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NAOMI WYNTER-VINCENT

**IN THE PENUMBRA OF WILFRED BION:
POSSIBILITIES FOR LITERARY CRITICISM**

**D. PHIL
CREATIVE AND CRITICAL WRITING**

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In the Penumbra of Wilfred Bion: Possibilities for Literary Criticism

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Summary

In this thesis I explore the possibility of developing an approach to literary criticism oriented by the work of the British psychoanalyst, Wilfred Bion. Although his work is the subject of renewed interest within clinical psychoanalysis, Bion's theoretical ideas and standing as a writer have not yet been the subject of sustained interest within the field of literary criticism. I seek to demonstrate how his ideas can generate productive readings of literary texts in ways that extend existing scholarship or supplement the insights of a Freudian literary criticism.

The thesis draws widely from Bion's clinical contributions from the 1960s (*Learning from Experience*, *Elements of Psycho-Analysis*, *Transformations* and *Attention and Interpretation*), the later collections of seminars and lectures, and his final experimental autobiography, *A Memoir of the Future*. I reference a number of his theoretical insights, including his theory of thinking (thoughts without a thinker, the container-contained relationship), his description of 'psychotic' modes of functioning (beta-elements, bizarre objects), the theory of transformations and the caesura. Although his work is oriented to the clinical context, the idiosyncrasies of his written and pedagogical style, along with his deep attention to the language and imagery of a number of thinkers and poets, open a rich seam of critical resources for the literary critic.

Each chapter of the thesis develops a critical reading of an individual text: Freud's *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*, B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*, Mary Butts' short story 'With and Without Buttons', Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea*, J. G. Ballard's *The Atrocity Exhibition*, Nicholas Royle's *Quilt*, and Wilfred Bion's *A Memoir of the Future*. The last of these, exploring Bion's late foray into experimental literary writing, also considers Bion's interest as a writer.

Citations

Citations from *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from the German under the General Editorship of James Strachey; London: The Hogarth Press and Vintage, are given throughout as (SE volume number: page number).

The following abbreviations of Bion's works are used:

EiG	Experiences in Groups
LfE	Learning from Experience
EoP	Elements of Psychoanalysis
Trans	Transformations
A&I	Attention and Interpretation
Cog	Cogitations
ST	Second Thoughts
TP	Two Papers: The Grid and Caesura
TWT	Taming Wild Thoughts
Ital	The Italian Seminars
Tav	The Tavistock Seminars
BL	Brazilian Lectures
LA	Wilfred Bion: Los Angeles Seminars and Supervision
NYSP	Bion in New York & São Paulo
WM	War Memoirs 1917–1919
LWE	The Long Weekend
AMSR	All My Sins Remembered
MotF	A Memoir of the Future
CW	Complete Works of W. R. Bion (+ volume no.: page number)

Figure 1. The Grid

Replicated from Bion's 1971 paper, 'The Grid', in *Two Papers: The Grid and Caesura*.

	1 Definitory Hypothesis	2 Ψ	3 Notation	4 Attention	5 Inquiry	6 Action	...n
A β -elements	A1	A2				A6	...An
B α -elements	B1	B2	B3	B4	B5	B6	...Bn
C Dream Thoughts Myth, Dream, Model	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	...Cn
D Pre-conception	D1	D2	D3	D4	D5	D6	...Dn
E Conception	E1	E2	E3	E4	E5	E6	...En
F Concept	F1	F2	F3	F4	F5	F6	...Fn
G Scientific Deductive System		G2					
H Algebraic Calculus							

Acknowledgements

Ideas are born if they are given a chance.
(Tav: 22)

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Chapter One

Selected Facts: Introducing the Work of Wilfred Bion

If a new result is to have any value, it must unite elements long since known, but till then scattered and seemingly foreign to each other, and suddenly introduce order where the appearance of disorder reigned.¹

I have experience to record, but how to communicate this experience to others I am in doubt; this book explains why.
(LfE: v)

The work of British psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1897–1979) is beginning to emerge from its position of relative obscurity even within the mainstream of clinical psychoanalysis. A series of recent publications² suggest that Bion's oeuvre, in its bewildering entirety, is enjoying renewed interest. In 2014, the first complete edition of his works (comprising sixteen volumes) was published under the general editorship of Chris Mawson³. Viewed as a whole, it becomes clear that the scope and breadth of Bion's writing demands detailed commentary, and bears comparison with that other great 'standard edition' within the psychoanalytic field, the complete works of Freud.

I contend that the work of Wilfred Bion offers a rich and valuable resource for thinking about writing (and writing about thinking). While a number of writers have drawn on his work to explore literary themes (see, for example, work by Jacqueline Rose⁴, Mary Jacobus⁵, and Steven Connor⁶), the relative difficulty of his writing, in some places replete with mathematical symbols, and a style that shades between clinical *froideur* and driest humour, has perhaps hindered the wider circulation of his ideas among literary critics and critical theorists. R. D. Hinshelwood has written of Bion that 'his writings appear gnomic, irritating and intensely stimulating, and this style has been responsible for a tendency to sanctify him while not really

¹ Poincaré, *Science and Method*, 30.

² For example, Harris Williams, 2016; Levine & Civitarese [eds.], 2016; Sandler, 2015.

³ Bion, *The Complete Works of W.R. Bion*.

⁴ Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*.

⁵ Jacobus, *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis: In the Wake of Klein*.

⁶ Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*.

understanding him'⁷. Some of his more approachable texts, such as the collections of his transcribed seminars and lectures, have only been available in print since 2005 (*The Italian Seminars* and *The Tavistock Seminars*) or even more recently (his *Los Angeles Seminars and Supervision* was published in 2013). With the exception of his important early paper, 'Attacks on Linking', his work has not been anthologised, surprising given how concise some of his papers are. His two remarkable 1977 essays about the 'stray' or 'wild' thought, improvised onto a dictaphone and posthumously transcribed by Francesca Bion, have been in print since 1997, but in a minor and expensive edition that has not helped to bring these gems of his thinking to wider audience. More recently, a volume of the *Complete Works* has brought a number of additional essays and his 'Further Cogitations' to light, including the provocative essay, 'New and Improved' (CW 15).

Bion also left a rich collection of autobiographical resources. His war memoirs, written immediately after his return from the First World War, was intended to serve belatedly in lieu of unwritten letters to his parents; episodes from these memoirs are revisited and enriched by later accounts that appear in *The Long Week-End*, which offers a biographical account from birth through to the end of the war. *All My Sins Remembered* picks up from after this period, and ends gloomily in the aftermath of his first wife's death, though the volume has been rounded out with a selection of his letters and illustrations to his second wife, Francesca, and their three children. The collected volume of his 'cogitations', as he called them, provides a kind of theoretical journal offering glimpses into the development of many of his ideas. Finally, his strange three-volume 'novel', *A Memoir of the Future*, launches Bion at the close of his life into a wildly creative, experimental kind of autobiography drawing on personal history, theory and 'speculative imagination' (Ital: 47).

Part of the reason for Bion's relative neglect derives, I suggest, from the not unreasonable tendency by commentators to position his work as a footnote to Melanie Klein. In fact, he entered into analysis with her after the period of the 'Controversial Discussions' (between the followers of Anna Freud and the followers of Melanie Klein in the 1940s), although he was involved in psychotherapeutic training at the Tavistock Institute from the 1930s. His theoretical approach is

⁷ Hinshelwood, *A Dictionary of Kleinian Thought*, 232.

undoubtedly refracted through the lens of Melanie Klein's highly original reading of Freud, and he is usually named in the group of post-war psychoanalysts described as 'post-Kleinian', alongside others such as Hanna Segal, Betty Joseph, and Esther Bick. The central Kleinian concepts of projective identification and the (paranoid-schizoid and depressive) positions are a *sine qua non* for Bion's best-known idea, the container-contained relationship⁸.

His clinical specialism in psychotic patients also benefitted from Klein's extension of psychoanalysis to children, for whom new ways of thinking about psychoanalysis were needed. The language of object relations (splitting, part-objects, the 'good' and 'bad' breast, phantasy) is strongly evident in his work, although his formal use of 'Kleinian' terms comes to be supplemented with new, wholly 'Bionian' concepts, such as alpha-function, beta-elements and bizarre objects, and existing words and phrases used to new effect, such as the selected fact, transformations, and caesura. Over time, the recognisable elements of Kleinian theory are also modified in subtle but distinctive ways: the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions become PS ↔ D (indicating the oscillation between the two states), and are further glossed as 'patience' and 'security' respectively when applied to the psychoanalyst's experience (A&I: 124).

While Bion's work proceeds from his grounding in Kleinian metapsychology, it is Freud's short 1911 essay, 'Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning' (SE 12), which serves as starting point and inspiration for Bion's highly original speculations in *Learning from Experience*, as well as the labels he gives the different 'uses' of a statement along the vertical axis of the 'Grid', his observational tool for the practising analyst, first described in 1963 (TWT). His recourse to Freud also suggests comparison with that other 'inspired bizarre analyst'⁹, Jacques Lacan, whose work, unlike Bion's, has enjoyed considerable posthumous attention within the world of critical theory and literary criticism.

⁸ This is sometimes referred to as 'containment'. I follow Mawson in avoiding this to some extent, due to the way it lead the term to be confused with Winnicott's concept of 'holding' (CW 4: 250).

⁹ Phillips, *On Flirtation*, 136.

Bion was himself keen to stress that he did not necessarily wish to challenge existing psychoanalytic theories, being chiefly concerned with the refinement of psychoanalytic observation. This has perhaps also contributed to the overlooking of his work beyond the clinical field: he has been seen as a specialist primarily in what at first (and second) sight can appear as overly abstracted or technical clinical work. Although the later seminars and lectures did much to round out that picture, his gnomic, even aggravating style of responding to audience questions confirmed his ‘difficulty’ even as he was at pains to dismantle a position of authority. In this respect, too, he bears comparison with Lacan, who sought to bring into question the presumed authority of the analyst. Unlike his French counterpart, however, it is clear from Bion’s frequently scathing self-commentary that he considered himself to have done nothing more than make ‘the best of a bad job’ (CS: 321).

Wilfred Bion’s life was a remarkably eventful one¹⁰, marked by a number of traumatic events that included serving in the First World War and losing his first wife very shortly after the birth of their first child, Parthenope. The son of a civil engineer and a woman of Anglo-Indian heritage, he was born in north-west India in 1897, and spent his formative years there. His childhood memories of India – of brilliant light and searing heat amid the ever-present vigil against wild animals – made a profound impression on him. At the age of eight, he was abruptly sent away to a public school in England, an experience he found profoundly painful, surviving chiefly, in his view, by cultivating his skill in sports and developing a personality structure that he described as a ‘shell’ (LWE: 81). His interrupted childhood was compounded by the more traumatic interruption of his early adulthood by the First World War. He joined the Royal Tank Regiment in 1916, serving as an officer in Flanders and Ypres until the end of the war, and was decorated for his bravery with a DSO (Distinguished Service Order) medal by the British government, and awarded membership of the French Légion d’Honneur. After the war, he read history at Oxford University, and after graduation briefly entered school teaching (before a false allegation of misconduct prompted his resignation); thereafter he embarked on medical training at University College London in 1924, already intending to pursue an interest in psychoanalysis. In the 1930s he studied psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic, and began a training

¹⁰ Drawn from Bion’s own accounts, and from the essay by Francesca Bion, ‘The Days of our Years’ (CW 15: 91-111).

analysis in 1938 that was, again, subject to interruption: the onset of another war. During the first part of the 1940s he began the experimental group work (known as the Northfield Experiment) with demobilised and injured soldiers that would form the basis of his first (and, during his lifetime, most commercially successful) book, *Experiences in Groups*.

His personal life was also marked by false starts and interruptions. After a disastrous love affair and broken engagement (AMSR: 25), he married Betty Jardine, a successful stage actor. War work took him away from home shortly before she was due to give birth; he received the good news of Parthenope's birth only to learn of his wife's death a few days later. Thus Bion found himself a widower and a new father at a point when his career as an analyst was only just beginning, and his financial situation was precarious. Later, he went into analysis with Melanie Klein, and was in due course married a second time, to Francesca, going on to have a further two children. His first fully psychoanalytic work, *Learning from Experience*, came out in 1962. Bion was then 65 years old, entering relatively late in life into the most productive, ground-breaking, and distinguished phase of his career. Yet in 1968, he moved with his family to Los Angeles, leaving behind the leadership roles that threatened to see him 'loaded with honours and sunk without trace' (CW 15: 102). He returned finally to the UK in 1979, planning an extended trip to India to which he had not returned since his childhood. But he died the same year at the age of 81, before it could take place.

Bion worked with many highly disturbed patients, and he emphasised that the development of the capacity to *think* is a precarious, hard-won achievement that, analogous to Freud's enquiries into sexuality, cannot be taken for granted. His elaboration of Melanie Klein's concept of projective identification into a two-mind model of thinking (the 'container-contained') reframes the analytic space as a place of 'being-two-to-think' or – put another way – two to *dream*, as James Grotstein describes:

Put another way, as the analysand shared his dream with me, it had been incompletely dreamed. As I listened to him, I unconsciously entered his continuing dream and 'became' his 'dreaming co-pilot' in order to complete the dream.¹¹

¹¹ Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion's Legacy to Psychoanalysis*, 286.

Dream is central to Bion's work as it is for Freud, but differently: he writes that 'he took up only the negative attitude, dreams as 'concealing' something, not the way in which the necessary dream is constructed' (Cog: 33). The question of how we process experience is taken up in the first of his four metapsychologies, *Learning from Experience*, where he develops a number of theoretical concepts – alpha-function, alpha- and beta-elements, bizarre objects, the contact-barrier and the beta-screen, the L[ove], H[ate] and K[nnowledge] links, and their 'minus' counterparts (chiefly, -K). The distinction between the conscious and unconscious parts of the mind outlined by Freud becomes less important than the question of how experience is made available for use by a mind, and whether the personality that develops can grow by what it learns. Bion found it helpful to suggest that the thought is ontologically prior to the thinker, a 'thought without a thinker' that places a demand on the subject to develop an apparatus able to 'think' the thought through. He reorients Klein's formulation of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions to the process of learning: borrowing the phrase used by the French mathematician, Henri Poincaré, it is the 'selected fact' that drives the change from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive state, by making it possible to 'unite elements long since known, but till then scattered and seemingly foreign to each other'. In Bion's work, the positions are usually indicated as PS ↔ D, to indicate the movement between two different states of mind that are both normal aspects of learning.

In some ways the 'analyst's analyst', Bion was deeply concerned to develop observational and analytical tools for the working practitioner. He created the Grid in an attempt to provide a framework for noting and describing the analysand's statements and the analyst's interpretations, and among the clinical community he is perhaps best known for his dictum that analysts should work 'without memory or desire' (LA 136). The analyst should cultivate her or his ability for observation untainted as far as possible by preconceived theories, focusing not on what is already known, but what is unknown. Unlike Freud, whose project it was to uncover and integrate the experiences of the past, Bion is concerned with the future and what can yet emerge.

The use of psychoanalytic ideas to think about literature is not new. Psychoanalytic literary criticism has developed along the path of a twofold 'return to Freud' that went first via the post-structuralism 'linguistic turn' stimulated by the work of

French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (e.g. his ‘Seminar on *The Purloined Letter*’¹²). His best-known ideas – the mirror stage, the ‘unconscious structured like a language’, the three orders of the symbolic, the imaginary and the real – have been deeply influential in inspiring a vast industry of ‘Lacanian’ criticism in fields such as film theory (e.g. Laura Mulvey’s paper, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’¹³) and culture (e.g. Slavoj Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*), to the extent of having being taken at one time more or less as *the* psychoanalytic criticism, *tout court*.

More recently, a second pathway to Freud inspired by the work of Jacques Derrida (and also by work alert to Freud’s interest as a writer, such as that by Patrick Mahony¹⁴), has led to a new Freudian criticism via clinically ‘marginal’ texts such as *The Uncanny* and themes such as telepathy (Jacques Derrida¹⁵, Nicholas Royle¹⁶). Yet both of these pathways to (and from) Freud have overlooked the considerable contribution of post-Freudian thinking associated with the ‘British turn’ of psychoanalysis associated with the work of Melanie Klein and her followers, and in the various strands of Independent thought associated with Ferenczi, the Balints, Donald Winnicott, Marion Milner, and others (though see, for example, the volume edited by Peter Rudnytsky¹⁷). The work of Julia Kristeva, drawing on Kleinian preoccupations with the maternal body and primary destructiveness (as well as Lacan), is a notable exception to this trend. In part, this reflects the more practical, clinical orientation of the British schools (with a greater focus on working with children), or the sense that their approach to art might be ‘unsophisticated’ compared to thinking based on French psychoanalysis. The basis for a ‘Kleinian aesthetics’ resides chiefly in the work of Hanna Segal, who brought Klein’s idea of *reparation* to bear in creative work: art as the working through from the paranoid-schizoid to the depression positions¹⁸.

¹² Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*.

¹³ Braudy and Cohen, *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*.

¹⁴ Mahony, *Freud as a Writer (Expanded Edition)*.

¹⁵ McQuillan, *Deconstruction: A Reader*.

¹⁶ Royle, *The Uncanny*.

¹⁷ Rudnytsky, *Transitional Object and Potential Spaces: Literary Uses of D. W. Winnicott*.

¹⁸ Segal, ‘Notes on Symbol Formation’.

The psychoanalyst and feminist theorist Juliet Mitchell, having previously advocated a feminist ‘return to Freud’ in 1974, made the case for a fuller consideration of Melanie Klein, editing and introducing a selected volume of her papers which appeared in 1986. She concludes her critical introduction by stating that ‘Klein change[d] the terrain and thereby change[d] the task’¹⁹, noting that Klein’s characterisation of the unconscious as a primarily descriptive, rather than dynamic repository or realm of experience, accounts for the diminution of its conceptual importance among her followers, including Bion:

In a way it [the unconscious] has becoming uninteresting; after all, in what way can we say a baby phantasising a breast is unconscious of it?²⁰

Klein’s reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (SE 18) and Freud’s conception of a death drive foreground primary destructive impulses at the heart of the child’s psychical landscape. In literary criticism, the effects of the Kleinian turn are seen in work by, among others, Jacqueline Rose²¹, Lyndsey Stonebridge²², Mary Jacobus²³, and Steven Connor²⁴, in relation to his work on Samuel Beckett.

In *Why War?*, Jacqueline Rose argued that a critical reconsideration of Melanie Klein’s attention to that which was repressed in Freud’s theory – namely, the primacy of destructive impulses and the death drive – was overdue. Klein’s apparent weaknesses as a writer and theorist should not, she suggested, be so easily taken at face value, for ‘Klein does theory *otherwise*’²⁵. For Rose, engaging seriously with the question of the death drive can puncture the phantasy of mastery at the heart of theory, and reorients the critical project to what is ‘creatively unmasterable’. The re-emergence of state-funded aggression (in the Falkland Islands and the first Gulf War) under the government of Margaret Thatcher required a critical theory based on Kleinian lines to account for the ubiquity of destructive impulses observed in political and popular culture. Rose asks: ‘Why [...] has there been no rereading of

¹⁹ Klein, *The Selected Melanie Klein*, 32.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

²¹ Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Return to Melanie Klein*.

²² Stonebridge, *The Destructive Element: British Psychoanalysis and Modernism*.

²³ Jacobus, *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis: In the Wake of Klein*.

²⁴ Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*.

²⁵ Rose, *Why War? Psychoanalysis, Politics and the Return to Melanie Klein*, 139.

Melanie Klein?’²⁶, suggesting that ‘a post-Lacanian orthodoxy has blocked access to Klein’²⁷. In a later collection, *On Not Being Able to Sleep*, Rose draws on Bion’s theory of the bizarre object (from his early essay, ‘On Hallucination’ (ST: 65)) to identify moments in the work of Elizabeth Bowen and Mary Butts where ‘the relationship between history and perception’ is rendered ‘objective and odd’²⁸, as in the example she gives from Bowen’s *The Heat of the Day*:

Louie repeatedly stopped to touch petals, her raspy finger-tips being every time entered by their smoothness.²⁹

While Rose’s instinct in her selection of texts is unerring, her analysis of the representation of history within modernist texts is stronger than her immersion in Bion’s theory³⁰. Nevertheless, her essay offers an interesting, if underdeveloped, illustration of the possibilities of reading Bion in connection with literature. Her focus on Mary Butts led me indirectly to the discovery of Butt’s short story, ‘With and Without Buttons’, which forms the subject of chapter five of this thesis; her identification of the bizarre object provided the theoretical focus of chapter six, which addresses a scene from Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Mary Jacobus’ work to develop a specifically Kleinian (and post-Kleinian) literary criticism has gone further in exploring Bion’s work both as theorist and writer. In *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis: In the Wake of Klein*, the entire third section of the work (‘Transformations’) is devoted to detailed critical readings of Bion’s work, including the autobiographies and *A Memoir of the Future*. Jacobus writes:

Bion’s way with his psychoanalytic constructions is to read them aslant, against the grain of their received meaning. This tendency illustrates the swerve that makes him a strong reader of Klein rather than her follower, even

²⁶ Ibid., 138.

²⁷ Ibid., 139.

²⁸ Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*, 93.

²⁹ Ibid., 193.

³⁰ Rose’s essay, as it appeared both in *Critical Quarterly*, and later as a chapter in *On Not Being Able to Sleep*, is marred, surprisingly, by two small errors in respect of Bion’s name and the title of one of his books – mistaking Bion’s *Attention and Interpretation* for the critical theorist Frank Kermode’s *Forms of Attention*; moreover, she suggests that the bizarre object should be understood as deriving from a ‘particular form of attention’ rather than from the psychotic failure of alpha-function.

as he continues to work with the basic tools of Kleinian concepts such as splitting and projective identification.³¹

Bion was also Samuel Beckett's first analyst (from 1933–1935) at an early point in both men's careers. Their relationship forms the central interest of Ian Miller's and Kay Souter's study of Beckett and Bion, published in 2013³². In *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*, Steven Connor reflects on aspects of Beckett's use of language in terms of Bion's early paper, 'Attacks on Linking' (ST: 93). In his chapter, 'Making Flies Mean Something', he writes:

Beckett's work often seems driven by the urge to atomise, to slice, split and divide, in pursuit of the ideal of maximal disarticulation, or what Wilfred Bion (1993) calls an 'attack on linking'.³³

³¹ Jacobus, *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis: In the Wake of Klein*, 201.

³² Miller, *Beckett and Bion: The (Im)Patient Voice in Psychotherapy and Literature*.

³³ Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*, 55.

Bion and Literature

Poets have found a method of communication. Milton invents a new word, ‘pandemonium’; Shakespeare strings together ordinary words in a way that starts things vibrating inside countless generations of people. Why? How is it done?
(NYSP: 59–60)

While Bion did not address himself directly to literary questions, it is clear that he was closely attentive to language and sensitive to literature and poetry. What at first sight seems so austere in his earlier theoretical style – such as the elaboration of a distinctive, ostensibly algebraic terminology – attests a concern that his enquiry into certain psychical mechanisms should remain free of pre-conception, or ‘unsaturated’ (EoP: 48), for as long as possible in such a way that the curiosity underlying the question might avoid being arrested by a premature answer. He frequently recalls the phrase by Blanchot: ‘*la réponse est le malheur de la question*’ (Tav: 30). Alpha-function, in particular, is a ‘placeholder’ term: designed to free his investigation from the ‘penumbra of associations’ (LfE: 2) that might attach to another word more closely related to conventional speech or Freudian terminology.

Bion received a classical, English public school education, and remained a voracious and catholic reader all his life. He makes liberal and frequent use of a range of both literary and philosophical references, returning frequently to two or three quotations from Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (‘So much the rather celestial light’, ‘void and formless infinite’), as well as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and *Cymbeline* (‘Golden lads and girls all must/ As chimney-sweepers, come to dust’ (MotF: 436³⁴)). He also references Virgil (in the story of Palinurus), Tolstoy (noting the translated word, ‘sooth’, to indicate the truth-seeking instinct), Stendhal, Hugo, Valéry, Bagehot, Bennett, Manley Hopkins, Joyce, Pound, Kipling, Coleridge, Tennyson, Shelley, Byron, and Keats, whose phrase, ‘negative capability’, he takes up enthusiastically. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* provides an important intertext for *A Memoir of the Future*. He also draws on an eclectic range of philosophers of science, historians and spiritual thinkers, including Kant, Hume, Descartes, Tacitus, Frege, Russell, Popper,

³⁴ *Cymbeline*, Act 4, Scene 2. Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 1154.

Meister Eckhart, Isaac Luria, Bishop Berkeley, Buber, and Teilhard de Chardin. He quotes from both the Bible and the Bhagavad Gita.

Much of the apparent complexity of his thinking in *Transformations* and *Attention and Interpretation* stems from his eager and detailed discussion of Euclidean geometry; aside from Poincaré, Heisenberg and Fraunhofer provide additional scientific references. He refers frequently to Leonardo da Vinci's depictions of swirling currents and hair, seeing in them an attempt to represent emotional turbulence (BL: 23).

In their preface to *Bion's Sources*, Hinshelwood and Torres compare Bion to Freud:

To some extent [Bion's] intellectual breadth resembled Freud, but whereas Freud wrote in a linear narrative style [...], Bion wrote in a non-linear, labyrinthine and enigmatic style [...]. His style is more Beckettian than Shakespearean.³⁵

Bion himself never mentions his former analysand, but (as Connor has noted), Bion's work provides a way to think about fragmented or non-linear modes of expression as an 'attack on linking'. In a short passage in *Cogitations*, the homophony that is endemic to the French language prompts an intriguing discussion of 'disarticulate' language, language in transition from the paranoid-schizoid to the depressive position:

The people of this district [the Dordogne, France] speak of a 'crise de foie'. It seems to be that this would be quite appropriate if it were spelt 'crise de foi' or 'crise deux fois'. There is no need to suppose that the language being spoken, the appropriate language, is an articulate one rather than, say, a language that is a transition from paranoid-schizoid to depressive, from part objects to whole objects.
(Cog: 370)

Bion's development of projective identification emphasises its communicative role, but this is not to suggest that he returns language to a narrowly representational function. His work is exquisitely concerned with the transmission and cultivation of the *thought*, posited as logically prior to the mechanism of thinking. For Bion this is both developmentally true, when the pain of hunger and the absence of the breast in

³⁵ Torres and Hinshelwood, *Bion's Sources: The Shaping of His Paradigms*, xv.

infancy generates a problem to be solved (what to do with the bad feeling), and structurally true for the adult equipped with a mind who nevertheless needs some *thing* to set off the thinking process.

He introduces time into the process of projective identification by suggesting that it is the sojourn of the split-off, evacuated object in the mother's mind that enables the infant to take back and bear the thought, and reflects that Klein's clinical style – of immediately interpreting the analysand's anxiety – can have the unintended consequence of stimulating even greater anxiety and splitting. For Bion, this factor enables him to talk about the effect of literature, of the way that the seed of thought can germinate in other minds and in other times:

It is very difficult to give expression to the wild idea. If people can possibly bear to have a wild idea and allow it to germinate, then they might be able to put it into a form that made it more communicable. In *Finnegan's Wake* Joyce says that you would have to spend your life reading it to acquire the language or the capacity to understand it. I don't think anybody is likely to do that. But then you get this curious effect: perhaps in another fifty years people will be able to read *Finnegan's Wake*; what has happened to the wild ideas that are triggered but not expressed, we cannot tell. But they *are* communicated [...]
(Tav: 3)

Bion's work has attracted a small but dedicated academic following that has until recently focused on a few key names. The late James Grotstein, who was analysed by Bion in Los Angeles, oversaw the essay collection prepared in commemoration of Bion's life in 1981³⁶, and wrote a detailed theoretical exposition of Bion's work in *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion's Legacy to Psychoanalysis*. Donald Meltzer devotes part three of *The Kleinian Development* to Bion's clinical significance. *Bion's Dream*, by the poet and writer Meg Harris Williams, is the result of her detailed and creative engagement with *A Memoir of the Future* (which will be discussed in chapter nine), including her role in an unfinished film dramatisation, which is the subject of *The Becoming Room: Filming Bion's A Memoir of the Future*, published in 2016. The Brazilian psychoanalyst Paulo Cesar Sandler has also written extensively on Bion, including one of two dictionaries of Bionian terms (the other is by Rafael E. López-Corvo), and a projected three-volume appreciation of *A Memoir*

³⁶ Grotstein, *Do I Dare Disturb the Universe? A Memorial to W. R. Bion*.

of the Future. The late psychoanalyst and writer Parthenope Bion Talamo, Bion's daughter by his first marriage, brought her father's ideas to a wider audience in Italy, where she lived and worked until her untimely death (in a car accident) in 1998. The Italian analysts Antonino Ferro and Guiseppe Civitarese have written a number of books that develop Bion's ideas under the guise of 'analytic field theory'. In the UK, R. D. Hinshelwood and Nuno Torres edited a volume of essays devoted to exploring Bion's philosophical and theoretical sources, and Chris Mawson, editor of the *Complete Works*, previously edited *Bion Today*. Francesca Bion, who edited a number of Bion's works for posthumous publication and wrote the 'Key' to *A Memoir of the Future*, remained closely engaged with Bion scholars until her death in the spring of 2015. Other noteworthy developments of Bion's ideas can be found in work by clinicians Duncan Cartwright, David Bell, Annie Reiner, Célia Fix Korbivcher, Howard Levine, and Lawrence Brown. The 'thought without a thinker' has been brought into a productive relationship with Buddhist teachings in a book by Mark Epstein³⁷.

The title of this thesis, 'In the Penumbra of Bion', recalls Bion's frequent use of that unusual word, *penumbra*, which appears on over thirty occasions in his *Complete Works*, and seven times alone in *Learning from Experience*. The word appears almost exclusively as part of the phrase 'penumbra of associations', and most frequently in relation to what Meltzer describes as Bion's 'empty concept'³⁸ of alpha-function, so named as to avoid the associative ideas that might accrue unhelpfully to words borrowed from conventional language. The penumbra is the area of 'partial or lighter shadow round the perfect or darker shadow' (*Chambers*); the word is derived etymologically from the two Latin words *paene* (almost) and *umbra* (shadow), the latter shared with another notably 'Bionian' word, 'adumbrate' (or 'adumbration').

Bion's penchant for the penumbra appears to have gone as yet unremarked by his commentators, surprising given Bion's frequent invocation of light and darkness as metaphors for the psychoanalytic enterprise. Referencing both John Milton's blindness and Freud's letter to Lou Andreas-Salomé (A&I: 43), in which Freud writes 'I know that in writing I have to blind myself artificially in order to focus all

³⁷ Epstein, *Thoughts without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective*.

³⁸ Meltzer, *The Kleinian Development*, 389.

the light on one dark spot', Bion proposes to bring darkness, rather than light, to bear on obscure problems, the better to discern any faint 'light' (clarity, or pattern) immanent within the object under investigation:

Instead of trying to bring a brilliant, intelligent, knowledgeable light to bear on obscure problems, I suggest we bring to bear a diminution of the 'light' – a penetrating beam of darkness: a reciprocal of the searchlight.
(BL: 20)

I am also alert to what Bion would call the 'implicit model' (LfE: 78) of my title. Being 'in' something implies, as Bion made clear, a 'container and something to put in it' (EoP: 6). The penumbra (that is also *not quite* an umbrella) may be a place of refuge, as well as a place defined by a relationship to a light source with the potential to cast new, and other shadows. In medical terminology, where it refers to the area just outside the place of a stroke, the 'existence of a penumbra implies that salvage of the cells is possible'³⁹. It is a precarious but hopeful place. The project of this thesis stands *in the penumbra* of Wilfred Bion, since it meets his ideas in the half-shadow that they cast, in my mind at least, over questions of 'creatively critical' writing and the literary representation and transformation of thinking and thoughts.

I finally decided against a version of the title that would include the word 'Bionian', recognising that the word 'Bionian' is a problematic (if convenient) shorthand indicating 'based on the ideas and work of Wilfred Bion'. In this I was guided by Bion's discussions of the group and the mystic in *Attention and Interpretation*, where he describes the tension between the new idea represented by the mystic (or genius) and the group's efforts to assimilate (and thereby suppress) the new idea (see, for instance A&I: 74). I was also guided by Bion Talamo's essay, 'Why We Can't Call Ourselves Bionians: Notes of the Life and Work of W. R. Bion'⁴⁰, in which she identifies the 'quality of mental freedom that made Bion such a disconcerting person, and an academic who could not, by his very nature, 'found a school''⁴¹. Although I have removed the word from the title, I do continue to use it, sparingly, as a reasonable abbreviation, to denote an approach that uses Bion's theoretical tools. The

³⁹ <http://multiple-sclerosis-research.blogspot.com/2015/04/education-inflammatory-penumbra.html> [accessed 14 February 2016].

⁴⁰ Bion Talamo, *Maps for Psychoanalytic Exploration*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

term is also used straightforwardly by a number of notable Bion commentators, including Grotstein, Meltzer, Ferro, and (surprisingly) Bion Talamo herself⁴².

In what follows I aim to demonstrate that a number of Bion's ideas can be read productively alongside a range of literary texts, and also alongside texts by Freud and Bion himself. Each of the following chapters is designed to illustrate one or more facets⁴³ of Bion's work, and to introduce the reader unacquainted with Bion to the breadth of his ideas while drawing attention to his own status and interest as a writer. This last point echoes Patrick Mahony's reappraisal of 'Freud as a Writer'. It is chiefly Freud, rather than Klein, whose work offers a spectral counterpoint to Bion in the chapters that follow.

In 'Freud's 'Excessively Intense Idea': the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*', I propose a Bionian reading of Freud's early and unpublished neuropsychology (SE 1). It can be read, I suggest, as a purely creative work designed to enable him to advance a series of thoughts, in line with Bion's theory of thinking in which thought is conceived as something which places a demand on the subject to create an apparatus capable of thinking it.

Freud's spectral presence continues in the next chapter, 'Pompey's Thought-Worm: Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*', in the form of a marginal reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (SE 18) alongside Stevie Smith's début novel, *Novel on Yellow Paper*. The figuring of thought as an intestinal worm that 'works at her' from the inside resonates with Bion's digestive model of thinking and in turns helpfully dramatises Bion's paradox of the 'thought without a thinker'. Attention to the trope of parasitism within the novel also enables a re-reading of the book's ostensibly anti-semitic themes. Furthermore, a Bionian reading of *Novel*'s subtitle, 'Work it out for Yourself' enlarges a reading of the narrative's apparent trend to a suicidal theme by arguing that what Pompey seeks is not simply an attentive reader to 'work out' the true meaning of her story, but a collaborative mind that does some of the work. The

⁴² Ibid., 100.

⁴³ Meltzer, *The Kleinian Development*, 396. Another implicit model. Meltzer notes the letter that Bion wrote to him following his review of his work. He offered the model of 'the diamond cutter's method of cutting a stone so that a ray of light entering the stone is reflected back *by the same path* in such a way that the light is augmented'.

chapter closes with a consideration – using one aspect of Bion’s Grid, ‘column 2’ – of Bion and Stevie Smith as tonally distinctive writers.

