BION’S DREAM
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A reading of the autobiographies

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KARNAC
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To Francesca Bion
I am: therefore I question. It is the answer—the “yes, I know”—that is the disease which kills . . . The song the sirens sing, and always have sung, is that the arrival at the inn—not the journey—is the reward, the prize, the heaven, the cure.

[Wilfred Bion, *All My Sins Remembered*]

I know nothing. I ask. When one replies to me, I mark what is said In bone and artery. Blood says: this is true, And that’s but a mask.

[Roland Harris, “I ask a fresh vision”]
Introduction

From the time of Transformations (1965), Bion began to integrate his earlier work on groups with his quest to understand the individual psyche, and it became increasingly clear that this is an aesthetic quest. The individual is himself a “group of thoughts and feelings” and the method of psychoanalysis is to discern and describe their “underlying pattern”: “I wonder what I do when trying to draw an analysand’s attention to a pattern” (Bion, 1991, p. 213). In the realm of aesthetic patterns, “Psychoanalysis is just a stripe on the coat of the tiger. Ultimately it may meet the Tiger—the Thing Itself—O” (ibid., p. 112). The “ferocious animal Absolute Truth” may not be capturable, but the “great hunters” of psychoanalytic intuition can interpret from shadowy glimpses, provided they are free to have nightmares rather than being confined to “the pale illumination of daylight” (pp. 5, 239).

Bion’s autobiographical narratives A Memoir of the Future (1975–1979) and The Long Week-End (1982), together with its sequel All My Sins Remembered (1985), are the key to his self-analysis of internal groupings and their shifting patterns. These books, therefore, represent the most finely honed examples of his teaching method. The “model of actual physical warfare” may be used as a
storyline, but the real subject is always the “war of the mind”, and “from that warfare there is no release”—a phrase from “before psychoanalysis was even thought of” (Bion, 2005a, p. 93). At the end of his life, he strove to present not just his life-story, and not just his thoughts, but his mode of thinking, in terms of an internal conversation which might be sufficiently realistic in its form as to become “audible to others” (1991, p. 113). His ambition is none other than to dramatize the process of thinking itself: the type of thinking which, however imperfectly, “shapes the thinker”, and whose reality is seen rather in the changing shape of a mind than in any theory, message, or summary of experience.

Looking back over his own romance with psychoanalysis, Bion tells us that instead of “feeling-it-in-the-past” as with his first analyst, he realized he needed to know how to deal with his feelings of the present; this meant getting back in touch with his native “spark of sincerity” (Bion, 1985, p. 45). He compares his mind to a smouldering fire awaiting reignition:

Don’t interrupt [Bion says to himself]; I’m thinking. It would be useful if I could search through the debris of my mind, the ashy remnants of what once was a flaming fire, in the hope of revealing some treasure which would reconstitute a valuable piece of wisdom—a spark amidst the ashes that could be blown into a flame at which others could warm their hands. [ibid., p. 31]

He offers his own mind as a potential fount of vitality at which others might “warm their hands” if they, too, can seek out the generative spark of sincerity, coextensive—he says—with the “sleeping beauty” of psychoanalysis itself.

The Long Week-End has joined the classic narratives of the First World War and is easy to read and empathize with; but the Memoir is probably still, as Francesca Bion has said, the least understood of Bion’s works. As my mother, Martha Harris, has written:

[Bion’s] own intuitive thinking was so far in advance of anyone else’s in our field that its seminal effect can only begin to be felt. Such is the impact of A Memoir of the Future, which traces the complex mind in action, talking from many vertices, from the whole gamut of his years—the foetus in the womb to the 77-year-
old . . . it presents the living drama of his internal history; amusing, argumentative, profound, puzzling, always unexpected, sometimes blindingly, obviously true. [1980; Harris, 1987a, p. 344]

The Memoir, described as a “fictitious account of psychoanalysis” (Bion, 1991, p. 4) is clearly and explicitly an artificial dream, searching for aesthetic form in a genre of its own. It is Em-mature’s “psycho-embryonic attempt to write an embryo-scientific account of a journey from birth to death” (p. 429). The story covers an entire lifetime and yet, in another sense—like William Golding’s dream of a drowning man, Pincher Martin—could be taken as dreamed in an instant. As T. S. Eliot put it:

