zenith, Bion underwent such a radical change that he seemed to have been through a metamorphosis. Yet this was not like the sudden changes wrought by actors and deities: Bion had been preparing himself for such a change throughout the previous decade.

We have chosen to call this the 'group period', as our focus is more on Bion's work than on his life, on the intellectual production rather than on biographical material. We present the work according to Bion's own classification:

- War research. During the war Bion identified with the British army, and worked to find solutions to some of the problems it encountered within its structure.
- Research into small groups. After the war Bion developed an original method of communicating the new clinical experience of working with groups.
- Retrospection, in which Bion recast his research into groups in terms of Kleinian concepts, and eventually left group work to become a full-time analyst.

# 5 The Army Psychiatrist

## A TURNING POINT IN LIFE

Bion had enough time to organize the temporary suspension of his professional work before joining the army for a second time in 1940. He also allowed himself some rest and recreation time. He spent a few days with friends in the country, where he met an attractive actress whom he continued to meet. A little later he went by himself on a short but sunny holiday on the Côte d'Azur. Once this brief interlude was over, his life became like those of so many at that time: 'Frustration, futility, anger and humiliation'. Bion adds: 'hollow words, stupidity and bigoted hypocrisy' (1985, p. 46). The naive young man had become a lucid adult who was to be tormented by frustration in a tragedy of petty officialdom, bureaucracy and red tape. In his autobiography Bion sketches the vicissitudes of life as an army psychiatrist, remembering the emotional events rather than giving any chronological account.

It was in the Second World War that psychology and psychiatry began to be recognized as work of the utmost importance. The most frequent cause by far of soldiers invaliding out of the army was the significance of psychological problems. At the outset of war the army had only two psychiatrists, and half a dozen professional officers with some psychiatric or psychological skills; by the end of the war it employed over three hundred psychiatrists and psychologists. Besides taking on the clinical treatment of psychological troubles in the armed forces, the army psychiatrists were also expected to find ways of dealing with the proliferating urgent psychosocial problems that resulted from mass mobilization and total warfare. The army began to realize that clinical treatment should also be extended into research into preventive measures, and provision for demobilization and readaptation to civilian life. These problems were to be of immense significance for the reorganization of psychiatric care in postwar

Britain.

One group from the Tavistock Clinic published an anthology of essays, *The Neuroses in War*, edited by Emmanuel Miller, which came out just before the war. Most of the authors, including Hadfield, wrote on their experiences of treating ‘shell shock’ in the Great War. Bion contributed an essay on the ‘War of nerves’, written in a rather dogmatic style. This essay bears interesting comparison with the first article he wrote for *The Lancet* in 1943. The two pieces are very different, and it is difficult to see evidence of the genius of the later works in the laboured lucubrations of the early essay. Bion never included his first published article in his listed writings, and his admirers and followers also (tactfully) forgot all about it.

Bion was quite well aware of the situation in which military psychiatrists would be working. It left much to be desired. He thus very much resented the obligation to go to Aldershot for military training, judging this training to be ‘totally irrelevant’. The veteran of the First World War had not forgotten the Army Medical Corps, nor its reputation for incompetence. For a second time, Bion decided to devote himself wholeheartedly to the defence of his country, but whereas the first time he had been a young school leaver, this time he was a man in his forties, self-confident, well socialized, with years of professional practice. Having already experienced the ‘glory’ of war, and the heavy cost of such an illusion, he looked to his future with a realistic, mature eye.

Like the majority of his colleagues, once enlisted Bion began work at Craigmile Bottom Hospital by treating men who had been traumatized, suffering ‘shell shock’. This concept had been much discussed during and after the First World War, and was still controversial. In a literal sense the term connotes an emotional shock caused by experiencing the explosion of a shell or missile. It was the way in which the symptoms of shell shock were repetitious that Freud considered significant, and these ‘traumatic neuroses’ led him to the concept of something that lay ‘beyond the pleasure principle’. Bion was also moved by this psychological damage suffered by the victims of war. However, whereas Freud had had the opportunity and time to think about these symptoms at some remove from his patients, Bion felt constrained by his responsibilities as part of the Army Medical Corps. It was clear that something had to be done to understand and to treat these problems, which were threatening, in increasing numbers, to handicap further a nation at war.

At this time it was decided that the medical section of each command should

have a psychiatrist attached to it. The ‘Command Psychiatrist’ was the specialist adviser to the other medical officers, and consultant for all the patients. In practice the specialist gave consultations wherever there were troops or military hospitals, and also made visits to various units set up to cater to their specific needs. Bion was assigned to Western Command at the David Hulme Military Hospital in Chester. This seems to have been one of the relatively peaceful times. His visits enabled him to meet acquaintances from the First World War again. He also socialized with the officers in Command. One reason why invitations were especially forthcoming was that the relationship with Betty Jardine, the actress he had met just before the outbreak of war, had led to mutual love, and marriage.

The event had finally occurred – the confirmed bachelor had tied the knot! Bion had admired the actress on stage as a spectator before meeting her at a friend’s house. He found her less attractive and amusing in real life than on stage, but none the less she seemed ‘likable’! In his autobiography Bion is rather silent about Betty, as if no other woman could compare with the beautiful fiancée of the wild roses, who had rejected him. One of the couple’s close friends writes: ‘She was very warm, attentive, very intelligent and very attractive in the way of a very poised and mature personality…they were an ideally matched couple’ (E. Trist, personal communication, 3 June 1987).

There must have been a great number of men who would have liked to marry Betty Jardine. This young woman had started her acting career in 1926 in Manchester (her birthplace), working in repertory for seven years with the same company. She made her debut on the London stage in 1933, and continued to work in London until her death. In 1936 she went to New York with her company for a season, and the following year she began taking some small film roles. But it was in 1938 that she achieved her major success.

Along with large audiences, Bion applauded her performance in *The Corn is Green* at the Duchess Theatre. The 1938 edition of *Who’s Who in Theatre* does not indicate Elizabeth McKritick Jardine’s date of birth, but she was probably some ten years younger than her husband. There are many photographs of her in the journal *Theatre World* which show that she was very attractive.

Emlyn Williams’s play *The Corn is Green* was loosely autobiographical. The title is an allegory for the development of the soul, brought to ripeness and maturity through experience. The role of the main protagonist was taken by the playwright himself, who was re-enacting, rather than acting, the dramatic

narrative, and Bion probably found that he could identify with many of his predicaments. The protagonist is torn between the desire to take up his scholarship to study at Oxford, and wanting to help look after his illegitimate child. Betty played the role of the young woman who decides to become pregnant, and seems to have given an excellent performance. She was used to playing the role of the beguiling adolescent, but in this narrative the adolescent is transformed into a somewhat cynical, powerfully seductive young woman. The critics were unanimous in praising her ability to enact this transformation. Although Betty was not the star of the play, many critics (in *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Sphere* and *Theatre World*) were enthusiastic about her performance. Besides acting, Betty studied speech dialect and was interested in photography. As a sophisticated young woman she seems to have been an ideal partner for Bion, the proud young army officer of legendary heroism. Bion often noticed how, as an ideally suited couple, they could arouse the envy of their hosts.

## SELECTION

Although married life held promise of a new dawn, the ominously dark clouds of army life loomed on the horizon. Bion was dismayed when he visited a therapy unit and found ‘a balance in insecurity which was maintained by doctors and the medical institution as much as by the patients’. With Rickman he wrote a report for the army’s psychiatric service, the Wharncliffe Memorandum, outlining a project aimed at treating neurosis through group therapy. Although both Bion and Rickman had hoped to be able to put the project into action fairly promptly, they had to wait three years before it became operational. Yet the Wharncliffe Memorandum was an important document which introduced their ideas to a wider constituency and was supported by many psychiatric colleagues.

Shortly after writing the Memorandum Bion was paid a visit by J.R. Rees, whom he considered a friend. Rees, a brigadier, was trusted as an authority by the army High Command. He had once been a director of the Tavistock Clinic and had been able, with his gifts of diplomacy, to make his way in the world. With good administrative skills and organizing abilities, he had become known as the ‘founding father of British army psychiatry’. After this informal visit Bion became confident about his future, and was shattered when his ‘old friend’ ordered him to take quite a different posting.[6]

From December 1940 onwards it became clear that the Command

psychiatrists could not meet the demands of the work generated by the war, so it was decided to divide the work up geographically and hierarchically. The Command psychiatrists were to remain at general headquarters to co-ordinate the work of regional area psychiatrists. Bion had assumed that he would be one of those based at headquarters. In the event he was posted to York as an area psychiatrist, and given only a week or two to leave his base at Chester. He took it badly: 'I was angry and hurt…I had got the sack'. His wife supported him, and was patiently tolerant throughout this difficult time.

Bion's disappointment left him so embittered that his autobiography omits any description of his success in implementing his project for officer selection. During World War One it had been possible to select officers from among those who had distinguished themselves in actual combat. With a few exceptions, it was no longer possible to use a similar method in the Second World War because of the frequent repatriation of British soldiers. Most of the foreign armies had established psychological testing for officer selection, and had been using such methods for some time. The British army began to use similar methods, although the tests took a long time to process and tended to be unreliable indicators of efficiency. The physical tests administered by medics were more or less satisfactory, but it was gradually recognized that the psychological testing was a real problem. The army needed a great many officers, but did not employ enough psychiatrists and psychologists to administer and process the tests. What was needed, then, was a method which would enable rapid and effective selection from a very large number of candidates.

Towards the summer of 1941 informal experiments were being conducted at High Command in Scotland. New psychological tests, taking only a few hours, produced results which correlated very closely to the results of tests entailing several weeks of training by professional officers. In the light of these encouraging results, a first experimental commission was set up in Edinburgh in early 1942. It was known as the No. 1 War Office Selection Board, and comprised six people, three of whom were to assess candidates for their military qualities and three of whom (one psychologist and two psychiatrists) were to give specialist advice. The Selection Board was to synthesize the two different – and sometimes divergent – sources of information from the military and psychiatric panels, with the help of a professional officer presiding over the group.