In ‘Restoring the Lost Container: B. S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates*’, I draw attention to an aspect of B. S. Johnson’s famous ‘book in a box’ that has been overlooked in earlier criticism; namely, the box itself. Where previous commentators have read Johnson’s experimental work primarily in terms of the unbound *contents* (as a metaphor for the experience of chaos and disintegration), I seek to demonstrate that the *box* relocates *The Unfortunates* as an elegiac work of reparation of the container-contained relationship that has been lost through the death of B. S. Johnson’s (real-life) mentor, Tony Tillinghurst. Bion’s conception of thinking as something that is developed through the proxy of another person’s mind (the relationship of the container to the contained) provides a valuable tool for thinking anew about book, box, and all.

The next chapter, ‘With And Without Bion: Supplementing an Uncanny Reading of Mary Butts’, enacts a close reading of the short story, ‘With and Without Buttons’, by the English modernist writer, Mary Butts. While the story can be understood in terms of the Freudian ‘uncanny’, I suggest that a number of Bion’s ideas – beta-elements, the protomental space and O – deepen a reading of the story that traces unthinkable – rather than repressed – sexual desire in the relationship of the narrator, her sister-double, and their sceptical neighbour, Trenchard.

The figure of the telescope in *Wide Sargasso Sea* provides the focal point for the next chapter, ‘Jean Rhys’ Bizarre Telescope: A Bion-emic/-etic Reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. I develop Jacqueline Rose’s productive suggestion that Bion’s theory of the ‘bizarre object’ opens a way of reading dissociative, psychotic effects in literature. The telescope in *Wide Sargasso Sea* can be seen both as a form of link between characters and communities, and as a bizarre object that figures the disintegration of Rochester’s mind.

The theme of psychosis is continued in ‘Efficient Psychosis: Notes Towards a Bionian Ballardian Breakdown’, which develops a Bionian reading of J. G. Ballard’s experimental novel, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Bion’s theorisation of psychosis, through the ideas of beta-elements and beta-space, provides ways to think about

Ballard's experimental use of form to depict a psychotic landscape. Moreover, both Bion and Ballard seem to gesture toward the possibility of a positive, sane or 'efficient' conception of psychosis that would take seriously its potential to disrupt existing modes of thinking.

In 'Becoming Ray: Transformations in Nicholas Royle's *Quilt*', I read Royle's début novel through Bion's 1965 metapsychology, *Transformations*. The novel's darkly suggestive conclusion evokes the possibility that the main character and narrator – the unnamed son in the aftermath of his father's death – undergoes a radical transformation that can be explored in a more detailed way by reference to Bion's four kinds of transformation: the rigid-motion transformation, the projective transformation, the transformation in hallucinosis, and the transformation in O.

Finally, in 'Dream I Tell You: Bion's *A Memoir of the Future*', I turn to Bion's own creative writing through his experimental work, *A Memoir of the Future*. Part-experimental autobiography, part-fiction, part-theoretical exposition, Bion's three-volume *Memoir* defies analysis at the level of genre and stands as an exemplary instance of that which Theodor Adorno and Edward Said have described as 'late style'. Bion's initial readership – chiefly practising psychoanalysts who had known Bion during his leadership of the London Clinic of Psychoanalysis and the British Psychoanalytic Society (CW 15: 114) – were not only baffled but embarrassed by this last efflorescence, with many dismissing the work as evidence of Bion's senility. With the exception of work by Meg Harris Williams⁴⁴, *A Memoir of the Future* has received scant attention in terms of its specifically literary aspects. Though I cannot attempt an exhaustive study of it here, I suggest that it merits a close reading as an attempt, through writing, to construct the 'necessary dream' that attempts to give birth to the thought without a thinker and to integrate Bion's traumatic wartime experiences.

⁴⁴ Harris Williams, *Bion's Dream: A Reading of the Autobiographies*.

Chapter Two

Freud's 'Excessively Intense' Idea: *Project for a Scientific Psychology*

In writing this I have to start somewhere and this produces difficulties because the start of a discussion tends to impose an appearance of reality on the idea that the matter discussed has a start.
(EoP: 3)

The problem of beginnings is one of those problems that, if allowed to, will confront one with equal intensity on a practical and on a theoretical level.¹

Where and how to *begin*? Locating Bion within psychoanalytic literary criticism requires a reference to Freud. Parthenope Bion Talamo reflects on the assumption that Bion is assumed to have read Freud:

Rarely, or perhaps never, have I been asked whether Bion read Freud, since I suppose that it is taken for granted that he did; and yet the ways in which Freud's thinking permeated Bion's, and the degree to which it did so, are neither so obvious nor so automatic – there is not too much 'of course' about it.²

Adam Phillips places Bion in comparison with Jacques Lacan: both 'bizarre', and 'inspired', and in different measures controversial psychoanalysts. Like Lacan, Bion inclined toward a mathematical (or perhaps, *mathematised*) aspect alarming to the uninitiated, and professionally they shared a particular depth of experience in working with severely ill and psychotic patients. They also both stand in an interesting, oblique relationship to Freud: Lacan, famously, declared that his work performed an essential 'return to Freud'³ in the face of American-led ego psychology. Bion claims no such project but refers many of his central ideas of *Learning from Experience* to Freud's 'Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning' (LfE: 4–5).

A re-reading of Freud's early essay, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*⁴, alongside Bion's *Learning from Experience*, unearths unexpected resonances between the very early, pre-psychoanalytic Freud and aspects of Bion's theories. Additionally, a reading

¹ Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 3.

² Bion Talamo, 'Bion: A Freudian Innovator'.

³ Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*.

⁴ Freud, SE 1, 281–397. Subsequent references are to this edition.

of the *Project* informed by Bion makes possible a fuller appreciation of Freud the writer, by drawing attention to the *Project*'s purely *creative* aspect. I contend that the *Project* is best understood as a piece of creative writing; that is, as a work that seeks to generate or express the new idea. While the *Project* benefits from a contextualised reading that locates it as a part of the pre-history of psychoanalysis, a sustained reading of the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* as creative writing demands that we pay closer attention to its quirks and contrivances. This chapter takes its title from the phrase, 'excessively intense idea', which appears in the *Project* on five occasions, at the beginning of the first and second parts. 'The emergence of the excessively intense idea,' Freud writes, 'brings with it consequences which, on the one hand, cannot be suppressed and, on the other hand, cannot be understood' (347). Bion's theory of thinking offers new ways of thinking about the *Project*, and I suggest that we can see the 'excessively intense idea' that drives Freud to write the *Project* as the 'thought without a thinker': that is, the wild or stray thought 'awaiting a sufficiently mature mind for them to be thinkable, thoughts pressing for the development of an apparatus to think them'⁵.

Written over several months in 1895, the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* is Freud's attempt to 'furnish a psychology that shall be a natural science: that is, to represent psychical processes as quantitatively determinate states of specifiable material particles, thus making those processes perspicuous and free from contradiction' (295). Although the text seems to draw heavily on neurological concepts, Freud's use of scientific ideas is tendentious. As Mark Solms and Michael Saling have made clear, the 'neurology' that Freud invokes in the *Project* bears only a slight comparison to the contemporary research that Freud himself wrote about in early papers not included in the *Standard Edition*, such as 'Gehirn' ('brain') and 'Aphasie' ('aphasia'). They suggest that Freud 'ignored almost completely the complex gross structure of the nervous system, the knowledge of which he demonstrates and communicates so skilfully in 'Gehirn''⁶. Freud effectively invents several classes of specialised neurones and modes of interaction to explain reflex actions, cognition, and memory; the resulting text is bewildering in its convolution and complexity.

⁵ Civitarese, *The Violence of Emotions: Bion and Post-Bionian Psychoanalysis*, 14.

⁶ Solms and Saling, *A Moment of Transition: Two Neuroscientific Articles by Sigmund Freud*, xii.

Not published in Freud's lifetime, the *Project* stands as a pre- or proto-psychoanalytic curio that has nevertheless attracted influential readings by Jean Laplanche and Jacques Derrida. The *Project*'s memorable single case study of Emma, a young woman traumatised retroactively (*nachträglich*) by a sexual assault in childhood that she only later understands, offers a complex account of the sexual determinants of hysteria. The two-stage model of trauma at the heart of this episode forms the basis for Jean Laplanche's later recuperation of a 'generalised' seduction theory⁷, understood as the implantation of the enigmatic signifier of the other, and received by the subject *après-coup*⁸.

In his 1966 essay, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', Derrida traces Freud's recourse to a metaphors of writing at work in his conception of the psyche. He draws attention to two ostensibly marginal texts by Freud over the thirty-year period 1895–1925 demarcated by the *Project*, at one end, and the 'Note on the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'' (SE 19), on the other, to uncover in Freud's texts 'the structure of the psychic apparatus [...] represented by a writing machine'⁹. Derrida's discussion centres on the translation of the curiously productive word, *Bahnung* (translated in the *Standard Edition* as 'facilitation'), for which he proposes the word *frayage* in French, variously translated as 'breaching' or 'fraying'¹⁰). This reading will inform my own, different focus upon that same term to support a reading of the *Project* as a work *in transit*.

Freud's letters to Wilhelm Fliess, his close friend and correspondent, leave us in no doubt as to his own difficulties and frustrations in its composition. In a series of letters between April and November of 1895¹¹, he veers between devotion and despair, alternately taking up and abandoning the work before eventually beginning to write the final version in late September. In April, he is 'positively devoured by it, till I am really overworked and have to break off. I have never experienced such a powerful preoccupation' (283). A month later he describes devoting 'every free minute of the last

⁷ Laplanche, *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*.

⁸ Freud's word 'nachträglich' has been translated as 'après-coup' by Laplanche. In English it has been rendered various as 'deferred action' or 'afterwardsness'. See, for example, discussion by Rosine Perelberg in *Time, Space and Phantasy*, 2008: 2n1.

⁹ Derrida, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', 75.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the different and disputed translations of *Bahnung*, see, for instance: Cassin, *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, 610–611.

¹¹ The following quotations from Freud's letters to Fliess all taken from Freud, SE 1.

few weeks' to writing, spending 'the night hours from eleven till two with imaginings, transpositions and guesses'; not stopping before he is 'truly and seriously overworked' (284). By mid-June, the project is *in embryo*: 'To make an announcement on this now would be like sending the six-months' foetus of a girl to a ball' (284); but the gestation that is progressing well in early August is then beset by difficulty:

I have had a queer experience with my $\Phi\Psi\omega$ ¹². No sooner had I made my alarming announcement and called for your congratulations after climbing a secondary peak, than I met with fresh difficulties and found I had not enough breath left for the new task. So I quickly made up my mind, threw down the whole alphabet and persuaded myself that I took no interest in it whatever. (284)

A visit to Fliess in September proves reinvigorating, and on the 23rd he writes that his 'rested brain now makes child's play of the difficulties that were left over' (285), beginning to write again while 'still in the railway carriage' on his return journey. Yet by October he writes again of his continued frustration as he describes himself 'alternatively proud and happy [...] ashamed and wretched', and beset by 'mental torment' that the project 'does not fit together and perhaps never will' (285). A fortnight later, things are again looking up:

Everything seemed to fit in together, the gears were in mesh, the thing gave one the impression that it was really a machine and would soon run of itself. (285)

But November returns Freud to his earlier despair, such that he throws the writing into a drawer, declaring, 'I can no longer understand the state of mind in which I hatched out the 'Psychology'' (285). Left unfinished, the *Project* will, in fact, spend the next several decades confined to Freud's drawer prior to posthumous publication in 1950 (in German) and 1954 (in English translation).

Freud's correspondence with Fliess suggests that there are two aspects to his problem. What is beyond question is that Freud has an *idea* that he is struggling to express in writing, where writing is both the expression of the idea itself *and the machinery or apparatus* that would enable its expression. The idea that, as Stevie Smith's character,

¹² Denoting the three neuronal classes phi-psi-omega, characterised by permeability, impermeability and (registering) perception, respectively.

Pompey, will put it¹³, ‘works at [Freud] like a worm’, is a thing both inside and outside Freud: it is a ‘six months’ foetal idea that gestates within Freud; it is a parasite or a canker (he is ‘positively devoured by it’); it is something that nevertheless eludes him despite ‘beckon[ing] to [him] from afar from time immemorial’ (283) that in his view he finally fails to capture in writing.

Bion develops the idea of the ‘thought without a thinker’ from the time of his early paper, ‘A Theory of Thinking’, although the term does not appear in his published work until the late audio-essays of 1977 (published posthumously in *Taming Wild Thoughts*), *A Memoir of the Future* and in his published lectures and seminars where the idea is referred to interchangeably as the ‘stray’ or ‘wild’ thought. In ‘A Theory of Thinking’ he describes two distinct components in the process of thinking and places the ‘thought’ ontologically prior to ‘thinking:

It is convenient to regard thinking as dependent on the successful outcome of two main mental developments. The first is the development of thought. They require an apparatus to cope with them. The second development, therefore, is of this apparatus that I shall provisionally call thinking. I repeat – thinking has to be called into existence to cope with thoughts.
(ST: 110)

Something of Bion’s thinking is echoed by Georges Perec, the French writer and leading member of the *OuLiPo*. Perec, whose interests ranged widely between formal experiments in constrained writing, occasional essays and novels, was also a devoted crossword setter. In his preface to a volume of his crosswords, he offers an analysis of the *cruciverbiste*’s art that resonates with Bion’s theory of thinking to a remarkable degree. Perec identifies two discrete operations involved in compiling a crossword puzzle:

The creation of a crossword is composed of two operations which are completely different, and, at the limit, perfectly independent of each other: the first is the construction of the grid, the second the writing of clues.¹⁴

¹³ See next chapter.

¹⁴ Perec, *Les Mots Croisés*, 11. My translation: ‘La fabrication d’un mot croisé se compose de deux opérations tout à fait différentes et, à la limite, parfaitement indépendantes l’une de l’autre: la première est la construction de la grille, la seconde la recherche des définitions’.

Perec is detailed and explicit in locating these two phases of work in quite different, even ‘contradictory’, states of mind. Constructing the grid is ‘a fastidious, meticulous, maniacal task’¹⁵, while making up clues can be carried out in any idle hour, while strolling, ‘without thinking’¹⁶; he can even imagine a crossword being created by two writers: one providing the grid; the other, the clues. In a similar vein, Bion writes: ‘the thinking used in the development of thoughts differs from the thinking required to use the thoughts when developed’ (EoP: 35). Perec goes on to identify the starting point for the new crossword as the *potence*, the combination of the first vertical and first horizontal words that stimulates the creation of the grid. Outside of this context, the word *potence* also means a post and brace (as in a scaffolding), the thing from which some other thing hangs (as in a gallows), but it also ‘carries’ the idea of potency and potential¹⁷. Freud’s ‘excessively intense idea’ is, I suggest, the *potence* on which the *Project* hangs, a first conjunction of ideas (that which Bion called the ‘definitory hypothesis’, marked in column 1 of the Grid¹⁸, and which is placed, like the *potence*, in the top left-hand corner). It is the thought without a thinker, the wild or stray thought that requires the construction of some thinking apparatus enabling it to be apprehended and developed.

Bion describes the way that the writer must await the thought without a thinker with a combination of patience and guile. He imagines sitting in his armchair and thinking preparatively ‘in case that strange creature should exist and should it swim into my ken’ (29); he also evokes the distress of the thinker who must find ‘some sort of network’ in which to ‘catch’ his thoughts:

I find myself in the state of mind with which I am distressingly familiar – the state of mind in which I can only say that I am abysmally, literally and metaphorically, ignorant. That is one reason why it is a matter of some urgency to me to be able to find some sort of network in which I can catch any thoughts that are available.

(31)

¹⁵ Ibid. My translation: ‘une tâche fastidieuse, minutieuse, maniaque’.

¹⁶ Ibid., 13. My translation: ‘sans y penser’.

¹⁷ <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/potence/62991?q=potence#62280> [accessed 14 July 2015].

¹⁸ See Figure 1. The Grid.

Freud's evident torment in composing the *Project* goes some way, perhaps, to conciliate the modern reader faced with the task of making sense of Freud's tendentious neurology. Highly speculative concepts such as Q, abstractly denoting 'quantity' (of stimulus), beget related terms used unclearly or inconsistently (Q $\acute{\eta}$ ¹⁹); classes of neurones proliferate to meet Freud's changing requirements: permeable Φ - [phi] neurones are supplemented first by impermeable Ψ - [psi] neurones (that provide the physical basis of memory) located deeper inside the organism. The perceptual neurones, ω [omega], make a relatively late appearance, *deus ex machina*, to account for consciousness and 'qualities'. Finally, 'secretory' or 'key' neurones, mentioned only briefly towards the end of part one of the *Project*, evoke the tantalising prospect of the influence of endogenous Q by mysterious internal secretions.

A striking aspect of the *Project* is the way that Freud uses neurology to build an argument that tends elsewhere. Many of the ideas that will become tenets of psychoanalysis are there *in embryo*, from the primary and secondary processes, drives, dreams, repression, and the role of sexuality in the formation of hysteria. Yet this is a text on the way to becoming a different kind of work which will not subsequently require a neurological scaffolding. Within five years, Freud will publish the *Interpretation of Dreams*; within ten, his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*.

Freud assembles an impressive and distracting array of pseudo-neurological concepts not to defend but to construct a scientific account of psychology. The *Project* builds in complexity from 'two principal ideas':

- (1) What distinguishes activity from rest is to be regarded as Q, subject to the general laws of motion. (2) The neurones are to be taken as the material particles.
(295)

With these two planks in place, Freud takes a surprising number of steps forward. I suggest that he builds the apparatus of his argument 'on the fly', in a manner similar to

¹⁹ Described by James Strachey in his introduction to the *Project* as Q's 'mysterious companion [...]'. Both [Q and Q $\acute{\eta}$] undoubtedly stand for 'quantity'. But why this difference between them? [...] There is no question that the difference is a real one, though Freud nowhere explicitly announces it or explains it' (289).

‘booting’ (from ‘bootstrapping’²⁰) into a computer programme. Bootstrapping describes the self-starting process that proceeds through a series of steps that install instructions of increasing complexity to a point where the overall programme can run independently. It offers a technique or a response, if not a complete answer, to the question of how to begin. Even the first lines of the text suggest a progressive initialisation from a strikingly telegraphic style (requiring substantial work on the part of the translator to render the first paragraph in readable English) that gradually opens out into full and connected sentences. Freud’s translator into English, James Strachey, notes:

But the main problem raised by Freud’s manuscript is his use of abbreviations. These are of various kinds. They reach their maximum in the first four and a half pages – the portion which he wrote in pencil in the train. [...] But not only are individual words abbreviated, as often elsewhere, but the sentences themselves are framed in telegraphic style: definite and indefinite articles omitted, sentences without any principal verb. Here, for instance, is a literal translation of the first sentence of the work: ‘Intention to furnish natural-scientific psych., i.e. to represent psych. processes as quantit. determinate states of specifiable material particles, thus to make perspicuous and free from contradiction.’ Where the sense is not in doubt, the sensible plan is obviously to fill in the gaps, indicating with square brackets only the less certain completions of the meaning.
(287)

Bion has written that ‘the start of a discussion tends to impose an appearance of reality on the idea that the matter discussed has a start’ (EoP: 3), a concern that is perhaps most evident in the opening pages of *Learning from Experience*, which begins (and continues) in a telegraphed, halting style in which he also writes: ‘I have experience to record, but how to communicate this experience to others I am in doubt; this book explains why’ (LfE: Intro 3). Where Bion has ‘experience’ to record (and learn from), Freud has as yet only the intuition that the anxiety neuroses are in some way traceable to the question of sexual functioning, as he describes in his correspondence with Fliess as early as 1892 (177).

Freud’s letters to Fliess provide a richly suggestive account of the process of writing that resonates in parallel with the themes of the *Project* itself. A text *about* mechanism (the various mechanisms of psychological processes in response to Q), its success or failure is described *in terms of* a mechanism that does (or does not) promise to ‘run of

²⁰ The idea of bootstrapping is taken from climbing: pulling oneself up ‘by one’s bootstraps’ describes the process of using one’s bootlaces to establish a foothold.

itself” and which can facilitate or impede the flow of explanatory demands placed upon it. An associative nexus of words and ideas speaks to a concern both for mechanism and flow, coalescing in the word ‘facilitation’ (*Bahnung* in the original).

A few remarks of exposition are required. Two classes of neurones initially emerge from Freud’s first and second principal theorems to account for a neuronal system that receives and gives off Q (that is, quantities of external stimulus). Beyond an initial trend in the neurones to ‘divest themselves of Q ’ (immediate and complete discharge of external stimulus in the form of reflex action), there arise ‘endogenous stimuli’ from within the organism itself, giving rise to ‘the major needs: hunger, respiration, sexuality’ (297) (the antecedents here of Freud’s drive theory), requiring purposive action and a store of energy available to meet the ‘exigencies of life’. Needing to account for the structure of ‘cathected’ neurones pre-loaded with endogenous Q (or $Q\eta$), Freud hypothesises the existence of contact-barriers around each neurone, offering varying resistance to the passage of external Q .

His neurone theory must now account for the ‘main characteristic of nervous tissue [...] that is, quite generally, a capacity for being permanently altered by single occurrences’ (287), or memory. ‘It would seem, therefore,’ he writes, ‘that neurones must be both influenced and also unaltered, unprejudiced [to further external stimulus]. We cannot off-hand imagine an apparatus capable of such complicated functioning’ (299). He accordingly *invents* a distinction between Φ -neurones, which are and remain permanently permeable to new sensation, and Ψ -neurones, which come ‘loaded with resistance’ and are thus in effect impermeable to Q , but which can be ‘permanently altered by the passage of an excitation’ in the direction of greater permeability and similarity with the Φ -neurones from which they are originally distinguished.

Freud’s conception of contact-barriers evokes a neuronal reticulum comprised by barriers of varying resistance and location relative to surrounding neurones. The passage of Q from the Φ -neurones meets resistance from the contact-barriers that may nevertheless yield to quantities of stimulus that surmount their particular resistance. The modified pathway that this leaves behind he calls ‘facilitations’, i.e. the facility with which communication between two neurones is now possible, on the basis of previous experience. These facilitations, Freud argues, are the physical basis of memory, in turn

inaugurating and underwriting the entire panoply of psychical processes, such as thinking, attention and dreaming.

As Derrida has also noted, the figurative value of Freud's conception of facilitations for his overall theory cannot be too highly stressed. The metaphorical and associative force of the German word, *Bahnung*, cognate of the more common word, *Bahn*, derives from the related meanings of a path or lane, and more particularly a railway (*Bahn* or *Eisenbahn*)²¹. With this in mind, Freud's letter to Fliess of the 23rd September returns to view. It has been noted previously²² that the tone of Freud's correspondence with Fliess strikes the reader as surprisingly passionate: 'I write so little to you', he begins, 'only because I am writing so much *for* you'²³ (emphasis mine). The first draft of the *Project* is moreover begun '*in Eisenbahnwagen*' (in the railway carriage) as he returns to Vienna following a stay with the Fliess family. It is fitting that a piece of writing that is itself *en route* from one set of ideas (neurology) to another (psychoanalysis) is itself begun in a railway carriage. Freud's 'train of thought' is enacted on a train (*Eisenbahnwagen*) that both enacts the distance between Freud and Fliess, and evokes the communicating pathways between neurones (*Bahnungen*) that effect a passage between physiological and psychical processes.

Derrida's analysis of the *Project* reads Freud with Freud in order to throw light on his implicit metapsychology. In translating the word *Bahnung* with the French word *frayage*, Derrida maintains the sense of a path or a track (*Bahn*) via the French phrase '*se frayer un chemin*' (to forge a path), but develops the word in the direction of the violence or force implied in the idea of 'pathbreaking' to account for the effect of (the passage of) Q on the resistant-but-permeable Ψ -neurones. 'Fraying, the tracing of a trail, opens up a conducting path. Which presupposes a certain violence and a certain resistance to the effraction. The path is broken, cracked, fracta, frayed'²⁴.

²¹ A German etymological dictionary suggests that the connotation of 'railway' emerges from around 1840: <http://www.dwds.de/?view=1&qu=bahn> [accessed 26 March 2015].

²² For example, in Shirley Nelson Garner's essay in Hunter, *Seduction and Theory: Readings of Gender, Representation, and Rhetoric*.

²³ 'Ich schreibe so wenig an Dich, nur weil ich soviel für Dich schreibe' (my translation). Freud, *Aus Den Anfängen Der Psychoanalyse, Briefe an Wilhelm Fließ, Abhandlungen Und Notizen Aus Den Jahren 1887-1902*. Indeed, Fliess' role in the composition of the *Project* cannot be overlooked, suggesting, as it does, an exemplary instance of the container-contained relationship described by Bion and explored in detail in a different context, in chapter four.

²⁴ Derrida, 'Freud and the Scene of Writing', 77.

Derrida draws attention to the way that Freud introduces a definition of memory only for it to be immediately replaced with a further, subtly different definition that in fact changes the ontological ground of his argument entirely. Freud writes:

We can then say: Memory is represented by the facilitations existing between the Ψ -neurones.

[...]

We can therefore say still more correctly that memory is represented by the differences in the facilitations between the Ψ -neurones.
(300)

The difference in definitions presented by Freud as a merely incremental elaboration belies a seismic shift that undoes the metaphysics of presence assumed by the first definition. Allowing that the memory installed by facilitations is only operative under a system of differences *between* facilitations renders inoperative the notion of an original inscriptive force of Q and calls into radical question the possibility of a ‘first time’ (Derrida makes ironical reference elsewhere in his essay to the ‘virginity of the receiving substance’²⁵). Yet the words that Freud uses around the term *Bahnung* do not necessarily support the violence or effraction implied by the ideas of ‘fraying’ or ‘breaching’. For example, Freud describes facilitations in the same section in terms of an ‘absorption’ (301), (Ger.: *Absorption*) of Qñ by the contact-barriers and as the ‘partial and locally determined lifting’ (302) (Ger.: *Aufhebung*) of resistance (to Q). Neither of these terms imply the violence of an effraction. What is also under-emphasised in Derrida’s account, I suggest, is the notion of quantities (and ideas) *in transit*.

For Bion, the idea of a thought ‘on the way’ is an important one. Thoughts without thinkers arrive unbidden on the metaphorical doorstep, like stray animals (TWT: 27), seeking a mind or a culture in which they may lodge, if only temporarily. Though he generally uses the idea of transference in its classical definition, there are moments where he seems to expand the concept to indicate a staging-post of the thought as it travels through mind, or minds:

²⁵ Ibid.

[Transference] is an idea that you have ‘on the way’ – you transfer it to me as a temporary measure on your way to what you really think or feel. At the same moment the new idea that you have is a temporary one and will be discarded sooner or later. It is another one of those places where you stop on your own particular journey.
(Ital: 28)

Edward Said, in *Beginnings*, cites the psychologist Jean Piaget, who suggests that ‘the genesis [of a structure] is never more than a transition from one structure to another, but also a formative transition [*passage formateur*] that leads [*qui conduit*] from a weaker to a stronger [*de plus faible au plus fort*] structure, structure is never more than a system of transformations whose roots remain operative’²⁶. The *passage formateur* in the *Project* leads from neurological ideas (the neurone and Q/Qñ) to the point where the *Project* can be discontinued in favour of a wholly new science, psychoanalysis, stripped entirely of its neurological scaffold.

The idea of the scaffold appears in *Transformations* in a discussion of the argument between Bishop Berkeley and Isaac Newton. Berkeley satirised Isaac Newton’s evocation of mysterious, non-empirical entities called ‘fluxions’ to provide the logical underpinnings of his theory of calculus. He wrote that Newton ‘used fluxions, like the scaffold of a building, as things to be laid aside or got rid of as soon as finite lines were found proportional to them. But then these finite exponents are found by the help of fluxions. Whatever therefore is got by such exponents and proportions is to be ascribed to fluxions: which must therefore be previously understood. And what are these fluxions?’ (Trans: 157). Like Newton, Freud develops an array of hypothetical entities – his Φ -, Ψ - and ω -neurones – which must each be ‘previously understood’ in order for him to advance his argument. Freud is by no means unaware of the ‘unfortunate tinge of arbitrariness’ (303) that seems to surround each new step in his reasoning, though he presses on at each moment of difficulty ‘follow[ing] a Darwinian line of thought’ (303) that provides a functional, teleological warrant to press on at each stage.

Freud’s discussion of facilitations and contact-barriers in the *Project* suggests that his theoretical constructions are of a piece with his compositional difficulties. Having noted that ‘Every Ψ -neurone must in general be presumed to have several paths of connection with other neurones – that is, several contact-barriers’ (301), he pauses to consider that

²⁶ Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 192.

anyone ‘engaged scientifically in the construction of hypotheses will only begin to take his theories seriously if they can be fitted into our knowledge from more than one direction’ (302), unconsciously evoking, it appears, an analogous relationship between his Ψ -neurones and his hypotheses. Seeking to avoid the ‘arbitrariness of a *constructio ad hoc*’, he then proceeds to shore up his theory of two classes of neurones with an ingenious circular argument to the effect that he has not invented his two classes of neurones so much as ‘found them already in existence’ (303), in the form of an earlier hypothesis (concerning external and endogenous sources of stimuli) which was itself the earlier basis of his distinction of Φ - and Ψ -neurones.

Freud further suggests that the Ψ system might be structured as a ‘sympathetic ganglion’ that bridges internal and external sources of stimulus. The psychoanalyst and neuropsychologist Mark Solms has described this as a system designed to ‘associatively link endogenous needs (expressed as drives) with the external objects that satisfied them’²⁷ expressed by ‘the formula ‘I feel like this about that’’²⁸. In so doing Freud invokes a secondary, internal interface between external and internal sources of stimuli modelled on the original distinction that has carried his discussion to this point, in effect placing *en abyme* the structure of his argument thus far.

Freud’s sympathetic ganglion is one of a number of points in the *Project* where a carefully developed argument builds to the emergence of a new idea that renders some of the preceding points redundant. By locating the interface between external and endogenous stimuli deep within the heart of the Ψ -neurone recast as a sympathetic ganglion, Freud begins to move further away from a neurological account toward the psychology that is his stated objective. The planks of his neurological scaffolding remain in place, however, and serve as platform for further development.

The sympathetic ganglion and the ψ -neurone can be seen as distant forebears of alpha-function, which first appears in *Learning from Experience* as a placeholder term ‘intentionally devoid of meaning’ (LFE: 3) during Bion’s discussion of the activities that enable the subject to process experience. By the time of *Elements of Psychoanalysis*, Bion has arrived at a working definition of alpha-function as ‘that function by which

²⁷ Solms, *The Feeling Brain: Selected Papers on Neuropsychanalysis*, 149.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 169.

sense impressions are transformed into elements capable of storage for use in dream and other thoughts' (EoP: 4). Like Freud, Bion is wrestling with the difficulty of beginning to write about something that is only really 'thought' in the act of writing itself; in both cases, their enquiries proceed through the creation of one or more 'imaginary facts', as Bion writes in his *Italian Seminars*: 'I shall start by having a speculative imagination, something that is not a fact, an imaginary fact' (Ital: 47). The *Project* contains a great number of imaginary facts that nevertheless provide important ways for Freud to begin to talk about the elements required for a scientific psychology: memory, learning, attention, thought, and dream, and a number of passages anticipate an object-relations model and coincide with Bionian ideas to a remarkable degree²⁹.

'A main characteristic of nervous tissue,' Freud writes, 'is memory: that is, quite generally, a capacity for being permanently altered by single occurrences' (299); learning 'on the basis of memory' comes very close to Bion's theorisation of 'learning from experience' in recognising the need to account for the cumulative and progressive structuration of 'mind' (to be understood ambiguously in terms of both a physical and psychic reality) that does something with experience other than the primary process (or 'primary nervous system' (296)) reflex of discharge. Freud's description here of an iterative process of conduction and differentiation also seems to anticipate alpha-function, which is not innate, but learned and internalised from early and ongoing encounters with another mind. This is Freud:

This gives us a hint that conductive capacity is to be linked with differentiation, so that we may expect to find that the process of conduction itself will create a differentiation in the protoplasm and consequently an improved conductive capacity for subsequent conduction.
(298–9; itals. mine)

For Bion, the mother's capacity to receive and respond empathetically to infantile distress, and her ability to convey a helpful, alternative reality to the child – a state of mind he terms *reverie* – leads to the establishment of the child's own mind and ability to contain and process stimulus and desire. In a suggestive passage, the *Project* seems to anticipate object relations theory, and the communicative aspect of projective identification:

²⁹ A point made briefly by Chris Mawson (CW 4: 256).

Experience shows that the first path to be taken is that leading to internal change (expression of the emotions, screaming, vascular innervation). But, as was explained at the beginning, no such discharge can produce an unburdening result, since the endogenous stimulus continues to be received and the Ψ tension is restored. The removal of the stimulus is only made possible here by an intervention which for the time being gets rid of the release of $Q\eta$ in the interior of the body; and this intervention calls for an alteration in the external world. [...] At first, the human organism is incapable of bringing about the specific action. It takes place by *extraneous help*, when the attention of an experienced person is drawn to the child's state by discharge along the path of internal change. In this way this path of discharge acquires a secondary function of the highest importance, that of *communication* [...]

(318)

The result of this external help, aside from the discharge of endogenous Q and the satisfaction of the need, is that 'a facilitation is then formed' that serves to teach the system to know what to do in case the need should arise again. This account of learning seems to approximate what in Bion's model of thinking is the development of the mind through the 'mother's alpha-function' (LFE: 36). The point is made succinctly by Freud: 'it is in relation to a fellow human-being that a human-being learns to cognise' (331).

Bion, like Freud, locates thinking as a response to the discrepancy between the conditions served up by an external reality and the internal investment (translated by Strachey as 'cathexis') in an idea related to need and desire. 'I shall limit the term 'thought'', Bion writes in 'A Theory of Thinking', 'to the mating of a pre-conception with a frustration' (ST: 111). Freud speaks of a Ψ process of 'judging [...] evoked by the dissimilarity between the wishful cathexis of a memory and a perceptual cathexis [...]. Their non-coincidence gives the impetus for the activity of thought, which is terminated once more with their coincidence' (328). Although the terminology is different, I suggest that both Bion and Freud conceive of a similar process.