We had the experience but missed the meaning,
And approach to the meaning restores the experience
In a different form, beyond any meaning
We can assign to happiness. [“The Dry Salvages”, ll. 93–96]

The meaning lies in the process as aesthetic object—the “living drama of an internal history”—not the accidents of life, but their usage as a metaphorical representation of mental life. It is the dreamed meaning that has a “seminal effect” and that ignites sparks in other people and engages their own self-analytic “restorative experience”.

Something of this “dreamed” quality inheres also in the more literal autobiographies, by contrast with Bion’s war diaries, for example. These, too, are essentially internal narratives: as Bion says, “I write about ‘me’” (1982, p. 8). In this lies their universal and psychological (as distinct from historical) interest. In a piece of dialogue between internal voices in Sins, Bion says:

I think you’ve got it muddled up.  
I don’t mind if I have because I’m not telling the story of my life. Those who want to write the story of their lives have a problem: that problem is not mine. [1985, p. 33]

The statement (from one part of himself) that he is not telling the story of his life may appear obscure, until we recognize that his main concern in writing the narrative is to do with living his life in the present; as he explains elsewhere:
The reason why we concern ourselves with things that are remembered, with our past history, is not because of what it was—although that might be quite important in its own right—but because of the mark it has left on you or me or us now. [Bion, 1997, p. 38]

Paradoxically as it may seem, it is this “mark now” that will give the story a chance to endure. What he is really remembering is the pattern of his mental development, a continuing evolution that involves making contact with the internal child from the time when he was not a “bloody fool” (as he often felt himself to be, after going on permanent “home leave” from his “poor little ignorant Indian self”): “I think I remember, or imagine—I don’t even now know which—that there was a time when I was not [a bloody fool]” (1985, p. 32). When he was the “Elephant’s Child” of “insatiable curiosity” he was a different, more Shakespearean, kind of fool with an appetite for learning; and rediscovering this internal aspect is what provides the vital spark for each new story or spiritual journey that he undertakes.

At the very foundation of the perennial dream-story lies the phantasized mating between Bion’s internal parents. His father, Bion tells us, “hunted with Jim Corbett” and thereby acquires (in internal reality) something of his environmental intuition and heroism—the man who, as we learn from Man-Eaters of Kumaon (1944), lived on the caesura between the tiger-mind and the human one, sensitive to the emotional upheavals of this delicate borderland between jungle and habitation. Complementing the hunter—father in this mental landscape is the mysterious female, tigerish spirit embodied in his ayah and part-Indian mother with her lush “abandoned” hats. Here lies the hidden richness that enabled him to “stick close to the fighting line” and to mentally survive the various traumas of his life.

When Bion speculates in the Memoir on the blush on the walls of the uterus that occurs with the mating of sperm and ovum (1991, p. 566), and that occurs each time a new idea is conceived, he is re-dreaming the origins of his own mind—newly infused with meaning once again, casting off the coverings of respectability. For “This is an attempt to express my rebellion—to say “Goodbye” to all that” (p. 578). Goodbye to the “cant” of his “overpowering” non-conformist upbringing, to the cant of kosher Kleinianism, to
the confines of all types of respectable “hero dress” that imprison
the “growing germ of thought”. At the end of his life, therefore,
Bion was committed to following his own advice to “abandon him-
self” to the Platonic Idea of psychoanalysis, incarnate in the form of
his self-analysis. Yet what he said of the writers he admired applies
also to his own autobiographies:

How difficult it is to realise that with certain books one does not
“read” them - one has to have an emotional experience of reading
them. This seems so slow compared with the easy slick reading . . .
[1985, p. 178]

It is no use going straight to the end of the book (i.e., the interpre-
tation), as Bion satirises in his little dialogues between author and
reader at the beginning and end of each volume of the Memoir. In
an emotional experience of reading, we have to forego memory and
desire and instead acquire a symbolic congruence with the writer’s
own story, to take it in and incorporate it in our own self-analysis.