Bion was posted to the Selection Board, and worked there as a psychiatrist with John Sutherland and Eric Wittkower. It was in this context that he proposed

his ‘Leaderless Group Project’, which was to replace the lengthy individual tests with one two-and-a-half-hour exercise that included several candidates simultaneously. Another advantage of his project was that the two panels of army professionals and medical officers could work together to pool a joint assessment of candidates. Bion suggested that a leaderless group be formed, and set a task which would enable observers to assess the attempts to organize or guide the group from within. For example, eight or nine candidates would be asked to build a bridge, and as they received no instruction on how to organize the work, nor on the function of leaders, they had to improvise among themselves. It was felt that this kind of exercise would provide an opportunity for observing how each man reconciled his ambitions, hopes and fears with the demands of the task assigned to the group.

Bion emphasized that the observers should attend to the real-life situation rather than the set task (such as the building of the bridge in the example). The set task acted as a device to account for the presence of the observers, and the latter were to evaluate each candidate’s capacity to relate to the tensions produced, in himself and others, by desires for personal success and fears of group failure.

Later Bion described the ‘revolutionary nature’ of his method, which differed so radically from existing methods of psychological testing. The standard practice had consisted of two phases: the first of identifying specific qualities required by the particular functions and roles, the second a lengthy attempt to measure those specific qualities in individuals through a series of evaluative tests. With the leaderless group a selection team observes candidates in interaction. This process is in dramatic contrast to the fairly rigid hierarchy of power characteristic of the army – in effect, it introduced a democratic principle into the process of selection by focusing on communal relational aptitudes. Bion’s project was accepted and adopted because it fairly accurately reproduced the types of conflicts and feelings engendered in officers in wartime conditions. He explained that an officer in action can be efficient only in so far as he is able to take account of interpersonal relations. Bion summarized the relational principle of his approach with characteristic wit: ‘If a man cannot be the friend of his friends, he cannot be the enemy of his enemies’ (1948, p. 88).

The origins of the Leaderless Group Project probably lay in Bion’s experiences as an officer serving at the front in World War One. How could he have forgotten the experience of leading his team under enemy fire? The oldest of the NCOs had asked him to accept leadership, at which point Bion had had to

reconcile his personal interests with those of the men, whom he had met for the first time, and for whom he was responsible. During the Second World War the officers proved more receptive to Bion than to other medical officers, because he had fought in the First World War and been decorated for his courage. This gave him incontestable prestige, because very few British soldiers had seen active service since 1939.

More selection boards were set up along the lines of the No. 1 Board in Edinburgh. During 1942 a Research and Training Centre was organized in London, near the War Office. The Edinburgh team expected Bion to be given leadership of the Research Centre, with the rank of lieutenant colonel. He too wanted to be responsible for training, so that personnel could be trained using the leaderless group method without it becoming too distorted or compromised. But it was a company officer who was assigned leadership of the Research and Training Centre, and became head of the selection committees. Bion was not even promoted.

This disappointment angered him. He could not accept the post of deputy assistant, and asked to be transferred to Northfield military hospital in Birmingham. Although the army adopted Bion's method of selecting officers, it did not have the desired effect on military hierarchy.

From the outset the Selection Board psychiatrists had worked in a dual capacity: as experts administering the tests (in collaboration with psychologists) and also as medical specialists examining each candidate. The psychiatrists became increasingly relegated to the individual examination of 'problem' cases. The official version, described by Ahrenfeldt, cited the very large number of candidates and the lack of specialized staff. But in March 1943, a 'political' decision was made to limit the psychiatrists' intervention only to those cases referred to them by the president of the Board. Then, in August 1943, the War Office decided that psychiatrists would no longer take any part in the selection of officers. There was a growing movement in the army which was very hostile to psychiatry, and opposed it with great efficiency. There is no doubt that Bion's radically new methods of testing and selection suffered from this growing hostility.

In fact it was not only the army but a large section of British society that was afraid of the 'evil' of psychoanalysis. The psychiatrists of the experimental Board set up in Edinburgh were all analytically orientated. Most people were suspicious of what seemed to them to be unwarranted meddling with sexuality or

religion.

Bion believed that a nation at war could do more than maintain the quality and quantity of its officers; it could also increase their number and value. The army had to be as careful in selecting officers as conservationists are in selecting trees for the development of forests. Selection should be the concern of the army as a whole, not just the Selection Boards. Trist recalls the spirit of this approach as being ‘an experiment in Regimental Nomination’. As the Edinburgh Selection Board sometimes had no candidates for examination, Bion suggested that every ‘good’ regiment could nominate candidates for officer training, in addition to those men chosen by the regimental commander. This suggestion was accepted by Regional Command, permission was granted, and in some regiments candidates were chosen by a series of secret ballots. The experiment was successful: the quality of recruits was maintained, while the number of officers was greatly increased (Trist, in Pines [ed.] 1985, p. 12).

Some people, however, thought that the introduction of these democratic principles into army hierarchy was dangerous. Although they undoubtedly improved the efficiency of the selection process, Bion’s methods were considered potentially subversive. Perhaps Bion was sensitive to the spirit of social change that Rickman had encountered in the Soviet Union which, at this time, was one of the Allies. Nobody concerned with social progress could remain utterly deaf to the ‘songs of the Red Army’.[7] In the event, the question of officer selection was debated at the highest level by an Army Council, and a majority opposed Bion’s regimental nomination project. By this time, however, Bion was already working on another project.

## REHABILITATION

Psychoses were only a small fraction of the range of emotional disturbances treated by army psychiatrists in World War Two. It was soon evident that most of their work involved the treatment of neurosis and behavioural problems. These men were initially referred to specialist centres within the general emergency services, along with other medical emergency cases. The extent and depth of the problem, and the inadequacy of treatment provision, were eventually recognized. In April 1942 army hospitals were set up specifically for the treatment of ‘war neuroses’. The largest of these was Northfield in Birmingham, which had two hundred beds in the hospital wing and four hundred beds in the training wing. Patients were initially given active psychiatric treatment in the hospital wing but

were transferred, as soon as possible, to the training wing. Here the psychiatrists were called upon simply to supervise the rehabilitation process, which was administered by the rather severe rule of regimental officers. Ahrenfeldt notes that ‘the two units were sharply delimited, and there were no nursing sisters or medical officers in the training wing, but military training officers who regarded psychiatrists with some degree of suspicion’ (p. 151). The atmosphere of the hospital, especially in the early days, was intensely dismal, and general efficiency left much to be desired. Bion asked to be transferred to Northfield with the aim of making it an efficient and functional hospital for treating emotional and behavioural problems of war. He introduced group treatment, although the entire experiment lasted only six weeks. In the light of group interaction each individual’s problem was comparable, and neurosis was found as much in the group as in the individual. Before this the majority of patients and nurses had known only one form of help: avoiding the problem.

In psychiatric hospitals neurosis has to be confronted as an enemy is confronted, instead of retreating from it. The staff as a group must realize that neurotic behaviour makes communal life difficult, and finally destroys any co-operation and efficiency.

Northfield Hospital treated only those men who were thought to be capable of returning to active service after rehabilitation. Rickman was in charge of treatment in the hospital wing. In each fifteen-bed ward he organized a group discussion every morning. After physical exercise the men could return to consult the psychiatrist and talk about the problems that had been raised for them as individuals in the group session. Rickman thought that neurotics contributed well in group discussion because of its structure of equality in interpersonal relationships.

The men knew that their next step was to move to new groups in the training wing. There Bion received them, to rehabilitate them to army life or to assess whether or not they were capable of returning to active service. In cases where rehabilitation was impossible, the psychiatrist judged whether the man should take up auxiliary employment or be discharged. Bion thus organized his wing as ‘a framework enclosed within transparent walls’ – the patient’s behaviour signalled his competence and his aims, in much the same way as the leaderless group interactions signalled officer capacities in selection candidates. Bion managed to re-establish discipline, and to keep the men usefully occupied. He helped to build ‘an unmistakable esprit-de-corps’. He added: ‘anyone with a knowledge of good fighting regiments in a theatre of war would have been

struck by certain similarities of outlook in the men of such a unit and the men of the training wing' (1961, pp. 21–2).

Bion fostered the initial stage of group life, in which the leader and the men hold one another in reciprocal idealization and set aside feelings of persecution and guilt. With his extraordinary aptitude for leadership, Bion managed to create a team which aspired to the best in army life. However, he and his men also had responsibility for facing up to matters of life and death. The idea of death generates extreme anxiety and deep feelings of guilt. If the leader knows about an officer's life on the battlefield he can 'be spared the hideous blunder of thinking that patients are potential cannon fodder, to be returned as such to their units'. Bion solved this problem by transcending his immediate role as an officer. His task as a psychiatrist was 'to produce self-respecting men socially adjusted to the community and therefore willing to accept its responsibilities whether in peace or war' (1961, p. 13). So far so good…if we overlook the reasons why this experimental treatment was brutally terminated after only six weeks.

With hindsight, Bion thought there were several reasons why this structure was prematurely closed down. 'Intra-group tensions in therapy', written in the thick of it in 1943, clearly states his view that the brief duration of the project in no way compromised its scientific principles, nor the results obtained. It was the local contingencies alone that prevented the long-term implementation of the method. His 1946 article 'The Leaderless Group Project' deals with 'the problem of the psychiatrist'. Bion acknowledges there that patients may feel a violent hatred towards a psychiatrist whose aim is to return them to the firing line: 'A psychiatrist attempting to use the group method to study internal tension is, in the situation of today's context, interrupting a withdrawal and so risks being in the firing line' (1946, p. 81). In 1947 Bion again chose to write about his experiment at Northfield, giving the impression that he had had a shock. He openly states that his superiors put an end to the experiment without giving any explanation. His experiment, he surmised, had provoked a 'powerful release of emotion which showed itself chiefly in heightened morale amongst the patients, acts of indiscipline by two warrant officers of the staff – ex officio stable personalities – and minor, but persistent obstruction of obscure origin' (1948, p. 81).