There are further points at which Freud's conjectures seem to anticipate both Bion and Klein. Freud's contention that 'what we call *things* are residues which evade being judged' (334) evokes Bion's description of beta-elements to a remarkable degree, even to the extent of intimating that they result from the evasion (or failure) of psychical processing (alpha-function, in Bion's terminology), a point implicit in Bion's nomenclature (beta-elements are genetically more primitive than alpha-elements, and

yet they are called *beta*, logically proceeding alpha-elements³⁰). Freud's evocation of 'secretory' (or 'key') neurones, mentioned in passing in the *Project*, also seems to intuit his later formulation of a death drive, specifically in its more Kleinian conception (understood as a primary and inherent destructiveness witnessed by anxiety and unpleasure):

It only remains to assume, therefore, that owing to the cathexis of memories unpleasure is *released* from the interior of the body and freshly conveyed up. The mechanism of this release can only be pictured as follows. Just as there are motor neurones which, when they are filled to a certain amount, conduct Q η into the muscles and accordingly discharge it, so there must be 'secretory' neurones which, when they are excited, cause the generation in the interior of the body of something which operates as a stimulus upon the endogenous paths of conduction to Ψ -neurones which thus influence the production of endogenous Q η , and accordingly do not discharge Q η but supply it in roundabout ways. We will call these [secretory] neurones 'key neurones'.
(320)

In an intriguing and seemingly performative aposiopesis, Freud breaks off his discussion abruptly following a discussion of the emergence of thoughts into consciousness:

Nevertheless, [thoughts] usually emerge [into consciousness] (1) if the smooth passage [of quantity] has reached an end or has come up against an obstacle, and (2) if it has aroused an idea which, for other reasons, calls up indications of quality – that is, consciousness. At this point the discussion may be broken off.
(375–376)

Freud closes the *Project* with a section that dwells, with a certain irony, on the problem of 'error' in the process of thought. He is not unaware that his own line of reasoning, using a single neurone as the basis for a description of the entire complex of a thought-process, may itself introduce error into the basis of his argument:

For the thing-complex and movement-complex are never quite identical, and among their divergent components there may be some the neglect of which disturbs the outcome in reality. This defect in thought originates from the endeavour, *which, indeed, we are copying here*, to substitute a single neurone for the complex – which is necessitated precisely by the immense complexity. *These are mistakes in judgement or faults in the premises.*
(384; first italics mine)

³⁰ See discussion on this point by Grotstein, 2007: 62, and here in chapter five.

He outlines a number of different kinds of thinking, including practical thinking, ‘cognitive’ thinking, and judgement. Practical thinking, the original basis for all types of thinking, is that which tends toward the discharge of Q and modification of the external world in order to meet the ‘exigencies of life’. By contrast, cognitive thinking is of a more theoretical or contemplative kind, less related to the immediate need to do something about the quantities of stimulus exerted on a system. One of the advantages of cognitive thought is that it enables thinking to be done ahead of time, before a practical need arises:

If the thought-process lasts too long, its product will have become useless in the meantime. For that reason we ‘*think ahead*’.
(383)

In its way, the *Project* does just that: it is an example of a prior thinking that, in this case, precedes the entire body of psychoanalysis, but which nevertheless stands Freud in good stead for the more narrowly ‘psychical turn’ that his ideas will take. It is reminiscent of Bion’s insight that ‘what we have to discover for ourselves leaves behind in our mind a pathway that can also be used on another occasion’ (Cog: 26). The pre-thinking that has been done in the *Project* sets ‘in train’ the whole panoply of psychoanalytic ideas that will find expression in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the *Three Essays*, and even *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. What has been laboriously achieved in the *Project* establishes a pathway (in the manner of a Derridean ‘fraying’) that nevertheless moves the thought from one place to another:

What was originally a laboriously established thought-connection afterwards becomes, owing to simultaneous full cathexis, a powerful facilitation. The only question about it is whether it is always effected along the pathway that was first discovered or whether a more direct connection may be followed.
(385)

By the end of the *Project*, Q and thoughts (not the *thinking* of the thought but the thought itself: the ‘thought without a thinker’) have become virtually interchangeable: Q is described as ‘*in flow*’ (375); thoughts leave behind a ‘thought-facilitation’ as the outcome of the passage of Q and Q₁ through the neuronal system.

In conclusion, I contend that the ‘excessively intense idea’ that animates the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* is productively considered as a ‘thought without a thinker’,

seeking the apparatus that will enable it to be thought. This creative ‘project’ is echoed internally within the text through the figures of Q and Q $\acute{\eta}$, the two varieties of stimulus from external and internal sources. Together, they come close to representing that which Bion will term O³¹: namely, the ultimate reality – or stimulus, using Freud’s language – to which we are subject, and which cannot be apprehended (as with Q/Q $\acute{\eta}$) except in small quantities (large irruptions of Q are synonymous, for Freud, with pain (307)) through alpha-function or the sympathetic ganglion. In ‘A Beam of Intense Darkness’, James Grotstein describes the thoughts without a thinker as ‘unthought thoughts [that] emerge from the two arms of O (inherent pre-conceptions and sensory data of emotional significance)’³², which might be otherwise described as endogenous and exogenous stimuli. Examined as a precisely *creative* piece of writing that aims to bring Freud’s embryonic idea to term, the *Project* can be seen to enact in its writing the creative process itself.

³¹ Bion’s term O will be discussed in greater detail in chapters five and eight. Briefly, it is Bion’s shorthand for ‘ultimate reality’ or the noumenon, following Kant.

³² Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion’s Legacy to Psychoanalysis*, 73–74.

Chapter Three

Pompey's Thought-Worm: Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*

Ah, distracting thought that creeps through the disintegrating mind, unwelcome worm.¹

Animula vagula blandula,
hospes comesque corporis,
quae nunc abibis in loca?²

Stevie Smith, better known for her poetry, published three novels in her lifetime. The first of these, *Novel on Yellow Paper*, was published in 1936, after a publisher told her that he would consider printing her poetry if she first wrote a novel. *Novel* is a first-person narration by Pompey Casmilus, a young woman who works as a private secretary. Near the beginning, she writes:

The thought that comes to me now, that I am riding this horse, that puts his ears back and dances across the shadows, and glances with hatred and panic at the white gate posts, is the thought of all that I wish to say in this book, is the thought that works at me like a worm, like an intestinal worm that pulls and drags its alexandrine length along those five hundred yards of trouble.
(12)

In what follows I would like to develop the narrator's suggestion that the book is the result of a *thought*, and more specifically to consider Pompey's striking characterisation of the thought as something that 'works at [her] like a worm', an 'intestinal worm' that models thought both as a parasite and as that which creates or holds open the space of the intestine. The figure of the intestinal worm is remarkably resonant with Bion's suggestive analogy between thinking and digestion. In *Learning from Experience*, he describes beta-elements as 'undigested facts' (LfE: 7), contrasting them with alpha-elements that 'have been digested by alpha-function and thus made available for thought' (LfE: 7). It also recalls Bion's statement that 'thinking is a development forced

¹ Smith, *Novel on Yellow Paper, Or, Work It out for Yourself*, 210. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

² Loeb Classical Library https://www.loebclassics.com/view/hadrian-poems/1934/pb_LCL434.445.xml [accessed 27 February 2016]. Attributed to the Emperor Hadrian. Pompey declares herself an '*animula, vagula, blandula* of the office' on p. 204. The Loeb suggests the following translation: 'Dear fleeting sweetening, little soul /My body's comrade and its guest /What region now must be thy goal?'

on the psyche by the pressure of thoughts and not the other way round' (ST: 111). I suggest that the intestinal worm is the thought without a thinker, structured as a parasite that is both inside and outside the mind. The book's ostensibly anti-semitic themes are also reconsidered via the trope of parasitism. The figure of the parasite additionally informs a reading of the book's subtitle and Pompey's ironic refrain, 'Work it out for yourself', and the theme of suicide which it seems to suggest. As Pompey chides her readers for their mindlessness, she also calls on the mind of the reader to supply the alpha-function that she was herself denied through the early death of her mother.

I also attempt a Bionian analysis of Stevie Smith's complex and characteristic handling of tone. Extending Bion's use of the Grid for the analysis of literature, I suggest that both Stevie Smith and Bion exemplify the use of 'column 2 formulations' that resist the emergence of catastrophic change. While Bion considered the Grid 'a feeble instrument' (BL: 98), finally unsatisfactory for his use as a clinician, his use in the textual analysis of Bishop Berkeley's comments to Isaac Newton demonstrates Bion's sensitivity to language, confounding what can seem overly abstract in his approach.

Early in the narrative, Pompey issues a warning to her readers: 'This is a foot-off-the-ground novel that came by the left hand' (38). While the image has, perhaps, a sexual connotation, which Pompey does not deny – 'But oh how I have enjoyed sex I do enjoy myself so much I cannot pass it over' (121) – it also characterises Pompey's 'waggishness' (199), her frivolous and apparently unserious approach to life. Her beaus reiterate the point: she is *ungründlich* (from German: 'not thorough'), according to Karl (244); for Freddy, she is *indécisée* (from French: 'irresolute, indecisive') (43).

It is also a description of her writing style, which comes to Pompey, as indeed it came to Stevie Smith, in a continuous stream-of-consciousness monologue³. The correspondences between the character of Pompey Casmilus and Stevie Smith are abundant, and thinly veiled: like Pompey, Stevie Smith worked as a secretary while writing poetry, lived in suburbia with a beloved aunt, lost her mother to an early death and her father to his *Wanderlust*; and both Stevie and Pompey claim ownership of the text (*Novel* is both Stevie's and Pompey's novel). The manuscript of *Novel on Yellow Paper* was, in fact, typed on yellow paper (according to Spalding, the title was

³ Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography*, 112.

originally a placeholder name after Smith's original suggestion, 'Pompey Casmilus', was turned down⁴). Several features of the text draw the reader's attention to the book's metafictional qualities, including the question of writing under a pseudonym. The opening lines of the novel replace the traditional invocation of the muse with an address to Casmilus, revealing that Pompey's surname is itself a *nom de plume*:

Casmilus, whose great name I steal,
Whose name a greater doth conceal
(9)

The 'greater name' of Casmilus is Hermes, the Greek god of boundaries and border crossings, able to travel to and from the underworld. Pompey's name is at some remove from her birth name, Patience, just as 'Stevie' was for the writer christened Florence Margaret (significantly, it is with the image of a tigress called *Flo* that the novel will close). In an amusing twist, some critics assumed that Stevie Smith was a pseudonym of Virginia Woolf. One reviewer even went so far as to write to Woolf personally, to tell her: 'You are Stevie Smith. No doubt of it. And *Yellow Paper* is far and away your best book'⁵.

Pompey, who works for Sir Phoebus Ullswater, uses her writing to mitigate the 'orgy of boredom to which [her] soul is committed' (16), writing on yellow paper in order to avoid sending the pages of her novel to her employer's clients by accident. Like Kismet, the easily distractible horse from Cornwall with whose image the novel opens, that 'dances across the shadows, and glances with hatred and panic' (12), Pompey's distinctive voice glances over the whirlwind of her social life and friendships, introducing characters that are dropped moments later, promising confidences that never materialise: 'I'll tell you about Bennie? Of course I'll tell you about Bennie, and about all my friends. You look back and see what I say about it at the beginning of this book' (15). For the reader, Pompey warns, unaccustomed to her foot-off-the-ground style, there is nothing to do except abandon the book from the outset:

And if you are a foot-off-the-ground person I make no bones to say that is how you will write and only how you will write. And if you are a foot-on-the-ground person, this book will be for you a desert of weariness and exasperation. So put

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 115.

it down. Leave it alone. It was a mistake you made to get this book. You could not know. (38–9)

The book, she says, is ‘the talking voice that runs on’, a collection of her thoughts that ‘come and go and sometimes they do not quite come and I do not pursue them to embarrass them with formality to pursue them into a harsh captivity’ (38). Pompey agrees (as did Stevie⁶) to punctuate the book for ease of reading:

And for my part I will try to punctuate this book to make it easy for you to read, and to break it up, with spaces for a pause, as the publisher has asked me to do. But this I find very extremely difficult.

For this book is the talking voice that runs on, and the thoughts come, the way I said, and the people come too, and come and go, to illustrate the thoughts, to point the moral, to adorn the tale.

Oh talking voice that is so sweet, how hold you alive in captivity, how point you with commas, semi-colons, dashes, pauses and paragraphs?
(39)

Characterising her thoughts as wild animals that should not be pursued ‘into a harsh captivity’ brings her into a remarkable resonance with Bion’s description of the ‘thought without a thinker’. In *Taming Wild Thoughts*, it is a ‘wild’ or ‘stray’ thought, more or less suitable for domestication:

If a thought without a thinker comes along, it may be what is a ‘stray thought’, or it could be a thought with the owner’s name and address upon it, or it could be a ‘wild thought’. The problem, should such a thought come along, is what to do with it. Of course, if it is wild, you might try to domesticate it.
(TWT: 27)

The thought of all that Pompey wishes to say in this book is a rather different animal: a worm, in parasitic relationship to its intestinal host. As others (e.g. Najarian⁷ and Stevenson⁸) have noted, much in Stevie’s work turns out to be densely allusive to the canon. In this instance, it is Alexander Pope who provides the doubly ironic intertext from his 1711 *Essay on Criticism*:

A needless alexandrine ends the song

⁶ Ibid., 112–113.

⁷ Najarian, ‘Contributions to Almighty Truth: Stevie Smith’s Seditious Romanticism’.

⁸ Stevenson, ‘Stevie Smith’s Voices’.

That like a wounded snake, drags its slow length along.⁹

Pope's implication is that the alexandrine – twelve-syllable poetic meter – is a ponderous form favoured by the pretentious writer: a 'wounded snake' for Pope (a veiled suggestion, perhaps, of failed potency), an intestinal worm for Smith, that supplements what is comic in Pope's snake through the bathetic figure of the worm. Less deadly, the worm is nevertheless capable of working at her from the inside, 'pulling and dragging' its way through her intestine: the body of the worm the intestine's uncanny mimesis, the parasite vouchsafing its host. Like a worm, perhaps, Stevie's original draft of *Novel* was a singular and linear text that was, according to her biographer, begun by her 'writing six thousand words in one night' and completing the rest within ten weeks¹⁰. The segmentation of the worm – in the form of extensive punctuation absent in the initial draft – came later, at her publisher's insistence. The alexandrine is also the form used by Racine in *Phèdre*, which becomes an important reference in Pompey's developing theme of the nobly chosen suicide.

But it is the figure of the worm as a *thought*, as that from which the entirety of the novel springs, that is especially striking, and resonant with Bion's idea of the 'thought without a thinker'. For Bion, the determination of thinking is 'simplified if 'thoughts' are regarded as epistemologically prior to thinking and that thinking has to be developed as a method or apparatus for dealing with 'thoughts'' (LfE: 83). He describes the way that the thought – that psychical entity that steps in where some anticipated *thing* has proved not to be – places a pressure on the personality to develop a mind: 'an apparatus has to be produced to make it possible to think the already existing thought' (LfE: 83).

Bion is acutely attentive to the role that models play both in his own work and in the minds of his patients. Attention to the implicit model enables the analyst to answer the question: what does a given individual *do* (or purport to do, in omnipotent phantasy) with their thoughts? He writes:

'Thinking' can be regarded as the name given to a model or abstraction derived from a realisation; with an actual patient the problem is to determine what he represents by the term thinking.
(LfE: 83)

⁹ Pope, *The Major Works*, 28.

¹⁰ Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography*, 112.

Pompey's image of the thought-worm proposes one such answer (and moreover relates thinking to writing). The thought or thoughts that are constitutive of *Novel on Yellow Paper* are figured paradoxically as something originating both from within and without: the alien parasite is nevertheless deeply internally installed. The worm is also an intestinal double that both mimics and defines the shape of the intestine. Without its worm, there is no intestinal space: the worm can be seen as a stenting device holding open the otherwise negative, potential space of the intestine. Steven Connor suggests that Bion's formulation of the thought without a thinker describes a pre-Cartesian ego defined negatively around the existence of thoughts:

Before the achievement of the state of *cogito ergo sum*, there is a stage in which it would be possible to say *cogitationes sunt, ergo non sum*: there are thoughts, therefore I am not.¹¹

Pompey's thought-worm brings to mind another worm-like creature described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the infusorian (or 'animalcule'). Recounting a scientific study that claimed to demonstrate the potential immortality of the infusorian (SE 18: 47), he noted that the infusorian's death seemed to come not from any trend within the organism's vital processes, but from a failure in the creature's environment. The infusorian exception would, however, prove premature: subsequent studies cast doubt on the original, as in the original experiment the nutrient fluid that surrounded the infusoria was replaced at each new generation. When it was not, and the infusoria were left to swim in fluid contaminated by their own waste products, they, too, died.

Freud's infusorian tale is one of those curious moments where Freud's theory turns. Having won back his hypothesis that all life routes toward death, he disavows the preceding excursion into infusorian territory: 'At this point the question may well arise in our minds whether any object whatever is served by trying to solve the problem of natural death from a study of the protozoa' (SE 18: 49). Yet in an aside, he also suggests that the death of the infusorian provides a template for human mortality:

An infusorian, therefore, if it is left to itself, dies a natural death owing to its incomplete voidance of the products of its own metabolism. (It may be that the same incapacity is the ultimate cause of the death of all higher animals as well.) (SE 18: 48)

¹¹ Connor, 'Thinking Things', 6.

Death is the result of the ‘incomplete voidance of the products of [one’s] own metabolism’. Pompey’s thought-worm produces the novel, but eliminating it from her system risks taking the intestine (that is by analogy her mind) along with it, threatening a ‘mindlessness’. While *Novel*’s subtitle seems to signal that Pompey may be on the verge of committing suicide, it is also a protest against a kind of mindless, ‘pre-fabricated’ thinking. As a private secretary she is required to do other people’s thinking, to ventriloquise¹² other people’s thoughts, signing the Baronet’s letters in his name (204), or composing a fictitious report about the Amazon for the Baronet’s mother, for which she draws inspiration from the games of her childhood (26), even as it must efface or exhaust her own capacity for thinking. Doing all the thinking for other people, she is herself very tired: ‘Oh I am so tired. There never was anyone so tired as poor Pompey at this moment at this page, at this very line, at this word’ (58). She is never in the position herself to comment on matters in her own capacity:

Well look this dangerous way I am running on. I am a private secretary. And how is Sir Phoebus? And how is...? and how is...? I regret I am not in a position to state. No, that grand remark I am never able to write, and partly I think it is because it is often being too much of the truth. I am afraid I am not in a position to state. And I am afraid I should be. And I feel a desperate character.
(16)

Working for a magazine publisher, she also depicts the vacuous content of the women’s weeklies: sanctimonious relationship advice (53), homilies of married life (151), facile advice on interior décor (66-7), all characterised by a kind of airy thoughtlessness and a ‘a certain type of vulgarity, allied with stupidity’ (184) that she despises. Her narration is punctuated by pages of her unattributed ‘favourite quotations’ (42, 50), which she sarcastically suggests may serve the reader for ready-made conversation at ‘high-class parties’, as they serve her in her role as secretary:

So now you shall have some more nice little quotations for your scrap book. Or if you have no scrap book you can shoot them at your friends at your high-class parties and you may think you are lucky that you can just have them straight off like this and don’t have to fit them into a speech the way I do for Sir Phoebus.
(50)

¹² Derived etymologically from the idea of speaking in, or from, the belly, another intestinal situation.

Elsewhere she describes her contrarian relationship to religion. Although finally not a believer, the mental engagement entailed by the high church tradition appeals to her: she detests the simplification of doctrine to appeal to ‘bone lazy’ people unwilling to ‘use their brains’ (179):

But now I think the Church should stand up, should get right up now, and say: Stupidity is a sin. And then it should teach in very difficult to understand, very high-up language, not simple at all, but really very difficult [...]
(178)

The ‘working-out’ that she invites the reader to do for her- or himself runs in parallel with the ‘working-through’ of the thought through Pompey’s mind. Thus the role of her readers in ‘working it out’ may be to lend the use of their mind to do some of the work of receiving and further working on her thoughts¹³. The gesture of asking the reader to supply some of the ‘work’ also recalls Sterne in *Tristram Shandy*:

Writing, when properly managed (as you may be sure I think mine is) is but a different name for conversation. As no one, who knows what he is about in good company, would venture to talk all; – so no author, who understands the just boundaries of decorum and good-breeding, would presume to think all: the truest respect which you can pay to the reader’s understanding, is to halve the matter amicably, and leave him something to imagine, in his turn, as well as yourself.¹⁴

All of this contrasts sharply with earlier scenes in which it is Pompey who seems unable to think, either through a kind of ‘thoughtlessness’ (in the conventional sense of the term) or due to an inability to think in the face of strong emotions. Two of the novel’s Jewish scenes exemplify this. Near the beginning of the novel, Pompey recalls a party she attended. Looking around the room, she is suddenly elated to realise that she is the ‘only goy’ – that is, non-Jewish person – at the party. ‘Hurrah to be a goy!’ she exclaims:

Last week I was at a party at Leonie’s. Suddenly I looked round. I thought: I am the only goy. There was a newspaper man there and a musician and some plain business men. But the Jews. Well all to say about the Jews has already been said, so I’ll leave it. But then I had a moment of elation at that party. I got shot right up. Hurrah to be a goy! A clever goy is cleverer than a clever Jew. And I

¹³ Compare this, for instance, with B.S. Johnson’s contention that the reader should add nothing to the writer’s thought (see chapter four).

¹⁴ Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, 73.

am a clever goy that knows everything on earth and in heaven. This moment of elation I am telling you about: the only living person in that room, the cleverest person in that room; the cleverest living goy.
(10–11)

The offensiveness of this statement is the more remarkable for its inclusion in a novel in which the narrator is closely identifiable (and *was* identified) with the author herself. In her biography, Frances Spalding notes that Stevie's ostensibly anti-semitic themes lost her a number of Jewish friends¹⁵, and Kristin Bluemel writes 'Is it as bad as it seems?' How could [Stevie Smith] have begun her career in 1936 with this apparent celebration of racial or ethnic superiority?'¹⁶ Bluemel, who considers the anti-semitic aspects in all three of Smith's novels, attempts to recuperate her reputation by arguing that Smith intentionally presented a complacent public with unpalatable truths about the insidious commonplace of anti-Jewish feeling. She notes Smith's use of the Yiddish word 'goy', Jewish slang for the gentile, that positions Pompey as an 'insider' of Jewish culture¹⁷ even as she is contemptuous of it. Pompey is a 'hanger-on' in Jewish society, and the theme of the Jew-as-parasite (which we shall later see) provides an ironic identification. Her vision of Germany's prospective cruelty to the Jews is also remarkably prescient. To begin with Pompey presents a complacently romantic image of Germany, but this gives way progressively to darker images that she insistently presses her reader to realise:

Ah that beloved Germany and my darling Karl. I too can see that idea of sleeping, dreaming, happily dreaming Germany, her music, her philosophy, her wide fields and broad rivers, her gentle women. But the dream changes, and how is it to-day, how is it to-day in this year of 1936, how is it to-day?
(49)

During a holiday in Germany, Pompey she encounters the growing tide of anti-Jewish feeling: 'Ugh that hateful feeling I had over there, and how it was a whole race was gone run mad', she declares, perceiving a 'feeling of cruelty in Germany, and the sort of vicious cruelty that isn't battle-cruelty, but doing people to death in lavatories' (103).

¹⁵ Spalding, *Stevie Smith: A Critical Biography*, 122.

¹⁶ Bluemel, *George Orwell and the Radical Eccentrics: Intermodernism in Literary London*, 29.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

Yet Kristin Bluemel does not address another Jewish ‘scene’ that I consider to be even more important. This time Pompey is with her Jewish friend, Rosa, whose friend Lottie challenges Pompey to ‘dress with more *chic*’:

So. And she put on me her hat and a coat with hanging sequin sleeves, and round my neck a piece of fur. And Rosa was there, and Rosa was looking at me with a look in her eyes that was a little bit begging me to remember that Lottie was important to Rosa, because of something between Horace and Herman. And I slanted my eyes at Rosa, and couldn’t quite get the hang of that look, and I stood in front of a long glass and began to laugh silently.
(61)

Within this scene of growing tension – Lottie’s arrogance, Pompey’s affront at being thus ‘played’ at dress-up, and Rosa’s pleading look – Stevie Smith uses pauses to subtle effect. Micro-moments of narrative pause alert the reader to the fault lines of Pompey’s personality, her potential to become ‘a tiger’: ‘When I am confronted with this certain type of vulgarity, embodied in a certain type of vulgarian, I can feel I am a tiger, with claws on his feet that would go ripping and tearing the flesh from off him’ (184). The scene with Lottie and Rosa continues:

[...] I stood in front of a long glass and began to laugh silently.

Because it was funny. There in the mirror was Pompey, with the fur and the sequins and hat, and behind on one side was Rosa bending forward anxiously, and behind on the other side was Lottie [...]
(61)

The narrative suspension between Pompey’s silent laughter and the line that follows signals the interruption, not only of Pompey’s good humour, but of Pompey herself, for the narrative resumes in the third person (‘there [...] was Pompey’), alerting us to a moment of dissociation that will become more marked in the passage that follows. Pompey’s fury invokes the classical anti-semitic trope of the Jew as Christ-killer, noting the resulting tableau of the three women ‘in front of a long thin mirror, with a Rosa and a Lottie beside, as if it was Christ crucified between thieves’. The scene continues to unfold, the impersonal details of the furnishings and the dispassionate account of her reflection leading to a moment that is literally *unthinkable*:

Like it was. Oh a green light shining through the dirty windows, on to a pink carpet, and the curtains were pink damask stamped with a floral dance of

peonies, and the fringes were pink, and there was the dark face of Pompey with a long narrow head, and on top a hat like a turban wound round, and a fringe falling to the fur band round the neck, and one hand outstretched to hold the gloves of green velvet, and the other hand up to the shoulder to throw back the sapphire sequins. *And there was something that I didn't like, that I couldn't think, and then I thought:* It's the gloves are wrong.
(62; ital. mine)

Pompey proceeds to fling down the gloves, and pours tea into the drinking goblet reserved for use by Lottie's pampered dog:

And that was a fine picture again, and I laughed and laughed, and looked to see the teeth showing through, and never shall I forget the fine picture that was. And my face was dark and brilliant, and Lottie's face was calculating, and then the calculations died, and the eyes were dead.
(62)

Slowly tilting the goblet, Pompey then allows the tea to fall 'drop by drop' on to 'careful Lottie's carpet', concluding with a retort modelled on the Beatitudes: 'Blessed are they that shall not be offended' (63).

It is a remarkable, disturbing scene, never referred to again, and more offensive, I suggest, than the earlier 'Hurrah to be a goy!' scene; yet it does not seem to have attracted critical attention. Its specifically anti-semitic aspects – the references to the Crucifixion and the New Testament – are more 'considered' insults than the imbecility of getting 'shot right up' (10) at the realisation of being the only goy at the party. Where Pompey only entertains that thought within the confines of her head, here we encounter the *passage à l'acte* from anger to revenge.

Another 'Jewish' anecdote develops the theme of the parasite. In her inventory of her acquaintances, she describes a Jewish couple, 'Cyril the Sponge' and his partner, Prunella, in terms that evoke the stereotype of the parasitic Jew, ironically, given her own parasitic existence. Like Cyril the Sponge, Pompey is the frequent recipient of lavish weekend hospitality that she is unable to return: 'I don't mind saying that I am a lucky girl and get entertained pretty freely one way and another. And a lot of my friends, now it is funny how it has turned out, have moved away to the country. So now I go week-ending, and there you get new angles on life' (20). She is undoubtedly aware of the bargain she makes in accepting invitations to events that she nevertheless misses

no opportunity to criticise (87). With Prunella, there are yet further points of identification and allusion: Pompey suggests that as an unmarried woman Prunella is an ‘emotional careerist’ liable to attempt suicide when things go wrong (22). Prunella’s name also affords Pompey an oblique reference to the intestinal theme, with an allusion both to Jonathan Swift¹⁸ and the Jewish intellectual, Max Nordau:

Well, this girl was christened Gladys, but of course that wouldn’t do. So later on she got herself called Prunella, which is a whole lot better, though linking up, by the tyranny of the association of ideas, like I read in Max Nordau, with intestinal stasis. And what do you know about that, Mr. Arch-Enemy-of-Elimination-Celia-Celia-Celia-Swift?
(21)

In the tea-spilling scene, it is something *unthinkable* that precipitates her extraordinary, calculated response to Lottie’s effrontery: ‘And there was something that I didn’t like, that I couldn’t think, and then I thought: It’s the gloves are wrong’. From a psychoanalytic point of view, the succession of elements is precisely observed: first the bad feeling, the failure of alpha-function, then a different kind of thinking that aims ‘to rid the psyche of accretions of stimuli’ (LfE: 7), by projecting the bad feeling into an unrelated object. The abrupt shifts in tone, fragmented phrases (‘like I was’), and the light, rattling repetition of the phrasal connective ‘and... and I...’ belie Pompey’s breezy *gladness* – ‘Oh how glad I am I am not Lottie Beit, and how glad I am I am not Rosa’ – though the oscillation of ‘I am I am not’ suggests an equivocation. Later in the novel, she regrets her behaviour, attempting to assuage the fear that by her thoughts alone she may have done harm:

So presently the train got well started up, and I sat back and, and I felt real wicked the way I had felt about the Jews myself. As if that thought alone might swell the mass of cruelty working up against them, like when I sent my poems to F. Caudle, the girl that taught me English at school, she said. She was real struck on church was this girl. And she said they were just another nail in the cross that they put the Lord on, or maybe it was just another thorn in the crown that they put on Him, but the idea was, see, they was just swelling the mass of all the evil and cruelty in the world. But I thought then, well that’s not how they are at all, she certainly has got them all wrong, yes, she’s just got them all wrong from beginning to end.
(107)

¹⁸ Swift’s satirical poem, *The Lady’s Dressing Room*, includes the memorable line: ‘Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia shits!’. Swift, *The Poetical Works of Jonathan Swift: Volume 1*, 251.

The feared omnipotence of her thoughts contrasts with her descriptions of her physical frailty and nervous disposition. Reflecting on her childhood, she writes:

I was born with a broken arm, and at three I had a way of getting suddenly very cold and quite, quite stiff, and having to be brought home in a milk cart. [...] So at five I had tubercular peritonitis and nothing but a trouble and an exasperation was I to my poor mama that was not so-o-o strong herself but indeed not at all strong. (73)

We encounter the party girl ('Pompey No Weakness' (59)) debilitated by late nights with Harriet, and feeling 'real unearthly' after a long journey, 'that I might go up to heaven any minute, wafted straight up and no visible means of support' (97). Aside from these moments there are also places where her narrative seems to punctuate around something – some *thing*, some memory – that is itself too traumatic to be represented within the narrative, despite the 'running on' style that is so distinctive both to Stevie Smith and Pompey. The pause that follows the narration of her late nights with Harriet gives on to the aftermath (as we learn only later on) of the end of her relationship with Freddy:

You can easily see how it is I am getting later and later getting to bed every night. Harriet cannot sleep me at her flat, it is only a flat for one. So the last minute has come and we can neither of us bear another minute not to be in bed. But I think that Harriet could always bear it but I no I cannot bear it because I cannot bear it.

Have you ever had a shock? said the funny doctor.
(70)

Though attributed to flu, it is the loss of her 'sweet boy Freddy' (206) that precipitates her mental and physical collapse. Walking out 'too far' (and recalling her more famous line, of being 'much too far out all my life'¹⁹), she has a hallucinatory 'vision of the fiend' among the litter of newspapers and wrapping paper, returning 'profoundly disturbed' to her hotel (71). The pause between the two scenes suspends not only the narrative but Pompey's subjectivity: her indefatigable presence, the 'talking voice that runs on' (39), suspended across the moment that follows an extremity of mental exhaustion, the moment that precedes the aftermath of her 'shock'. The pause is itself the place of trauma, of that which is unrepresentable and unthinkable by Pompey. A

¹⁹ Lee, *Stevie Smith: A Selection*, 128.

similar impression occurs in the later scene in which her feelings of distress shift abruptly into third-person narration:

Oh Jesus Christ, in the mighty sweep of your divine mind, the sorrow of night space and the rushing air, the dark night and the soft plumage of the bird flying by night that brushes your exalted cheek, the wide and lofty thought sweeping ever upwards and outwards, bearing with it what agony of spirit and noble strike, this then is what this then is what.

Pompey was enamoured of a chimera.
(221)

She describes her ‘ivory towers’, places of mental refuge away from the ‘fetid and debilitating’ (41) atmosphere of London, and imagines a ‘wide open lofty room’ or an ‘ivory haystack’, where she can fall into *dreamless* sleep:

First of all then we will consider the haystack. It stands up in a sunny field by the side but out from a chestnut tree. So. The hay has been cut. Of course. It isn’t imported hay in that stack. Well all the rest of the field, it is a very big field [...]

Well now into this picture empty of all human interest comes Pompey Casmilus. Here at last, she says, is the right haystack, the right moment, and the right solitariness. She climbs up the ladder, that was left did I say, on the top of the haystack. It is flat. And she pushes down the ladder again because she doesn’t care if she never wakes up again [...] So I lie back on my ivory haystack and there is nobody else in the whole wide world and so I fall asleep. No dreams. No dreams.
(40–41)

Pompey’s desire not to dream is repeated later, when she equates the ‘night space’ with horror (*‘Ah night space and horror, keep my dream from me.’* (83)). To her ivory tower she adds another mental enclave, the one reserved for the thought of suicide, a theme that announces itself obliquely from the very first page, when Pompey begins her narrative not with salutation but with farewell:

Beginning this book [...] I should like then to say: Good-bye to all my friends, my beautiful and lovely friends.

And for why?
Read on, Reader, read on and work it out for yourself.
(9)

Pompey describes the thought of suicide as a bulwark against trauma. She describes having been sent away from home during a period of childhood illness, learning ‘after crying days and days I was still alive, so then I at once became rather cynical’ (155). What affects her even more is the realisation that the maid who dotes on her does so ‘not at all [on the basis of] a deep feeling, but as one might pet, pat and cuddle a puppy’ (156). This ‘deceitfulness of outward similarity’ so terrifies her that she begins to cultivate the thought of death as an escape. Later, the feeling of fear is transferred to her mother, whose heart disease and suffering leaves Pompey ‘so furious and so powerless’ (157). Suicide is a ‘rich and spacious thought’ that she recommends to all:

So I will say this at once, it is a wise thing that every intelligent, sensitive child should early be accustomed to the thought of death by suicide. This follows inevitably from what I have been saying. But do not strain or pull away, because now we are coming to that rich and spacious thought where human pride is paramount.
(155)

Personal pride, for Pompey, is vouchsafed by the ability to take one’s own life in the face of what is unbearable. The motif of the freely chosen death appears both in her telling of Tolstoy’s story (that Pompey knows in its German translation), *Der Lebende Leichnam* (‘The Living Corpse’), and in *Phèdre*, in which Racine’s eponymous heroine prefers suicide to disgrace. Her mother’s suffering, and hers, forced to endure her own helplessness, is recalled in the closing image of the novel, the story of the tigress Flo:

There was pity and incongruity in the death of the tigress Flo. Falling backwards into her pool at Whipsnade she lay there in a fit. The pool was drained and Flo, that mighty and unhappy creature, captured in what jungle darkness for what dishonorable destiny, was subjected to the indignity of artificial respiration. Yes, chaps, they worked Flo’s legs backwards and forwards and sat on Flo’s chest, and sooner them than me, and sooner me than Flo, that couldn’t understand and wasn’t raised for these high jinks. Back came Flo’s fled spirit and set her on uncertain pads. She looked, she lurched, and sensing some last, unnameable, not wholly apprehended, final outrage, she fell, she whimpered, clawed in vain, and died.
(251–2)

Between suicide and trauma Pompey picks out a third way that is embodied in her attitude of the ‘*toute entière* visitor’ (212), for whom the rhythm of *visiting* – doing the rounds of social engagements, spending time with her friends and then leaving again –

enables her to appreciate her friends without having to endure the too-close contact of the permanent relation:

I visit and visit and visit, my darling friends, my less darling friends, my acquaintances. I am very grateful to them all. In visiting I find a very great deal of comfort and satisfaction, and each least place where I visit I am so enchanted and so happy that it is another visit, and that at the end of the time I may say: Good-bye and thank you, good-bye.
(212)

The ‘rhythm of visiting’ that ‘in [Pompey’s] blood’ recalls the *fort-da* scene described by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. He observes his grandson, at the age of one and a half, playing repeatedly at a game that involves throwing a wooden reel into his cot, ‘uttering at the same time his expressive o-o-o-o’, which he takes to be the German word *fort* (‘gone’). The game continues: ‘He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful *da* (‘there’)’. Freud interprets the child’s game in terms of its specifically psychical work: the lost and jettisoned object can be recuperated:

The interpretation of the game then became obvious. It was related to the child’s great cultural achievement – the instinctual renunciation [...] which he had made in allowing his mother to go away without protesting.
(SE 18: 15).