This little book started life as a single chapter of The Aesthetic
Development (Williams, 2010), on a basis of reprinting previous
essays, but it outgrew its allotted shell. It concludes with a discus-
sion of some of Bion’s poetic “ancestors” (as he called them), an
expanded version of an essay which Luiz Carlos Junqueira of the
Brazilian Psychoanalytic Society asked me to write for publication
in Portuguese (Williams, 2009). The influence of the poets on the
deep grammar of Bion’s theories has been little studied, so it
seemed useful to give this implicit feature of his “autobiography” a
chapter of its own, even though it is far from comprehensive. It
enables us to step back a psychic generation in terms of the life of
the spark of sincerity, to observe how the poets got into Bion in the
same way that Bion (as well as the poets) can get into us. It demon-
strates how thoughts are “generative”, as the post-natal Group
affirm in the Memoir.

Above all, in this book I have tried to avoid the “dependency”
trap of which Martha Harris warned while Bion was still alive:

The dependent group structure so often manifests itself in the
reliance upon a crystallized selection of the theories of Freud (the
original Messiah), sometimes pitted against a similar extrapolation
from Melanie Klein (a latter day saint). Bion is unlikely to escape
the same fate. Their theories in such a climate of polarization are suitably selected and presented to eliminate the essential questioning, contradictions and progressions inherent in the formulations of pioneers who are constantly struggling to conceptualize the clinical observations they are making. [1978; Harris, 1987b, p. 328]

The delusion of possessing one’s subject—so being in a position to judge and evaluate—is easily maintained when it has cultural or academic respectability. I do not wish to participate in a new orthodoxy; instead, here I have continued a personal search, begun thirty years ago, for living pieces of wisdom ever ready to be fanned into a flame. I want to write about Bion in a way that could only be written by myself, though I hope the picture may overlap with that of other readers. If we take what Bion says seriously, this is the way he would himself wish to be “remembered”. Such is the goal of all serious writing, including literary criticism; as Bion constantly reminds us, there are no new ideas—it is only their rediscovery and digestion that is new. Thoughts can exist quite happily without a thinker; it is only the thinker who is modified.

Notes

1. The Memoir was originally published in three separate volumes (The Dream, 1975; The Past Presented, 1977; The Dawn of Oblivion, 1979); followed by A Key (1981). References here are to the complete single-volume edition (Karnac, 1991).
2. Martha Harris had been a supervisee of Bion’s.
3. In the Memoir, Bion writes that whether the instruction to adopt an exoskeleton took the form of “couvre-toi de gloire” or “couvre-toi de flanelle”, he “felt a fool either way” (p. 442).
4. In childhood, Wilfred was compared to Kipling’s “Elephant’s Child”, and in Sins he writes of “Me, the Elephant’s Child, one who does not learn for all its questions” (1985, p. 51).
5. I remember being profoundly impressed by this book as a teenager, so when I encountered Bion’s autobiography, the positive and mysterious associations outweighed the more deadening veneer of the Edwardian Arfer–Raj type of masculinity that, to some extent, held his father in its straitjacket.
CHAPTER ONE

Remembering*

The Long Week-End

Wilfred Bion’s The Long Week-End is a fascinating account of one man’s failure to become an individual, to achieve integrity, to make emotional contact with his internal objects. It is remarkable in that it is a well-written, witty, artistic evocation of an apparently unprepossessing subject. It works on the lines of the questions posed in his Memoir of the Future: “Has anyone seen an artist paint a picture ‘about’ or ‘of’ something ugly which was nevertheless beautiful?” (Bion, 1991, p. 128). The genre of the work might be described as a hybrid drawn from Goodbye to All That, Lord of the Flies, and 1984. For although its effect depends on the realistic description of a particular social climate, it has a futuristic quality which makes an essential contribution to its emotional impact. In the religion, prudery, and patriotism of the late Victorian age, one glimpses Big Brother in the form of a series of “false