Bion observed that he had set off 'a chain reaction'. Trist recalls that Bion was very angry, and continued to be angry after he was again transferred. He thought about publicizing the events that had taken place at Northfield. He considered

fighting his case through higher authorities. In the end, he thought it best to to keep silent about it. The only successful outcome would have led to displacing General Rees and his colleagues at the War Office, and Bion felt that he had neither the popular support nor the political acumen necessary for such action. Some thirty-five years later Bion returned, at length, to this episode when he wrote his autobiography. The passage of time had barely changed his feeling of betrayal. He tried to moderate his bitter resentment towards his superiors in the military hierarchy, but it was still simmering. He added his thoughts that his superiors had considered it dangerous to have people as ‘intelligent as Rickman’ and himself around because ‘we would blow up the Military Training Scheme, and the whole of Army Psychiatry’. He thought his immediate superiors were afraid of being punished for permitting them to carry out their experiment.[8] Bion had good reason to feel bitterly critical of the army. The army had greatly benefited from his skills and his commitment, but had never recognized them. In his autobiography he notes that he was the only psychiatrist he knew who left the army at the same rank as he had entered. Bion ended his military career as a major, whereas both Trist and Sutherland finished the war as lieutenant colonels. His record of service in the Great War should have given him a significant advantage over his colleagues-he had ended that war on his way to becoming a general.

It is worth asking whether or not Bion colluded in his fate. According to Sutherland, he tended to take a somewhat uncompromising attitude on issues such as the Northfield affair. He was reluctant to expand on the implications of his ideas, so that the administrators often did not know how they could be implemented. Sutherland considered that Bion had ‘a rather uncommunicative attitude’ (in Pines [ed.] 1985, pp. 50–51), remembering him as a rather self-contained man, making mostly brief and incisive remarks. Moreover, Bion was ‘totally uninterested in, if not actively hostile to, playing polities’. Bridger, who was posted to Northfield as his replacement, confirms this: ‘It must be said that he made few concessions and I do not recall him ever bartering or negotiating’ (p. 88).

How was it that despite his constant and concerted efforts, his method was never properly recognized? Melanie Klein, who was to become his next analyst, offers a possible explanation. Towards the end of her life Klein became interested in envy. She found that some people defend themselves against situations in which they feel envious by inverting them. In this way the disturbing feelings are activated in others, while those thus defended can validate

their own qualities and behaviour.

Bion joined the army psychiatrists with a history of legendary heroism. With his powerful physique and his self-confidence, he made a strong first impression. In addition, the army must have seen him as someone with strange projects, a messianic spirit, unafraid of difficulty. Trist remembers that he was very easily mythologized. But people who deny their own envy often become targets of persecution by others. Klein notes that the defence against envy is often manifested as a devaluation of the object, as in a manic defence, because a devalued object need no longer be envied. Throughout his autobiography Bion expresses regrets that he had to deal with so many mean, narrow-minded and even contemptible individuals. Could there be echoes of a Céline in this predicament? Furthermore, according to Klein, the devaluing of the self may also be part of a defence against envy. Bion was quite capable of systematically devaluing each of his qualities as he presented them in his autobiography. Francesca, his widow, then wanted to reveal, equally systematically, 'the other side of genius'.

What are we, with hindsight, to make of the experiment that Bion and Rickman set up at Northfield? It was undeniably a manifestation of creative genius. From November 1944 S.H. Foulkes and T.F. Main went to Northfield, and set up the famous 'Northfield Experiment II'. It very often happens that real innovation is prematurely terminated; but the environment may slowly become more receptive to the initial idea, and the innovation then gives way to more permanent changes and influences. Northfield Hospital became the birthplace of the 'therapeutic community' which was to lead psychiatric practice in hospitals after the war, first in Britain and then in the United States.

Under Foulkes and Main the hospital was entirely devoted to care and rehabilitation. In the special issue of the *Bulletin of the Menninger Clinic* devoted to the Northfield experiment, Bion's 'Leaderless Group Project' figures prominently as the precursor of the therapeutic community.

## THE YEARS OF TRAGEDY AND SURVIVAL

After Birmingham, Bion was posted to Winchester. He liked the commander of the Selhurst unit, who helped him to overcome his psychiatric 'pyrexia'. At this stage he was far from being unhappy. His wife was working in London again, after a tour with her company. Betty was living with old friends in London, and could visit her husband once or twice a week. She was soothing and supportive

after each disappointment. Her own acting career was going from strength to strength, and Bion was justifiably proud of his wife. During the Great War he had wished that his mother might think of him as a hero; now it was for Betty that he wished to do well. We find this hope in his poignant remark ‘I still cannot help hoping that she was not deprived of the comforting lie that he [her husband] was really a man and a hero’ (1985, p. 60).

For six months, between March and August 1943, Bion was at Selhurst interviewing officers who had been prisoners of war before liberation following the surrender at Tobruk. He interviewed some four hundred officers who needed to be rehabilitated to everyday life. Still ahead of his time, Bion was already raising questions that would be recognized after the war.

Betty became pregnant. Bion stopped being so preoccupied by his professional frustrations, and the couple looked forward to the birth of their child. The end of the war was within sight, and a kind of optimism began to emerge. Despite – or perhaps because of – the pregnancy, Bion accepted a posting for a final mission. In North Africa the army had discovered that men with emotional disturbances became worse when they were evacuated from the front; so a new aim was to offer the soldiers treatment as close to their unit as possible. The need for a closer link between military action and the psychiatric team was first recognized during the Allied landing in Normandy. The 21st Army Corps was formed. According to Trist, it was Bion who was Montgomery’s first choice as military psychiatrist. With his wife’s agreement, he joined this new project.

Bion found himself in Normandy, hoping to use his group methods of treatment for soldiers near their units. There he heard the news that the birth had gone well – he had a baby daughter. Three days later, by telephone, he received the tragic news that Betty was dead. It seems to have been a pulmonary embolism, for which there was no treatment at the time. Bion was devastated. He returned to London immediately. Thirty-five years later, writing his autobiography, he was still tormented by lacerating self-doubt: ‘What killed Betty and nearly killed her baby? Physical malformation? Incompetent obstetrics? Callous or indifferent authorities? Or the revelations of the hollow drum that was being so loudly beaten by her husband’s departure?’ (1985, p. 62).

Bion was outraged that Betty’s parents thought he might want to have the baby adopted. His partner had left him with a baby and £8,000, a sum they had saved from his pay ‘for a rainy day’…He entrusted the baby to the same woman,

in Slough, who had taken good care of Betty. The war was over.

Bion did not return abroad; he was posted to Surrey. Although the autobiography might lead one to believe that he withdrew from his work and was submerged by grief, Trist informs us that he was as active and circumspect as before. He successfully completed the final task demanded of army psychiatrists at the end of the war. The Selection Boards were no longer required for selecting officers, but for rehabilitation and redeployment. Bion's influence spread further afield than the situation in which he was working. Some officers had been inspired by his leaderless groups and his rehabilitation therapy in groups, and they came to learn from him. Bion held to two simple principles: first, the duration of rehabilitation should not be prescribed; rather, each man should leave when he felt that he was ready to do so; secondly, tasks should be not under medical control but ordinary regulation.

These principles were adopted by Lieutenant Colonel Trist, a psychologist who had become a staunch supporter of Bion since the Edinburgh days, and Colonel Wilson, a close colleague from the Tavistock before the war. Wilson was important in the history of British military psychiatry, and his plans for the rehabilitation of prisoners of war were taken up by the War Office. Trist thought that the staff selected for work on the famous Civil Resettlement Units were posted there largely because of their sympathy with Bion's ideas. At the same time, his ideas were central to the second Northfield Experiment. Bion was neither promoted nor decorated, but he could be certain that he had made a magnificent contribution to the army psychiatric service throughout the Second World War.[9]

# 6 The Experimental Therapist

No sooner was the war over than Bion emerged relieved, disenchanted, devastated and worried. He was relieved to be free of the war and the army that had taken so many of his working years, disenchanted because there had never been any official recognition of his work and ideas, devastated by the loss of his Eurydice during his quest for recognition, worried because he was now left with a young child and no money.

He took one day at a time. With his savings from the marriage he was able to buy a cottage in the country at an auction. He settled in Iver Heath with the family that was looking after the baby. This domestic arrangement brought him some peace of mind, but he still had to worry about earning a living. He rented a consulting room in Harley Street. Concerned about his reputation, he was aware of the prestige of a Harley Street address. He was so short of money that he had to work long hours – not only throughout weekdays but also on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Whenever he had spare time, he spent it with his young daughter. He bought a bicycle, added a baby seat to it, and every Saturday afternoon took her for a bike ride. Parthenope soon became very attached to her father. Parthenope was the unusual name that Betty and he had decided to give the child, should it be a daughter.[10] As soon as she could walk, the toddler would come to meet her father at the bus stop. This event is one of the very few recorded in the autobiography at which Bion expresses a real feeling of joy and gratification.

Eventually the problems of work began to invade the peace of his domestic family life. He found it impossible to ignore them, even when he was gardening or preparing home-grown apples for bottling.

In 1945 Bion started analysis with Melanie Klein and resumed his training at the Institute of Psycho-Analysis. This proved a time of extraordinary desire for

intellectual work, and Kleinian concepts became his ‘base camp’ from which he began the solitary ascent of his life’s work.