Visiting allows Pompey to negotiate relationship by vacillating between the *fort* and the *da*, the coming and going, enabling a paradoxical experience of equilibrium based on oscillation. Freud remarks on the ‘vacillating rhythm’ (SE 18: 41) that marks the battle of the life and death instincts. But the flickering connection with the object also evokes the traumaticity of contact: of something to be taken in small doses because the full blast of relationship might overwhelm her resources. It is something that she has already experienced:

What can you do? You can do nothing but be there, and go on being there steadily and without a break until the end. There is nothing but that that you can do.
(225)

Pompey’s inability to sustain contact leads to the end of her engagement to Freddy. Of all her suitors, he is the most lightly sketched, but he represents the stability and

conventionality of suburban life that Pompey can only observe from the outside. Even as a fellow resident of Bottle Green, she has remained an outsider:

I have never known anyone here except my Aunt the Lion, and I have wandered about having a nostalgie for this suburb but no means of getting into the inside-of it. And I have burned to know the suburb from top to bottom and round and about and within. And Freddy has been my guide, my Virgil, in these regions. He has taken me in, I have visited in Bottle Green.
(233)

It is the breaking-off of Pompey's engagement that precipitates the crisis which her narrative intimates: the physical crisis of her influenza, her 'vision of the fiend' while she is ill, and the passages about visiting, marriage and suicide, in which she declares the rhythm of friendship 'antipathetic to marriage' (198). Pompey experiences love's loss as a 'tearing inside' and the destruction of an unconscious link:

And between two people without knowing it a love may grow up, and a link may form, and no one knows or guesses. And so it has been. I did not know. But when it is over, then it is tearing inside, it is 'tearing in the belly' one would wish oneself dead and unborn. And one does little things and goes to see friends and does one's work and fusses with this and that and feels in one's heart the drift and dribble of penultimate things, and thinks: To-morrow I shall be dead.
(236)

The profoundly visceral quality of 'tearing in the belly' suggests that, by leaving her, Freddy takes a part of Pompey with him. It is, again, something intestinal, a 'tearing in the belly' that recalls the worm that 'pulls and drags' its way through her. Connor notes that it is Bion who suggests that 'nobody is able to generate the capacity to think endogenously for themselves'²⁰; rather, thinking develops from the *linking* of minds, prototypically in relationship with the mother whose capacity to think lends another mind to think the thoughts as yet too challenging for the child to bear. Indeed, Bion describes passion as 'evidence that two minds are linked' (EoP: 13). Pompey's descriptions of her mother suggest the failure of such a relationship:

My mother was dying, she had heart disease, she could not breathe, already there were the cylinders of oxygen. There was the nurse and the doctor coming day and night. *But if you cannot breathe how can you breathe the oxygen?*
(225; italics mine)

²⁰ Connor, 'Thinking Things', 9.

Pompey's liminality, her status as a '*toute entière* visitor', is also developed in her discussion of the Church. We learn that Pompey, at around the time of her mother's death, wanted to get 'inside-of' Christianity, but found herself unable to generate the affect that would make it possible for her to do so:

But at this time I was trying very hard. Yes at this time I was pushing and forcing myself to get into the inside-of this Christian religion. But all the time at this time I was feeling cold, very cold and outside-of, and not at all ever warm and inside-of.
(173)

Repeatedly Pompey finds herself 'hankering after the inside-of position but getting just this near to it and no nearer' (176). It is not that she is 'unfeeling' – her love for Freddy and her aunt, her capacity for fury, and the sorrow she felt at her mother's suffering – offer eloquent testaments to her capacity for emotion. She nevertheless recognises in herself some inability to accede to a certain kind of affirmation; at one point, she identifies herself with the 'spirit that denies':

But always, well I couldn't be altogether completely serious, but I tried hard, I assure you I took this remark about the better qualities of man, lack of appreciation of, very seriously, and I was always trying to get things from a serious angle and sometimes I used to get downright morbid, chaps, I used to sit and cry, thinking there I was like Goethe's Mephistopheles, the spirit that denies.
(181–2)

Pompey's self-description is undercut by her distinctively facetious tone. It is a characteristic Stevie Smith effect. Sheryl Stevenson has described Smith's tone as 'deliberately non-resonant'²¹, and it recalls Bion's comments about the kind of patient who speaks with 'no overtones or undertones of meaning' (LfE: 15). Of course, Bion is himself a past master of a similar effect. A prefatory note to *Bion in New York and São Paulo* achieves something of his idiosyncratic tone:

I thank all who participated in these discussions with their objections and agreements. Many who read this book will feel that my replies are inadequate and incomplete. That they are inadequate I must admit; that they are incomplete I regard as a virtue especially if it stimulates the reader to complete the answers.

²¹ Stevenson, 'Stevie Smith's Voices', 26.

I wish the reader as much enjoyment as I had in speaking; if it sends him to sleep may I wish him 'Sweet Dreams and a profitable awakening'.
(NYSP)

The question of tone, I suggest, links Stevie Smith with Bion. Facetiousness, dryness of style, and a certain tempting of the absurd combine curiously to convey a detached and ironic relationship to their discourse. I propose that we can also look to Bion's theoretical statements to describe and analyse literary tone. Though he never attempted literary criticism, he did produce close readings of analytic material, using the Grid to track aspects of tone and the production of meaning.

'The Grid', his paper first produced in 1963 and revised in 1971, introduces the reader to his specialised observational tool designed to analyse the statements made within the psychoanalytic session: both those of the patient and the analyst's interpretations. Taking the form of an 8x9 grid, it combines two axes – a vertical axis tracking the genetic development of thoughts, from beta-elements to algebraic calculi, and a horizontal axis ranging a series of different 'uses' to which statements may be put: as a 'definitory hypothesis', for example, placing two objects in a constant conjunction (column 1); as the notation of something that previously took place (column 3); as a statement that demarcates the site of attention (column 4) or enquiry (column 5), or as an action (column 6). A column 2 formulation, however, is of a different kind. In the 1963 version of 'The Grid', he writes:

Column 2 is to categorise the 'use' to which a statement – of whatever kind it may be and however untrue in the context – is put with the intention of preventing a statement, however true in the context, that would involve modification in the personality and its outlook. I have arbitrarily used the sign ψ to emphasise the close relationship of this 'use' to phenomena known to analysts as expressions of 'resistance'.
(TWT: 9)

In using the symbol ψ (psi) to denote column 2, he relates the column 2 formulation both to the factor of unconscious resistance and to the development of [a] mind or psyche (for which the ψ symbol is a common psychoanalytic shorthand). Column 2 is also the place of the lie, since 'true thought requires neither formulation nor thinker', but 'the lie is a thought to which a formulation and a thinker are essential' (A&I: 104), though the complexity of lying will lead Bion to suggest in his 1971 paper that column

2 ‘requires expansion into a ‘grid’ of its own’ (TP: 5²²). He also places there any material that defers the possibility of encountering one’s personal truth, including material ‘valuable against the inception of any development in his personality involving catastrophic change’ (TP: 5–6). Chris Mawson provides a helpful gloss: column 2 material ‘specif[ies] the acceptance of an answer known at some level to be false, in order to evade the pain of leaving the question open and allowing an evolution, with the possibility of disruptive growth of the mind’ (CW 10: 105). All of this suggests that a column 2 categorisation pertains only to the grossest statements of denial, lying, or bombast. In fact, Bion seems to use column 2 more subtly.

While Antonino Ferro has written ‘in praise of row C’²³, the level of ‘dream thoughts, dreams and myths’, I suggest that column 2 offers an equally rich seam for thinking about the question of tone. *Transformations* includes the notable occasion, previously mentioned²⁴, when Bion uses Grid coordinates to consider Bishop Berkeley’s famous retort to Isaac Newton’s formulation of the differential calculus. He quotes a section from *The Analyst*²⁵ to which his analysis will be directed:

“It must, indeed, be acknowledged that he used fluxions, like the scaffold of a building, as things to be laid aside or got rid of as soon as finite lines were found proportional to them. But then these finite exponents are found by the help of fluxions. Whatever therefore is got by such exponents and proportions is to be ascribed to fluxions: which must therefore be previously understood. And what are these fluxions? The velocities of evanescent increments. And what are these same evanescent increments? They are neither finite quantities, nor quantities infinitely small, nor yet nothing. May we not call them the ghosts of departed quantities?”
(Trans: 157)

Bion offers the following analysis, which I cite fully in order to convey its remarkable, disconcerting quality. The coordinates given relate to the Grid²⁶; his reference to ‘cycles’ and to $T\beta$ are a part of this theory of transformations²⁷:

²² The Brazilian psychoanalyst, P. C. Sandler, has taken up this task with enthusiasm, proposing several alternative ‘Grids’. (Sandler, *A Clinical Application of Bion’s Concepts. Volume 3: Verbal and Visual Approaches to Reality*.)

²³ Ferro, *Psychoanalysis as Therapy and Storytelling*.

²⁴ See also chapter two. I cite the passage here again and more fully because it aids in understanding Bion’s analysis of its *tone* (which is more important to this discussion than the idea of ‘scaffolding’ previously discussed).

²⁵ Berkeley, *The Analyst*.

²⁶ See figure 1.

Berkeley's formulation may be regarded as an F3 contribution. The polemical tone gives it a column 2 category, denying, though he acknowledges the truth of Newton's result, the validity of the method: the ironic tone denies the reality of 'the ghosts of departed quantities'. The pamphlet as a whole is thus an example of an F3 formulation used, in its second cycle, as column 2 to deny both the 'ghosts' component and the H3 component in his and Newton's confrontation. From a psychoanalytic vertex both formulations, Newton's and Berkeley's, can be seen as $T\beta$ (col. 3) (intended to produce a formulation $T\beta$ (col. 3) (cycle 2)), or, $T\beta$ col. 2 (intended to deny emergence of beta-elements).

T Newton β H3 furthers mathematic enquiry: T Newton β col. 2 denies the 'ghosts'. T Berkeley β col. 2 denies, by irony, 'ghosts' and, by polemic, the scientific approach. In both instances the col. 2 dimension is directed against psychological disturbance; why? for fear of the turbulence and its associated 'becoming'.
(Trans: 158)

Discombobulating though it may be (and incomprehensible to the uninitiated), Bion does, in effect, perform a detailed textual analysis, which – though explicitly given from a 'psychoanalytic vertex'²⁸ – nevertheless touches on specifically literary features of the text: tone, the use of irony, and polemic. His analysis also focuses precisely on the line that is the most memorable in Berkeley's account: his image of the 'ghosts of departed quantities'. In this example, a column 2 formulation is indicated by the use of polemic and irony, but it also implicates Berkeley in a relationship predicated on *resistance* to the emergence of something which would unsettle his worldview. In a further example that seems obliquely to recall Stevie Smith's best-known poem, he suggests that (the imposition of) 'desire, memory and understanding' can equally serve the column 2 function by disingenuously substituting 'transformations in K which give a similitude of transformation in O' (that is: that apparent statements of fact may block passage to truth perceived as catastrophic):

'How I wish I had the chance to swim!' expresses the idea that a particular state of completion (wishing to swim) has been achieved and precludes the unsaturation that would be felt were the individual to wish to swim.
(A&I: 52–53)

²⁷ A fuller discussion of Bion's theory of transformations appears in chapter eight. $T\beta$ denotes the 'end product' of a transformation, and is not to be confused with beta-elements/ β -elements (Trans: 10).

²⁸ Bion's more precise rendering of the conventional phrase 'point of view': see, for example, BL: 42.

A statement in column 2 can also draw attention to the *function* of column 2, rather than necessarily implicate the speaker or writer in an attitude of disingenuousness or resistance. This, I suggest, is where Bion's and Smith's tone come into play. In his re-reading of Sophocles' *Oedipus The King*, Bion maps the play's characters onto the horizontal axis of Grid in terms of their mythic function. It is to the unwilling prophet, Tiresias, who 'prefers not to' respond directly to Oedipus' question to know Laius' killer, that the column 2 function falls: his initial refusal to provide prophecy is in the service of Oedipus' ignorance. Tiresias also represents the attempt to check Oedipus' overweening arrogance (ST: 84). The provocations of both Stevie Smith's and Bion's characteristic style can be seen to speak to this function: Pompey's gossipy persona leads a contemporary audience to the discovery of their own prejudice; her insistence that the 'reader work it out for [her- or him-]self' is finally an invitation not to the suicidal 'secret' (as it initially seems to be) but to punctuate the attitude of the complacent reader.

Beneath the surface of Bion's highly stylised analysis of Berkeley, there is deep sensitivity to the emotional evocation of a text that would not conventionally be considered ripe for analysis of either a literary or psychoanalytic kind. His analysis illuminates questions of language *use* and *effect* that are at the same time sensitive to context and the response of the reader. This is very different to the style of psychoanalytical literary criticism that would reduce literature to the intentions (conscious and unconscious) of the writer or perform a 'psychoanalysis' of a character. Freud, despite his warnings in *The Question of Lay Analysis* (SE 20), nevertheless did 'apply' psychoanalysis extramurally (as in his study of Leonardo) and his forays into literary analysis can be simplistic in their underlying view of literature. Bion's example – despite the apparent abstruseness – is, by contrast, potentially both rigorous and supple in its handling of language, alert to the lightning-quick changes in tone that suggest a new or emerging relationship to the material.

In *Novel*, Pompey describes herself as an 'animula, vagula, blandula of the office' (204), invoking Hadrian's deathbed address to his 'little soul' as it departs his body. As the anima (soul or spirit) leaves behind a dead body, so the distracting thought-worm risks taking her 'disintegrating mind' (204) along with it, as it works its way out and into the novel. Bion's digestive model of thinking also describes the curious parasitism of the 'thought without a thinker' that is both inside and alien to the mind. Freud's

figure of the infusorian that dies if unable to eliminate the products of its metabolism supplements this Bionian model by bringing death into the picture: the over-thinking, ventriloquising Pompey risks eliminating her mind along with her thought, though she would sooner die than submit to the thoughtlessness that she despises. Her invitation to ‘work it out for yourself’ combines with her defence of the high-brow, complex and inaccessible to engage the reader in supplying some of the alpha-function, or mind, that was missing in her experiences with her mother. Following Freud, she seeks to ‘follow [her] own path to death’ (SE 18: 39), writing the ‘rich and spacious thought’ of suicide that nevertheless enables her to go on living. Freud suggests that the organism seeks to ‘die only in its own fashion’ (SE 18: 390), and places the self-preservative instincts in the service of the death drive. Like Hermes, Pompey is suspended in a paradoxical, liminal position: wanting/not wanting to live, thinking/not thinking, visiting/leaving, *fort/da*; wanting to get on the ‘inside-of’ the Church and Bottle Green, but remaining only a visitor. This contrarian aspect is also ‘the spirit that denies’, the column 2 function that makes of Stevie Smith’s character an avatar of the column 2 function: hyper-aware and provoking, demanding that the reader work it out, for her- or himself.

Chapter Four

Restoring the Lost Container: A Bionian Reading of B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates*

the mind as a think of an image¹

How the mind can take these things in, calmly, discuss them, hold them, and still be affected, terrified by them! The mind.²

After many years of relative obscurity, the work of the British novelist, B. S. Johnson, has been brought to a new audience following the publication of a volume of his collected short fiction, plays and prose (*Well Done God!*) and the republication of four of his seven novels³, for which an extensive and thoughtful biography by Jonathan Coe⁴, published in 2004, prepared the ground. *The Unfortunates*, Johnson's memorable 'book-in-a-box' and his fourth novel, was republished in 1999, some three decades after its original publication.

The Unfortunates is remarkable for its physical form. It comprises 27 loose sections (or 'chapters'), collected, rather than bound, within a box. Aside from two sections indicated to be read 'First' and 'Last', the remaining sections 'are intended to be read in random order'⁵. As with all of Johnson's novels, it was designed as a way of 'solving particular writing problems'⁶: in this case, according to Johnson himself, to deal with the 'randomness of the material'⁷. Johnson's experiment in form was not entirely new: the French writer, Marc Saporta, had previously published his *Composition no. 1*

¹ Johnson, *The Unfortunates*. (The estate: 5.) As a collection of loose sections, *The Unfortunates* poses a certain challenge to referencing conventions. I follow other commentators in using the opening one to three words of each section (as seems appropriate in each case), followed by a page reference. For ease of reading, these are placed consistently in the footnotes. Johnson provided an alternative device – a different typographic symbol at the top of each section – but these are difficult to reproduce typographically.

² Cast parapt: 2.

³ Johnson, *Albert Angelo, Trawl, House Mother Normal and Christie Malry's Own Double Entry*, all London: Picador (2013).

⁴ Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson*.

⁵ 'Note' printed inside the box itself.

⁶ Johnson, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, 19.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

entirely as loose single pages presented within a box. There is evidence that Johnson became aware of *Composition no. 1* while he was writing *The Unfortunates*⁸.

The Unfortunates presents a novelistic account of events that took place in Bryan Johnson's life. I hesitate to describe it as a 'fictional account', because Johnson was vehemently opposed to the writing of fiction as he saw it, or as a 'story'. Indeed, he is perhaps best known for his controversial and arguably self-limiting mantra, 'telling stories is telling lies'⁹. He was, above all, committed to truth-telling in his novels, which he regarded as a form for the telling of both fiction and non-fiction. *The Unfortunates* recounts Johnson's experience, while working as a sports journalist, of being sent to cover a football match in Nottingham. The trip brings back the memories of his friendship with Tony Tillinghast, 'Tony' in the novel, a fellow student who died young of cancer. Jonathan Coe describes their friendship:

While still an undergraduate at King's College London, Johnson had been editor of the student magazine *Lucifer*, and had once made a trip to Nottingham to make friendly contact with the editorial board of that university's magazine. On this trip he had been introduced to a Nottingham undergraduate called Tony Tillinghast, and the two became close friends. The friendship was spiky and combative: Tony was a serious, assiduous scholar, bent on an academic career; Johnson professed to despise academia, claiming that the work of literary critics and historians was only worthwhile if it helped writers to produce better books. Taking up this challenge, Tony had read *Travelling People* in manuscript, chapter by chapter as Johnson wrote it, scribbling copious annotations in the margin. The novel had been dedicated to him and his wife June. And then, in late 1962, Tony had been diagnosed with cancer. Two years later he was dead, at the age of just twenty-nine.¹⁰

In what follows I suggest that what has been overlooked in previous Johnson criticism is the bearing that the nature of Tony and Bryan's friendship – in effect, one of mentor and 'mentee' – bears on the formal solution taken by Johnson in creating a 'book' loosely assembled within a box. Previous readings of *The Unfortunates* have tended to focus on the 'loose sections' – and the way in which they function as a metaphor for the experience of randomness, disorder and chaos – than on the box itself. This reading is hardly surprising given that Johnson himself understood his work in these terms. Nevertheless, I argue that a Bionian conception of the container-contained relationship

⁸ Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson*, 231.

⁹ Johnson, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, 389.

¹⁰ Coe, *Like a Fiery Elephant: The Story of B. S. Johnson*, 21.

and the part played by ‘another mind’ in the development of thinking draw out the many places in the text where issues of thinking and mind are predominant. As the mind (and body) of Tony disintegrates, Johnson loses his friend’s containing mind, which has played such an important role in his writing. I suggest that *The Unfortunates* is Johnson’s attempt to restore the lost container not only through the box, but through writing. I will also consider how *The Unfortunates* is essentially a book about writing, and the ways in which B. S. Johnson and Bion share a certain orientation to truth in their work.

The opening lines of the first section draw our attention to something known but not realised as the narrator arrives at the train station: ‘But I know this city! ’ [sic]. Here and throughout *The Unfortunates*, phrases and words are riven by textual spaces that seem to indicate a gap or suspension in the narrator’s mind, sometimes inviting the reader to make up the word that is missing, but more frequently signalling what is painful – even unthinkable – for the narrator to contemplate. The technique recalls the ellipses which separate (and connect) the textual thoughts in Johnson’s earlier work, *Trawl*, an autobiographical account prompted by a three-week voyage on a fishing trawler. Where there are (literal) points of connection in *Trawl*, here there are narrative gaps, places where, as the reader learns later, ‘the mind has fuses’¹¹.

The narrator’s recognition of the town he knew plunges him immediately into the memory of Tony: ‘his cheeks swallowed and collapsed round the insinuated bones, the gums shrivelled, was it, or shrunken, his teeth now standing free of each other in the unnatural half yawn of his mouth’, uncanny *memento mori*. As a sports reporter, Johnson became used to going off to cover matches at a moment’s notice, barely registering the details of the assignment, with only a minimal pre-conception of the task at hand. In ‘A Theory of Thinking’, Bion describes the ‘pre-conception’ as an ‘empty thought’, seeking to mate with a ‘realisation’ (ST: 111) or what he will later describe as the process of ‘saturation’ (EoP: 24). This idea seems to be echoed in Johnson’s use of the typographical symbols that accompany each section of the text. The ‘Publisher’s Note’ that appears in all of Johnson’s recent republications reminds us that he was personally and minutely involved in the details of typesetting. ‘First’ is identified by an outlined circle, thus: ○, suggesting, perhaps, the empty, but delineated space, which the

¹¹ Then they: 5.

novel will aim to fill or saturate as the text progresses (that the symbol that accompanies the last section is a solid black circle seems to support this reading). With Bion in mind, it also evokes the figure of O, Bion's shorthand for unknowable reality, for the pure (and unmediated, unassimilable) blast of truth. In *A Memoir of the Future*, a dreamlike voice traces a frenzied account of O, which leads 'from nothing to consciousness to sleep to dream to waking thoughts to dream thoughts to nothingness to O = zero, from O = zero to O which is O = oh! to O which is a picture which is a picture of a hole or greedy mouth or vagina' (MotF: 36). Using Bion's terms, Johnson's opening declaration ('But I know this place!') signals the mating of a pre-conception with a realisation, enabling the potential for emotional growth.

In a text that provides a minimum of narrative framing, the first section nevertheless signals a number of themes and narrative threads. Tony's illness is the first of these, and his physical disintegration is drawn vividly and unsparingly. Further images of decay are seeded throughout the novel, in accounts of the local bars that the narrator visits during the course of his day. In descriptions of ill-preserved décor, he seeks 'venerableness', the conditions for veneration which seem to be denied him:

This pub, then, what signs of venerableness does it bear, to be seen, claiming to be one of the oldest in England? Black beams, low ceilings, but preserved in various ways, varnish, worm repellent, that detract from the seeing of age, prevent me from venerating it. Which leaves me with only association.¹²

Something prevents the narrator from venerating the past, and his memory; he is left 'with only association'. The elegiac mode suggested by the narrator's first memory of Tony is shown to be complicated or forestalled in some way, the work of mourning, that Peter Sacks¹³ argues is the function of the elegy, not yet achieved. Jahan Ramazani's account of the 'modern elegy' – enacting a melancholic, unachieved mourning – is closer to *The Unfortunates*, though I suggest that Ramazani's remark about the twentieth-century phenomenon of 'self-elegy' may be closer still, being 'often more *compensatory* than elegies proper'¹⁴. I propose that what prevents veneration is the loss of the shared mind that the narrator associates with Tony. Here is a first description of Tony's mind, and the use made of it by the narrator:

¹² Away from: 2.

¹³ Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*.

¹⁴ Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, 30. Itals. mine.

he had a great mind for such detail, it crowded his mind like documents in the Public Records Office, there, a good image, perhaps easy, but it was even something like as efficient, tidy, his mind, not as mine is, random, the circuit-breakers falling at hazard, tripped equally by association and non-association, repetition, while from him it flowed regularly, pointedly phrased, constantly, at a high constant, knowledge, learning, information, perhaps slowly, some, but how he embraced conversation, think of an image, no. My visits here were long talks broken only partly by eating, what a generalisation, there, more talk on his part than mine, far more, but I learnt, selected and elected to hear what I needed, what was of most use to me, at that time most use, from his discourse, yes, the word is not too pompous, discourse, a fine mind, a need to communicate embodied in it, too, how can I place his order, his disintegration?¹⁵

The comparison of Tony's mind with the narrator's ends with the question of how the narrator, now bereft, can 'place his order, his disintegration'. Although the narrator refers to Tony's 'fine mind', his own order and disintegration are also at stake. It is a question of how to make sense of tragedy, of the appalling randomness with which a young and promising life was cut short. But it is also a question that speaks to the narrator's difficulty in having to complete this hardest of tasks in the absence of Tony's mind to supplement the narrator's inadequacies. What he is struggling to achieve, the text implies, is to re-find and make use of what he had previously 'learnt, selected and elected to hear': in other words, to find within his own mind the framework of thinking that Tony's mind had afforded him.

The description of their relationship recalls Bion's account of the container-contained relationship. In *Learning from Experience*, he outlines a developmental theory of thinking predicated on the availability of another person's mind (templated on the mother's *reverie*) to receive the anxiety of experiences that are initially fragmentary, meaningless and unassimilable. Starting from Melanie Klein's description of projective identification, he 'abstract[s] for use as a model the idea of a container into which an object is projected and the object that can be projected into the container, [...] designated by the term contained' (LfE: 90). The containing mind models thinking for the other, and is progressively installed, through introjection, as a reliable template for psychological function, or what Bion calls alpha-function.

The narrator's (and Bryan's) friendship with Tony suggests a relationship of the kind that Bion describes. Their initial collaboration arises out of a challenge made by the

¹⁵ First: 3–4.

narrator. Tony, the more assiduous student and critical thinker, values criticism as ‘a discipline of the highest kind in itself’. The narrator puts this to a test:

To me, I told him, the only use of criticism was if it helped people to write better books. This he took as a challenge, this he accepted. Or perhaps I made the challenge, said that I would show him the novel as I wrote it, the novel I had in mind or was writing: and that he would have a chance of influencing, of making better, a piece of what set out to be literature.¹⁶

The piece of writing that they thus set out together to improve will become the narrator’s first published novel (in reality, what will be published in 1963 as *Travelling People*):

Working more specifically, this time, on and around my first novel, discussing, improving, refining, deleting. Perhaps I exaggerate, through the pain of his absence, now, his interest in the book was not so great that he spent days with me, though hours, certainly, reading and correcting. I could not really have asked for more in view of the pressures of his own research, but his contribution was very important to the book, his criticisms were nearly always constructive, and after he had read it I was more confident in what I had done, that it had passed the scrutiny of someone whose opinion I respected, whose judgment was based on academic standards which, even more than my own, were given some sort of objective, or at least collective-subjective, value.¹⁷

As his friend and writing mentor, Tony enacts the role of the container that enables the narrator to address both his drafts and his anxieties about writing to a reliable and sensitive recipient. Again and again, there are vignettes of their relationship that centre on the narrator’s writing, though the narrator again indicates a reserve, taking from Tony ‘only what [he] needed’:

he put me on to many things I should not have known about, as well, his generosity of mind was directed and constructive, though I took from him only what I needed, what was determined by my own needs, directions, but it was good to have to bounce ideas off, to learn from, to have him pull me up when I committed wild excesses, made a fool of myself, in my work.¹⁸

Tony’s undergraduate dissertation, and later PhD thesis, centres on James Boswell, Samuel Johnson’s famous biographer. As Boswell writes [Samuel] Johnson, so B. S.

¹⁶ The opera: 1–2.

¹⁷ Again the house: 1.

¹⁸ Then he: 4.

Johnson's narrator will come to write Tony, making a promise to him on his deathbed that he'll 'get it all down, mate'¹⁹. Their relationship recalls Sherlock Holmes' comment to Watson in Conan Doyle's *A Scandal in Bohemia*: 'I am lost without my Boswell'. After Tony's death, the narrator is asked to write his epitaph, and suggests a line by Brecht: 'he made suggestions, and we accepted them'²⁰.

Emphasising the importance of Tony's containing role shows certain aspects of Johnson's elegy (or self-elegy) in a more sympathetic light. The seriousness of Tony's condition only becomes clear to the narrator when he is unable to attend the launch party for the narrator's first novel due to his illness²¹, an apparently trivial prism. Reading *The Unfortunates* in terms of the lost container-contained relationship (and the specific role that Tony played in bringing the narrator's book to publication) makes sense of what otherwise seems an unduly solipsistic response. As Tony's health deteriorates, his capacity to receive the narrator's work diminishes. He recalls an occasion when Tony's role as his critical friend fails, something he can only now see in perspective:

Forget what he said about the thing, but know I was disappointed, tried to explain how to Ginnie on the train coming home, that his comments were not really constructive, interested, this time, with this novel, but were almost petty, almost irrelevant. [...] Perhaps I did not give him enough time to consider it, the deadline was a self-imposed one, I was eager to finish to have his opinions so that I could improve the book, to have done with it. Nothing he said, after this draft was finished, made me change a word, I was disappointed, but I can see now that it was reasonable that the book would seem irrelevant to him, everything must have, in his condition²²

Despite his importance to the narrator, Tony is at moments an ambivalent figure to whom the narrator places himself in opposition. He recalls surprise – and possibly, quiet satisfaction – in noting spelling mistakes and other errors in Tony's dissertation²³. Tony's academic bent, his striving to complete his PhD and win a research post, contrasts with the narrator's desire to pursue creative writing above all else. As age-peers, there is something in Johnson's account that suggests that Tony is sometimes

¹⁹ So he: 5.

²⁰ Last: 3.

²¹ Then they: 1.

²² Sometime that: 3.

²³ The estate: 6.

experienced not as the mother-container but as a more phallic, intruding interlocutor against whose streams of words the narrator has to defend himself: ‘there were times when he talked so much that I had to shut off part of my mind, he talked me into that much insensitivity’²⁴. Tony’s ‘fine mind’, the ‘sort of mind [...] that could marshal an argument methodically’²⁵, also produces his volubleness and the proliferation of unassimilable particles of thought that recall Bion’s description of beta-elements:

And so on and so forth, that was a phrase Tony used too much, for suggesting continua of thought or information or knowledge, in conversation. And so on and so forth, to end almost every sentence, on one occasion, I remember, it annoyed me, the repetition, and I only just forbore from telling him about it, then, at one of those times I had to shut my mind off.²⁶

Bion describes the container-contained relationship as a commensal one in which both parties – paradigmatically the mother and the infant – benefit from the encounter: ‘in terms of a model the mother derives benefit and achieves mental growth from the experience: the infant likewise abstracts benefit and achieves growth’ (LFE: 91). The container-contained relationship can come to be characterised by its mutuality and the reciprocal growth of a containing function that supports both parties. The narrator’s ambivalence is compounded by his own inability to reciprocate the containing function that Tony enacts for him. In a scene from a day out he fails to protect Tony from himself:

We had a drink in a pub somewhere, near a new bridge here, on the way back, it was dark by then, though summer, and in the car park there was some incident, I think someone was backing into Tony’s path, and he kept going, they both kept going, and I was supposed to be the one looking out for a learner, but I could not reach the brake as it was the other side of Tony, farther from me, and all I could do was to push the horn button, to touch the horn ring, did it have one, that model, and the other man stopped in time.²⁷

We also find him uncomfortably attempting to comply with June’s suggestion that he spend time with Tony in Brighton:

²⁴ Then he: 2.

²⁵ That was: 3.

²⁶ Again the house: 2.

²⁷ Southwell: 3.

she phoned me to say that Tony was very low, needed taking out of himself, did she say, was that her phrase, how a common expression can become so like a philosophical statement²⁸

The strangeness of the phrase that the narrator identifies brings home the metaphorical force – and impossibility – of June’s request. Taking Tony ‘out of himself’ implies that Tony’s mind and his ‘now alien body’ can be divided from each other, his mind a part-object that can be relocated away from the site of cancerous growth. The narrator recognises the futility of the task:

And I did my best to take him out of himself, ha, as I remember, but I had no control over the rampant cells either, the one thing that would have been of use to him I could not give him, it was no use, no one could give him.²⁹

Cancer is an important motif in Johnson’s work. It appears in at least two of his other novels, in *Christy Malry’s Own Double Entry* and *House Mother Normal*, where the reader learns that cancer is dormant insider the cruel ‘house mother’ of an old people’s home, lying in wait to undermine her sadistic triumph over her charges and her authority within the text. The character of Christie Malry is similarly undone by a case of the ‘lumps’ that proves terminal, and Johnson’s mother, whose death is the occasion of his final novel, *See the Old Lady Decently*, was also dying of cancer during the writing of *The Unfortunates*. Cancer, never directly named in *The Unfortunates*, is a persistent figure of the ‘random, arbitrary, gratuitous’³⁰. It is the silent, cellular bad object that erodes Tony’s body, the force of chaos and randomness that destroys Tony’s ambitions, undoing the patient hard work through which he sought to build a career and a home. It is a figure of unstoppable, proliferative growth – the ‘too much’ of Tony’s discourse from which the narrator has occasionally to protect himself, and the creeping confusion of the narrator’s own thoughts. Tony’s tumour is described as ‘explosive, runaway, zealous, monstrous’³¹, a force that is perversely strong even as his body weakens; it cannot be destroyed save by killing ‘the good as well as the bad cells’³². When doctors cut him open to remove the tumour, they find that ‘its feelers or fingers or

²⁸ Sometime: 1.

²⁹ Sometime: 1.

³⁰ Just as it seemed: 3.

³¹ Ibid.: 8.

³² Ibid.: 6.

tentacles had grasped right round the collarbone', and that the most they can do is to use radiotherapy to 'stop its growth, at least'³³.

