

# NIGHT VISION

Wilfred Bion's Epistemological  
Poetics and the Experience of  
the First World War

*Dominic Angeloch*



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## About the author

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## Introduction

Prior to becoming one of the most important and influential psychoanalysts after Freud worldwide, Wilfred Bion, born in Mathura, India, in 1897, fought as an officer in the British Army during the First World War. As a commander of a tank unit, a completely new type of weapon at the time, on which the hopes of the Allies rested, he was, barely eighteen years old, involved in operations on the most important battlefields of the First World War, such as Ypres and Amiens. During his active service, Bion distinguished himself through extraordinary courage and left the army in 1918 as a highly decorated war hero. The joy of life and the consistency of his psyche, however, were left behind on the battlefields. “Nobody told me [...] that war service would utterly change my capacity to enjoy life” (Bion, 1991, p. 508), it says in *A Memoir of the Future*, his trilogy of novels published shortly before his death in 1979, and “Myself”, one of his alter egos, states: “He says the consistency of his mind never recovered” (p. 58). Bion describes himself as condemned “to spend the rest of my life paying the bill for all those shells and tanks and bullets and the state of mind used to provide an armour” (p. 396).

All his life, Bion strived to find narrative form for the traumatic experiences he went through as a tank commander in the Great War.



The body of his autobiographical works, which consists of texts written at different stages of his life and remains fragmentary, documents his desperate efforts to wrest a biography of his own from the most terrible, devastating processes of world history. There is no continuum of any kind for this destroyed life story: no continuum of experience or memory, both of which are subject to severe trauma; no continuum of narrative when its content has no beginning and no end, not even a form (and certainly no moral of the story). What emerges with Bion's autobiography—particularly in its parts *The Long Week-End 1897–1919* and *War Memoirs 1917–1919*, but also in *All My Sins Remembered* and *A Memoir of the Future*—is something like the prehistory of the psychical catastrophe from which Bion was unable to escape until his death.

As such, however, these autobiographical fragments also reflect the prehistory of the historical catastrophe under whose spell the world still stands today. From the perspective of a subject who was at the centre of the battles and lost himself there: “They have a way of making people look so life-like, but really we are dead,” writes Bion towards the end of *The Long Week-End*, his central autobiographical fragment. “I? Oh yes, I died—on August 8th 1918” (Bion, 1985, p. 265). And in *A Memoir of the Future* it says: “As far as I am concerned the ideas *hold me* whether I like it or not. I would not go near the Amiens–Roye road for fear I should meet my ghost—I died there. For though the Soul should die, the Body lives for ever” (Bion, 1991, p. 257). Thus Bion's autobiographical works, written mainly in the last few years before his death and largely published posthumously, are actually an undead man's account of the time leading up to his (psychical) death.

Bion's autobiographical and literary writings are a testament for and are the result of a lifelong attempt to understand something incomprehensible, to express something unspeakable, to restore something destroyed, by remembering it in and through the body of a narrative. That incomprehensible thing represents something akin to the primal history of the psychical catastrophe that Bion failed to escape from as long as he lived. This required the development of a new kind of narrative, a narrative that casts a “penetrating beam of darkness” (Bion, 1990, p. 20), that creates an environment of maximum darkness in which the outlines of the object emerge as such in the first place. This development of a new kind of narrative, which is able to relate the inexpressible,

can be traced in the development of Bion's writing; it is formed in the course of a gradual accomplishment of memory as it finds its formulation in language. Particularly significant for the understanding of this development, however, are the ways in which the attempts to describe his experiences over decades *fail* in comparison to the finally successful form in *The Long Week-End*. They reveal the extent of the underlying mental and literary problems and open up a panorama of Bion's inner landscape—the *mental* landscape of experienced destruction and the *literary* landscape of the narrative by means of which this destruction is reconstructed.

How is experience conveyed through texts? How is experience transformed into literature, and how is literature transformed into experience? These fundamental questions are both the background and the subject of the following readings.<sup>1</sup> They focus on the fragments of Wilfred Bion's autobiography (Bion, 1982, 1984, 1985), which are also literary works, and his literary works (Bion, 1991), which can also be read as autobiographical fragments; these are treated in the context of Bion's oeuvre as a whole, drawing on the concepts of reflection on experience and thinking developed in his theoretical and clinical writings (esp. Bion, 1962, 1965, 1970, 1992) as well as the strategies of writing and cognition with which, as will be shown, they are genetically linked. This book, the first comprehensive study of Bion's autobiographical and literary writings, thus for the first time systematically places a hitherto unexplored part of his work in the context of his entire oeuvre.

My following discussion is divided into three main sections.

Part I of this book explores experience, cognition, and their failure in philosophical, psychological, and philological aspects as well as the dangers to which any attempt at understanding is exposed. Those readers, however, who are less interested in the reflection of epistemological conditions and circumstances of remembering, writing, and narrating and rather wish to learn without delay about Bion's life and the way in which Bion worked out his own life story through writing are invited to begin their reading directly at Part II.

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<sup>1</sup> I have already pursued such questions elsewhere on another subject, the development and methods of George Orwell's writing; a study that in many respects forms a counterpart and companion piece to the present book, especially with regard to the theory of experience underlying both works: See Angeloch, 2022a.

Parts II and III of this book first provide an overview of the autobiographical and literary writings against the background of an account of the external facts of Bion's life, and then undertake narrative analyses of the central sequences in which Bion tries to find a narrative form for what were arguably the most terrible events of the war, and which were not only a deeply traumatic experience remaining with him throughout his life, but also resulted in what he felt to be his psychical death. Taken together, these sequences impressively show the painful work of gradually dissolving or at least coming to terms with the psychical catastrophe of a paralysing trauma, the causes of which reach far beyond the individual and private. Following the chronological thread from childhood in India and youth in England to the experience of the First World War in France and Belgium, and with a constant reference to Bion's entire theoretical oeuvre, detailed narrative analyses trace how Bion develops a method in the narrative of his life that exposes the reader in a way that is as characteristic as it is unique to the emotional experience whose narrative is at issue. In the description of this method—its practical and theoretical prerequisites, the special way in which the text–reader interaction is organised by means of it, as well as its effect on the reader—lies the vanishing point of the perspectives that this study unfolds.

Experience; the question of how thinking emerges from it; how and under what conditions insight, understanding, and cognition are possible—these are central, if not *the* central, themes of Bion's psychological/philosophical work. But they are just as central to his autobiographical and literary writings. My readings set out to contribute to the thus far still unwritten inquiry into the genetic context in which Bion's autobiographical, literary, and theoretical writings figure, together with the concepts and writing strategies embodied in them. Not only the form and content of all his texts, but also the questions they pose—and do not so much answer as raise in us—are multifariously designed and systematically oriented towards achieving insight and understanding. This is what I call Bion's "epistemological poetics". My analysis of its development aims to explore the way in which Bion remembers himself, his experiences, and his time, how he narrates and reflects on them in his subjective, cultural, and historical dimensions, how the experiences that his texts convey are reflected in us as

(reading) experiences, and what insights they evoke in us, and how. Particular attention is paid to how and with what means—narrative, textual, theoretical—(epistemological) perspectives on experiences, everyday life, and contemporary events are opened up to us, both in their mediation via language and narration as well as in their non-logical, preverbal, gestural, interactional dimension of unspoken narrated history.