## ACTIVE RESEARCH

As soon as he was demobilized, Bion returned to part-time work at the Tavistock Clinic. He found that in only a few hours per week he could research into institutional dynamics. He approached groups as he had always done, as an arena for active research. He was not simply making objective observations but actively facilitating change. It was not always clear whether he was aiming at changes in the institution, in the therapeutic process, or in training methods, but in every context Bion was impressively efficient and original. Sutherland gives a good description of the atmosphere in the early stages of a training group. Bion wanted to be able to compare group dynamics from a range of contexts, and to compare the results derived from different groups. At this time he was interested in people working from positions of power, and he organized a group at the Tavistock for ten people working in senior management in industry. He hoped that through this initiative his methods would be used in industry. Rickman and Sutherland participated in the study group, and worked with Bion for many months. Sutherland notes how impressed they were by Bion’s sensitivity and intelligence, but he admits: ‘His role was stressful much of the time, and Rickman and I were not sufficiently on his wavelength to take the pressure off… despite the denial mechanisms in the group, the impact was profound; two members developed duodenal ulcer symptoms before the group finished, and three decided to have personal analysis subsequently’ (in Pines [ed.] 1985, p. 52).

A little later Bion organized regular meetings in his consulting room for analysts who had worked with groups. Each person could talk about their experiences and their projects, and everyone was on an equal footing. It was a kind of ‘self-help’ group, but Bion did not find that it provided the kind of help he was looking for, nor did his colleagues find it useful. Rickman jokingly dubbed it the ‘Pentecostal’ group. The meetings drew to a close. Trist, who had been an observer at the Tavistock therapy group, paints a – by now familiar – picture:

> He was detached yet warm, utterly imperturbable and inexhaustibly patient. He gave rise to feelings of immense security…His interventions were on the sparse side and tended to be terse. They could be kept so because he always waited until the evidence for what he would say was abundant. He expressed himself in direct, concise language that everyone could understand. If a patient made an intervention

> before he did, so much the better; there was no need for him to make it. He seemed to want to make the group as self-interpretative as possible and to facilitate its learning to become so (in Pines [ed.] 1985, pp. 30–31)

Before leaving the clinic Bion proposed a final project: a therapy group for the staff. The committee accepted the proposal and the ‘staff group’, open to all, met at first once and then twice a week. The clinic’s working process with fears of possible staff redundancies and demotions had created much acrimony, divisiveness, tension, anxiety and guilt. Bion’s group offered a collection of very disparate people, with different roles, aims and institutional relationships, the only occasion on which they could meet one another on equal terms. The group worked well for about a year. During this time the committee responsible for reorganization managed to find satisfactory solutions for most of the staff problems. As people began to find satisfactory solutions to their work problems they stopped attending the group, and it eventually stopped meeting because there were no more participants.

## THEORETICAL INNOVATIONS

After the war, the Tavistock Clinic was brought into the new National Health Service. Bion gave up most of his sessions there; he wanted independence. He also wanted to approach psychological problems on an individual basis. He resigned from most of his commitments at the Tavistock, but despite his withdrawal he had managed to develop a method of group therapy that was to have a tremendous influence there, and he had done so in the space of only a few years. His ‘bequest’ arrived at just the right time. While psychiatry was almost exclusively devoted to treating hospitalized patients, Bion developed a group technique that could, in some cases, replace psychotherapy.

Bion had organized the groups in early 1948. He had worked under the aegis of an institution that allowed him complete freedom. He had developed concepts that were foreign to psychoanalysis in two ways:

- first, the material observed was different;
- secondly, setting aside analytic theories of group formation, he could decide whether or not his own ideas were complementary to or in contradiction with existing theories.

He aimed to: ‘try to persuade groups composed of patients to make the study of group tensions a group task’ (1961, p. 29). The psychiatrist neither formulated

rules nor presented any agenda. With no other task before them, the group had time to participate in something akin to free association. The participants often turned to him, waiting for him to do something. As in psychoanalysis, Bion would respond to this demand with an interpretation. Having been placed at the centre of the group, he communicated his feelings to the other members.

This dynamic enabled verbal exchanges to take place between psychoanalyst and participants. Whenever he felt it appropriate, Bion would make an interpretation; he would try to express concisely the group's attitude towards him. He based his interpretations on this concept of the group's attitude towards an individual because people are influenced by: 'what we feel to be the attitude of a group to ourselves, and [how we] are consciously or unconsciously swayed by our idea of it'. Bion extended the scope of his interpretations when he considered that the same process was taking place in another member of the group. The emotional dynamic that is usually focused on the leader may also become displaced on to another member of the group. But before extending his theoretical concept of interpretation, Bion developed an entirely new concept of group dynamics.

## Group Mentality

Throughout his work Bion employs many visual and optical metaphors. Accounting for the emotional dynamic described above, he invokes his experience as a student of medicine observing a specimen under a microscope. On one focus setting one structure can be seen; by changing focus an entirely new formation can be discovered. Bion transposes this metaphor to the observation of emotional dynamics through a 'mental microscope'. A group mentality can be perceived, and the image of people meeting in order to resolve their emotional problems can also, at times, be perceived as a group mobilizing its hostility and contempt towards patients, and especially towards those patients who seriously wish to tackle the problem. But each individual member may deny any feeling of hostility, because the group facilitates anonymous expression of hostility. Every group has a mentality which is in contradiction to its conscious aims, and in contradiction to the conscious aims of the individuals that constitute it. The group's uniformity contrasts with the diversity of individuals' thoughts. 'Once he had identified this concept he was in possession of a referent for the group setting analogous to the unconscious in the individual setting' (Trist, in Pines [ed.] 1985, p. 32).

When individuals come together as a group, they create a ‘basic assumption’ by contributing selectively unconscious elements. This anonymous collaboration creates a group mentality which expresses the unanimous but unspoken aims and beliefs of the group. But this group mentality destroys any possibility of any individual privacy. Group mentality, typically, will not tolerate the fact that an individual member may derive satisfaction from anything other than what the group makes available to its members. This is what Bion calls group culture. Group culture is a function of the conflict between the individual’s needs and the group mentality. As an example of group culture, Bion describes the creation of a ‘miniature theocracy’ in which a leader is turned into a supreme being (the group mentality of children in a school playground), and another where all participants, including the leader, are deemed equal. The role of the therapist is to throw some light on to the emotional dynamic suffusing the group, usually one of tension and confusion. In order to describe the nature of the tensions Bion introduces a triad of concepts: individual, mentality and culture.

## ‘Basic Assumption’ and ‘Work’ Group

Working with the emotional life of groups, Bion was amazed at the futility of group conversations: ‘If judged by ordinary standards of social intercourse the performance of the group is almost devoid of intellectual content’ (1961, p. 39). So he focused on the emotional charges underlying verbal exchanges rather than their ‘contents’.

Drawing his hypothesis closer to his experience, Bion substitutes ‘desires’ for the ‘needs’ of his original formulation of group culture as a function of the conflict between individual and group mentality: ‘In the group mentality the individual finds a means of expressing the contributions which he wishes to make anonymously, and at the same time his greatest obstacle to the fulfilment of the aims he wishes to achieve by membership of the group’ (1961, pp. 52–3). Bion discovers that the ‘aims’ of group interaction can be categorized into three types of ‘basic assumption’, and an individual who contributes to the group mentality will feel uneasy whenever he thinks or acts in a way that does not accord with the basic assumption in play. Bion focused on identifying the types of basic assumptions to be found in groups. The new concepts derived partly from his previous experiences. Maintaining a tripartite structure, he extends its theoretical profile. By the end of his research Bion was convinced that in all groups there is an interaction between two levels of emotional activity. One of

these he calls the work group; the other he calls the basic assumption group.

The category ‘work group’ describes only one aspect of mental activity (it does not describe the individuals constituting the group). Even a random collection of individuals may come together to complete a task of some sort. All individual members of the group voluntarily co-operate with the necessary activities. All activity presupposes a contact with reality which requires respect for reality. As a consequence, the work group is characterized by its awareness of the dimension of time, and the need for progress. Characteristic of the work group are those features which Freud describes as characteristic of the ego.

Bion was concerned to identify those mental activities which impede, corrupt or sometimes support the rational group process. They derive from powerful emotional states which push the faculty of judgement into second place. At first sight these activities seem rather chaotic, but they acquire a certain coherence when they are understood as manifestations of the basic assumption held in common by all members of the group. It is not that members of the group create a basic assumption and all else follows from this; rather that ‘The emotional state exists first and the assumption follows from this’. The work group requires an aptitude for collaboration with other participants. The basic assumption group, by contrast, is held together by an automatic and involuntary participation of its members. To account for this Bion uses the concept of ‘valency’ as a description of an individual’s readiness to enter into combination with a group in making and acting on basic assumptions. An individual without valency would no longer be human.

The ‘basic assumption group’ does not recognize the passage of time, and understands little of whatever relates to time. It therefore rejects all processes of growth and development, which depend on changes in time, and in place of growth it offers the alternative of a feeling of increased vitality: ‘This longed for alternative to the group procedure is really something like arriving fully equipped as an adult fitted by instinct to know, without training or development, exactly how to live and move and have his being in a group’ (1961, p. 89).

Bion identifies three types of basic assumption group that may underlie the work group: the basic assumption may be one of dependence, pairing, or fight-flight.

In a group where the basic assumption is of dependence, the group seeks the support of a leader from whom it hopes to receive spiritual and material guidance, protection and nurture. It believes that all its needs can be satisfied by

one person, on whom it develops total dependence. Bion asks us to take this in a literal, not a metaphorical, sense. At first members of the group try to reinforce the idea that the group comprises a doctor and his patients. They insist that the doctor is the leader, and the only important person there. They feel cared for only when they are directly relating to the leader. If they are not relating, they feel frustrated and trapped in their need and hunger. For this type of group, power is something that is magical rather than scientific: the ideal leader is something of a sorcerer.

The second type of basic assumption concerns the group's aims in uniting. Bion was drawn to recognition of this problem by a recurring situation. The discussion would become monopolized by two people who would seem more or less to ignore the presence of other members of the group. From time to time the couple would exchange glances in such a way as to suggest an amorous relationship. In the meantime, their conversation was not very different, in its content, from other conversational exchanges in the group. While neurotics are usually very impatient with any activity that does not refer to their own problems, members of the group may accept this monopolization of the conversation by the couple with apparent ease.