Bion describes mental growth as the development of the container that 'develops by accretion to produce a series of sleeves that are conjoined' (LfE: 92). His thesis in *Learning from Experience* aims precisely to account for the ability of the mind to grow progressively in its capacity through the development of the container-contained relationship, or ♂♀. Interestingly, he places cancer in an analogous relationship to the mind when he writes about death in his third autobiography:

death is not a matter of practical consequence to anyone, but it is the animate, continuing-to-live object that has to bury or otherwise dispose of the dead object. If your eye offends you pluck it out: if your cancer offends you cut it out: if your mind makes you uncomfortable... what then?
(AMSR: 27)

There is something in Johnson's account of Tony's illness that suggests that his cancer effects a grim parody of Tony's qualities, as strong as his mind, and as prolific as his words. The proliferation of new cells offers a perverse mimesis of the mind's processes, the alpha-elements and dream-thoughts that generate a profusion of images, words, oneiric flashes seeking narrative sequence, and container-contained relationship in the mind that grows through successive 'matings' of a pre-conception with a realisation. Bion describes a pathological variant of the container-contained relationship, the 'minus' container-contained, or -(♂♀) (LfE: 97), in which envy and rivalry predominate to effect the 'denudation' or stripping of the apparatus for thinking, a kind of 'eating-away' of the mind by itself. -(♂♀) is as 'an internal object without an exterior [...] an alimentary canal without a body [...] it is the resultant of an envious stripping or denudation of all good and is itself destined to continue the process of stripping [...] as existing, in its origin, between two personalities' (LfE: 97). In *The Unfortunates*, it is the figure of cancer that undoes meaning and seems to reverse the function of the mind, making understanding impossible:

That this thing could just come from nowhere, from inside himself, of his very self, to attack him, to put his self in danger, I still do not understand. Perhaps there is nothing to be understood, perhaps understanding is simply not to be found, is not applicable to such a thing. But it is hard, hard, not to try to

³³ Ibid.: 5.

understand, even for me, who accept that all is nothing, that sense does not exist.³⁴

The cancer that erodes Tony's body and mind is also identified with the disintegrative forces that impede the narrator's ability to think. Throughout the novel we are offered glimpses of the narrator's difficulties with thinking as well as observations of 'how the mind works, remembers these things, not others'³⁵. The narrator's mind 'clutters itself up with so much rubbish'³⁶; like Tony, he 'want[s] to impose some order on this overgrowth'³⁷ amid a confusion and profusion of details and lists: memories that 'will not fall into place'³⁸; images of 'rejectamenta'³⁹ and debris. He reflects 'yes how the mind arranges itself, tries to sort things into orders, is perturbed if things are not sorted, are not in the right order, nags away'⁴⁰. The gaps and swerves in the text (quite aside from the breaks imposed by the unbound sections) also speak of moments of disorientation, of cliché that fails to nourish:

These melodramatic idiotic moments in which life is completely
stale thoughts, this stale⁴¹

These

The narrator struggles to find an adequate response to Tony's cancer, its blind destructiveness, and the way it defeats the narrator's attempts to impose meaning where meaning fails:

so why this, if it is so meaningless, anything means something only if you
impose meaning on it, which is in itself a meaningless thing, the imposition.⁴²

For Johnson the question of meaning-making poses a further difficulty that is born of the own exacting demands that he makes of his readers. In *Well Done God!*, he rejects the notion of a critical or imaginative reader who brings his or her own ideas to the literary object:

³⁴ For recuperation: 2.

³⁵ Again the: 4.

³⁶ Cast parapet: 2.

³⁷ Then he: 1.

³⁸ The estate: 8.

³⁹ His dog: 4.

⁴⁰ Southwell: 1.

⁴¹ His dog: 4.

⁴² Away from: 3.

For readers it is often said that they will go on reading the novel because it enables them, unlike film or television, to exercise their imaginations, that that is one of its chief attractions for them, that they may imagine the characters and so on for themselves. Not with my novels; [...] I want my ideas to be expressed so precisely that the very minimum of room for interpretation is left. Indeed, I would go further and say that to the extent that a reader can impose his own imagination on my words, then that piece of writing is a failure. I want him to see my vision, not something conjured out of his own imagination. How is he supposed to grow unless he will admit others' ideas? If he wants to impose his imagination, let him write his own books. That may be thought to be anti-reader; but think a little further, and what I am really doing is challenging the reader to prove his own existence as palpably as I am proving mine by the act of writing. (28)

As Johnson himself published literary reviews, it is a remarkably contrarian, arguably defensive position. He seems to suggest that the reader *qua* reader should under no account add, make or impose any meaning not intended by the writer, gesturing to an ethics of 'separate spheres' in which the reader and the writer remain within the bounds of their roles. Johnson limits himself, too, to an ethics of truth-telling that disbars him from writing fiction (though in this he proves inconsistent: *Christie Malry* is unmistakably fictional – although the absurdism of its plot and Johnson's metafictional references keep this point uppermost in the reader's mind). Rather than encouraging the reader (the actual reader, or the reader that exists in B.S. Johnson's mind) to assist in the commensal work of making meaning, he is suspicious of what the reader may bring (or take away) from Johnson's work. I suggest that Johnson's conception of the writer's relationship to his audience comes close to Bion's formulation of $-(\sigma\varphi)$.

It is important to foreground the extent to which *The Unfortunates* is predominantly a book *about* writing, and the experience of writing. Both the novel's innovative form and its powerful themes of death and loss can overshadow this. There are at least three writing projects within the text. The first of these is the report of the football match that the narrator must file by five o'clock that day. This is hack-writing to a deadline: writing not to 'tell the truth' but to fill a 500-word-shaped hole within tomorrow's papers. Within the time of the novel, there is also the writing of the narrator's first book and the role played by Tony in guiding the work to its successful publication, making the narrator (and Johnson) a published author. Finally there is *The Unfortunates* itself,

the making good of the narrator's promise to Tony on his deathbed that he'll 'get it all down, mate'⁴³.

The narrator is sent to watch a football match between City and United. At the match he pours scorn on the 'well-paid pseudos who write their reports from prepared telling phrases'⁴⁴ while nevertheless taking pride in his ability as a professional writer:

I am proud, is that the word, no, certainly not, satisfied, self-satisfied, that I can do this job, pleased with my new professionalism, that I can write to these tight deadlines, and to these precise lengths, can get both exactly right, have never fallen down on either, yet: when I first started Zulf told me that was the most important thing, from their point of view, not the quality of the writing, but meeting deadlines, getting it through on time, at the right length. Which I have done.⁴⁵

His professional assignment requires him to write not truth but to provide an exciting, sensationalist account, though 'it would help if there were anything worth writing about. Even if it's a bad match, they tell you, disguise it, write it as though it were a good match. Bollocks to that, bollocks to this stinking match'⁴⁶. The narration depicts the scene of 'live' writing, the match report as it emerges, interrupted first by the narrator's thoughts, and a second time by the spoken punctuation when he rings the report through to the office. It also appears in an edited version, shorn, as the narrator feared, of its more erudite phrases, inside *The Unfortunate's* box: a dramatisation of the stripping effect of the -(♂♀). He wonders whether 'this bloody reporting language [may] affect, destroy even, my own interest in language', how the deadline forces him to use 'the words which first come into my head, which is not good, relying on the chance of real words which may come in only the two hours of a match'⁴⁷, his report deadline another kind of container in which words are placed, pseudo-words, readymade, alongside the 'chance of real words'. Bion describes this kind of language characterised by the overused phrase, 'yes I know', as 'a sort of modern version of the unconscious, a kind of way of doing without an unconscious by having such an apparatus of mental bricks and mortar' (Tav: 36) that makes it possible to do without thinking at all. Pope's

⁴³ So he: 5.

⁴⁴ Time!: 5.

⁴⁵ Away from: 1.

⁴⁶ The pitch: 5.

⁴⁷ The pitch: 7.

‘needless alexandrine’⁴⁸ also makes an appearance, this time in a self-consciously erudite reference to a player called Alexander:

Devoid of real incident, the match dragged its slow length, no, yes, there’s Alexander, earlier, when he hit the bar. Alexander, dragging his slow length along from right back, hit a long one which beat Phipps but struck the intersection, like a wounded snake has to be worked in somewhere, no, it’ll never work, too contrived, scrub it.⁴⁹

The question of how to write truth without contrivance is seen in two depictions of rain, offering a call-and-response (or the other way round, depending on the order in which they are read) to the writer’s dilemma:

Images for rain are common, I cannot think of one, I do not need to think of one, really, for what purpose?⁵⁰

It begins to rain, rain like an extension of the air, wet air, not falling in drops, in material terms, that is, in drops one would call drops, but a fine air mist of wetness, of rain, that makes me blink, that just depresses me one stage further, that does not soak, or give me cause to feel abandoned. Does it?⁵¹

The differing passages offer two characteristic voices of B. S. Johnson: the one withering, high-handed, pouring scorn on the very attempt to write yet another image for rain, the too-easy metaphorisation of disappointment through the image of rain on a grey day in a northern town; the other passage self-conscious and close-written, the *vernissage* by degrees of a consciously hesitant image of ‘rain like an extension of the air’ that nevertheless achieves a subtle and honest description (‘that does not soak, or give me cause to feel abandoned’). In Bionian terms we might venture that the first example registers a pre-conception of rain and Johnson’s resistance to the psychical work that would place it at risk of becoming a column 2 formulation⁵² – the realm of the lie – while the second version enacts the successful mating of the pre-conception with its realisation: ironically, the ‘saturation’ of ‘rain’ by Johnson’s finely wrought description of ‘rain like an extension of the air’.

⁴⁸ See chapter three.

⁴⁹ The pitch: 6.

⁵⁰ Away from: 1.

⁵¹ Time!: 3.

⁵² See chapter three for a fuller discussion of the column 2 formulation.

The narrator's account of the news of Tony's death is characteristically unsentimental, the fact of his death mentioned seemingly in passing: 'for he had died that evening'⁵³. It appears in the novel's shortest section by far, occupying less than half a printed page; the most important 'fact' of the novel no more than a subordinate statement on a 'throwaway' page, a literally *detached* account. And like death itself, the notice of Tony's passing is no respecter of narrative propriety, for the section comes when it comes – maybe halfway through reading, maybe immediately after the first section. It cannot be ideally placed within a literary-chronological re-ordering of *The Unfortunates*; no surprise or mystery attaches to it. In another section Johnson provides a memorable image of smoke rising from the crematorium as the narrator walks away from Tony's funeral. Ascending in a straight column, 'as far as smoke can ever be said to move in a straight line', it moves into and disperses 'into the haze, the sky, it was too neat, but it was, it was'⁵⁴. It is, I suggest, a fitting final image of Tony: the lost container disintegrated, dispersing into air.

Previous commentators have followed Johnson in placing greater emphasis on the loose sections than on the box itself. Johnson described 'a certain point' when the mass of ideas that preceded each novel would coalesce, '[come] to have a shape, a form that I recognise as a novel'⁵⁵. His account of this process comes very close to the selected fact described by Poincaré⁵⁶ and taken up by Bion: 'this crucial interaction between the material and myself has always been reduced to a single point in time: obviously a very exciting moment for me, and a moment of great relief, too, that I am able to write another novel'⁵⁷. In the case of *The Unfortunates*, however, this 'moment of relief' seems to require the supplementary aspect of the box, since the material at hand – questions of untimely death, a promising life stricken by cancer – does not allow of resolution: the cancer does its work inexorably, and brings disintegration rather than resolution. In his formulation of the container-contained relationship, Bion drew inspiration from his fellow psychoanalyst, Elliott Jaques, who described the 'integrative reticulum' that must be in place in order for creative work to be possible. The integrative reticulum is a psychical object that holds, and holds together:

⁵³ June rang: 1.

⁵⁴ We were: 1.

⁵⁵ Johnson, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, 23–24.

⁵⁶ See the Introduction, chapter one.

⁵⁷ Johnson, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, 23–24.

the mental schema of the completed object and the means of creating it, organised in such a manner that the gaps both in the mental picture of the object and in the methods of creating it are established. Consciously, it is a combination of any or all of concepts, theories, hypotheses, and working notions or hunches. Unconsciously, it is a constellation of ideas-in-feeling, memories-in-feeling, phantasies, and internal objects – brought together and synthesised to the extent necessary to direct behaviour, even if not sufficiently to become conscious.⁵⁸

What is important, in other words, is that the artist can conceive of the project as a whole, and allow a conception of the completed object to organise the work itself. In the case of *The Unfortunates*, the integrative reticulum that Jaques describes is given concrete form, and the narrator's thoughts, memories and encounters are placed within the box with a minimum of other structure. But the integrative reticulum that Bion calls on in his formulation of the container-contained relationship can also fall apart. In Jonathan Coe's introduction to the 1999 republication of *The Unfortunates*, he recounts Johnson's instructions to readers of the original Hungarian edition. Due to publishing costs, the novel was printed as a bound book, entirely contrary to the Johnson's wishes. He was nevertheless able to append a prefatory note in which he suggested how readers might recreate the intended effect. The edition included a page of symbols at the back of the book, referencing the symbols at the head of each section. These could be cut out and 'place[d] [...] in a suitable receptacle' in order to determine, tombola-style, the next section to read. He added: 'what all Hungarian readers cannot help but miss is the physical feel, disintegrative, frail, of the novel in its original format'⁵⁹.

Johnson also wrote that 'the whole novel reflected the randomness of the material: it was itself a physical tangible metaphor for randomness and the nature of cancer'⁶⁰; that it provided a better 'solution to the problem of conveying the mind's randomness than the imposed order of a bound book'⁶¹, and this view is taken up by commentators such as Nicolas Tredell, Patrick Parrinder and Philip Tew, even where, in the case of Parrinder, it is thought to be 'not a very successful device', since 'there is no way of re-ordering the twenty-seven sections so as to introduce a previously hidden element of surprise'⁶². To argue that *The Unfortunates* fails for lack of 'surprise' rather misses the

⁵⁸ Jaques, 'Disturbances in the Capacity to Work', 360.

⁵⁹ Introduction: xii.

⁶⁰ Johnson, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, 25.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶² Parrinder, 'The Novels of B. S. Johnson', 54.

point: while Tony's cancer shocks, it does not surprise – it does what cancer does; it reminds us that we all die in the end.

Other commentators, including Greg Buchanan, Kaye Mitchell and Glyn White, recognise that the box device is not only a way to foreground the theme of randomness, but they also neglect to consider the box in detail. White notes how 'randomness as an experience for the reader immediately gives way to specificity'⁶³ and suggests that 'ultimately, there is more to gain from the format than the partial experience of randomness'. He also comes closest to describing the experience of reading *The Unfortunates* with the text progressively 'whittle[d] away'⁶⁴ with each completed section. Buchanan pursues an interesting line of analysis, noting how the reader's involvement in having to 'put the book together' effects a denaturalisation of the book format that echoes the processes of illness, leaving Tony, for example, needing mechanically to perform previously automatic bodily functions (such as moistening his lips after his saliva glands are destroyed by treatment). He also notes Julia Jordan's suggestion that 'each sentence contains its own first – and sometimes second and third – draft'⁶⁵. This is especially clear in the match report section, where we see phrases alternately selected and rejected, but it is elsewhere at work where anecdotes are taken up and reworked within or between sections. Where this technique seems to aim at an increasingly subtle approximation of the narrator's emotional truth, it stands in marked contrast to the thin and stereotyped depictions of the narrator's former girlfriend, Wendy, who appears in the text as a cipher for feminine betrayal, something 'undigested'. In *A Memoir of the Future*, Bion has recourse to a metaphor of cancer to describe the way that thoughts can remain 'undigested': he notes the way that a character's 'small sarcasm at [her husband's] susceptibility to a pretty face began to harden, to remain undigested. Envy lay waiting, single-celled, to become malignant' (MotF: 10).

Mitchell suggests a phenomenological approach to *The Unfortunates* in which the act of reading 'concretis[es] the text, making it into the work that it is'⁶⁶, each reading assigning a temporary ordering. But she finds that the text produces 'an *impression* of

⁶³ White, *Reading the Graphic Surface: The Presence of the Book in Prose Fiction*, 115.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 116.

⁶⁵ Jordan and Ryle, *B. S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant Garde*, 55.

⁶⁶ Tew and White, *Re-Reading B. S. Johnson*, 52.

randomness'⁶⁷ which is ultimately 'disingenuous', citing Judith Mackrell, who finds that there is not more 'than a superficial experience of indeterminacy'⁶⁸. She also describes the box as a 'coffin' that returns the question of *The Unfortunates*' elegiac intent into view. Contemporary criticism (described by Tredell and Parrinder) suggested that the novel failed as an elegiac work, since it finally focused more on the narrator than on Tony. Buchanan cites Julian Jebb who suggests that the characters of the novel 'seem more like visitors to a consciousness than individuals encountered, observed and described'⁶⁹, while Tredell contends that the 'elevation of the elegist over the elegised is not peculiar to *The Unfortunates*: it is inherent in the very form of the elegy'⁷⁰. Jebb's analysis is congruent with my suggestion that *The Unfortunates* may be better understood as an attempt to restore an internal object, the work of mourning the recreation of a container, enacted performatively by the box device, but also in the process of writing.

This is undoubtedly an ambivalent process, a way both to 'be done with' the painful material of the past as well as to integrate it. Johnson described his writing as a kind of exorcism, suggesting that he was in some way haunted by the things in his mind. What haunts the narrator, in Bionian terms, are images of the dying Tony identified with the disintegration of the containing mind that is, in fact, a part of the narrator. For Johnson, writing enacts the psychical evacuation of mental pain:

And I write especially to exorcise, to remove from myself, from my mind, the burden of having to bear some pain, the hurt of some experience: in order that it may be over there, in a book, and not in here in my mind.⁷¹

Yet *The Unfortunates* also gestures positively toward the possibility of 'grow[ing] towards' bigger and more complex writing projects. The narrator recalls how he discussed his idea for a new novel with Tony:

Perhaps we talked about the next one, an idea I had had, was very enthusiastic about, but was aware that I was not big enough to write it, yet, that the idea was

⁶⁷ Ibid., 55.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Jordan and Ryle, *B. S. Johnson and Post-War Literature: Possibilities of the Avant Garde*, 55.

⁷⁰ Tredell, *Fighting Fictions: The Novels of B. S. Johnson*, 111.

⁷¹ Johnson, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, 18–19.

bigger than I was and I would not have the techniques to handle it, would have to grow towards it. [...] I am still not big enough for that one.⁷²

This mysterious other book – the book still unachieved – is the book awaiting the growth of the narrator, the book for which he (and his mind) has to be ‘big enough’. The work of restoring the lost container that is effected by *The Unfortunates* can also make it grow. Bion suggests that love is involved in growth, and that the mind that grows through love also becomes able to receive love (LfE: 33). Johnson’s ambivalence toward his readers and criticism (useful only if it helps to build better writers) is nevertheless accompanied by the fleeting recognition that there is a role for an *other* in the apprehension of art. He cites Rilke:

Works of art are of an infinite loneliness and with nothing to be so little reached as with criticism. Only love can grasp and hold and fairly judge them.⁷³

Johnson’s solipsism has been noted by many of his critics, and it is reflected in both his creative work and his commentary. His earlier novel, *Trawl*, both begins and closes with I (‘I, always with I ... one always starts with I .. and ends with I’⁷⁴). The final page of *The Unfortunates* suggests that the narrator continues to oscillate between Johnson’s characteristic solipsism and the possibility of offering up his personal experience to a wider audience:

The difficulty to understand without generalisation, to see each piece of received truth, or generalisation, as true only if it is true for me, solipsism again, I come back to it again, and for no other reason. In general, generalisation is to lie, to tell lies.⁷⁵

In *Cogitations*, Bion returns the word, publication, to a more literal reading – *public-ation*: the making public of a private truth. He suggests that the process of truth-telling, which he relates to a broad definition of ‘scientific method’, is not completed until it can be made available to ‘common sense’, a term he uses not in the conventional way but to indicate the possibility of correlation between different people, or between different ‘senses’ within an individual. For Bion, truth cannot finally only be personal. He writes that ‘the physical act of writing and carrying through all the other acts, up to

⁷² I had: 5-6.

⁷³ Johnson, *Well Done God! Selected Prose and Drama of B. S. Johnson*, 397.

⁷⁴ Johnson, *Trawl*, 183.

⁷⁵ Last: 6.

and including public-ation, constitutes being a man of action *for the writer*' (Cog: 169): the 'social component' of writing is not incidental. Between the passage above and the final words of the novel Johnson leaves a quarter-page of blank space, suggesting the time of a decision, or indecision, the question of whether to end the novel with a variant of his usual mantra ('telling stories is telling lies'), or to venture toward public-ation. Eventually, he continues:

Not how he died, not what he died of, even less why he died, are of concern, to me, only the fact that he did die, he is dead, is important, the loss to me, to us ⁷⁶

The last word – 'us' – left pendant and unpunctuated ends *The Unfortunates* on a cautiously hopeful note, suggesting that the narrator can now accede to 'public-ation', with the restoration of relationship, of being 'two-minds-to-write': the narrator re-integrating the part of his mind that is Tony's true legacy.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Chapter Five

With and Without Bion: Supplementing an Uncanny Reading of Mary Butts

A word does not start as a word – it is an end product which begins as an impulse, stimulated by attitude and behaviour which dictates the need for expression.¹

We do not know where the mental boundaries are, nor do we know where the impulses commence.
(Cog: 373)

Mary Butts' short story (first published in 1932), 'With and Without Buttons'², recounts the strange tale of two sisters who, deciding to play a spooky trick on their zealously rationalist neighbour, find themselves subject to a 'genuine' haunting outside of their control. A box of gloves 'with and without buttons' in a shared attic becomes the locus of uncanny happenings as single gloves belonging to a previous tenant appear in both the sisters' and their neighbour's home. A strange story told strangely, 'With And Without Buttons' foregrounds a number of curious emphases – buttons, beginnings, and the invocation of an uncanny natural force that pervades precarious boundaries between house and house, house and nature, and between the sisters themselves and their neighbour, Trenchard, whose masculine scepticism provokes the story's unfolding.

In what follows I aim to develop a reading of 'With And Without Buttons' that uses a number of Bion's ideas to address the strange features of Butts' text. In doing so I proceed from and acknowledge the suggestive use of Bion's work made by Jacqueline Rose³ to think about another work by Mary Butts, *The Death of Felicity Taverner*, though the specific contention of her essay (relating Bion's figure of the 'bizarre object' to disquieting literary moments marked by psychotic mechanisms) is pursued in the next chapter rather than here. Mary Butts is a wayward writer whose inclusion in the Modernist canon, as Nathalie Blondel observes⁴, has perhaps been held back by the

¹ Brook, *The Empty Space*, 15.

² Butts, *With And Without Buttons and Other Stories*. Subsequent references are to this edition.

³ Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*.

⁴ In her Afterword to Butts, *With And Without Buttons and Other Stories*, 209.

unevenness and eccentricity of her work⁵. Best known for her ‘Taverner Novels’ (*Armed with Madness*, written in 1918, and *The Death of Felicity Taverner*, in 1928), Butts’ style is both unmistakeable and maddening: by turns brilliant and affected, snatches of crystalline prose give way to awkward narrative handling and the complacent world-view of the privileged English upper class. Her passionate credulity for the occult (most prominent in *Armed with Madness*, which turns around an imagined discovery of the Holy Grail) takes her into murkier territory than the work of her contemporaries, such as T.S. Eliot or Rainer Maria Rilke, for whom the evocation of pre- and ultra-human forces provide a ballast and recuperation against a world laid low by man’s destruction. Where *Armed With Madness* strays into melodrama, the ‘dirty’ (and malodorous) little trick and ghost story at the centre of ‘With And Without Buttons’ is undergirded by a greater natural reality of something Butts names ‘Tide’, that percolates the fragile human-made boundaries of house and garden.

Freud’s essay, *The Uncanny*, frames a psychoanalytic insight into the generation of the particular and peculiar unease characterised by uncanny literary effects. While ‘With And Without Buttons’ unquestionably partakes of the literary uncanny, I argue that the story merits a supplementary Bionian reading to make fullest sense of the story’s uncanny aspects. I argue that his description of beta-elements, the protomental system and the caesura, and his theory of O and transformations can enable a more detailed reading of Butts’ strange tale.

The story begins with a curiously evocative maxim that places it from the outset in an ironical relationship to truth:

It is not only true, it is comforting, to say the incredulity is often no more than superstition turned inside out.
(85)

Butts’ opening line suggests that truth will have but an incidental value in ‘With and Without Buttons’, yet that there will be truth in the tale, all the same. For a story in which gloves will play such a central role, the figure of the reversible surface giving on each side to incompatible viewpoints is a curious one, drawing attention to the boundary

⁵ E.g. Oliver Conant cited in Foy, *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts: Between Feminism and Modernism*, 112.

fabric that performs a perverse (and *reverse*) intimacy of opposing sides, while nevertheless enacting or staging their discontinuity. The double surface of the glove, with a capacity both to enclose the hand within and the object without, is the medium of contact while at the same time disavowing or precluding the possibility of an intimate contact, skin-to-skin. The glove is a second skin and a way of touching the world, as well as an ironic figure of potential erotic contact (we will come later to the story's erotic and sensual themes).

This first line also seems to signal the reversibility of perspective, the way that meaning can give away to its opposite term. Bion described the 'binocular vision' (BL: 105) required of the analyst to see both the conscious and unconscious aspects of communication, and drew attention to the interdependence of meaning:

One of the weaknesses of articulate speech is shown in the use of a term like 'omnipotence' to describe a situation that in fact cannot be described at all accurately with a language that is of one kind only. 'Omnipotence' must always also mean 'helplessness'; there can be no single word that describes one thing without also describing its reciprocal.
(Cog: 370)

As its first line suggests, Butts' story will rely on a reversible perspective in which two apparently opposed ways of thinking (incredulity and superstition) exist simultaneously and form part of a total phenomenon. The theme is echoed in the situation of the two sisters (the non-narrating sister herself merely an amplification or double of the narrator) who live in one half of a formerly unitary house (89) now only connected through the attic.

The story continues: 'It was only because Trenchard said at lunch that the mass was a dramatised wish-fulfilment that what came after ever happened' (85). Butts evokes the language of psychoanalysis ('dramatised wish-fulfilment', 'reaction exercises' (87)) to frame 'With and Without Buttons' as a riposte to the 'faith of disbelief as inaccurate as its excess' (85), which she did, in fact, identify with Freud and psychoanalysis. Butts' biographer, Nathalie Blondel, notes that she read Freud 'from the 1910s' (the first earliest translations of Freud's work into English appeared from 1909⁶), but rejected his

⁶ English translations of Freud's work made by A. A. Brill appeared from 1909 onwards. See, for example: 'Dr. A. A. Brill Dies; Psychiatrist, 73.'

extreme rationalism and apparent repudiation of supernatural phenomena⁷. Although we do not know whether Butts read Freud's 1919 essay, *The Uncanny*, I suggest that the two texts stand in ironically companionate relationship to each other: Butts' story seeming to exemplify the effects of a specifically literary uncanny described by Freud, within a tale dedicated to overcoming the excessively rationalist sensibility which takes Freudian ideas as its bulwark.

Locating the 'beginning' of the story is no easy matter. The opening lines convey the anticipation of a story to be told while making clear that the matter – still troubling – is nevertheless in the past. Denouncing their churchgoing, the neighbour Trenchard provokes the narrator and her sister to defend the cast of mind that imbues ritual with 'real' significance, and to find a way to 'suggest him into an experience' (86). They fix on the plan of placing gloves, taken from a box of old-lady gloves they have found in the attic, around Trenchard's home, and then feeding him a spooky story:

We'll put them there and get asked round for the evening and start when we see one, and that's where our village story begins. All that he has to get out of us is there *is* a story [...]
(87)

With this decided, the sisters start to plot the details of their game, along with the story they will tell Trenchard to convince him of supernatural doings. As would-be story-makers and story-tellers ('before we begin we'll *do* something' (87)), they nevertheless allow that the story-*work* (chiefly upon Trenchard's mind, suggested into an experience) will not be achieved under their aegis:

This is what we planned, understanding that, like a work of art, once it had started, its development could be left to look after itself.
(87)

And so it is: the story 'begins' before they have a chance to do so themselves. Going round to Trenchard's one evening, they learn that he has already discovered not one but two odd gloves lying around. Only the second of these is the one planted by the narrator's sister; the original glove is a mystery. With this unexpected development, the narrator's sister is forced to extemporise a ghost story; the improvised story will

⁷ Blondel, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life. A Biography*, 82–83.

nevertheless coincide in every detail with the subsequent ‘story’ given to the narrator by a local: that the houses of both Trenchard and the sisters were formerly inhabited by one Miss Blacken, an old maid (‘nice about her hands’ (95)), and her brother, ‘a local family which had died out’ (88). The narrator, not realising that her sister is making up the story, takes umbrage at her for *beginning* too soon (‘I was still hurt that she had not first rehearsed it with me’):

‘Why didn’t you tell me you had begun? Why didn’t you coach me?’ Then she said:
 ‘To tell you the truth, I hadn’t meant to begin.
 (89)

The story’s strange beginnings multiply. The narrator suggests that ‘it was as though – and we had known this to be possible before – it had already started itself’ (90). When further gloves appear, it is Trenchard who remarks on beginnings:

‘Hullo,’ he said, ‘there’s another. It’s beginning. That makes four.’
 It was then that it had begun. If you could call *that* beginning.
 (90)

‘With and Without Buttons’ presents the reader with so many beginnings and motive impulses (the intention to trick Trenchard, the ruse of mysterious objects, Trenchard’s desire to hear a story, and an improvised story lent unexpected weight by corroborative local story-telling), and yet these remain collectively insufficient to account for the story that actually unfolds, taking the story-telling sisters by surprise. As such, Butts’ short tale seems to offer a commentary on the art of storytelling itself, drawing attention to the properly uncanny power of words and ideas to ‘suggest [people] into an experience’.

Returning to the epigraph by Peter Brook with which this chapter opens, one can also wonder whether the words of the story evoke a prior or primitive impulse giving on to narrative expression. Without seeking to ground the story in a story-outside-the-story (recalling Derrida, *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*), Bion’s figure of the protomental system offers a way to trace and detect the emotional, psycho-somatic/soma-psychotic datum that exists within the text. *A word does not start as a word*, and so it is to that word, ‘buttons’, that I turn to pursue not a ‘real beginning’ but the semantic penumbra of the text. The figure of the buttons appears at the end of a long list of prospective aids to the haunting planned by the two sisters:

I recognised a master's direction, but it all seemed to depend on our choice of stimulants. Last year's leaves, delicate damp articulations; coloured pebbles, dead flies, scraps of torn paper with half a word decipherable.... A mixture of these or a selection?

'Keep it tangible,' my sister said – 'that's the way. Our only difficulty is the planting of them.'

'Which,' I asked, 'are suitable to what?' It seemed to be necessary in laying our train to determine the kind of unpleasantness for which they were ominous. But I could not get my sister to attend.

'It's not that way round,' she said at length – 'dead bees, feathers, drops of candle-grease? Old kid gloves? With and Without Buttons. That will do.'
(87–8)

The phrase 'With and Without Buttons' (so capitalised) arrives fully-formed, appearing throughout with a persistent and baroque emphasis. David Matless calls attention⁸ to the variation on the phrase ('Some have all the buttons and some have none and some have some' (88)) that is described by the narrator as a 'rune'. Butts' buttons are ubiquitous, proliferative, and maddening: every scene in which a ghostly glove appears is ornamented with a button-based detail, though no pattern or meaning in the number or appearance of buttons is readily discernible. They nevertheless contribute to the story's strange effects: the buttons seem to haunt the story despite appearing as an incidental detail. Whoever or whatever the 'ghost' may be in 'With and Without Buttons', it is not as concerned with the buttons as her characters seem to be (barring one occasion, in which buttons are found in a bowl of food (94)). In a journal entry in 1930, Mary Butts tried to account for the ghostly effects created by M. R. James, the writer whose stories she much admired (and to whom she intended to dedicate her story): 'It occurred to me that the horrid details by which James gets his effects are *incidental*'⁹ (itals. mine).

I suggest that an adequate reading of 'With and Without Buttons' must take the buttons into account. While Freud's essay, *The Uncanny*, offers a starting point for analysis, it does not offer a way to make sense of all of the strange features of Butts' short story. 'With and Without Buttons' is nevertheless in many respects an exemplary instance of the literary uncanny, with its combination of haunting, doubles and automatisms. It is therefore worth stepping through a Freudian analysis, not least because of the way the

⁸ Matless, 'A Geography of Ghosts: The Spectral Landscapes of Mary Butts', 345.

⁹ Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts*, 339.

story addresses itself so pointedly to a style of rationalism that takes Freudian arguments as their basis.

Much of what is at stake in the German original of *The Uncanny* is the concept of home, and homeliness, *Heimlichkeit*: the uncanny is what is literally unhomely, *unheimlich*. Tracing the dictionary definition of *Heimlichkeit* to the point where it begins to shade into its opposite, *Unheimlichkeit*, Freud notes a quotation by Schelling that suggests that feelings of uncanniness arise when the privacy of what is *heimlich* is exposed:

‘everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light’ (SE 17: 225). In ‘Buttons’, the home is a divided place – a house literally divided in two to make two dwellings: the sisters on one side, Trenchard on the other – with the shoe-box containing old gloves that will serve for the haunting in the loft ‘by the door into his place when these houses were one’ (88). There exists from the outset a cosy arrangement of neighbourly intimacy (the neighbours are frequently in each other’s house, or venturing through ‘the gap in the hedge’ that divides a shared orchard), though it is a shared infestation that provides the initial motive for a meeting:

A nest of wasps had divided their attention between us, and we had met after sunset to return their calls with cyanide and squibs.
(85)

There is something darkly menacing in the image of the swarming wasps that do not respect neighbourly boundaries. They offer a clue to the instability of the border between the sisters and their neighbour, suggestive, perhaps, of an erotic aspect to the hazing and fragmentation of neighbourly boundaries: unlike bees, wasps proliferate to no productive end, and they entail no sacrifice in deploying their sting. There is also something ugly about the use of cyanide and squibs (small explosives) to stay their propagation. The figure of the wasps crowding the boundaries of the divided house draws attention to something shifting, unstable and the more potent for being minutely fragmented: they require a brutal response since it is impossible to contain them with precision.

The creeping animism of the gloves (themselves a metaphor for the mysterious hand which leaves them around, the ‘invisible hand’ of the ghost story) recalls Freud’s category of ‘dismembered limbs, a severed head, a hand cut off at the wrist, feet which

dance by themselves' (SE 17: 244), which receives only glancing discussion by Freud as instances of the castration complex, which he has already connected to the figure of the eye that appears in 'The Sand Man'. For Freud, the detachability of body parts is simply a symbol of fear of the missing or castrated penis. In 'With and Without Buttons', his argument does not seem compelling. The character of Trenchard plays foil to the sisters' desires, and it is their decision to 'suggest him into an experience' that sets the events of the story in train. The traces of an erotic aspect to the relationship between the sisters (more specifically the narrator) and their neighbour are readily discernible.

Freud notes 'the theme of the 'double'' (SE 17: 234) as another 'uncanny harbinger', which he sees as the relics of the 'surmounted stage' of primary narcissism, or the development of the super-ego (SE 17: 235). The narrator's sister functions chiefly as a conveniently expositional interlocutor who never comes into focus as a character separate from the narrator, and one might see the sister as the narrator's double. Certainly, the narrator's references to her sister have a facetious quality throughout, declaring on one occasion that she 'can rarely attain to my sister's breadth of mind'; on another, commenting ironically (since she *is* the narrator) that she 'recognised a master's direction' in her sister's plotting. They are together in every scene except two: the occasion when the narrator goes into the village to make enquiries of their house's former resident, and later on, in the brief but disturbing scene where the narrator and Trenchard are *alone together* (the sister is sent out to fetch perfume). The effect of the sister, I suggest, is to detract from the story's erotic themes that would otherwise centre more squarely on the relationship between the narrator and Trenchard.