*This chapter reprints a review article of The Long Week-End from the time of its original publication (Williams, 1983b), followed by a reading of the subsequent continuation of Bion’s autobiography in All My Sins Remembered.
parents”, of perverse ideals of masculinity and femininity and education. These, despite the good and even loving intentions of several of the main characters, succeed in divorcing the child Wilfred from any genuine emotional contact with his parents (literal and metaphorical), or with his cultural heritage. “The parents, staff, all were caught in a web of undirected menace” for “Who could recognise danger in piety, ardent patriotism to school and games heroes?” (Bion, 1982, pp. 47, 92). As a child, Wilfred has yet to learn that the prep-school bully, Morgan, is not unique but an archetype; and “there were plenty more where that one came from, the source of the Morgans of this life” (ibid., pp. 47–50). And Bion occasionally slips in, in parentheses, other remarks to remind us that the sinister “web” of that period continues in modern forms. But the main key to the present and future relevance of the book lies in our seeing it as an account of the failure of growth of an Everyman. As Bion brings to notice in his Preface, “Anyone can ‘know’ which school, regiment, colleagues, friends I write about. In all but the most superficial sense they would be wrong. I write about ‘me’”. For, in writing about “me”, he recognizes that he is “more likely to approximate to [his] ambition” of formulating “phenomena as close as possible to noumena” (p. 8).

The book, then, describes the series of misunderstandings and humiliations which transform him rapidly into an “accomplished liar” who can slip neatly into the basic assumptions of a given code of behaviour: a process which enables him to feel less of an “outcaste”—that is, less of an individual. He describes this as the formation of an “exo-skeleton” under the eye of a terrifying, vengeful God, “Arf Arfer”. This method of anti-education prevents him from learning anything from experience, even the experience of war, from which “I learnt nothing—presumably because at 19 I had become too set in my ways” (p. 193). For the setting of the mental sheath cannot serve the mind’s expansion:

neither the discipline of repetitive command, nor the “heaven” of middle class England, nor an exo-skeleton taking the place of a skeleton for an endo-skeletonous animal, can serve; still less in the domain of the mind. [p. 194]

After an anti-climactic year as best pupil and games captain, Wilfred leaves school preparing to “meet my father and mother”, as
if for the first time (for they virtually disappear during the school narrative). Instead of a true “meeting”, however, he discovers that his internal self seems to have disappeared; his mother kisses “a chitinous semblance of a boy from whom a person had escaped. But I was imprisoned, unable to break out of the shell which adhered to me”. The metaphor of the fledgeling who is unable to hatch out properly runs throughout the book. In the Memoir, it achieves a kind of completion when the officer “hatches” from his exo-skeletal tank, as he finally achieves, almost involuntarily, a capacity for thought. “Obsessed by the fear of cowardice”, the young man newly emerged from school looks around for various kinds of cover (“Couvre-toi de gloire” or “couvre-toi de flannelle”?) and, initially rejected for the Army, finds he has “no base on which to stand”. Time and again, the memory of meeting with his mother threatens to undermine the basic assumption group of the moment; but it is only a threat, for she is implicated in the network of deceit, having double standards of love and social acceptability. The conflict for Wilfred is intolerable; he feels, on leaving the Training Camp, that

I was cut off from my base. And the enemy was in full occupation of my mother. “Tomorrow to fresh woods and pastures new”. [Lycidas]. Yes, woods you fool! It is there alone in the jungle that you have to live. [p. 114]

There is “no anaesthetic for those suffering home leave” (p. 115). The pain of the other kind of “warfare”—the “jungle” of lonely internal struggle, the “woods” of Lycidas—is not bearable precisely owing to the double standards, which suggest a kind of unintentional treachery within the Mother. There is no support, no catharsis for the night-time fears related to the “jungle” of his childhood in India and his “poor little ignorant Indian self” (p. 92), which becomes somehow symbolic of the squashed outcaste potential of emotional contact. As at school, daytime conformity leads to night-time fears: “I say Richards, you were making a row last night! . . . as if you were being strangled!” (p. 90).

Bion makes clear that the “war” itself is simply the continuation of a pre-existing state of affairs, ad absurdum: “schoolboys of all ages playing soldiers, rehearsing for the real thing, but never learning