Bion noticed that the gender of the individuals is of little significance to the basic assumption of the pairing in the group. Every time this relationship emerges, it seems to be a kind of sexual relationship. During this time a mood of irrational hope contrasts with the usual feelings of boredom and frustration, and the group develops a belief that a person or an idea will save it by making all difficulties disappear: 'For the feeling of hope to be sustained it is essential that the "leader" of the group, unlike the leader of the dependent group or the fight-flight group, should be unborn. It is a person or an idea that will save the group – in fact from feelings of hatred, destructiveness and despair, of its own or another group – but in order to be able to do this, obviously, the Messianic hope must never be fulfilled' (1961, p. 151).

In the third type of basic assumption, group members unite in order to fight against or escape from a threat. The group can opt for either activity with apparent indifference – hence the name 'fight-flight'. Group members accept a leader whose demands offer them opportunities for fighting or for evasion. In this type of situation a therapist will quickly realize that the group unites easily around any proposition that expresses violent rejection of all psychological

difficulty, or offers means of avoiding difficulty by creating an external enemy.

### The Proto-Mental System

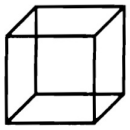
Bion was preoccupied with two questions concerning basic assumption groups.

The emotions associated with basic assumptions can be described in familiar terms, such as anxiety, fear, hatred, love. But these emotions affect one another when they are combined in a basic assumption. This means that anxiety, for example, as it is expressed in the dependence group, is different from its expression in the pairing group. The same holds true for other emotions and their combination: ‘In a word, the important thing is not the presence of such and such a feeling, such as security for example, but the way in which it combines with others.’ The first question concerns the nature and origin of psychological combinations. Bion wonders why it is that emotions can combine with a tenacity and exclusivity characteristic of chemical reactions.

There are no conflicts between the basic assumptions, and they can alternate easily within the same group. Conflict arises from the relationship between the basic assumption group and the rational (work) group. However, the emotional state associated with each of the basic assumptions excludes the emotions characteristic of the other basic assumptions. This leads Bion to his second question: What happens to the latent affects, the emotions belonging to the basic assumptions that are inactive in a group?

When a person joins a group, they try to identify themselves entirely with either the basic assumption or the rational structure. If a member identifies themselves with the basic assumption, they feel persecuted by what seems to them to be the arid intellectualism of the group (and especially interpretations). If the member identifies with the rationality of the group, they feel persecuted by internal objects. The emotional state of the group’s basic assumption cannot be acceptable to all concerned. The group process can support individuals only in detaching themselves from everything they find ‘bad’. The feelings which an individual seeks in a group exist only in combination with other feelings which may be less desirable to them, or even strongly disliked by them. The group therapist should allow himself to see all situations in a double psychological perspective. Bion illustrates this concept of the double perspective with the help of the diagram, first made by the Swiss crystallographer Wecker in 1832,

showing an ambiguous cubic structure. Perception of the figure can oscillate between a receding and a projecting perspective. According to the traditional perspective of cubic forms, the side closest to the spectator will be larger than the side farthest away. With a reversible cube, the spectator can focus on either of two squares as closest or farthest, because their size is identical. The spectator interprets the diagram in two ways simultaneously without being able to settle definitively on either.



Bion was not entirely satisfied with analogies from the psychology of perception; he was seeking a method analogous to mathematical formulae. Eventually he turned increasingly to mathematical models of psychic processes. At this stage he uses the mathematical ‘principle of duality’: ‘a system that proves the relationship in space of points, lines and planes, appears equally to prove the relationship of its dual in terms of planes, lines and points. In the group the psychiatrist should consider from time to time what is the dual of any emotional situation that he has observed’ (1961, p. 87). The basic assumptions no longer appear to the psychiatrist to be separate states of mind. Each of these states of mind, even when it can be fairly clearly differentiated from the other two, has a quality which makes it the ‘dual’ of one of the other two, or is an aspect of what he might have taken for another basic assumption.

Explaining the relationship of emotions to the basic assumption, Bion postulates the existence of a ‘proto-mental’ system: ‘the proto-mental system I visualize as one in which physical and psychological or mental are undifferentiated’. This system contains the prototypes of the three basic assumptions. ‘It is from this matrix that emotions proper to the basic assumption flow to reinforce, pervade and on occasion to dominate the mental life of the group’ (1961, p. 102). If the work group is infiltrated by emotions associated with the basic assumption dependence group, then the emotions characteristic of the other two (pairing and fight-flight) inoperative groups are confined to the proto-mental system. In this situation, only the proto-mental stage of the dependent group will have been allowed to develop into the differentiated state where its operation as a basic assumption can be observed by a therapist.

## The Specialized Work Group

Following Freud, Bion was interested in the group structure of the army and the Church. He conceived of these as specialized work groups. Some groups work with a task that is particularly likely to stimulate a basic assumption. However, the state of mind founded on a basic assumption cannot be expressed through action, as action requires maintaining contact with reality. Basic assumptions become dangerous in so far as an attempt is made to translate them into action. The specialized work group understands this threat as it attempts to invert the process; it attempts to translate action into terms of a basic assumption mentality.

The Church is usually susceptible to interferences from dependent group phenomena, and the army to those of the fight-flight phenomena. To maintain their rational functioning, they have to prevent their respective basic assumption group from being too active or exercising too much influence. A flourishing Church should strengthen itself with religious faith, while not becoming a basis of action. An efficient army must convey the message that its strength is invincible, while not trying to make use of it.

Bion suggests that the aristocracy performs the same function for the basic assumption pairing group as the army and the Church do for the other basic assumption groups. This subgroup connotes birth and breeding, and so provides expression of the desires of the basic assumption pairing group, without negating the rational activity of the group as a whole.

Changes in group mentality are not limited to moments at which one basic assumption replaces another; they may also take ‘aberrant’ forms. Sometimes the therapist’s interpretations do not satisfy the group. The group therefore begins to treat him as a child whose fantasies must be indulged. When the therapist no longer protests but nourishes the group, the group will nourish him and keep him alive.

The dependence group has as urgent a need for a dependent member as for a member on whom to depend. It has to recognize that its leader is mad, but is at the same time to be respected. The group can maintain this logic by oscillating between the two points of view. As the distance between the two points of view increases, the oscillations are increased and amplified. Sometimes the group loses control over the situation. With an explosive violence it extends itself to other groups until it has absorbed enough elements that are foreign to its own emotional atmosphere to decrease the tension of ambivalence.

Another form of aberration is splitting and schism. Schisms are the result of

the group's resistance to the need for growth. Depending on temperament, each member will adhere to one or other of the subgroups created by a schism. When one of the subgroups refuses to go any further, it appeals to the loyalty of the leader of the dependence basic assumption group. Another substitute for the leader may be found in turning to the group's history; minutes are taken, forming a sort of 'bible' which protects the group in its struggle against the threat of having to accept an idea which might require individual progress. Members of the subgroups invoke tradition, the Word of God or a deified person. They try to manipulate the leader so that being a member of the group requires no painful effort, and is a guarantee of popularity. By the exclusion of all feelings of discomfort, thought becomes stabilized at a level that tends towards platitude and dogma. The subgroup comprises converts to the new idea, but they become so dogmatic and so exacting in their demands that they cease to recruit new members. The two subgroups reach the same level, and conflict between them disappears: 'Schematically, the numerous schismatics are opposed by the numerically negligible schismatics, and both groups avoid the painful bringing together of the primitive and the sophisticated that is the essence of the developmental conflict' (1961, p. 159).

## RESPONSIBLE AND HISTORICAL THINKING

In January 1947 Bion read a paper to the Medical Section of the British Psychological Society as its president. His theme was the question of what psychiatry might have to offer Western society at a time of crisis. Although he was speaking of a world-view, Bion was mainly thinking about the British situation. Churchill had been beaten in the 1945 general election by a popular Labour victory. The ensuing social progress included the nationalization of a number of industries, the setting up of the National Health Service, a welfare state and a policy of voluntary decolonization of the British Empire. Bion's beloved India officially became independent in June 1947, the British Empire was disappearing, and the battle for world supremacy was divided between the USA and the USSR.

The lecture, published in 1948, was not included in the 1961 collection of papers entitled *Experiences in Groups*, although it does contain the beginnings of the theory of groups he was to develop later. Bion describes the contemporary crisis in Western society, and discusses the solutions that he saw as confronting all intellectuals. From the beginning of the twentieth century mankind enjoyed

the benefit of great technological progress which vastly improved the quality of daily life. However, the effect of technological advance on personal happiness remains debatable. Mankind has more or less succeeded in regulating external relations by means of law, but fails every time he tries to systematize a way of tackling the emotional tensions that underlie human relations.

Psychiatrists have made progress in the treatment of neurosis. Unfortunately, no therapeutic method has ever considered the group in the way that psychoanalysis considers the individual. The problem almost certainly lies in emotional factors. Bion suggests that the capacity for the acquisition of technical skills is to be considered separately from the capacity for full self-realization through emotion and intellect. Technical skills are easily communicated: a man of outstanding scientific creativity can convey a new technological capacity to thousands of colleagues very quickly. On the other hand, nobody has managed to communicate anything other than limited means of assuring man's emotional development. Imitation, in this sphere, is not of much use, and may even be dangerous if it creates false or imitative development. Hopes must rest on the development of a technique capable of facilitating emotional development, and it is this that psychological institutions should offer a society in crisis.

It is not only technological changes that affect emotional development – some forms of social organization also disturb many people. If they are to develop fully, people must have the scope for building personal relationships. The Greek metropolis allowed its inhabitants to participate fully in social life. Our perspective on Greek metropolitan life is perhaps an idealization rather than a historical reality, but it may none the less enable us to establish a criterion of the psychological health of a community: 'In the small community, it is possible for men to exercise their special talents without being condemned to the frustration and the atrophy of their other desires' (1948, p. 85).

Bion had started the gestation of these thoughts during his experiences in the Second World War. As a psychiatrist he had been able to recognize that the majority of patients belonged to the category of 'psychologically underprivileged' people. Of course it might be that these were people who deprived themselves of a wide range of personal relationships, but it might also be that the type of education they received at home and at school was largely responsible for this systematic deprivation. When a state of deprivation arises, a certain satisfaction can be found in renouncing the satisfaction of the frustrated desire, but this kind of renunciation can never really be successful, because the repressed desire will return in some form or other.