'I am seeing him now, more vividly than I like,' she writes early on (85). There is vividness, too, in the name itself. 'Trenchard' suggests the nature of the challenge that he presents to the sisters' worldview: the entrenchment of rationalism, something hard and unyielding, the sturdy outerwear of the trench-coat; and, perhaps, the experience of trench warfare. The story hints at Trenchard's involvement in the East African campaign, which ended in 1917, as he recognises the smell of 'bad skins' from his time in Africa (93). The image of Trenchard and the sisters lined up on either side of a divide also evokes the peculiar proximity of the enemy entailed by trench warfare. The sisters are infuriated by Trenchard's refusal to believe in supernatural forces, whether God or ghosts, and by his desire to 'sweat for our conversion; to shame us into agreement' (85)

with his rationalist views. The confrontation that sets in motion the sisters' desire to play a trick on Trenchard is notable for the menacing evocation of his anger, which might equally be suggestive of sexual arousal, or threat:

Until the evening I told him to stop boring us with his wish-fulfilments, for they weren't ours, and saw his healthy skin start to sweat and a stare come into his eyes. That ought to have warned me, as it did my sister, of whom I am sometimes afraid.
(85–6)

The text foregrounds a dense and heady sensuality in the environment. The story takes place 'one hot, sweet, blue-drawn summer, in a Kentish orchard' (85). The orchard hanging ripe with fruit and 'night hunting cries and scents of things that grow and ripen' convey an earthly fecundity, explicitly female, that the barriers of the house and dividing hedge can do little to stay: 'With every door and every window open, the old house was no more than a frame, a set of screens to display night, midsummer, perfume, the threaded stillness, the stars strung together, their spears glancing, penetrating an earth breathing silently, a female power asleep' (86). Female, reproductive power is contrasted with 'sex'. The narrator declares with breezy arrogance that getting Trenchard to 'make love' to them would be a simple task:

Not because we did not like him, but because we wanted to have power over him, the power women sometimes want to have over men, the pure, not erotic power, whose point is that it shall nothing to do with sex. We could have made him make love, to either or both of us, any day of the week.
(87)

The dichotomy between 'sex' – the mannered flirtations and liberal mores of the bohemian upper class – and a pure erotism founded on procreation places the related question of pleasure between uneasy opposites: sex is unreal and without value in its frothy, 'society' guise (the narrator will describe how the sisters try 'as was appropriate, to look like Paris, as a compliment to Trenchard' (94)), or violent, visceral, and of a piece with the forces of nature that permeate their encounter. The narrator's description of the provocation they seek to bring about in Trenchard has a recognisably sexual connotation:

If he doesn't rise the first night, he'll find that leaf when he goes to bed.
(87)

Moreover, the sisters' decision to use gloves (rather than the many other objects they consider) to proceed with their plan is strengthened by their feminine association:

they're the sort of things a man never has in his house, so that's sound so far.
But women do. Not the sort of things we wear, but he'd not know that. (88)

The box of kid-leather gloves that they find in the loft belonged formerly to Miss Blacken, the 'regular old maid [...] if maid she'd ever been' (91), whose story hints darkly – and inconclusively – at an obscene secret centred on a lost petticoat (identified obliquely with the 'nasty slummy rag' (93) that appears on their first visit to the loft, and with the smothering cloth of the final scene), night-time wanderings, and her care of her hands, suggesting a feminine delicacy at odds with her repellent figure ('dirty things done in a delicate way' (95)). From the local who offers information about Miss Blacken and her brother one might infer an incestuous relationship to her brother: 'Not that you could be saying regular old man for him, for he wasn't either, if you take my meaning, Miss' (91). But there is finally no deeper insight about Miss Blacken (or her brother) – no hint of prostitution, incest, secret affair, no actually *sexual* aspect at all, and it is perhaps precisely this unachieved or absent sexual life that lends horror to her story.

For all their sexual confidence, it is the sisters, as unmarried women, who are most closely identified with the spectral presence of Miss Blacken, and with the *pudeur* that the gloves of an old maid 'nice about her hands' evoke. The gloves occupy a strange place both as intimate and public apparel: delicate, form-fitting items, literally a second-skin both enabling and deferring the potentially sexual aspect of physical contact between the narrator (and her sister-double) and Trenchard. Seen from this perspective, the gloves suggest the symbolism of the hymen or a sheath, of that which establishes or resists sexual contact. In the later scenes before the party, the gloves take on a more life-like, tumescent aspect: one appears up the back of the [narrator's] dress, 'open like a hand' that 'collapse[s] a little' when Trenchard touches it. The final glove is 'yellow-orange kid-skin, still and fat', with 'the wrist and the fingers open and swollen' (95).

The gloves (and the buttons) also give way to a stickier ending that evokes a more carnal encounter, suggesting a more specifically female physicality. The 'filthy nonsense' that causes Trenchard's exclamation while he is dressing for the party is the

discovery of a 'patch of grey jelly' (on the 'stiff white linen' of his shirt) that prompts the sisters to feel 'as if there were slugs about, the things of which we are most afraid; and that we must keep our long dresses tight about us' (96). The gloves and the rag in the loft develop a mysteriously repellent aroma, the smell of 'bad skins' that Trenchard recognises, and a bottle of perfume owned by the narrator's sister is found suddenly to have acquired the 'the sweetness, like a lady-like animal, of old kid gloves' (97). The scene that takes place just before this is particularly striking. With her sister sent (and 'scent') away to fetch her perfume, the narrator is alone with Trenchard for the first and only occasion. Though of a piece with the breathless melodrama of the closing pages of the story, it has in isolation a strikingly dissociative, oneiric quality that suggests a sexual scene, or a scene of trauma:

She ran away, and I stood still, aware of my shoulder-blades and the back of my neck, and all of my body that I couldn't *see*. Doors would not open easily. I heard him swearing and stumbling, the clang of a bucket tripped over and kicked away in the yard.
(97)

More in the mode of telling rather than showing, the writing nevertheless conveys to startling effect the narrator's awareness of her physicality (and of all her body that she 'couldn't *see*', her *heimlich* parts) that immediately precedes Trenchard's stumbling flight into the courtyard. The two moments of the scene (her awareness of her body, the fleeing man) invite a reading of a phantasied or attempted rape, but leave open the question of whose violation is at stake. I suggest that the final scene of the story, in which Trenchard is discovered overcome, apparently smothered, by a dirty piece of cloth (that is perhaps Miss Blacken's lost petticoat), develops the theme of an overwhelming, female sexuality which subjects their neighbour to a phantasied oral violation:

Inside we expected to find one large, troubled man, upstairs collecting things. Instead there was quiet, a kind of dead quiet that came to meet us down the steep stair. The loft door was open. On the flight that led up to it he was lying, feet down, his head upon the sill; his head invisible, wrapped up in what looked like a piece of dark green cotton. We dragged it off.

'Burn. Burn.' My sister said.

Some of it was in his mouth. We pulled it out. His tongue and mouth were stained. We slid him down to the foot of the flight and got water. (98)

Having been rescued from underneath the petticoat, Trenchard gives his own account, with the final words of the story emphasising his trauma's *olfactory* aspect:

the next thing I knew it had wrapped itself round my head and I couldn't get it off. I tore at it and tried to get out. Then I couldn't bear it any more. It was winding itself tight. Then I must have passed out. But, oh God, it was the smell of it...
(99)

A narrow reading of the gloves along the lines that Freud suggests in *The Uncanny* would obscure the themes of intimacy, contact and female sexuality. I contend that what is uncanny about the gloves is not that they are detachable or that they suggest a severed limb, but that they enact a 'tele-touching' at once remote and intimate. They preserve a boundary of decorum (protecting lady-like hands from the contamination of sexual touch) associated with the *pudeur* of Miss Blacken, which is lent an obscene tinge that may be grounded finally in nothing more than the obstinate preservation of her chastity into old age. There is nothing new in calling attention to Freud's blind spot in respect of female sexuality, to which his famously 'failed' case study of Dora attests (SE 12). Freud is also at pains throughout *The Uncanny* to play down the thesis, described by Jentsch, that ascribes 'the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty' (SE 17: 221), though like a revenant itself it persists in returning to Freud's consideration. 'With and Without Buttons' foregrounds intellectual uncertainty from the outset, with the narrator making clear that Trenchard's capacity to *think* is permanently disturbed by the affair:

Now he cannot think what he used to think, and he does not know what else there is that he might think.
(85)

Additionally, the many references to an impersonal force that drives the story ('It was trying to get out anyhow' (85)) might equally suggest the existence of a *thought* rather than the existence of a *ghost* (the ghost of a thought, perhaps). The flicker of Trenchard's anger that erupts when the narrator tells him to 'stop boring [them] with his wish-fulfilments' (86) gives rise likewise to a thought which will drive the development of the narrative: 'It did warn us, but it wound us up also' (86). The trope of 'winding up' a mysterious figure ('it') recurs on two later occasions: at a moment when the sisters realise that they are no longer the authors of their own story ('I know what it is we've

done,’ said my sister, ‘we’ve wound it up’ (91)) and during Trenchard’s closing description of the smothering cloth (‘It was winding itself tight’ (97)). Deciding to wait overnight for the details of their ‘good idea’ to give Trenchard a nightmare, the narrator’s sister declares that she ‘can feel one about’ (86).

In the fifth of his Tavistock seminars, Bion is asked to relate two terms of his own invention – the protomental (or proto-mental) system or ‘apparatus’, and the beta-element. His answer is instructive, but it is worth taking a moment to situate both of these concepts in turn. Of the two, his formulation of beta-elements is better known, but in fact the protomental system is the earlier term. It appears in Bion’s first book, *Experiences in Groups*, as a ‘a level in which physical and mental are undifferentiated’ (EiG: 102) and the matrix (from which the group behaviours that he describes as the ‘basic assumptions’) emerge. Despite the evocative word ‘matrix’, Bion’s conception of the protomental system is of a system or level of mind (or more accurately, some precursor of mind, ‘proto-’ mind) rather than a space or place. Bion’s conception of the protomental system bears some comparison with Julia Kristeva’s later concept of the ‘chora’¹⁰, although as it pre-dates his association with Melanie Klein it does not, as one might expect, reference the relationship to the maternal body, even as it may allude to intra-uterine life (TP: 42). It is, rather, a level of ‘mind’ on the border of somatic and psychical processes, which can nevertheless manifest a state of distress ‘in physical forms as in psychological’ (EiG: 102). While Bion’s formulation of a protomental system passes largely into disuse after *Experiences in Groups*, he continues to seek to articulate places of mind that cannot adequately be located through the classical distinction between the conscious and unconscious. In later years, he borrows the term ‘caesura’ to describe moments that mark the passage or re-activation of somatic and psychical material in new levels of mind. What we describe as a thought, he suggests, has a pre-history that may be rooted in ‘somatic’ or ‘embryological’ modes of ‘thinking’:

The embryologist speaks about ‘optic pits’ and ‘auditory pits’. Is it possible for us, as psycho-analysts, to think that there may still be vestiges in the human being which would suggest a survival in the human mind, analogous to that in the human body, of evidence in the field of optics that once there were optic pits, or in the field of hearing that once there were auditory pits? Is there any part of the human mind which still betrays signs of an ‘embryological’ intuition, either visual or auditory?
(TP: 42)

¹⁰ McAfee, *Julia Kristeva*, 19.

The ‘impressive caesura of birth’ described by Freud and cited by Bion (TP: 37) is only one of innumerable ‘caesuras’ that mark moments where the experience of one system penetrates into another, where something is realised, a thought takes shape, or a life-decision (such as marriage) is enacted (TP: 49). Returning to the question posed in the *Brazilian Lectures*, he evokes a frontier between mind and body that may sometimes be recognised in poetic expression:

But there are things that do seem to me to suggest this combination between the body and the mind. Why do the old anatomists call part of the brain the ‘rhinencephalon’? Why a nose brain? Why is a patient always complaining of a rhinitis? Psycho-somatic? Soma-psychotic? Take your choice. ‘Pure and eloquent blood spoke in her cheeks, and so distinctly wrought, that one might almost say, her body thought’ [Donne, ‘The Second Anniversary’].
(Tav: 54)

He suggests that the rhinencephalon, or ‘nose brain’, may be one of several precursor modes of intelligence (the optic pits, the alimentary canal), which, though largely supplanted by the function of the brain, nevertheless remain in vestigial form. ‘Smell’, he suggests elsewhere, ‘can be one of the long-range methods of communication’ (Ital: 19). The issue of smell also appears in *The Uncanny*, but it goes unremarked in Freud’s account of a short story where he had himself been (exceptionally, if we are to believe him) affected by a sense of the uncanny:

I read a story about a young married couple who move into a furnished house in which there is a curiously shaped table with carvings of crocodiles on it. Towards evening an intolerable and very specific smell begins to pervade the house
(SE 17: 244)

Nicholas Royle has identified the story as ‘Inexplicable’ by L. G. Moberly¹¹ and traced a number of uncanny smells in this and other stories, arguing that Moberly’s concern with the ‘*recurrence* of smell’ suggests ‘a link between smell, uncanny repetition and trauma’¹², though he hesitates to speculate on what the nature of that link could be: arguably, smells *linger* rather than recur; they disrupt the notions of beginning and ending which ground the possibility of repetition in the *fort-da* mode that Freud will go on to describe in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (SE 18). The smells that pervade ‘With

¹¹ Royle, *The Uncanny*, 138.

¹² *Ibid.*, 139.

and Without Buttons' (flowers, damp skins, scent) succeed in permeating – even perforating – the boundary between skin and skin that is effected by the wearing of gloves. In the closing evocation of the terrible *smell* that is the worst part of Trenchard's experience, Trenchard is perhaps the recipient of something that cannot yet be thought, but that urges communication. It is likewise received at a level that is other than a conscious one: in her journal, Butts described her experience of 'signatures', the term she gave to 'hints, coincidences, prophetic or retrospective of a significant event', in terms of an apprehension of or attention to something for which 'one's brain is not quite the right instrument'¹³.

Extracts from *Cogitations* suggest that Bion developed the term, 'beta-element', in 1960 (though he describes something recognisably similar as early as August 1959 (Cog: 63)). It appears first in publication in 1962. Bion's account of beta-elements is both complex and shifting, and has invited differing interpretations by commentators. At the simplest level, the category of beta-elements may be described as the stream of sense-impressions that have not been worked on by alpha-function to produce alpha-elements, the most basic elements of thought. Writing in *Learning from Experience*, Bion describes beta-elements as chiefly suitable for 'evacuation', either through the mechanism of projective identification, or by a variety of procedures 'intended to disencumber the personality of accretions of stimuli' (LfE: 13). Insofar as they resist their progressive transformation by alpha-function (the processes of mind that enable us to 'learn from experience': i.e. to think), beta-elements persist as 'undigested facts' (LfE: 7) that neither join the store of our memories nor contribute to the rudiments of thought.

The definition is further complicated by Bion's own early comparisons of beta-elements to the Kantian categories of the noumena and things-in-themselves (a contested category within Kantian scholarship that Kelly Noel-Smith argues Bion misunderstands¹⁴). It prompts James Grotstein to suggest that beta-elements comprise both 'pre-processed sensory impressions' (pre-processed in the sense of: prior to processing by alpha-function) and the noumenal 'Ideal Forms' implicit in Klein's account of innate or prenatal pre-conceptions (e.g. of the breast), which equip the baby for its initial encounters with the world. Beta-elements have, moreover, an emotional (or

¹³ Butts, *The Journals of Mary Butts*, 371–2.

¹⁴ Torres and Hinshelwood, *Bion's Sources: The Shaping of His Paradigms*, 129.

proto-emotional) quality, with Grotstein proposing that they are ‘O’s proto-emotional descendant – that is, the β -element is the emotional sense impression of O: the ghost of O’¹⁵.

So what does a beta-element look like? The analytic literature is richly equivocal on the topic, since Bion himself describes beta-elements in more or less substantive terms. In one of two essays transcribed from audio in 1977, beta-elements are described as something solidly ‘physical’, if mysterious:

The first box I am thinking of is really not suitable for anything so ephemeral as what I usually call a thought, namely, something that is physical; I shall call it a beta-element. I don’t know what that means and I don’t know what it is, and as it hasn’t turned up I am still ignorant. But anyway, there it is, in case that strange creature should exist and should it swim into my ken.
(TWT: 29)

Intriguingly, the phenomenon that Bion describes may approximate something that Mary Butts described as a part of her spiritualist cosmology. In Roslyn Reso Foy’s account of ‘With and Without Buttons’, she associates the smell as a part of what Butts identifies as ‘Elementals’. This is an ancient belief in the animal-thing, seen, heard and smelt, but impervious to touch and infecting like a poison’. Butts compares such elementals to Ariel and Caliban, spirits that evoke in humans the ‘fear that there is animal life outside the animals he knows, less than human life and more, and infinitely malignant’. In ‘With and Without Buttons’ the skins of the gloves become elementals revealing the supernatural life outside the ‘skins, furs, shells and feathers of our earth’ [...]¹⁶

Where Butts’ ‘elementals’ reveal ‘supernatural life’ animating organic objects, beta-elements manifest psychical debris. Elsewhere Bion suggests that beta-elements can also be *words* – as they are used for hallucination – but words used concretely rather than abstractly. Writing in *Attention and Interpretation*, he contends that ‘the word representing a thought is not the same as the identical word when it is representing an hallucination’ (A&I: 17). Bléandonu makes the connection with beta-elements directly:

¹⁵ Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion’s Legacy to Psychoanalysis*, 59.

¹⁶ Foy, *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts: Between Feminism and Modernism*, 100.

As the concept of hallucination has a long and loaded history of meaning, Bion prefers to use the term 'beta-element'. This enables him to relate the 'hallucination' encountered in clinical practice to the 'thing-in-itself' of philosophical speculation.¹⁷

The buttons of 'With and Without Buttons' invite an analysis along these lines. Heralded in the title, and thrust egregiously into every scene, they nevertheless add little functionally to a story that starts with the placing of gloves (whether they have one, none, or several buttons) and continues through a series of such events to a dénouement that finally features neither gloves nor buttons. While the buttons briefly take centre-stage in one of the final 'happenings' (their appearance on top of a bowl of strawberries), they play a less significant role than the events which follow, in which the buttons give way entirely to gloves that seem to swell and shrivel, patches of 'grey jelly', the smell of 'dead skins', and smothering rags. What is chiefly uncanny in the figure of the buttons is the narrator's and the sisters' (and even Trenchard's) insistence on enumerating the buttons in each new scene of 'haunting'. No pattern or meaning can be readily identified in the sequence of these numbers: none, three buttons missing, two buttons, and so on. They are countable ('some have all the buttons and some have none and some have some' (88)), but as a feature of the story they remain quite *unaccountable*. That Trenchard himself falls in with the button-counting lends the story an additional uncanny aspect that suggests something too close, more-than-neighbourly, in the sharing of minds between the sisters and Trenchard (in relation to whom the sisters seem to have taken on an almost wifely role by the time of the garden party).

The buttons are the most persistent reference among a number of small, particulate or fragmentary objects that are notable throughout the text. The wasps that 'had divided their attention between us' at the beginning of the story are one such figure, as are the items listed as possible 'tangible' aids to haunting:

Last year's leaves, delicate damp articulations; coloured pebbles, dead flies, scraps of torn paper with half a word decipherable.... A mixture of these or a selection?
(87)

The suggestions continue until the narrator's sister alights on gloves and buttons: 'dead bees, feathers, drops of candle-grease? Old kid gloves? With and Without Buttons. That

¹⁷ Bléandonu, *Wilfred Bion: His Life and Works 1897–1979*, 219.

will do' (87–8). I propose that these objects are understood best not as incidental detail or literary ornamentation, nor even as sexual symbolism (though the theme of female sexuality and the figure of buttons bears reference to Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons*), but as intimations of aspects of feeling and thinking which press upon the story for textual expression. The buttons are *things* – notably tangible, non-abstract – within the frame of the narrative; they are also *words*. They add little to the plot but are an obtrusive, uncanny feature of the text (and the title), inviting further analysis.

A further, overlooked aspect of Bion's formulation of beta-elements is also instructive. In a journal entry from February 1960, he highlights an important aspect of beta-elements: namely, their relation to a sense of an object's 'vitality' or 'deadness'. It takes place within a discussion of infantile development and the destructive attacks made by the infant on its objects:

In this instance it is necessary to talk about this object which should be non-existent and therefore impossible to discuss. Its importance lies in the fact that the infant, if enraged, has death wishes, and if the object is wished dead, it is dead. It therefore has become non-existent, and its characteristics are different from those of the real, live, existing project; the existing object is alive, real, and benevolent. (*I propose to call the real, alive objects α -elements; the dead, unreal objects I shall call β -elements.*)
(Cog: 133; itals. mine.)

The deadness and unreality of beta-elements are of course the more disturbing for nevertheless continuing to *exist*: an aspect of reality can be psychically repudiated (by the child or the adult), but the reality which gives rise to the impressions of those objects will continue to press in on the mind. This model of beta-elements – as the persistence of supposedly 'dead' objects seeking representation – suggests that beta-elements come to *haunt* us, and as such provides an extended way of thinking about the uncanny, and the uncanny effects of 'With and Without Buttons'. The maddening insistence on the buttons becomes more meaningful if they can be taken as narrative – and textual – traces of a repudiated aspect of reality seeking an expression that is closer to evacuation than to symbolisation. Bion describes beta-elements as 'objects that can be evacuated or used for a kind of thinking that depends on manipulation of what are felt to be things in themselves as if to substitute such manipulation for words or ideas' (LfE: 6). The reader does not take the buttons to be hallucinated, but is invited by the narrator to share in a kind of group experience in which the story's most egregious

feature is shared by all as a kind of empty code – and equally collectively passed over without comment: the text invites the reader to be finally as blind to any possible ‘meaning’ of the buttons as the characters themselves.

I suggest that ‘With and Without Buttons’ evokes an emotional, protomental field from which the narrative elements of the story ‘emerge’. This is not to suggest that the emotional atmosphere precedes the story (except within the terms of the story itself), and it is also not the same as saying that the markers of an emotional and environmental atmosphere should be read chiefly as metaphors to decorate or dramatise the story, as in the pathetic fallacy (e.g. the trope of the ‘stormy night’ suggesting a story of passion). It is not really satisfying as a ‘ghost story’ (despite its undoubted uncanny effects), and is finally un compelling as an incidental account in the genre of a personal *fait divers*. But as a self-reflexive staging of a thought and its vicissitudes, it is a remarkable achievement. The scene where the sisters return to the house at the end of the evening sets a stage for the tale’s unfolding:

We went home through the orchard in the starlight and sat downstairs in the midsummer night between lit candles, inviting in all that composed it, night-hunting cries and scents of things that grow and ripen, cooled in the star-flow. A world visible, but not in terms of colour.
(86)

The scene bears comparison with Bion’s transcribed audio-essay (‘28 May 1977’). His wife and editor, Francesca, tells us that it was ‘recorded by Bion sitting alone in his study’ prior to travelling to Rome. He describes waiting for a ‘thought without a thinker’ to come along. An extract gives a flavour of the essay’s charming and curiously languorous atmosphere:

I have been idling away my time, thinking in this way – a way I could describe as being almost thoughtless. If, as a child, I had been caught at it, somebody would have said, ‘Why on earth don’t you find something to do?’ I would now like to have a look in case I have caught anything in the net of my idleness.
(TWT: 32)

Like Bion, the sisters await the idea that will catalyse their determination to give Trenchard a ‘nightmare’: they ‘can feel one about’. As they go upstairs to bed, the house is beset by something which Butts names ‘tide’, as remarkably evocative as it is formless:

Through walls and glass, through open doors or shut, a tide poured in, not of air or light or dark or scent or sound or heat or coolness. Tide. Without distinction from north or south or without or within; without flow or ebb, a Becoming; without stir or departure or stay: without radiance or pace. Star-tide. Has not Science had wind of rays poured in from interstellar space?
(86)

Whatever else it may be, it is not sea-tide or river-tide: Butts' account of it suggests something formless but nevertheless substantive: a primeval soup from which something might evolve, and which confounds any possible boundary either man-made, or physical ('through open doors or shut'). It evokes a pervasive, irresistible force that takes as its nearest reference the water-tides driven by such cosmological forces as gravity and planetary movements. Had it been intended as a poetical rendering of Bion's concept of O, it would be difficult to better. I suggest that Butts' evocation of 'tide' during the night in which the sisters await the appearance of an 'it' (their 'good idea', a nightmare for Trenchard, a mechanism by which to frighten him, the beginning of a story) is an attempt to register the foundation of an emotional experience (and something as yet prior to a thought) that will unfold into a 'Becoming' (the term is both Butts', and Bion's¹⁸). To do so I relate two 'eras' in Bion's thinking that address the question of reality in different ways.

The first of these is his hypothesis of the 'thought without a thinker' and that which Sandler has described as his '(onto)genetic view of the development of the thinking apparatus'¹⁹, in terms of Bion's classification of beta-, alpha- and other particles or parts of thought. The second is his description of O and transformations, which does not replace or supersede the first system, but which suggests a theory of observation for the practising psychoanalyst in respect of tracing back and tracking forward the evolution of an originary reality O through transformations into and in diverse realms of human activity.

Bion's figure of O first appears in *Transformations* to denote absolute reality: 'what the absolute facts are cannot ever be known, and these I denote by the sign O'. O names that which cannot be experienced directly (other than as an emotional 'catastrophe') but

¹⁸ 'Becoming O', an idea introduced in *Transformations*, is discussed in more detail in chapter eight.

¹⁹ Sandler, *The Language of Bion: A Dictionary of Concepts*, 305.

which can be ‘stepped-down’ or metabolised²⁰ by transformation into emotional experiences and knowledge wrought in many possible different domains. Bion frequently quotes Milton’s evocation in *Paradise Lost* of something ‘won from the void and formless infinite’ as a representation of O (Trans: 151).

If Butts’ passage about Tide evokes the O of the sisters, it is also the narrator’s transformation of O *in* narration (using Bion’s language, O is not transformed *into* narration, but *in* narration). It is the translation of something that is not originally experienced into a form that makes the experience of it possible. Using Bion’s earlier analytical tools – the beta- and alpha-elements first described in *Learning from Experience* – we can identify those features of the text which suggest the metabolisation of an idea and the development (i.e. the further evolution, the developing) of a thought which the narration is shaped to make it possible to think.

The intangible quality of beta-elements has also led to the equation of beta-elements with O. James Grotstein argues that beta-elements should be understood as ‘O’s phenomenal derivatives’²¹ that have failed to be transformed by alpha-function; i.e. that beta-elements do not exist conceptually prior to a notion of alpha-function, and can be defined only on the basis of a failed encounter with alpha-function. It is for this reason, Grotstein suggests, that Bion’s naming of beta- (after alpha- in the alphabet) places alpha-elements as prior to beta-, even though beta-elements are genetically the more primitive (and appearing before alpha-elements in the Grid). Grotstein follows Ferro in using the term *balpha* to emphasise the close connection of beta-elements with alpha-function²², a formulation that again recalls Bion’s allusion to a place *between* beta- and alpha-elements, representing something that exists on the boundary of body and mind. Again, it is ‘The Second Anniversary’ that provides the example:

Beta-elements are a way of talking about things which are not thought at all; alpha-elements are a ways of talking about elements which, hypothetically, are supposed to be a part of thought. The poet Donne has written, ‘the blood spoke in her cheeks ... as if her body thought’. This expresses exactly for that intervening stage which in the Grid is portrayed on paper as a line separating

²⁰ The analogy is Grotstein’s: ‘Thoughts, like glucose, must emerge from a series of intermediate transformations so that the sensory and intuitive impacts of awareness can be slowed down to utilizable elements.’ Grotstein, *Do I Dare Disturb the Universe? A Memorial to W. R. Bion*, 15–16.

²¹ Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion’s Legacy to Psychoanalysis*, 124.

²² *Ibid.*, 46.

beta-elements from alpha-elements. Note that I am not saying that it is either beta or alpha but the line *separating the two* which is represented by the poet's words.

(BL: 41)

Using Bionian ideas to supplement a Freudian reading brings the memorable features of 'With and Without Buttons' into clearer focus. Its rich and distinctive atmosphere – replete with buttons, gloves, smells, thoughts intimated but remaining (to borrow a word that Bion uses frequently) 'sub-thalamic' (TP: 43), and all that evolves from 'Tide' – plays a substantial role in producing the story's uncanny effect. The story *evokes* (calls forth) a response in the reader that we may describe as 'uncanny', but which emerges less from the story's ghostly happenings than from the unsettled and unsettling – and one might say protomental – background from which the features of the story emerge. Butts' buttons are less spooky in themselves than the sense they convey of another field or level in which the buttons might evolve into future meaning; considered as beta- (or *balpha*-) elements, they are also frightening to the extent that they represent aspects of experience which resist meaning, remaining stubbornly unaccountable in the face of any reading; the gloves likewise do no real harm but draw attention to ideas that remain unspoken: themes of incest, rape, and female desire.

Chapter Six

Jean Rhys' Bizarre Telescope: A Bion-emic/Bion-etic Reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*

The telescope drew away and said don't touch me.¹

There is a screen, a caesura, a resistant material between one particle and the next. [...] Unless some person paints on a piece of glass, like Picasso, so that it can be seen from both sides of the screen – both sides of the resistance.
(MotF: 465)

In *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys reimagines the pre-history of the gothic secret at the heart of *Jane Eyre*: Rochester's previous marriage to Antoinette Mason (Bertha Antoinetta in Charlotte Brontë's 'original') in Jamaica. Writing to Francis Wyndham in 1958, she criticised Brontë's glancing treatment of the 'madwoman in the attic', the 'all wrong Creole scenes' that neglect the 'real cruelty of Mr Rochester' (xiii) to his young wife held under lock and key for fifteen years. Rhys' prequel breathes vivid life into Antoinette's spectral presence in *Jane Eyre*, and into the world of the newly emancipated West Indies from which she is brought unwillingly to England.

The story of Antoinette Mason (as I will call her, following Rhys' designation) is central to both texts. In *Jane Eyre*, the plot turns around the woman who 'laughs, yells and acts but never speaks' (xiv), yet who nevertheless functions first to thwart and then enable Rochester's second marriage to Jane. The importance of her role in advancing the dénouement of *Jane Eyre* stands in marked contrast, however, to Brontë's development of her as a character and the depiction of her fate under Rochester's charge.

In this chapter I will trace the curious figure of the telescope that appears three times in part two of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The telescope, which sits on a table on the veranda at Granbois, briefly Antoinette and Rochester's marital home, has gone largely unremarked in critical commentary, but can be shown to figure the novel's central themes, including the *othering* and isolation of each of the three communities whose

¹ Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, 96. Subsequent references in this chapter are to this edition.

lives are entangled by the islands' colonial history: the black community, formerly slaves; the white Creoles, the former slave-owning class prior to the abolition of slavery; and the new class of white occupiers who have travelled from Britain to profit from the former plantation-owners' financial ruin. As an instrument of maritime navigation, the telescope is well-placed to bring to mind the islands' colonial subjugation by the French and the British, and to evoke the shifting mediation of contact with, and distance between, the three communities. The distinctive mechanism of the telescope, extending and retracting to bring its subject into greater or lesser magnification, also figuratively enacts the shifts both in narrator and narration throughout the novel, most marked in part two. I argue that Bion's theory of the bizarre object can provide a more detailed understanding of the telescope's final outing, in which it seems to enact a moment of recoil and massive projective identification. Jacqueline Rose's suggestive use of the bizarre object to think about texts by Elizabeth Bowen and Mary Butts provided a starting point for the development of this idea². I suggest that the telescope can also be seen as a *caesura*, marking the place where different perspectives collide.

The telescope on the table at Granbois has three outings in part two of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. It first appears early in Antoinette and Rochester's honeymoon, as a detail of the furnishing, during a scene in which their conversation reveals their mutual incomprehension of the other's reality:

'Is it true,' she said, 'that England is like a dream? Because one of my friends who married an Englishman wrote and told me so. She said this place London is like a cold dark dream sometimes. I want to wake up.'

'Well,' I answered annoyed, 'that is precisely how your beautiful island seems to me, quite unreal and like a dream.'

'But how can rivers and mountains and the sea be unreal?'

'And how can millions of people, their houses and their streets be unreal?'

'More easily,' she said, 'much more easily. Yes a big city must be like a dream.'

'No, this is unreal and like a dream,' I thought.

² Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*.

The long veranda was furnished with canvas chairs, two hammocks, and a wooden table on which stood a tripod telescope.
(49)

Rhys' description of the veranda is surprisingly practised: a very similar description occurs both in her early short story, 'Mixing Cocktails', in 1927, and then again in her novel, *Voyage in the Dark*, in 1934. In 'Mixing Cocktails', she writes:

On the veranda, upon a wooden table with four stout legs, stood an enormous brass telescope. With it you spied out the steamers passing: the French mail on its way to Guadeloupe, the Canadian, the Royal Mail, which should have been stately and actually was the shabbiest of the lot... Or an exciting stranger!³

In this passage the telescope's function (spying the mail steamers) references the West Indies' colonial history, as well as the islands' close historical relationship with Canada. As a domestic object, it offers a window onto the wider world and a chance to see without being seen, a domestic/secret, truly *heimlich*⁴ device that offers an *unheimlich*⁵ vision of other worlds that is by turns exciting or banal (as the Royal Mail steamer proves 'the shabbiest of the lot'). Here is the telescope again, in *Voyage in the Dark*:

Before I came to England I used to try to imagine a night that was quite still. I used to try to imagine it with the crac-cracs going. The veranda long and ghostly – the hammock and three chairs and a table with the telescope on it – and the crac-cracs going all the time.⁶

Rhys' repeated evocation of the various elements of the tableau (not only the telescope, but the hammocks, the wooden table and the veranda) has led Neville Braybrooke⁷ to presume that the scene is directly autobiographical. Though quite possible, this is not proven. What is interesting is the way in which Rhys will repeatedly deploy the same or similar material across a period of nearly forty years. Kenneth Ramchand 'trace[s] in Miss Rhys' use and re-use of the same material, a progressive distancing in the art of autobiographical fragments and pressures which nevertheless account for the intensity of feeling in all her works'⁸. The depiction of the telescope in *Wide Sargasso Sea* occurs not once but three times, with a subtle change in detail between the first and second

³ Rainey, *Modernism: An Anthology*, 957.

⁴ *The Uncanny*, SE 17.

⁵ Literally 'unhomely', not domestic, but also 'uncanny'.

⁶ Rainey, *Modernism: An Anthology*, 71.

⁷ Braybrooke, 'The Return of Jean Rhys'.

⁸ Frickey, *Critical Perspectives on Jean Rhys*, 201.

appearance giving way to the explosion of the telescope's figurative power on its third and final outing.