Bion's general thinking in this period, with the theory of group formation and the themes of social and historical issues, was influenced by the work of Arnold Toynbee.[11] As soon as he began to think seriously about group dynamics, Bion was influenced by Toynbee, who had posited the concept of an unknown factor, apparently of a psychological nature, operating in the growth of civilizations. Bion considered that he had been able to identify this unknown factor: it consists in the individual's capacity to form personal relationships, and in the quality of those relationships. When a community exists within a context of generosity, it will be able to recognize that leisure is important. Leisure in no way connotes a pleasant absence of work but a 'dynamic state of personal relationships which, properly produced and used, is one of the most potent forces in psychiatric investigation' (1948, p. 87).

Bion illustrates this with an example from his leaderless group technique. He cites the moment at which the group waits, without having any specific task to which it must apply itself, for consciousness of personal relations to enter into the mind of each member. In this situation, when the survival of the community is not imposing any particular task on the group, the unknown quality characteristic of groups and civilizations can be found. This idea that the threat to contemporary civilization is something that emerges from unconscious emotional drives, rather than from the environment, is one that had been proposed earlier by Freud, Jung, Adler and their followers.

As a historian Toynbee was searching for a quality that was self-sufficient 'and which consequently remains more or less intelligible when isolated from the rest of history'. In contrast to the contemporary convention of historical writing, according to which the nation was taken as the historical unit, Toynbee chose to work with a structure rather more inclusive than the nation-state, and used the term 'civilization'.

The nineteenth-century study of neurosis had foundered on the fact that neurosis tended to be studied simply as the suffering of the individual. When Freud began to formulate an explanation derived from an interpersonal as well as an intrapersonal dynamic, he discovered the perspective from which many of the problems raised by neurosis became intelligible and could be deciphered. Bion followed the same intellectual trajectory – looking for solutions for neurotic distress, as Freud did, but substituting the group dynamic for the two-person interpersonal relationship.

In order to reach a general view of history, Toynbee had to relinquish

contemporary historical method, in which all historical causality is structured by the perspective of the historian who is writing. He could not accept the apparent ‘givens’ of history, but had to rethink their conditions of existence. To compare several concurrent series of events requires a synoptic perspective, which can be derived only from a comparative method of study. In order to make comparisons, Toynbee needed to identify categories and types of civilization. It was to this end that he introduced the concept of the ‘external model’. In order to classify his historical material, Toynbee identified twenty-one civilizations at the start of his study, and thirty-one by its conclusion, which could be categorized in terms of three external models: the Hellenic, the Chinese and the Judaic. Bion adopted this comparative method, and the concept of the external model was – in a different form – to play an important part in the epistemological period of his work. Although Bion never cites Toynbee as an influence, he seems to have duplicated his structure in his theory of the three models of the basic assumption group underlying all group structure.

From the earliest days, Hellenic civilization was divided by tensions between political pluralism and cultural unity. Although they shared a similar culture, many sovereign states were at war with one another. In Graeco-Roman civilizations, mankind sought the potential creativity of a system of great independence and great regional diversity. But the cost of such a system is permanent conflict – when such conflict becomes too intense, society seeks peace in unity. According to Bion, the group characterized by the fight-flight basic assumption tries to resolve its problems by fighting. Historically, this predicament is ended only when each national group is absorbed by an element which is foreign to their indigenous emotional structure, such as the Roman Empire.

As the historical dynamic of classical Antiquity does not provide a model for all civilizations, Toynbee also proposed the Chinese model. Chinese history comprises a succession of historical eras in which the ideal is the universal State, punctuated by intermediate stages of disorder and discord. Within the Chinese model the so-called ‘civilized’ man strives to maintain a social unity, and to rebuild it whenever it is fragmented or ruptured. This rebuilding avoids the struggle and disruption caused by fragmentation. When a group is dominated by the basic assumption of dependence, it seeks security and hopes to protect its members from the emotional experiences characteristic of other basic assumption groups. The establishment of a universal State usually erases the identity of the other states it incorporates.

Despite having no state and no territory, the Jewish community maintained its unity and its historical continuity. Since Jewish history is not the only civilization in diaspora to have responded in this way, Toynbee calls this type of civilization the Jewish model. A community of this type conserves its identity despite diaspora and deracination. The Jewish community achieved this by strict adherence to religious ritual. It did not seek to merge into the surrounding majority, believing itself to be in possession of a unique religious revelation. Finally, it always made every effort to gather the economic resources necessary for survival. In the Jewish model, culture seeks to protect the faith of the ‘chosen people’ while the rest of society resigns itself to the fusion of national identities in ecumenical unity. The basic assumption of pairing is always accompanied by feelings of hope: a person or an idea will come to save the group. But to fulfil this role, the messianic hope must never be actualized; it must remain a potential.

# 7 The Kleinian Psychoanalyst

Apart from his theories of group structure, Bion always maintained a psychoanalytic frame of reference. It is not surprising that he finally entered the analytic fold. However, he entered it in two stages. In the last essay of *Experiences in Groups* (first published in *Human Relations*, vols I-VII, 1948–51) he starts by setting out his own theories in relation to Freud, then demonstrates how the discoveries of Melanie Klein allowed him to find new solutions to the problems.

## THE FREUDIAN

It is extraordinary that Bion, who was still unknown in psychoanalytic circles, treated Freud's work on group behaviour with such 'familiarity'. He addressed Freud as if he were an equal, as if he were in discussion with a colleague from the Tavistock Clinic. Bion did not avoid direct criticism of Freud's theories if he considered it necessary.

With his analytic experience Freud had tried, in 1921, to cast some light on the more obscure points in the work of Le Bon, McDougall and others who had written on group psychology. They suggested that group psychology was a specific response to the situation in which a number of people are brought together at the same time and in the same place. Bion, on the other hand, thought that the external situation is not necessary except in so far as it permits the observation of the phenomena manifested in group behaviour. The situation is of interest because it is the framework within which group dynamics, expressed as relations between individuals, can be observed. The members of a group should be close enough to the therapist for the latter to make an interpretation without raising his voice. If all participants are to be able to observe the interactions on which the therapist is basing his interpretations, spatial dispersal must be limited.

Similarly, all participants must be present at the same time. However, the assembling of individuals does not in itself create group formation, nor does it add anything to the structure of individual psychology. For Bion, the idea that the assembling of a group is what creates the phenomena of group formation is erroneous. The error issues from the belief that something begins only when its existence can be demonstrated.

In fact, no individual, however isolated, can exist outside a group, nor be free from the effects of group behaviour. An individual cannot be understood except in terms of the group and the society in which he lives. Yet few mistakes are made in psychoanalysis when group phenomena are not explicitly taken into account, as analyst and patient share many group dynamics between them.

For Bion, group analysis allows a greater understanding of the analytic situation. Psychoanalysis can be thought of as a work group with a predisposition to a basic assumption of coupling. Also, psychoanalysis has a tendency to accord sexuality a determining role in human imagination and thought. Naturally, it is assumed that two people can meet only for sexual reasons. Freud assumed that the link uniting the couple is libidinal in nature; but Bion suggests that even if this is true of the basic assumption pairing group, it is not so evidently true of the basic assumption dependence and fight-flight groups.

Therefore, Bion felt that it was necessary to use more neutral terms to describe the links between individuals and groups. We have shown that two types of mental processes can be found here. In the work group, which operates through rational processes, the term co-operation seems most appropriate for describing the nature of these links. As we have seen, Bion uses the term ‘valency’ to describe individuals’ instinctive capacity to unite according to the basic assumptions. Freud revolutionized the treatment of neurosis by acknowledging its origins in the individuals’ object relations rather than in the idea of the individual as an entity in itself; but according to Bion, he was not fully able to apply this revolutionary approach to the theory of group psychology. By observing a group, the focus of study is simply widened to include phenomena other than intrapsychic processes. In other words, the difference between group psychology and individual psychology is only illusory. The group provides a focus of study in which certain aspects of individual, intrapsychic phenomena are made more distinct.

In many cases Bion felt that a correct interpretation has the effect of bringing the behaviour of a group closer to the reactions found in a family situation. In

other words, Freud's idea that the family group is the basic prototype of all groups seemed to him to have some basic validity, but it seemed inadequate in that it left obscure the origins of some of the most powerful emotional forces in a group.

The more stable the group, the more it reflects the Freudian view. The more disturbed the group, the closer it approaches the mechanisms and primitive phantasies described by Melanie Klein. Freud considered group psychology from the starting point of whole-object relations and neurotic defences, whereas Bion considered the group in terms of part-objects and more psychotic defences. It seems that although he wanted to liberate himself from being constrained by existing theories, Bion was hesitant to begin a Copernican revolution in which family life and psychoanalysis would be specific examples of a more generalized group dynamic.

## KLEIN'S STUDENT

By publishing his article 'Group dynamics: a review' in the issue of the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* dedicated to Melanie Klein in 1952, Bion participated in a celebrated event.[12] From the outset he states his theoretical position: 'In this article I shall briefly summarize some theories at which I have arrived by applying to groups, in which I was participating, the intuitions developed by present day psychoanalytic training' (1952, p. 253). By the time the article was republished in *Experiences in Groups*, Bion had become even more explicit about his theoretical direction: 'I propose to discuss the bearing of modern developments of psycho-analysis, in particular those associated with the work of Melanie Klein' (1961, p. 141).

The problem in question was that of the aspects of group psychology that had not been fully analysed by Freud. Bion's tone and attitude towards Freud had undergone a great change since his previous article. As a result of his official affiliation with Melanie Klein, he seemed to be revisiting his true ancestry. Now, Bion identified himself as a descendant of Klein who, in turn, saw herself as extending the work of the founder of psychoanalysis.