On each of the two occasions above, the telescope appears to an unnamed, first-person narrator who is imagining other worlds from the threshold of her domestic environment. By the time of its appearance (or 're-appearance') in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, a second person has entered the scene, and a new narrative voice has overlaid Antoinette's initial narration in part one to question the primacy of her reality. Only Rochester has experienced both England and Jamaica; yet he responds defensively to Antoinette's suggestion that England is a 'cold dark dream' from which both she and her 'friend who married an Englishman' want to wake up. Where Antoinette's apprehension is understandable in the light of her inexperience, Rochester's unspoken coda ('No, this is unreal and like a dream') betrays his willingness to sacrifice Antoinette's reality and disavow the evidence of his senses.

The second instance of the telescope takes place directly after Rochester's meeting with Daniel Cosway, the man who claims to be Antoinette's illegitimate half-brother and who purports to offer a friendly 'warning' to Rochester against a backdrop of half-veiled intimations of Antoinette's madness and promiscuity. On his return, the narration notes that 'the telescope was pushed to one side of the table making room for a decanter half full of rum and two glasses on a tarnished silver tray' (80). It is the beginning of a painful scene between Antoinette and Rochester and the prelude to Rochester's infidelity with the servant girl, Amélie.

It is also the night of *obeah*, in which Antoinette tries first to reason with her husband, grown suspicious and paranoid following Daniel Cosway's interference, and then to win back his love via a potion concocted by her nurse and servant, Christophine. Obeah, the name of the African diaspora spirit cult and its rituals, is a motive force in all of the island's three communities, each differently in thrall to the supposed powers and superstitions that surround it. Antoinette fears Christophine's involvement in obeah ritual (14) but will later plead for her help in the preparation of a potion able to re-ignite Rochester's sexual interest in her. Mason's English friends remark that it is 'evidently useful to keep a Martinique obeah woman on the premises' (14), suggesting the English newcomers recognise obeah's social influence. On the night of the fire at Coulibri in

which Antoinette's brother, Pierre, is killed, it is the inauspicious vision of Coco the parrot, burning and in flight, that finally frightens the tormenting locals away, though Antoinette's narration slyly notes that 'God who is indeed mysterious, who had made no sign when they burned Pierre as he slept – not a clap of thunder, not a flash of lightning' (22) seems to send forth the unfortunate parrot in direct response to Mason's prayers. Her equivalence of obeah with the techniques of white spiritual supplication and power re-emerges in the later scene where she accuses Rochester of a different kind of obeah – the erosion of her identity that performs another kind of 'soul theft' – at work in his refusal to use her real name:

'Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another name. I know, that's obeah too.'
(94)

Rochester's 'white' obeah, which will result in Antoinette taking on the uncanny lifelessness of the *zombi*, broken and stupefied by his distrust and infidelity, offers a curious counterpoint to the novel's notable animisms, such as the orchids that 'flourished out of reach or for some reason not to be touched', or the 'needle [...] swearing' (29) as Antoinette labours over her embroidery in the convent. 'All this was long ago,' Antoinette recalls in the first part of the novel, 'when I was still babyish and sure that everything was alive, not only the river or the rain, but chairs, looking-glasses, cups, saucers, everything' (19). But it is not Antoinette's childhood fantasia that breathes unexpected life into the tabletop telescope on its third and final outing: it speaks to Rochester alone. It occurs during the scene that follows Antoinette's return to Granbois after the events of the obeah night. She bites his arm as he tries to wrest a bottle of rum from her hands:

My arm was bleeding and painful and I wrapped my handkerchief around it, but it seemed to me that everything round me was hostile. The telescope drew away and said don't touch me.
(96)

The startling image of the telescope that recoils and speaks has attracted only brief critical attention. For Judith Raiskin, the telescope illustrates Rochester's 'projection of his fear and alienation onto the people and things around him'⁹, but she goes no further

⁹ Raiskin, *Snow on the Cane Fields: Women's Writing and Creole Subjectivity*, 135.

in discussing the particular and peculiar figure of the retracting and extensible telescope or to its function as a device that enables 'seeing at a distance'. The projection that Raiskin invokes is the simple displacement of Rochester's own unbearable fear to an external location, but it is also a part of the wider environment in which 'everything round [him] was hostile', the closing-in or totalisation of a paranoiac phantasy. Raiskin's treatment of the telescope as a projection of Rochester's own feelings does not do justice to the ambivalence of the figure of the telescope that both is, and is not, of a piece with the hostile environment and which embodies that hostility not through attack but by recoil. For Liliane Louvel, the 'twice-mentioned' [sic] telescope is an 'antagonistic' object which denies Rochester the clear vision which is its purpose: 'as they multiply illusion, optical devices, supposed to be faithful and objective, magnify or reduce the world, thus blurring judgement'¹⁰.

Louvel's account of the telescope generalises its role to that of an 'optical device' that is by its nature faulty in respect of a naturalised conception of vision. In her reading the telescope can only 'multiply illusion' rather than extend, amplify or elaborate the visual field, and she limits her description of the telescope's mechanisms to magnification and reduction. In fact, it would be more correct to describe the operation of the telescope as one of focalisation, the gathering-in of 'more light than the human eye is able to collect on its own'¹¹. I suggest that the telescope should be understood as an object that extends, virtualises and complicates the character of Rochester. Anthony Vidler, writing in *The Architectural Uncanny*, recalls Sartre's description (in *Being and Nothingness*¹²) in which the body is extended across its tools:

My body is everywhere: the bomb which destroys *my* house also damages my body in so far as the body was already an indication of my body. This is why my body always extends across the tool which it utilises: it is at the end of the cane on which I lean and against the earth; it is at the end of the telescope which shows me the stars; it is on the chair, in the whole house; for it is my adaptation to these tools [...]¹³

Sartre's evocation of the body 'at the end of' the telescope suggests a complex and performative virtualisation of bodily boundary that should complicate our reading of the

¹⁰ Louvel, *Poetics of the Iconotext*, 145.

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refracting_telescope [accessed 30.08.2015].

¹² Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, 349.

¹³ Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely*, 81.

telescope. We do not know who owns it: the telescope is unlikely to ‘belong’ to Rochester (since he arrived as a newcomer from England with, one might imagine, a minimum of possessions), but it is also not clearly, or no longer, Antoinette’s: she inherits the house at Granbois, but (as Rochester makes plain to Christophine) all of her estate has passed into his ownership upon their marriage: ‘I assure you that it belongs to me now’ (103). We might imagine that the telescope once belonged to Mason, or even old Cosway, Antoinette’s father. It brings to mind (but is not identical to) the larger telescopes on board the ships that have successively brought different communities into harbour: the colonial plantation-owners, the African slaves, and now the new class of white merchants seeking to make their fortune following abolition.

The telescope’s implication in colonial conquest suggests a less innocent aspect to the telescope on the veranda at Granbois. While the young narrator in ‘Mixing the Cocktails’ is motivated by curiosity to spy the arrival of the mail steamers, the history of the telescope attests to a more paranoiac function. Writing in 1609 to his patron, Galileo declares that he has:

made a telescope, a thing for every maritime and terrestrial affair and an undertaking of inestimable worth. One is able to discover enemy sails and fleets at a greater distance than customary, so that we can discover him [the enemy] two hours or more before he discovers us, and by distinguishing the number and quality of the vessels judge of his force whether to set out to chase him, or to fight, or to run away.¹⁴

The telescope is thus an instrument that can alternately prefigure, imagine or forestall a contact with the other; it is both a tool of curiosity and invitation (a way to see at a distance, to bring near what is far away) and a way to maintain distance from what is perceived as ‘other’, and threatening. Jonathan Crary has related advances in optical technology to the production of distinctive historical subjectivities. He proposes that ‘during the first few decades of the nineteenth century a new kind of observer took shape in Europe radically different from the type of observer in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’¹⁵, locating optical devices as ‘sites of both knowledge and power that operate directly on the body of the individual’¹⁶. Yet strikingly the telescope barely features in his detailed account of significant optical technology, which identifies the

¹⁴ Henry, *Virginia Woolf and the Discourse of Science: The Aesthetics of Astronomy*.

¹⁵ Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

paradigmatic optical devices of the seventeenth/eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as the camera obscura and the stereoscope, respectively¹⁷.

The telescope's role in seafaring and colonial expansion seems a striking omission from Crary's study, not least for the way the telescope contributes to new ways of seeing and relating to subaltern 'others'. Nevertheless his insight that optical technology may be 'related to the production of 'realistic' effects in mass visual culture'¹⁸ can connect the figure of the telescope in *Wide Sargasso Sea* to Angela Smith's contention (in her introduction to the text) that the novel is *about* perspective, 'pivot[ing] on mirroring and doubling, reiterating the trope of the looking glass' (xxi). While Smith contends that this can be understood in terms of the Lacanian mirror stage ('It is almost as if Antoinette is trapped at what Lacan calls the mirror stage of infancy'), I suggest that it is Rochester's self-image, at least as much as Antoinette's, that appears in a refracted – and fractured – mode, recalling Smith's remark that Rochester's perception is 'skewed' (ix). Smith also recalls Edward Said's contention that 'classic realist fiction develops in Europe in the nineteenth century because the 'power to narrate, or to block other narratives from forming and emerging' is a way of asserting cultural superiority' (xvii). The telescope's functions of focusing and magnification combine with its historical role in maritime conquest to become a device that figures the other as 'other' – simultaneously remote and under surveillance.

Maggie Humm has written of 'Rhys' depiction of telescopes as signifiers of the paternal eye'¹⁹, suggesting a Kristevan analysis of Rochester in which he 'constructs an apartheid between his speech and Antoinette and Christophine's language of songs and body movement'. 'Without his telescope,' Humm continues, 'Rochester fears entanglement in nature' associated with the literally unnavigable spaces of the island (as exemplified in Baptiste's insistence that there is – and has been – 'no road' (66) through the forest). The 'language of songs and body movement' is also connected to Antoinette's sensuality and the disturbing possibilities of sexual life unconstrained by English convention, in which trace and suspicion of miscegenation abounds, and where, as Antoinette declares, 'there is never a wedding' (16). His paranoia activated, Rochester casts an eye – and doubt – on his wife's 'purity' along racial lines:

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Ibid., 9.

¹⁹ Humm, *Border Traffic: Strategies of Contemporary Women Writers*, 74.

Long, sad, dark alien eyes. Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either. And when did I begin to notice all this about my wife? After we left Spanish Town I suppose. Or did I notice it before and refuse to admit what I saw? (40)

Rochester finds Antoinette's eyes 'too large and disconcerting. She never blinks at all it seems to me', suggesting disquiet at the powerful female gaze to which Rochester finds himself subject. The telescope, by contrast (and a kind of telescope, the pocket spyglass) figures the male gaze in *The Uncanny*. It makes an appearance on several occasions throughout Freud's work as a privileged figure of a 'mental apparatus'. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the telescope provides by analogy a virtual location for the focalisation of psychical reality:

On that basis, psychical locality will correspond to a point inside the apparatus at which one of the preliminary stages of an image comes into being. In the microscope and telescope, as we know, these occur in part at ideal points, regions in which no tangible component of the apparatus is situated.
(SE 5: 536)

The analogy with the focalisation of the telescopic image is a surprisingly complex one, since the phenomenon described emerges at an 'ideal point, regions in which no tangible component of the apparatus is situated'. Freud's metaphor invokes a virtual location arising necessarily relationally to the telescope that is simultaneously in no way referable to any 'tangible component' of the apparatus itself; its role is to gather and focalise a reality that nevertheless exceeds its jurisdiction. The telescope also appears in Freud's opening etymological analysis of the words *heimlich* and *unheimlich* in *The Uncanny*, where it populates (with no little incidental uncanniness) one of the dictionary examples he chooses to demonstrate the way in which the ostensibly benign quality of *Heimlichkeit* (homeliness) shades into something more sinister and *unheimlich*: 'He had achromatic telescopes constructed *heimlich* and secretly' (SE 17: 224). Later on, the pocket spyglass that enables Nathaniel's voyeurism in *The Sandman* offers a further detail sustaining Freud's reading of Hoffman's uncanny tale as allegory of the castration complex. Nathaniel's extending pocket spyglass provides an exquisitely phallic metaphor for uncanny seeing, as well as the basis for his illicit desire for Olympia, the wooden doll that he mistakes for Spalanzani's daughter.

In his analysis of *The Sandman*, Freud identifies the eye with the penis (231), and it is not too difficult to discern the telescope's phallic qualities: an instrument capable of

extension and retraction (though it is the latter activity from which we derive the notion of ‘telescoping’); an instrument that mediates contact between the male body and the other. I suggest that the telescope’s recoil does not so much suggest the patriarchal gaze but the collapse and wounding of Rochester’s phallic power in the aftermath of Antoinette’s attack (the symbolism of her biting his arm is not so far removed from castration). His contact with his wife up to this point has been primarily penile, as is the nature of his insult to her (namely, sleeping with Amélie). For good or ill, the penis-telescope characterises the link between Rochester and Antoinette, and the moment of its recoil is shared by them both. Where a Lacanian analysis might clarify the telescope’s shared ownership and the strange identity of their mutual recoil (Rochester *has* the penis-telescope; Antoinette *is* it), it is Bion’s idea of the link that brings the relational aspect of the telescope into clearer view. The moment of telescopic recoil can be seen both as an attack on the link between Rochester and Antoinette and as an instance of the psychotic mechanism which Bion names the ‘bizarre object’.

Bion describes the preconditions of psychosis as ‘a preponderance of destructive impulses so great that even the impulse to love is suffused by them and turned to sadism; a hatred of reality, internal and external, which is extended to all that makes for awareness of it; a dread of imminent annihilation and finally, a premature and precipitate formation of object relations’ marked by ‘thinness’ and ‘tenacity’ (ST: 44). Rochester’s account of his first weeks on the island and his decision to marry so quickly resonate with Bion’s characterisation of a relationship that is ‘premature, precipitate and intensely dependent’ (ST: 44):

And when did I begin to notice all this about my wife Antoinette? After we left Spanish Town I suppose. Or did I notice it before and refuse to admit what I saw? Not that I had much time to notice anything. I was married a month after I arrived in Jamaica and for nearly three weeks of that time I was in bed with fever.
(40)

It is an encounter that is marked both by the ‘thinness’ of its foundations as well as by the ‘tenacity’ with which Rochester will choose to enslave Antoinette in England sooner than countenance Christophine’s suggestion of a pragmatic dissolution of their marriage, leaving Antoinette free to take another lover as a divorced woman and remain living in the West Indies (102).

The bizarre object, which Bion introduces in his early paper, ‘Differentiation of the Psychotic from the Non-Psychotic Personalities’, names a particular mechanism of pathological splitting associated with the failure of alpha-function. In the psychotic personality (or that *part* of the personality which is psychotic), the ‘differentiation of the psychotic from the non-psychotic personalities depends on a minute splitting of all that part of the personality that is concerned with awareness of internal and external reality’ (ST: 43). The ‘bizarre object’ is the result of a reversal of alpha-function. It is important to distinguish the bizarre object from the beta-element: the bizarre object arises not from the failure of alpha-function in the first place to process and transform unmediated experience, but from its *reversal*²⁰. The analogy of paper fed through a shredder that is then switched into reverse offers a helpful analogy: what is returned from the reversal of alpha-function is not what it was in the first place: it remains ‘half-chewed’ – and damaged, returning in combination with the traces of personality with which it was originally paired and evacuated. The beta-element, Bion writes, ‘differs from the bizarre object in that the bizarre object is beta-element plus ego and superego traces’ (LfE: 25).

The theory of the bizarre object makes it possible to say that the telescope, in its moment of strange and sudden animation, is not only *like* but *is* Rochester. In her commentary on Elizabeth Bowen²¹, Jacqueline Rose writes that the hallmark of the bizarre literary object is that ‘things are in the wrong place’ when ‘the objects of the phenomenal world are granted the capacity to transfer their substance into humans, and [...] the reverse’²². The telescope figures Rochester in a manner that is more than metaphorical, since it provides not just an identification with his character but a new location for a part of his personality, which in turns brings attention to the dislocation of his mind in this moment of extreme feeling. In the scene described, it also takes on qualities which are not its own, but Rochester’s: wounded, paranoid, susceptible to touch, recoiling from attack. It *enacts* his recoil: body-less, it cannot be said as such to embody or incarnate it: the correct figure, if it existed in the English language would rather carry the sense of ‘*enthing*’ (similar, perhaps, to what Nicholas Royle calls ‘enantiodromic animism’²³, an animism that runs in the opposite direction). At the same

²⁰ See the previous chapter for a fuller discussion of this, including James Grotstein’s revisioning of the beta-element as something that has already failed to be transformed by alpha-function.

²¹ See also the Introduction, chapter one.

²² Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*, 93.

²³ Royle, *Quilt*, 120.

time it also recoils *from* Rochester ('do not touch me'). The literal retraction of the telescope body suggests a reversal of the extension of Rochester's self even while his mind is subject to a radical, outer-body dislocation from self to thing. The mechanism of Rhys' telescope is remarkably reminiscent of Bion's description of the bizarre object, which is worth quoting in full:

Each particle is felt to consist of a real object which is encapsulated in a piece of personality that has engulfed it. The nature of this complete particle will depend partly on the character of the real object, say a gramophone, and partly on the character of the particle of personality that engulfs it. If the piece of personality is concerned with sight, the gramophone when played is felt to be watching the patient; if with hearing, then the gramophone when played is felt to be listening to the patient. The object, angered at being engulfed, swells up, so to speak, and suffuses and controls the piece of personality that engulfs it: to that extent the particle of personality has become a thing.
(ST: 39–40)

In his paper, 'Attacks on Linking', Bion describes a state of mind in which emotion is hated for the way it threatens to establish a *link* between objects, leading to attacks on anything which could have a linking function. Following Klein, the prototype of the link is the 'primitive breast or penis' (ST: 93) that enables contact between self and other. The retraction of the penis-telescope which has hitherto stood quietly by evokes the destruction of a link. Rochester is the product of a patriarchal, emotionally stilted upbringing, where feeling is distrusted:

How old was I when I learned to hide what I felt? A very small boy. Six, five, even earlier. It was necessary, I was told, and that view I have always accepted.
(64)

Bion writes:

[the attacks] on the linking function of emotion lead to an overprominence in the psychotic part of the personality of links which appear to be logical, almost mathematical, but never emotionally reasonable. Consequently the links surviving are perverse, cruel and sterile.
(ST: 109)

The related questions of perspective, and reality – and *whose* reality is at stake – are central to a reading of *Wide Sargasso Sea*. The novel stands in spectral connection to the 'original', authorised story of Rochester encountered in *Jane Eyre*, and it troubles

the primacy of that ‘first’ encounter by evoking multiple, contiguous realities. The proximity of the differing narrative perspectives of Antoinette and Rochester (as well as the perspectives brought in by characters such as Daniel Cosway, Christophine and Amélie) draws attention to the existence of subtly or markedly different ‘realities’ that cannot be reconciled. Daniel Cosway’s letter to Rochester, in which he seeds the idea that Antoinette may be ‘going the same way as her mother’ (61) seems to rewrite Antoinette’s account of her mother, as well as undermining the reliability of Antoinette’s narrative more generally. When Rochester goes to visit, Daniel Cosway sends him away with a suggestion that Rochester is ‘not the first to kiss [Antoinette’s] pretty face’ (80), a sly suggestion that Antoinette is promiscuous: later, in the scene in which Christophine confronts Rochester, Cosway’s words are refracted through Rochester’s paranoia:

(Give my sister your wife a kiss from me. Love her as I did – oh yes I did.)
(102)

Towards the end of part two, Rhys draws attention to the multiplicity of perspectives through the use of an ‘echo effect’ in which the reader seems to hear Rochester’s mind in addition to his voice, responding to Christophine’s accusations:

‘But you don’t love. All you want is to break her up. And it help you break her up.’
(*Break her up*)
‘She tell me in the middle of all this you start calling her names. Marionette, Some word so.’
‘Yes, I remember, I did.’
(*Marionette, Antoinette, Marionetta, Antoinetta*)
‘That word mean doll, eh? Because she don’t speak. You want to force her to cry and to speak.’
(*Force her to cry and speak*)
(99)

The scene evokes the disintegration of Rochester’s mind. We are not shown a Rochester turned ‘mad’, as we are with Antoinette (‘her hair hung uncombed and dull into her eyes [...] inflamed and staring’ (91)), yet it is Rochester’s narrative that breaks down in part two, and in his narrative that we encounter the most disturbing and complex scenes of the novel. Bion’s description of the caesura – to indicate changing states of mind and the emergence of new realities – can help characterise the micrological shifts in

perception that seem to take place Rochester's narrative. Bion extends Freud's use of the word to describe 'the impressive caesura of birth' for use 'as a model to understand far less dramatic occasions which occur over and over again when the patient is challenged to move from one state of mind to another' (TP: 48). He suggests that 'the personality does not develop as it would if it were a piece of elastic being stretched out. It is as if it were something which developed many different skins as an onion does' (TP: 47), though in another analogy the caesura is also described as a 'penetration' that is 'effective in either direction' (TP: 45), another role, perhaps, for the telescope:

It is easy to put it in pictorial terms by saying it is like penetrating into the woman's inside either from inside out, as at birth, or from outside in, as in sexual intercourse.
(TP: 45)

The layering of voices (which is also the layering of different aspects of Rochester's mind – his social self, an inner voice, the voices of Christophine and later Antoinette which seem to speak through him) that occurs towards the end of the novel evoke a mind that is moving back and forth between different realities and realisations, mind flickering across caesuras. Elsewhere, Bion describes the ability of art to create something that can be seen from both the pre- and post-caesural perspectives:

There is a screen, a caesura, a resistant material between one particle and the next. [...] Unless some person paints on a piece of glass, like Picasso, so that it can be seen from both sides of the screen – both sides of the resistance.
(MotF: 465)

Antoinette insists that 'there is always the other side, always' (82). The title of this chapter playfully suggests that a Bionian analysis of the telescope can draw out the *emic* and *etic* dimensions of the novel, and the way that Rhys, like Picasso, writes to both sides of the caesura, enabling more than one perspective to be seen. The terms, '-emic' and '-etic', emerge from the anthropological distinction between ethnography emerging from within (*-emic*) or outside of (*-etic*) a culture. The distinction is difficult to draw in respect of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, where, strictly speaking, no one is indigenous: Antoinette is an outsider (the white Creoles are ironically described as 'white niggers' (22) by their former slaves); Rochester is clearly an outsider, though the balance of power is currently in his hands; the black or mixed race people represented in the novel are also historical outsiders whose ancestors were taken into slavery during the Middle Passage

(Christophine, the novel's most powerful black character, is doubly an outsider, lent a mysterious tinge through her provenance from the nearby French island of Martinique). *Wide Sargasso Sea* stages an encounter between mutually suspicious and hostile communities in which the position of the white Creole (and especially the white Creole woman) is a precarious one. The figure of Antoinette is made to bear the paradoxical brutality of the arriving whites who define themselves both in relation to, but distinct and superior from, the white Creole population who are their colonial forebears. Bion's idea of the link develops Klein's theory of object relations by drawing attention not only to the object of the relationship, but to the link between objects, and the space or field in which the relationship takes place. The Sargasso Sea in Rhys' account is wide and unboundaried: it is, notably, 'the only sea without a land boundary'²⁴, bordering no coastline; it is 'cold, peaceful and motionless' in Jules Verne's description²⁵. As a literary container, it is fittingly a space that belongs to no one, a purely a-relational space to which no person or group can lay final (or prior) claim; a place of dispossession to which all parties are subject, locatable only in terms of the links *between* people or via the mechanisms of colonial and post-colonial seeing. As an instrument of optical magnification, the telescope seems to draw near what is far away, to figure the possibility of relationship even as it keeps people at a distance. It represents several different ways of looking, encompassing curiosity, judgement, paranoia and voyeurism. The telescope also figures Rochester's capacity to link to Antoinette and seems to describe his paranoiac breakdown and the destruction of the emotional link. In its final scene, it becomes a bizarre object both hostile and persecuted, a wounded phallus, and the locus of Rochester's self-alienation.

The Rochester who (re-)appears in *Jane Eyre* is a man of pride and nobility who harbours a terrible secret. Fittingly, Antoinette's revenge, when it comes, will end with Rochester losing his sight, the result of the injury he sustains in trying to save her from the fire that she sets at Thornfield Hall. In the closing, happy scenes of that novel where he is reunited with Jane, Rochester is 'a poor blind man'²⁶, subject to Jane's female gaze and very limited in what he can see unaided by her 'eyes' ('for I was then his vision'²⁷).

²⁴ <http://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/sargassosea.html> [accessed 25 February 2016].

²⁵ Verne, *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Seas*, 273.

²⁶ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 474.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 481.

Wide Sargasso Sea ends with Antoinette awaking from a dream that seems to foretell a 'future' that we recognise, telescoping the time between the end of Rhys' and Brontë's novels:

Then I turned round and saw the sky. It was red and all my life was in it. I saw the grandfather clock and Aunt Cora's patchwork, all colours, I saw the orchids and the stephanotis and the jasmine and the tree of life in flames. I saw the chandelier and the red carpet downstairs and the bamboos and the tree ferns, the gold ferns and the silver, and the soft green velvet of the moss on the garden wall. I saw my doll's house and the books and the picture of the Miller's Daughter.
(123)

It is a dream populated by images of Antoinette's childhood, an eye fixed on what is seen at a distance, in relationship to another place and time.

Chapter Seven

Efficient Psychosis: Notes Toward a Bionian Ballardian Breakdown

Out it pours – masses of semi-whispered, disjointed stuff, name after name, some of which I know, some I may be supposed to know, some presumably I cannot be expected to know. [...] It does not require interpretation so much as loud cries of, “Help! Help! I’m drowning, not waving.”
(Cog: 220–221)

I am trying to put into terms of a verbal communication some idea that is felt to be too vast. Either the speech, formulation, grammar is destroyed, or the vocabulary and grammar get the upper hand – in which case the idea is destroyed.
(Cog: 356)

J. G. Ballard described *The Atrocity Exhibition*¹, perhaps the strangest gem in the Ballardian oeuvre, as a series of ‘condensed novels’ (xi) that might in themselves form one, yet stranger condensed novel comprised of several parts. Published in parts from 1966, and as an integral work in 1970, *Atrocity* remains a remarkable and compelling literary achievement while skirting the limits of readability, both in form and content. The book minutely and obscurely narrates the world of a series of recurring characters. A central figure (called variously Travis, Talbot, Traven, Tallis, Trabert, Talbert and Travers) is seemingly falling from his former life as a psychiatrist, toward psychosis. His condition is attended by the impassive clinical observer, Dr Nathan; the shifting characters of Koestler and Vaughan; the conglomerate female figures of Catherine Austin, Karen Novotny, and Travis’ long-suffering wife, Margaret. Kline, Coma and Xero are shadowy figures who may be products of the central character’s hallucination. Beyond these, the text makes frequent references to a group of celebrities and political figures from the 1960s and 1970s: Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Taylor, J. F. and Jackie Kennedy, Ronald Reagan and Ralph Nader, among others.

In what follows I would like to develop a new reading of *The Atrocity Exhibition* that draws on Bion’s theoretical tools. A psychoanalytic reading of Ballard is not new (see, for example, work by Samuel Francis²), and Ballard’s frequent references to Surrealism

¹ Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Subsequent page references are to this edition.

² Francis, *The Psychological Fictions of J.G. Ballard*.

and his strong thematisation of perverse sexualities resonate straightforwardly with psychoanalytic themes. Ballard's description of the work as a series of condensed novels invites analysis in relation to the mechanism of condensation described by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Moreover Dr Nathan's comments on the character's predicament are often explicitly psychoanalytical. In his chapter-by-chapter commentary, Ballard writes laconically that Dr Nathan is the 'safe and sane voice of the sciences. His commentaries are accurate, and he knows what is going on' (89). In one instance, Dr Nathan invokes Freud's dream theory, noting that 'one must remember that Talbot is here distinguishing between the manifest content of reality and its latent content' (32–33).

I suggest however, that it is Bion's rather than Freud's work that can most productively address the psychotic aspects, both of content and form, of *The Atrocity Exhibition*. The power and possibilities of the psychotic mind are key concerns for both Bion and Ballard, and they each, in different ways, gesture toward the possibility of a positive conception of psychosis that would be a critical and imaginative reservoir against hegemonic modes of culture. Two Bionian ideas will be useful here: his description of the 'beta-screen' as an agglomerative function of beta-elements, and 'beta-space'. Beta- (or β -) space appears only once in Bion's work, but seems to draw together a number of vivid motifs – surgical, astronomical and nuclear – that recall Ballardian imagery.

I suggest that Bion and Ballard, at this shared moment of writing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, resonate in their thinking of psychosis, broadly understood³ to extend beyond individual pathology onto questions of culture and writing. The trope of *resonance* provides a way to think about a productive juxtaposition of texts in which the similarities and shared concerns of the two writers result in a mutual amplification. A number of Ballard's motifs in *Atrocity*, such as the emphases on intersecting planes and angles, astronomical space-time, 'world cataclysm' (1) and embryonic development

³ The OED offers a partial definition of psychosis as 'severe mental illness, characterized by loss of contact with reality (in the form of delusions and hallucinations)' (ref); strikingly, the UK National Health Service (NHS) website <http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/psychosis/Pages/Introduction.aspx> [accessed 15 November 2015] describes psychosis as a condition which 'causes people to perceive or interpret things differently from those around them'. As a care provider and source of information to members of the public, the NHS has good reasons to offer a more value-neutral definition of a word with life-changing implications. But it also, perhaps inadvertently, opens the possibility of the 'sane' or 'efficient' psychosis envisaged by Bion.

reverberate with themes elaborated by Bion in his clinical journal, *Cogitations*, and in the several collections of transcribed seminars which date from Bion's move to California in 1968: *The Brazilian Lectures* (1973–4), *The Italian Seminars* (1977), *The Tavistock Seminars* (1976–1979), and *Bion in New York and São Paulo* (1977–8). The published transcriptions of these late seminars provide ample demonstration of the strange and provocative images that inhabit Bion's thinking.

The Atrocity Exhibition is formally striking: it consists of a series of paragraphs, each with an inline heading (or 'intertitle') marked in bold type, usually derived from the paragraph which follows, which in turn form a densely associative but narratively loose series of fifteen chapters in total. The last three of these stand somewhat apart from the previous twelve chapters; the text also includes an appendix with two surreal textual sketches, 'Princess Margaret's Face Lift' and 'Mae West's Reduction Mammoplasty'. Editions from 1990 onward also contain an additional paratextual component of annotations at the end of each chapter, by Ballard himself. What are we to make of this? Jake Huntley has compared *Atrocity*'s format to the structure of scientific papers, calling them blocks of 'hard, gleaming prose'⁴. The overall tone effects a clinical detachment echoed in the character of Dr Nathan, who seems to offer 'reliable', if sardonic, commentary throughout. They also suggest a 'bizarre exhibition catalogue'⁵ where the paragraph headings can be seen to frame or distil the text that follows. In other cases, no explicit connection can be drawn, though the metaphorical force of the intertitle may be discernible in the content:

Dissociation: Who Laughed at Nagasaki? Travis ran across the broken concrete to the perimeter fence. The helicopter plunged towards him, engine roaring through the trees, its fans churning up a storm of leaves and paper.
(3)

The book begins with the single word 'Apocalypse', thus opening into a world in which disaster is ever-present: imminent, *immanent*, and having already taken place in the mind – or minds – of Travis (or his avatars: what Luckhurst has called the 'T-cell'⁶, evoking the figure of a viral replication and depletion), who occupies a liminal, uncertain status at a psychiatric clinic:

⁴ Baxter, J. G. *Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 24.

⁵ Luckhurst, 'The Angle Between Two Walls': *The Fiction of J. G. Ballard*, 74.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 86. I will refer to the central character of *The Atrocity Exhibition* either by the name used in the given chapter from which a quotation is taken, or by the abbreviation, T.

‘Was my husband a doctor, or a patient?’ Dr Nathan nodded sagely, glancing over his fingertips at Catherine Austin. ‘Mrs Travis, I’m not sure the question is valid any longer.

(6)

Moving ‘deeper into his own psychosis’ (4) in the first chapter, he provides a shifting, unreliable centre to a book that can be seen as a conglomeration of texts rather than a unified work⁷. Similar in form, most of the ‘chapters’ reprise aspects of an inexplicit scenario that involves the central character; all the chapters call attention to scenes of trauma, atrocity, and war, whether historical events (the death of JFK, the Vietnam War) or in the central character’s phantasy. Throughout, these themes are connected to the work of the clinic to which T is attached in a shadowy capacity: in ‘The University of Death’, Talbot is a lecturer who shows his students ‘simulated newsreels of auto-crashes and Vietnam atrocities’ (19) to illustrate a ‘World War III’ scenario, while Dr Nathan watches uneasily in the background:

The Conceptual Death. By now these seminars had become a daily inquisition into Talbot’s growing distress and uncertainty. A disturbing aspect was the conscious complicity of the class in his long-anticipated breakdown.

(19)

The chapters in which T appears make possible the minimal construction of a character in differing phases of a psychosis (breakdown, madness and fleeting moments of recovery) in some relationship to the clinic and Dr Nathan; to a wife, Margaret; and to one or several lovers. In ‘Notes Towards a Mental Breakdown’, Trabert has an office in the psychiatric clinic, as does Travis in ‘The Atrocity Exhibition’⁸; Talbert is in the last phase of his work there in ‘The Great American Nude’. In ‘Tolerances of the Human Face’, Travers has just resigned his post. In ‘The Assassination Weapon’, ‘You: Coma: Marilyn Monroe’, and ‘You and Me and the Continuum’, Travis, Tallis and an unnamed central character (respectively) is/are fully in the grip of a psychosis; in ‘The Summer Cannibals’, the sanity of its unnamed central character wavers undecidably.

The later chapters, less connected to the central cast of characters, evoke the detachment of applied sociological research aiming to discern or simulate ‘optimum’ atrocities for

⁷ The first 15 chapters were originally published individually in ‘New Worlds’, other magazines and as pamphlets in 1966.

⁸ Referring to the chapter of the same name.

the purposes of greater social health. The chapter 'Love and Napalm: Export U.S.A.' describes a study into 'sexual stimulation by newsreel atrocity films':

Studies were conducted to determine the effects of long-term exposure to TV newsreel films depicting the torture of Viet Cong: (a) male combatants, (b) women auxiliaries, (c) children, (d) wounded. In all cases a marked increase in the intensity of sexual activity was reported, with particular emphasis on perverse oral and ano-genital modes.
(147)

Ballard's description of *Atrocity* as a series of 'condensed novels' is profoundly suggestive and invites more than one possible reading. Not least, it suggests the possibility of a long-form story offering the explanatory and contextual links that would make sense of Ballard's densely allusive prose (one might argue that Ballard's later novel, *Crash*, attempts something along those lines, expanding the characters and scenarios from the chapter of the same name in *The Atrocity Exhibition*). Despite his documented interest in psychoanalysis (Ballard originally intended to train as a psychiatrist after medical school⁹), it seems from his own account that it is not the condensation of the dream-work described by Freud that he has in mind. Rather, Ballard regarded his condensed novels as a feat of *distillation* that, by leaving out the linking phrases that are a part of 'forward conventional narrative', could give rise to the proliferation of new ideas:

I once said those condensed novels, as I called them, are like ordinary novels with the unimportant pieces left out. But it's more than that – when you get the important pieces together, really together, not separated by great masses of 'he said, she said' and opening and shutting of doors, 'following morning' and all this stuff – the great tide of forward conventional narrative – it achieves critical mass as it were, it begins to ignite and you get *more* things being generated. You're getting crossovers and linkages between unexpected and previously totally unrelated things, events, elements of the narration, ideas that in themselves begin to generate new matter.¹⁰

What is absent in *Atrocity* is a context that could anchor the narrative to stable moorings, even though the depiction of landscape and culture is richly evocative. It is a world of disused and desolate industrial landscapes, faded suburbia, 'derelict roadways' (25) and wrecked cars:

⁹ Ballard, *Miracles of Life: Shanghai to Shepperton. An Autobiography*, 136.