An individual seeking to join the emotional life of a group makes efforts as formidable as an infant seeking the mother's breast. If these efforts are frustrated, they regress: 'The belief that a group exists, as distinct from an aggregate of individuals, is an essential part of this regression, as are the characteristics with which the supposed group is endowed by the individual'

(1961, p. 142).

The individual constructs a fantasy of the existence of the group as they lose the sense of ‘individual distinctiveness’ and experience something indistinguishable from depersonalization. In order for a group to exist, the members must have experienced this regression, which prevents them from seeing it as a collection of individuals. When the individuals constituting the group are threatened with being made aware of their individuality, the group enters a state of panic. Bion agreed with Freud that the phenomenon of a group, crowd or mass is not in itself capable of creating a new instinct in human psychology. He counters all theories which suggest that the group is larger than the sum of its parts. It is easier to demonstrate and observe group behaviour when the individuals are united: ‘I think it is this increased ease of observation and demonstration that is responsible for the idea of a herd instinct, such as Trotter postulates’ (1961, p. 169).[13] Whereas the work group can apply itself to various tasks, the basic assumption group must essentially be explored by an analytic method. Since the basic assumptions are interconnected, and even seem to represent different facets of one another, psychoanalysis should be able to understand them in terms of a yet more fundamental structure. The phenomena associated with basic assumptions are analogous to defences against psychotic anxiety. At a certain point we find that the characteristics of the three basic assumptions are analogous to the three positions of a person in an oedipal predicament: for example, the leader of the fight-flight group sometimes resembles the dangerous father. But the analogy is not complete: ‘The relationship appears to be between the individual and the group. But the group is felt as one fragmented individual with another, hidden, in attendance’ (1961, p. 161). When the analyst suggests that the group itself should become the object of investigation, he provokes primitive anxieties. In the minds of group members these anxieties are close to the earliest phantasies of the contents of the mother’s body: ‘It will be seen from this description that the basic assumptions now emerge as formations secondary to an extremely early primal scene’ (1961, p. 164).[14] The concept of the primal scene used by classical psychoanalysis does not seem to account entirely for group dynamics. In groups the scene seems bizarre; it ‘seems to be that a part of one parent, the breast or the mother’s body, contains among other objects a part of the father’ (1961, p. 164). Seen as a link between part-objects, this version of the primal scene is associated with psychotic anxiety, and the primitive defences of splitting and projective identification as described by Melanie Klein.

The more powerful the group's basic assumption, the less it makes rational use of verbal communication. Klein underlines the significance of symbol formation in individual development, analysing the way certain individuals become unable to make or use symbols. Influenced by a basic assumption, all group members behave as if they are unable to use symbols. The group will be unaware of the fact that symbols are used for communication: 'Instead of developing language as a method of thought, the group uses an existing language as a mode of action' (1961, p. 186).

Bion's concept of the leader is different from that of Freud and his predecessors. Because Freud considered identification only as a form of introjection, he conceived of the leader as someone whose personality marks and influences the group. He compares the leader to a hypnotist. Bion, however, considers the leader as a creation of the basic assumption, as are all the other members of the group. He could not exist otherwise, as the members' identification with the leader is created not only through introjection but also through projection. The leader does not influence the group through a strong will and dominance, but tends to efface his own personality to satisfy the demands of the basic assumption group. The description of the leader seems to be a mixture of basic assumption and work group phenomena. It may happen that one person can simultaneously satisfy the demands of the basic assumption and retain contact with external reality, but it can also happen that an individual is endowed with all the prestige of being a work group leader simply because he is a vehicle for the emotions of the basic assumption group. This accounts for some of the disasters into which groups have been led by leaders whose qualities seem to be devoid of substance once the emotion prevalent at their prime dies down.

Bion states that 'In group treatment many interpretations, and amongst them the most important, have to be made on the strength of the analyst's own emotional reactions' (1961, p. 149). The analyst functions, in effect, as the recipient of the projective identification described by Klein in 1946 (Klein, 1946). This defence mechanism, which plays such an important part in group dynamics, provokes emotional reactions in the analyst. Bion was part of the group which, in the 1950s, encouraged the use of the countertransference as the starting point of interpretations.[15] An experienced analyst recognizes when he is the object of projective identification. He senses that the patient is trying to manipulate him to make him enact a role in his fantasies. At that point he feels violent emotions, while he is convinced that they are objectively justified by the situation. The analyst manages to transcend this impasse by unburdening himself

of the paralysing feelings of reality. If he achieves this, he perceives the relationship with the preceding interpretation whose validity he had been led to doubt.

By this time Bion seemed to have come a very long way from the optimism he had expressed at the outset of his group projects. With hindsight, his experiences confirmed that there could be no scientific justification for calling his group treatment psychoanalysis. A person engaged in group therapy must be able to hope that their initiative will bring about some healing or progressive change. Almost all patients in groups are convinced that the group is of no value as treatment, then their participation convinces them that their prejudices are justified. In the group they discover a total and real indifference towards – even hatred of – each other. Bion considered Ernest Jones's idea that 'group psychoanalysis' might even be no more than an ingenious form of resistance to the unconscious. He wondered whether it would be possible to test this idea in a group composed of people who had either been psychoanalysed or were being analysed as individuals. He was aware that he was a group therapist who had been trained on the job, and that he had never had a training in group therapy himself. He nevertheless maintained the illusion that the group process would be different in groups of individuals who had previously been psychoanalysed as individuals. Bion finally allowed the matter to rest in the judgement of the individual who might test their ideas and theories in the groups encountered in everyday life.

## WITH HINDSIGHT

Bion was interested in group dynamics throughout his life, even though he did not use his direct experiences in groups as a basis for theory and writing after the 1940s. In a letter written on 17 October 1977, he confirmed: 'I have not abandoned groups but the urgency of work to be done with individual analyses leaves me no time for anything else'. In 1961 he allowed his articles on groups to be reprinted in their original form. By this time he was intensely preoccupied with disturbances of thought, and was completing the work of theorizing psychosis. Also at this time he was preparing the publication of the first of the books that we have classified as belonging to the 'epistemological period' of his work. In retrospect, there were to be no further writings on the themes of the 'group period'. We can see, however, that Bion brought to his subsequent work the perspectives developed in this period of working with groups. The

conceptual wealth and fertility of the group period consist in its theoretical synthesis; concepts such as the basic assumption, the proto-mental system, span the differences between the work of historians such as Toynbee and psychoanalysts such as Klein. Beyond his interest in therapeutic groups, Bion had discovered a consuming interest in the theory of knowledge and philosophy. He began a synthesis of all these aspects of his intellect, later publishing an book subtitled 'The scientific approach to intuitive understanding in psychoanalysis and in groups' (1970).

When his early papers were published under the title *Experiences in Groups* in 1961, Bion added a preface. He was now writing as a psychoanalyst, and in his analytic work he had been struck by the feeling that individual analysis and group analysis are tackling different facets of the same phenomenon. By this he meant that it is in the nature of the analytically orientated person to identify with different aspects of those situations in which interpersonal relationships are activated.

The phenomena observed in such situations can be understood in two ways, depending on the observer's perspective. In the first view, what is foregrounded is the oedipal relation of the 'pairing group' basic assumption; in the second, it is the problem of self-knowledge, as symbolized by the mythical figure of the Sphinx. Bion refers to the figure of the Sphinx when he sets out the principles of basic assumption groups, identifying the predicament in which the work group, and its leader, are feared as being enigmatic and sinister, and all spirit of enquiry manifested in the group unleashes feelings of terror, like the terror of Thebes before the Sphinx in the Oedipus myth.

In the 'group period' Bion writes in an open and accessible style, reflecting his direct access to fundamental human experience and his desire to share it. Problems arise when he tries to evoke for his readers the atmosphere of a particular group, often immersing them in the group's feelings of frustration, exasperation, humiliation, rage and, especially, boredom. The reader, in turn, follows the same solitary and thankless path as the author. The only way out of the impasse with the group is to identify oneself with the author, from whose perspective the interaction is described. Bion's prose style often reflects a highly unusual turn of mind. It is hardly surprising to find that participants in his groups often felt as if they were faced with a sphinx. Even when the enigma is not that of human mortality, illness and anxiety can become the price to be paid for avoiding intellectual constriction. As readers our source of guidance is the author, who remains as inaccessible, enigmatic and mysterious as the Sphinx. In

this respect we are in much the same position as the participants in the groups, being ‘led’ by someone who seems to be wanting to extract the maximum amount of personal effort from them.

Bion often plays with ambiguity, and the reader may remain in a state of uncertainty, or begin to think for himself, while awaiting the author’s enlightenment. Bion’s readers are subjected to this textual process from his very first article, where he considers the question of the kind of discipline needed by neurotics. He decides that it must depend on the presence of (1) an experienced officer without fear or blame; and (2) a common enemy. Bion’s readers are then left to speculate on the meaning of this until the following page, where he explains that even hospitalized soldiers remain under attack from ‘the common enemy, which is the existence of neurosis as a disability of the community’ (1961, p. 13).

Another textual strategy much employed by Bion in his epistemological period is borrowing a technical term from another discipline, so that the word used in a psychoanalytic context remains surrounded by the ‘associative penumbra’ of its original context. As we have seen, for example, he uses the term ‘valency’ to describe the type of relationship which accounts for the pull of the basic assumption group. Valency was originally taken from chemistry, where it is used to describe the number of bonds that an atom or molecule may make with other elements in a chemical change. This kind of thinking manages to convey the stranger aspects of reality, but it may also create a sense of uneasiness and suspicion. In the opening sentence of the first of the articles to be printed in *Human Relations*, for example, Bion writes: ‘It was disconcerting to find that the committee [the Professional Committee of the Tavistock Clinic] seemed to believe that patients could be cured in such groups as these. It made me think at the outset that their expectations of what happens in groups of which I was a member were very different from mine. Indeed, the only cure of which I could speak with certainty was related to a comparatively minor symptom of my own – a belief that groups might take kindly to my efforts’ (1961, p. 29). According to Freud, humour is pleasurable in so far as it saves us from emotional work. Humour is not only liberating, like other forms of wit; it also has something of the sublime. The sublime in humour is a product of the way in which humour brings about a triumph of narcissism.

At his age, Bion was coming to terms with the inevitability of death, having witnessed the death of so many of his fellow soldiers and of his wife. The introduction of death into his psychological work gives his writing, from the

very beginning, a tragic and philosophical element. His concentration of thought and his capacity for working through enabled Bion to transform a private preoccupation into an intellectual project, through years of silent work. It is difficult, and perhaps impossible, to reconstruct the threads of his systematic yet audacious thought: it is a thinking which frequently retraces its path to transform the thread of continuity, which then may re-emerge suddenly at a further point.

# PART 3:
# UNDERSTANDING PSYCHOSIS

As soon as he was able to return to the solitude of the consulting room and private practice, Bion began a study of the psychotic personality. Between 1950 (The imaginary twin') and 1958b ('Attacks on linking'), Bion wrote a series of extraordinarily original papers, which he presented at international congresses and published in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*. His originality lay in the emphasis he placed on the relationship between thought and language in psychosis, and his new ideas in the analytic study of psychoses earned him lasting recognition as a pioneer in the field. With hindsight, these papers might be considered the starting point of his theory of thinking and thus of the third, 'epistemological', period of his work. 'A theory of thinking' (1962a) indeed marks the beginning of the epistemological period rather than the closure of the period during which he explores psychosis.

During this decade Bion considered himself first and foremost a Kleinian: 'Even when I do not make specific acknowledgement of the fact, Melanie Klein's work occupies a central position in my view of the psychoanalytic theory of schizophrenia' (1953/4, p. 23; 1967a, p. 23). Here Bion tackles the problems of thought disturbances which are connected to instinctual activity. Over and above Klein's work, his was securely anchored in Freud's theory of the psychic apparatus as organized by the reality principle. Freud had identified the hatred of reality as a characteristic of psychosis, and Klein links this to phantasies of attacks against the breast. Bion adds that the sadistic disequilibrium described here cannot help but affect the thought processes of the psychotic.

It would be incorrect to think of the psychotic period of Bion's work as simply a preparatory stage. Bion was no less creative in his work on psychosis than in his later project on psychoanalytic epistemology. He simply had a different

perspective in these earlier writings. Far from feeling oppressed by the history of psychoanalysis, Bion made good use of Freud's legacy, especially as augmented by Klein, to facilitate his own new departure. Eventually he formulated a theory of schizophrenic psychosis which is still used by most Kleinians today. In the next period he was to develop a model for explaining psychoanalytic understanding itself.

# 8 With Melanie Klein

In 1945 Bion began an analysis with Melanie Klein which was to last until 1953. In the course of these eight years a number of important changes took place in his life. Once he was accepted by the British Psycho-Analytical Society as a member, he began to be identified, through his writing and his presentations, as a brilliant student of Klein. He found a new psychic equilibrium – he married for a second time, and flourished in the presence of a very understanding partner. He was able to find Parthenope again, and to father two more children. It was during this time that Bion prepared to publish his work on group dynamics, as well as his first articles on psychosis. Psychoanalysis had awakened in him a deep creativity which was to stay with him until the end of his life.

## CHOOSING A GROUP

Bion went for analysis to the leader of one of the three major analytic groups of the British Society: Melanie Klein. Before leaving Austria, Klein had been analysed by two of the leading analysts of that generation: Sándor Ferenczi and Karl Abraham. Both had encouraged her to specialize in the analysis of children, and it was her pioneering work in this field that led to her election as a member of the Hungarian Society at the end of the First World War. At this time Bion was just embarking on his studies at Oxford, where he was to read history. A few years after settling in Berlin, Klein had developed a technique of analysing children through play. It was because of these innovations that Jones invited her, in 1926, to settle in London.

Her book *The Psycho-Analysis of Children* was widely recognized as the work of an original mind (Klein, 1932). It was the first systematic account of her understanding of early childhood, and engendered as much curiosity as criticism from analysts, who welcomed the rich and intuitive description of infantile

fantasy. Klein had located the onset of the Oedipus complex at an early age; thus she tended to find this structure in almost every stage of a child's development. In this, she proved herself almost more 'Freudian' than the founder of psychoanalysis himself. The idea of infantile sexuality was no longer quite as shocking as it had been, but Klein's work caused controversy because of her emphasis on the role of the death instinct in mental life and development. With her views on the phase of sadism at its height, readers could begin to intuit the central place that she was to accord the death instinct in her work. The first Kleinian system in fact contains the seeds of the concepts that were to surpass it. At this time there seemed to be a parallel between the development of the British Psycho-Analytical Society and that of Melanie Klein and her ideas; she felt at home in this organization, which stimulated her work and co-operated with her.[16]

Until the point at which Klein read her paper on the psychogenesis of manic-depressive states, there was a 'British School of psychoanalysis' which was not so very different from the Vienna and Berlin schools. Within this school the members were more or less in agreement with some – or all – of Klein's theories to date. In her paper written in 1935 Klein introduced the concept of the depressive position, and it was this paper which can be seen, retrospectively, to have initiated a historical split. By 1940, when Klein further elaborated this concept in relation to mourning, reparation and creativity, the split was even more pronounced. Klein thought of herself as a faithful follower of Freud – perhaps, even, his most faithful follower – yet she had developed a theory and a technique of analysis that were quite different from his. Not only did she claim to describe the unconscious life of very young children; she also claimed that there was psychosis in all of us.

The tension grew, owing to the historical events of the Nazi persecution, which brought many analysts from Vienna and Berlin over to London. Now the Controversial Discussions between Anna Freud and Melanie Klein began to dominate the British Society. Faced with uncompromising partisans, many analysts became unequivocally opposed to Klein's ideas, but the outbreak of the Second World War cast a different perspective on the controversies. If Klein had broken away from Freud by distorting rather than developing his work, then she – like Adler, Jung and Rank – should be excluded from the British Society.

The famous Controversial Discussions which took place in 1943 and 1944 eventually gave rise to the formation of a Kleinian School within the British

Society. This series of discussions meant that Klein and her followers had to formulate their ideas much more rigorously. At the time when Bion was looking for an analyst, the British Psycho-Analytical Society comprised three groups – one following the work of Anna Freud, one led by Melanie Klein, and a third comprising the majority of analysts who could accept only part of Klein's discoveries. The training regulations had been altered to allow students to follow specific groups and affiliations of their choice. This reorganization proved a positive change for Klein. She was surrounded by a group of loyal followers, and she had a forum within which to present her research.

Bion started his analysis when Kleinian analysis was reaching its definitive state. In one of her most important papers, 'Notes on some schizoid mechanisms' (1946), Klein had described the development of the phase preceding the depressive position, calling it the paranoid-schizoid phase. It predominates in the first three or four months of life, and may emerge again in childhood and in the regression of adults with paranoid or schizophrenic psychoses. The discovery of a concomitant defence mechanism, named projective identification, was to enable Kleinians to understand the pathology of schizophrenia and borderline disorders. The play therapy developed with young children had also helped to extend the terms of the analysis of adults. Bion made an excellent choice in selecting Melanie Klein as his training analyst. Not only could she appreciate the suffering of his infantile self, because of her extensive experience with children, but she was also unlikely to be hampered by his narcissistic and schizoid defences, as these were the areas of her own research.

In 1952 Klein and her close collaborators published an anthology of their research, *Developments in Psycho-Analysis*,[17] in which they set out a general theory of the early development of the mind in the first years of life, and the pathological forms of such development. The theory of drives accounted for the dynamics of anxiety, and object relations and defence mechanisms were explained in terms of fantasy. It was just before Bion terminated his analysis with Klein that she made the clearest, most systematic and comprehensive account of her theory of the developmental positions. The centrality of the depressive position remained her most fundamental principle. The structure of the personality depends on the way in which object relations become integrated into this position.

Do training candidates avoid the real issues at stake in the termination of their analysis by the act of becoming a member of the same society themselves? The

question was a serious one for Bion. In the same year as he finished his psychoanalysis with Klein, his article ‘Group dynamics: a review’ was given a prominent place in the issue of the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* dedicated to her. He remained a loyal follower for many years, declaring his allegiance in his international papers and talks.

As soon as Kleinian thought had developed a systematic theory, Kleinians began to apply this to cultural, social and intellectual phenomena. They considered that a theory could be tested only by being applied. Bion set out to test the ‘scientific theory’ that Klein had derived from research into infant development in the field of group dynamics. He confirmed that the way in which a baby manages to master the life-and-death struggle between conflicting drives is an illustration of collective unconscious life. He discovered that the basic assumptions arise as secondary manifestations of an archaic fantasy of the primal scene: ‘Basic assumption phenomena are characteristic of defences against psychotic anxiety, which is not so much a contradiction of Freud’s ideas but rather an extension of them’(1961, p. 130).

## PERSONAL COMMITMENT

Bion did not only choose a leader of a school of thought, he became involved with a person. He had read some of Klein’s work before asking her for an interview, and had soon realized that they shared deep concerns, even though his interests had initially been explored from a different direction. In history, literature and group dynamics he had been searching for elemental and primitive emotions, underlying psychotic structures, the anguish of early childhood. These intellectual affinities were fuelled by irrational sympathies and antipathies. Bion had the opportunity to see and hear Klein speak before deciding on a training analyst. She seemed to be ‘a handsome, dignified and somewhat intimidating woman’ (Bion, 1985, pp. 66–7). Nobody would deny that Melanie Klein was an unusual person. Nevertheless, it is still difficult to perceive the person herself, because of the aura of fragmented contradictions that surrounds her name, an aura created by both her disciples and her opponents. Bion had a better opportunity than most to experience her person and her aura, as he visited her often after his long analysis with her. But the dynamic between them was so intense that he seems even more subjective in his judgements than others who retained a greater distance.

It would have taken a woman of Melanie Klein’s calibre to embark on an