¹⁰ Greenland, *The Entropy Exhibition: Michael Moorcock and the British 'New Wave' in Science Fiction*, 116.

In the suburbs of Hell Travis walked in the flaring light of the petrochemical plants. The ruins of abandoned cinemas stood at the street corners, faded billboards facing them across the empty streets. In a waste lot of wrecked cars he found the burnt body of the white Pontiac. He wandered through the deserted suburbs.

(10; itals. in original)

Although the depiction of location within *Atrocity*, and especially of the suburban housing and motorways that surround Staines and Shepperton, is vivid and detailed, the relationships of the central character to his environment and to the other characters remain notional and unreal. They are also shifting and unreliable: the character of Karen Novotny dies (on at least three occasions), as does Margaret, the wife; sometime lover Catherine Austin dies along with Dr Nathan and Webster in the first chapter: all three return subsequently. Yet the unexplained or magical shifts in the narrative are somehow incidental to a deeper sense that something is missing or adrift in *The Atrocity Exhibition*: scenes of the greatest ostensible intensity and intimacy – car crashes and sexual scenes (frequently in combination) – nevertheless fail to confer a sense of relationship, of a *contact* between characters that could elaborate the *context* (noting that the word, ‘text’, carries the idea of a weaving or joining together). What Ballard’s prose conveys, I suggest, is an absence of the emotional link of the kind described by Bion in his essay, ‘Attacks on Linking’ (ST: 93), but in a different way to that described by Steven Connor in his work on Samuel Beckett: the ‘minute fragment[ation]’ of experience that Bion associates with the psychotic personality resulting here not in the fragmented monologue of a Beckettian character, but in Ballard’s curiously slick but emotionally monotonal textual chunks.

Bion theorises that the psychotic part of the personality attacks ‘anything which is felt to have the intention of linking one object with another’ (ST: 93) due to the existence of an ‘internal object [the internalisation of early experiences of relationship] which is opposed to, and destructive of, all links whatsoever’ (ST: 108). This manifests itself, in Bion’s clinical examples, in the behaviour of the man who stammers and stutters his agreement to Bion’s interpretation in such a way that he destroys the collaboration that his agreement implied. The link, Bion explains, is correctly understood to be with the *function* of the part-object rather than with the part-object which concretely represents it: the functions of ‘feeding, poisoning, loving, hating’ (102), for example, rather than with the part-objects associated with them, such as the breast or the penis. I propose that

the attack on linking, taken together with his theory of the beta-screen, can illuminate the tone and form of Ballard's 'condensed novels', and make sense of a text that is powerfully evocative and emotionally flat at the same time.

The beta-screen is first mentioned in *Learning from Experience*, where it appears in a section that follows on from his discussion of the 'contact-barrier' (borrowing from Freud's use of the same term in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*). It is important to have first some understanding of the contact-barrier, as the beta-screen is, in effect, a *pseudo*-contact-barrier. The contact-barrier is produced by alpha-function, which:

whether in sleeping or waking transforms the sense-impressions related to an emotional experience, into alpha-elements, which cohere as they proliferate to form the contact-barrier. This contact-barrier, thus continuously in process of formation, marks the point of contact and separation between conscious and unconscious elements and originates the distinction between them.
(LFE: 17)

For Bion, the distinction between what is conscious and unconscious is given by a dynamic process (alpha-function) with the boundary itself formed 'on the fly' by those aspects of psychical experience that have been transformed by alpha-function into alpha-elements. James Grotstein describes the contact-barrier as an 'emotional frontier'¹¹ that changes continually in accordance with the 'nature of the supply of alpha-elements and on the manner of their relationship to each other' (LFE: 17). The process described by Bion upends Freud's characterisation of the distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness, since what is unconscious is not 'what has been repressed', but 'what has been transformed by alpha-function': unconsciousness is also an achievement of alpha-function, enabling experiences to be relegated to memory or motor recall (e.g. in walking, or driving a car). Indeed, both consciousness and unconsciousness are achievements of alpha-function, which Bion likens to the ability to dream. He describes how 'the patient who cannot dream cannot go to sleep and cannot wake up. Hence the peculiar condition seen clinically when the psychotic patient behaves as if he were in precisely this state' (LFE: 7).

Where alpha-function fails, or works only partially and intermittently, there can emerge a pseudo-contact-barrier formed not by alpha-elements but by beta-elements: that is, by

¹¹ Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion's Legacy to Psychoanalysis*, 92.

those elements that have failed to be transformed by alpha-function, and are thus left untransformed, or, in the case of the ‘reversal’ of alpha-function, were transformed but have now been ‘de-’ or ‘un-’ transformed¹². Beta-elements – the rudimentary and cut-up psychical debris of the mind – flashes of sensory data, expostulations, and notably, *words*, treated as concrete things rather than signifiers in an associative chain – can nevertheless *agglomerate* and *adhere* to form clusters of material that Bion suggests are ‘coherent and purposive’ (LfE: 22), mimicking the contact-barrier. In the absence of the contact-barrier’s organising principle (alpha-function), there is nevertheless a ‘division of sorts, suspended between analyst and patient as it were, but offering no resistance to the passage of elements from the one zone to the other’ (LfE: 22).

The clinical features of the beta-screen, I suggest, resemble *The Atrocity Exhibition*’s ‘jarring montage of jump-cut prose’¹³ in which chunks of material – repetitive, vivid imagery, words and ideas shorn of context, and references to pop-cultural icons – are placed in provocative juxtaposition without the links that would enable the production of narrative. The effect of Ballard’s prose is dreamlike, or hallucinatory:

Clinically this screen of beta-elements presents itself to casual observation as indistinguishable from a confused state and in particular from any one of that class of confused states which resemble dreams, namely: 1. An outpouring of disjointed phrases and images which, if the patient were asleep, we would certainly believe to be evidence that the patient was dreaming. 2. A similar outpouring but expressed in a manner that the patient is feigning dream. 3. A confused outpouring that seems to be evidence of hallucination. 4. Similar to (3) but suggestive of an hallucination of a dream [...]
(LfE: 22)

The beta-screen is designed to ‘evoke emotions’ in the recipient of the psychotic text. The material produces an ‘emotional involvement’ (LfE: 24) in its audience that nevertheless defeats the analyst’s capacity to produce interpretations. In *Transformations*, Bion refers to the ‘evocative potency’ of the beta-screen (Trans: 165) that, in the implication of the analysand’s behaviour, is thought to offer far more interesting and subtle material than anything the analyst is capable of. The beta-screen’s

¹² One can visualise the reversal of alpha-function with the image of a paper-shredder when the shredder function is put into reverse: it does not return the previously shredded paper as an untransformed sheet, but in a disturbingly post-shredded form more liable to jam the machine when the shredding function is set on its normal movement again. (See also Chapter Six for a discussion of the reversal of alpha-function.)

¹³ Baxter, J. G. *Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 24.

strength derives in part from the way that is constructed. While Bion distinguishes analytically between alpha- and beta-elements, he imagines that the reality of the mind presents a far more complex picture, with the ‘replacement of a contact-barrier by a beta-screen [...] a living process’ (LfE: 24) that might be likened to an ongoing chemical reactive process in which reversals of alpha-function generate mental debris appropriated for the beta-screen. As with the ozone layer, there can be holes in alpha-function: places in the psyche where the mind breaks down. It is around these sites of erosion and reversal that beta-elements proliferate and agglomerate. There is no ‘pure’ beta-screen comprised of beta-elements, since by its nature the beta-screen opportunistically takes to itself anything – phrases, ideas and imagery – that, having come undone from the contact-barrier, is available for sequestration: in textual terms, words and images come undone from sites of stable signification and are available for opportunistic re-use in agglomerative, evocative constellations. Hélène Cixous has described a kind of writing that might alert us to a beta-screen formation, as well as its pleasures:

Millions of signs rain down and in their flood they stick to one another, they kiss.¹⁴

Bion’s clinical experience suggests a less ecstatic experience. He recounts occasions when he was aware that his patients were speaking of something ‘in a way that makes it clear that he is not meaning or expressing what is ordinarily meant or expressed when the word is used’:

But in the instances I have in mind the difference lies in what seems to be a lack of associations. It is as if the word were a counterpart of the pure note in music, devoid of undertones or overtones; as if, meaning nothing but ‘table’, it came near to meaning nothing at all.
(Cog: 63)

The Atrocity Exhibition is a disorienting text because the emotional orientation provided by the link is absent. Bion describes three kinds of links that he associates with love, hate and knowledge (or rather: the functions of those words: loving, hating, and ‘getting to know’), for which he uses the shorthand terms of L, H and K, respectively. Bion uses the term ‘passion’ to describe the nature of linking: ‘by passions I mean all that is

¹⁴ Cixous, *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*, 141. Also cited in Royle, *Veering*, 200.

comprised in L, H and K' (EoP: 4), and suggests that passion can only be present where two minds (or, put another way, where another mind has been internalised as alpha-function) are linked:

For senses to be active only one mind is necessary: passion is evidence that two minds are linked and that there cannot possibly be fewer than two minds if passion is present.
(EoP: 13)

The psychotic part of the personality that makes 'attacks on linking' does so precisely in order to destroy the part of the mind, or the mind of the other, perceived as hostile and persecutory. It creates a text that is evocative and yet resistant to interpretation, but which can seem to employ a certain guile in the production of a pseudo-formation (the beta-screen) of the contact-barrier. For a text to be 'psychotic', therefore, it does not need to be straightforwardly 'mad', or entirely incomprehensible. The bits and pieces of psychical debris that have come free of alpha-function can be ostensibly sophisticated and articulate, and need not outrage conventional conceptions of syntax and grammar. Something is missing, nevertheless. The emotional link that is absent from the psychotic text generates a dream-like experience that has sequences, but no *consequences*:

At last I think I see daylight on a point that has baffled me for a long time: what does the psychotic patient think analysis is? [...] [P]artly a mental event in which consequences (as they exist in the world of physical reality) do not exist – there are only sequences. In a dream an act *appears* to have consequences – there are only sequences.
(Cog: 1)

I suggest that the hallucinational, evocative (but emotionally flat) quality of scenes in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, combined with the formal 'chunking' of text, resembles Bion's characterisation of the beta-screen. Over and over, Ballard develops visually striking – one might say cinematographic – scenes in which exciting things happen or are depicted, but carry no emotional depth. A scene from 'Notes Toward a Mental Breakdown' depicts a film screening that may be a 'real' event, or the representation of the central character's psychosis as he observes (in the preceding paragraph) the naked body of Margaret Trabert:

Margaret Trabert lay on the blood-shot candlewick of the bedspread, unsure whether to dress now that Trabert had taken the torn flying jacket from his wardrobe. [...] He stood by the window with his back to her, playing with the

photographs of the isolation volunteers. He looked down at her naked body, with its unique geometry of touch and feeling, as exposed now as the faces of the test subjects, codes of insoluble nightmares. [...]

The University of Death. These erotic films, over which presided the mutilated figure of Ralph Nader, were screened above Dr Nathan's head as he moved along the lines of crashed cars. Illuminated by the arc-lights, the rushes of the test collisions defined the sexual ambiguities of the abandoned motorcade.
(66)

Huntley's description of *Atrocity* as a series of 'jump-cut' 'montage' speaks precisely to the 'sequential, yet inconsequential' effect of Ballard's 'hard, gleaming' prose. Ballard splices together vivid images that in themselves have a static quality and the mark of death upon them: lines of crashed cars, the illumination of the arc-lights, test collisions, the abandoned motorcade. It is very different from the textual effects of the 'attack on linking' that Connor describes in describing Beckett's work as pursuing an 'ideal of maximum disarticulation' and the creation of 'jaggedly indigestible' texts¹⁵. What is disturbing in *The Atrocity Exhibition* is the very *smoothness* of the text, of something that speaks as much of psychopathy as psychosis. In Ballard's own conception, however, leaving out 'the unimportant pieces', of moreover getting 'the important pieces together, really together, not separated by great masses of 'he said, she said' and opening and shutting of doors, 'following morning' and all this stuff" results in '*more things being generated*'. The deletion of the link seems to create a space in which new connections can proliferate. This argument comes close to what Huntley, citing Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, identifies as *Atrocity*'s 'rhizomic thought':

The tree imposes the verb 'to be', but the fabric of the rhizome is the conjunction 'and... and... and...' (1991:25). [...] Emergence from several points is precisely how Travis is manifested throughout *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and the lateral spread of the character continuously produces these *clusters of disparate matter*.¹⁶

Huntley's schizoanalysis of Ballard is a productive one, though it does not describe the mechanism by which the 'clusters of disparate matter' are produced. It also does not address the question of tone or the emotional experience of reading *The Atrocity Exhibition*. Using Bion's work on the attack on linking and the beta-screen enables a more 'humanistic' account (attentive to the emotional register, given that it is drawn

¹⁵ Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*, 198.

¹⁶ Baxter, *J. G. Ballard: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, 29–30. Itals. mine.

from a clinical setting) that is nevertheless open to a transhuman dimension through the linking of minds. *Atrocity* is a deeply evocative text, and a critical reading must take seriously the question of the evocation: what or whose responses does it call out; what resources of the reader or recipient are called on, manipulated or drained in a reading of *The Atrocity Exhibition*? Bion describes the attack on linking as an attack not only on the potential connection between analysand and analyst but as an attack on the analyst's mind: these patients are wearying in the extreme because they seem to produce a stream of vivid material that nevertheless defeats the analyst's capacity for interpretation. Ballard the writer cannot be identified with the personality that produces the psychotic character (Travis and his avatars) or the psychotic text, despite the success with which these are created. Nevertheless, Ballard does, I suggest, intend an 'emotional experience' for his readers which, as I shall argue, recalls Bion's writing strategies. I turn now to a fuller consideration of Ballard's imagery.

Atrocity is notable for its evocation of peculiar, frequently technically inflected images that draw on medicine, architecture, engineering and geology – spinal levels, 'thoracic drops' and neural intervals, concrete landscapes, 'the curvilinear roof of the Festival Hall' (7), porous rock towers and sand-dunes – brought into incongruous connection with obscene scenarios of bodily trauma and a hyper-conceptual sexuality that seeks to generate new acts of intercourse through perverse conjunctions of body with body, body with automobile, body with building:

Perhaps an obscene version of her body would form a more significant geometry, an anatomy of triggers? In his eye, without thinking, he married her right knee and left breast, ankle and perineum, armpit and buttock.
(92)

For Talbot the explosive collision of the two cars was a celebration of the unity of their soft geometries, the unique creation of the pudenda of Ralph Nader. The dismembered bodies of Karen Novotny and himself moved across the morning landscape, re-created in a hundred crashing cars, in the perspectives of a thousand concrete embankments, in the sexual postures of a million lovers.
(35)

All these buildings. What did Talbert want to do – sodomise the Festival Hall?
(86)

The strange conjunctions that pervade *The Atrocity Exhibition* offer another outcome of the attack on linking: T's progress throughout the chapters can be seen as his persistent

attempts to effect a recovery by establishing new acts of linking in phantasy. In his book of the same name, Roger Luckhurst has described Ballard's phrase, 'the angle between two walls' (71), as a key figure for understanding his work. The phrase 'the angle between two walls' is not without Bionian resonance: in *A Memoir of the Future*, the character of Roland invokes the idea of 'reversed perspective' to describe taking refuge in a corner: 'someone was trying to get me into a corner and club me to death. But thanks to reversed perspective I could cower in a corner where the angles of the walls protected me' (MotF: 73). Dr Nathan suggests that 'what Talbert is searching for is the primary act of intercourse, the first apposition of the dimensions of time and space' (86), in which new acts of intercourse can emerge from geometrical abstraction, the 'act of love [become] a vector in an applied geometry' (81). Bion stages a comparable conceptualisation and defamiliarisation. "We had sex", he writes in *Cogitations*: 'A curious expression that is not known to me' (Cog: 321). Similarly, Dr Nathan asks: 'in *what* way is intercourse per vagina more stimulating than with this ashtray, say, or with the angle between two walls?' (95). For Karen Novotny, 'standing in the angle between the walls' proves fatal:

Her figure interrupted the junction between the walls in the corner on his right. After a few seconds her presence became an unbearable intrusion into the time geometry of the room.

Epiphany of this death. Undisturbed, the walls of the apartment contained the serene face of the film star, the assuaged time of the dunes. [...]

Coma sat down beside Karen Novotny's body. She glanced at Tallis, who pointed to the corner. 'She was standing in the angle between the walls.' (60–61)

In an undated entry in *Cogitations*, Bion ponders the 'fate of the primal scene' in the mind as it is progressively transformed from sensuous experience (he leaves open the possibility that it exists initially only as a pre-conception) to a higher-order abstraction modelled on geometry:

The Oedipal chain

The fate of the primal scene:

1. There may be an actual sensory experience. This would correspond to the lowest-level hypotheses of empirically verifiable fact.
2. The scene assumes the character of a hieroglyph or an ideogram.

3. The ideogram becomes (a) formularised, or (b) abstract. If abstracted, then it becomes a figure constructed out of the 'elements' (of Euclidean geometry).
 4. An intermediate phase derived from another context – the invention of Cartesian coordinates.
 5. The further abstraction of the scientific deductive system that is Euclidean geometry, to produce the algebraic calculus representing the scientific deductive system that is Euclidean geometry. Thus is established algebraic geometry.
 6. Further calculi.
- (203)

For both Bion and Ballard, the sexual question centres not on the circulation of desire, as in the schizoanalytic reading drawn from Deleuze and Guattari, but on the capacity of the mind to think, unthink and rethink sex, and to apprehend the sensuous realisation of sex as it might be reverse-engineered from a prior calculus. Bion's note continues:

Reverse the direction

Now the algebraic calculus has to be returned to the lowest-level hypotheses of empirically verifiable data; it can then find its 'realization' in 'space' from which Euclidean geometry supposedly springs. But in fact the calculi that have been produced are many and diverse, including those of non-Euclidean geometry.

(203)

Luckhurst discusses Ballard's 'obsessive geometry of walls and ceilings' (121), arguing that Ballard's writing occupies the place of the *hinge*, 'the device which at once joins together and separates two planes or surfaces' (xiii), relating this to Derrida's concept of *brisure*, that 'single word for designating difference and articulation'¹⁷. Ballard, he continues, 'might be said to thematise both the space between and the peculiar oscillation of the permeability and impermeability of borders' (xiv–xv).

The figures of oscillation and permeability recall Bion's reworking of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions as 'PS ↔ D', which gives birth to mental growth through the discovery of the selected fact. Both Ballard and Bion have recourse to an 'emotional mathematics' (Trans: 154) that can enable the modulation of reality and the thinking of that which Hari Kunzru describes in his introduction to *Atrocity* as 'the junction between incommensurable systems' (xviii). T pursues the discovery of a

¹⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology [Corrected Edition]*, 65.

‘modulus’ able to be ‘multiplied into the landscape of his consciousness’ (26), finding it in Karen Novotny, his on/off, real/hallucinated, alive/dead sexual interest:

This cool-limbed young woman was a modulus; by multiplying her into the space and time of the apartment he would obtain a valid unit of existence.
(57)

The psychotic (part of the) personality is also characterised by a failure to establish and sustain alpha-function that Bion describes as a ‘primitive catastrophe’ (ST: 88), being able to do nothing to disencumber itself of the accumulations of stimuli except by the mechanism of projective identification. Yet this mechanism also fails in the absence of a containing mind that can ‘receive’ and transform the split-off material, resulting in an experience of time and space as unboundaried and infinite. Unprocessed reality, O, is experienced as a phenomenological blast that defeats any attempt at containment. In ‘The Assassination Weapon’, Dr Nathan declares, ‘What the patient is reacting against is, simply, the phenomenology of the universe, the specific and independent existence of separate objects and events’ (46). Bion, who (like Ballard) trained as a medical doctor, likened this to the condition of surgical shock:

The ensuing state can be most easily expressed by using surgical shock as a model: in this the dilation of the capillaries throughout the body so increases the space in which blood can circulate that the patient may bleed to death in his own tissues. Mental space is so vast compared with any realisation of three-dimensional space that the patient’s capacity for emotion is felt to be lost because emotion itself is felt to drain away and be lost in the immensity. What may then appear to the observer as thoughts, visual images, and verbalisations must be regarded by him as debris, remnants or scraps of imitated speech and histrionic synthetic emotion, floating in a space so vast that its confines, temporal as well as spatial, are without definition. The events of an analysis, spread out over what to the analyst are many years, are to [the patient] but the fragments of a moment dispersed in space.
(AI: 12–13)

In notes unpublished during his lifetime, Bion describes ‘beta-space’ as the ‘mental multi-dimensional space of unthought and unthinkable extent and characteristics’ (Cog: 313). I suggest that beta-space can be seen as a counterpart to the beta-screen formation described in *Learning from Experience*. In the beta-space, psychical elements scatter rather than agglomerate, and the self drains away in an experience analogous to surgical shock. Intimations of always-approaching disaster in *Atrocity* – of ‘seismic upheaval’

(1) and 'World War III' (6) – take place in a blasted landscape that equally depict the aftermath of previous catastrophe. The 1967 Apollo 1 disaster, in which three astronauts died in a fire prior to launch (65), is echoed in references to the assassination of JFK, the 'command module' of Apollo 1 reconceived as the presidential motorcade (74). The hallucinated figures of Kline, Coma and Xero may be joined by a possible 'fourth pilot on board the capsule' who may be caught in Margaret Trabert's womb (66); the phantasy of an additional pilot appears again in a narrative strand of a Cold War H-bomber (133). There are frequent references to Nagasaki and the Vietnam War.

Luckhurst suggests that Ballard's novels take place '*between catastrophes*, in the space after the initial catastrophe and the 'catastrophe' which follows: death' (38). For Bion and Ballard, both survivors of childhood trauma, exposure to war, and the sudden death of a partner early in marriage, the place of post-catastrophe is a place in which death has entered the scene, one may feel oneself to have 'died', and yet curiously continue to live. In one of his autobiographies, Bion affirms that he 'died' at the Battle of Amiens: 'Oh yes, I died – on August 8th, 1918' (LWE: 265). The creative (and psychotic) mastery of death and disaster is a preoccupation for T, who intends to 'start World III, though not, of course, in the usual sense of the term' (7) and 're-assassinate' JFK. 'But isn't Kennedy already dead?' asks an unattributed voice (46). 'Not in the sense that you mean', replies Dr Nathan: 'this is an attempt to bring about the 'false' death of the President – false in the sense of coexistent or alternate' (47).

It is a project that Ballard also takes up. In 'The Assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy Considered as a Downhill Motor Race', he follows the surrealist Alfred Jarry¹⁸ to re-implicate the narrative components of the assassination – the role of Oswald, the motorcade, the president's wife, Dealey Plaza and the Book Depository – and 're-dreams' the story in terms of a car race to comic and ironic effect: 'Kennedy got off to a bad start' (171). The essential features of the assassination – passed on in any retelling – are creatively re-imbedded using the facts on public record: 'Photographs of Johnson receiving his prize after winning the race reveal that he had decided to make the flag a memento of his victory' (172). Writing 'in praise of row C', Antonino Ferro connects Bionian theory with narratology in describing row C (the Grid category of 'dream thoughts, dreams, myths') as 'narrative derivatives' which can be recombined or

¹⁸ 'The Passion Considered as an Uphill Bicycle Race' in Jarry, *Selected Works of Alfred Jarry*.

re-dreamed by the group or the individual to create new stories from the same set of narrative elements:

One and the same sequence of a-elements can be narrated by, for example, a childhood memory; an account of 'external' life; a report of a film, a diaristic genre; an intimate-type genre; or an infinite number of other possible modes.¹⁹

Writing in the 1960s and 1970s, Bion and Ballard draw on a shared cultural imaginary that is inflected with their professional concerns and personal experiences. As for Ballard, images of space travel, astronomy and atomic disaster proliferate in Bion's seminars and in his private writing. For Bion, the disaster intimated in imagery of atomic war is both a disaster already experienced in the breakdown of the mind's ability to integrate new experience, as well as the disruption experienced by the group in the breakthrough of the new idea (A&I: 64).

Bion holds open the possibility that the kind of thinking labelled 'psychotic' might in some instances harbour the 'sane' psychotic who is able to 're-dream' his or her culture in a more creative way. In *Attention and Interpretation*, he names this figure the 'Mystic', the person 'both creative and destructive' who brings the new idea into the group, or 'Establishment' (A&I: 74), and who sees things in a new way. In the *Brazilian Lectures*, he gives the example of Freud's patient who 'had a phobia which made it impossible for him to wear socks':

I suggest that the patient did not have a phobia of socks but could see that what Freud thought were socks were a lot of holes knitted together. If this is correct, terms like 'phobia' in classical analysis do not do justice to the facts, and in particular do not do justice to the extreme capacity for observation which is natural to some patients.
(BL: 21)

The extreme psychotic disorientation that results in seeing holes instead of socks is reminiscent of imagery in *The Atrocity Exhibition*, which is replete with lists of anatomical detail, images of skin and anatomy blown up to billboard size, and with imagery of porous rock associated with the Surrealist painters Ernst and de Chirico:

A group of workmen on a scaffolding truck were pasting up the last of the displays, a hundred-foot-long panel that appeared to represent a section of a

¹⁹ Ferro, *Psychoanalysis as Therapy and Storytelling*, 28.

sand-dune. Looking at it more closely, Dr Nathan realised that in fact it was an immensely magnified portion of the skin over the iliac crest. Glancing at the billboards, Dr Nathan recognised other magnified fragments: a segment of lower lip, a right nostril, a portion of female perineum.
(11)

T seems to collect precise instances of spatial and temporal arrangements, literal and figurative snapshots of relationships posed as unchanging entities and identities (icons of beauty, youth, sexuality, such as Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor); freeze-frame tableaux of violence and death:

Notes Toward a Mental Breakdown. The noise from the cine-films of induced psychoses rose from the lecture theatre below Travis's office. Keeping his back to the window behind his desk, he assembled the terminal documents he had collected with so much effort during the previous months: (1) Spectro-heliogram of the sun; (2) Front elevation of balcony units, Hilton Hotel, London; (3) Transverse section through a pre-Cambrian trilobite; (4) 'Chronograms' by E. J. Marey; (5) Photograph taken at noon, August 7th, 1945, of the sand-sea, Qattara Depression, Egypt; (6) Reproduction of Max Ernst's 'Garden Airplane Traps'; (7) Fusing sequences for 'Little Boy' and 'Fat Boy', Hiroshima and Nagasaki A-Bombs.
(1-2)

The list presents a series of objects seen from very precise perspectives: a spectroheliogram is a photographic image of the sun taken at a particular wavelength; the second item mimics the precision of architectural language, and a transverse section recalls biomedical and histological analysis and the more modern imagery of the CT (computed tomography) scan. Marey's Chronograms, as Dr Nathan explains, are 'multiple-exposure photographs in which the element of time is visible' (6).

While Ballard's technique seems to repeat the gesture of Cubism, it works not to portray a single object in multiple perspective, but to create a proliferation of incommensurate images that lack a unifying theme. They recall Bion's description of the psychotic patients who present masses of fragmentary material – 'some of which I know, some I may be supposed to know, some presumably I cannot be expected to know' (Cog: 220–221) – that seems to confound the analyst's ability to discern a 'selected fact' that would 'unite elements [...] scattered and seemingly foreign to each other'²⁰. Ballard ironises

²⁰ Poincaré, *Science and Method*, 30.

conventional two-dimensional representations by having Dr Nathan suggest that the single-frame image enacts a psychotic reversal of the gesture of the chronograms:

Your husband's brilliant feat was to reverse the process. Using a series of photographs of the most commonplace objects – this office, let us say, a panorama of New York skyscrapers, the naked body of a woman, the face of a catatonic patient – he treated them as if they already were chronograms and *extracted* the element of time.

(6)

T's madness consists in reducing 'life' to a static image that has no way of representing growth and development. What he lacks, and seeks, is a qualitative calculus that would enable him to develop a model of relationship not templated on relationships with inorganic or dead others. The enquiry, I suggest, is Bionian:

How does one *find* the appropriate calculus? Or invent it if it does not exist? Galileo had to get on without the differential calculus in solving the problem of the freely falling body.

(Cog: 211)

Like Travis's reverse chronograms, Bion suggests that analytic interpretation provides only a snapshot of a relationship from which the element of time has been extracted:

The area which is available for inspection to psychoanalysis is like an expanding universe. As soon as I can understand what it means when I can see a body lying on a couch, the live relationship between me and you, and you and me (either direction) has become a dead relationship between I and it, and it and me, and you and it, and it and you.

(BL: 14)

Throughout his work, Bion brought his theories of thinking into close relation with psychoanalysis and to scientific enquiry more widely. While recognising the profound disturbance in functioning of his psychotic patients, he saw links between their preoccupations and behaviour with the norms of scientific practice. Above all, he took extremely seriously three related 'facts' important for the theory of psychoanalysis: the fact of reality ('O'), the fact of the mind (e.g. NYSP: 79), and the fact of life. Our being alive, he suggests, presents a challenge to scientific practice because it requires that theory take account of relationships between animate beings. The 'weakness [of

scientific method] may be closer to the weakness of psychotic thinking than superficial scrutiny would admit', he writes:

The scientist whose investigations include the stuff of life itself finds himself in a situation that has a parallel in that of the patients I am describing. [...] The inability of even the most advanced human beings to make use of their thoughts, because the capacity to think is rudimentary in all of us, means that the field for investigation, all investigation being ultimately scientific, is limited, by human inadequacy, to those phenomena that have the characteristics of the inanimate. We assume that the psychotic limitation is due to an illness: but that that of the scientist is not.

(LfE: 14)

Bion extends his enquiry into scientific method to questions of communication and reading, and suggests that reading his work must entail an emotional experience for the reader in order for it to be understood. In drafts for *Learning from Experience*, he advises the reader to 'read straight through this book, not to dwell too long on difficulties, and in this way to gain a working knowledge of the book itself'. He continues:

But the book will have failed for the reader if it does not become an object of study, and the reading of it an emotional experience itself.

(Cog: 261)

This statement is surprising, given the tone and form of *Learning from Experience*, which is likely to strike the first-time reader as a peculiarly terse and drily theoretical document. Like Bion, Ballard recognises the difficulty that readers may have with *The Atrocity Exhibition*, and indeed the annotated commentary that appears in later editions offers an accompanied experience of reading that is less forbidding. In the 'Author's note' that appears in the 2001 edition, Ballard offers an instruction to readers:

Readers who find themselves daunted by the unfamiliar narrative structure of *The Atrocity Exhibition* – far simpler than it seems at first glance – might try a different approach. Rather than start at the beginning of each chapter, as in a conventional novel, simply turn the pages until a paragraph catches your eye. If the ideas or images seem interesting, scan the nearby paragraphs for anything that resonates in an intriguing way.

(vii)

The figure of resonance that Ballard deploys is suggestive. One resonates with something that activates some aspect of one's self. With *Atrocity*, this is not so much a question of fellow-feeling or shared experience with T or the other characters. In fact, the text is notable in its productive of an affect-free, non-resonant landscape. Yet it nevertheless places an enormous demand on the reader to find some way into a narrative that is insistently two-dimensional. *Atrocity*'s difficulty and potential unreadability are a function of an 'evocative potency' that provokes the reader to attempt an emotional experience in relation to a text which activates but defeats the reader's alpha-function. Bion describes the kind of psychotic patient who insists that the analyst 'should follow every word he says and will constantly inject comments that are intentionally evocative or even provocative' (Cog: 217). As with the analyst, the reader is 'to be so treated that he cannot stay awake, and so interrupted that he cannot go to sleep' (Cog: 217).

I contend that Ballard and Bion both intend an 'emotional experience' for their readers, and do so through ways of writing that share something with psychotic mechanisms. They also share a preoccupation with the cultural overstimulation of our ability to respond to the mediatised traumas of atrocity and violence. In his 1947 lecture, 'Psychiatry at a Time of Crisis', Bion writes presciently of the effect of daily-repeated exposure to international news and popular entertainment:

We are bombarded with stimuli to which no direct reaction is possible. The newspapers inform us of political problems and decisions that move us emotionally, but to which we can make no direct response. The machinery of the press does little more for us than to ensure that we start and end the day with our daily dose of a sense of frustration and impotence. We contemplate an aeroplane crash in Newfoundland but can do nothing for the victims. We follow the fortunes of our favourite football team but cannot even help by giving up smoking. The vast apparatus of films and cheap fiction feeds phantasies of a world in which moral problems present no intellectual difficulties, and personal relationships assume an irreducible minimum of complexity.
(Cog: 345)

Ballard replies:

Faced with these charged events, we can only stitch together a set of emergency scenarios, just as our sleeping minds extemporise a narrative from the unrelated memories that veer through the cortical night.²¹
(145)

Towards the end of his life, Bion seemed to be gesturing toward an appreciation of a psychotic mode that confounds therapeutic orthodoxy. He lamented that psychoanalysis was ‘so blinded by the concept of ‘cure’ that it will not consider theories that might be sound but would make people madder, or more fundamentally increase mental instability to a point where sanity was impossible’ (Cog: 378). Notwithstanding his clinical experience with extremely disturbed patients, he nevertheless saw in the psychotic mode an aspect of the ‘Mystic’ or genius that resists the ‘Establishment’ (A&I: 74). He wrote a short story, ‘Predictive psycho-analysis and predictive psychopathology: A Fable for Our Time’, set in an imagined future after a ‘supposed atomic disaster’ in which the writer recounts the history of a ‘revolutionary discovery’ taking place some three hundred years earlier. An everyman called Smith (practising ‘a rudimentary science called ‘psycho-analysis’ sardonically defined as ‘made up of two parts: ‘psyche’ [...] and ‘anal’’) defies the establishment by keeping an ‘open mind’ on a psychotic patient (‘a woman, thought she was ‘the Virgin and the Duke of Wellington’) and comes to the conclusion that ‘his candidate was really a new type of immature animal and was not suffering from some malformation of character’, demonstrating ‘the early embryonic stages of a personality rightly and instinctively, though clumsily, recognised as a menace to the existing order’ (Cog: 327–332). Bion suggests that the category of psychosis may be ‘too gross, too macroscopic’, not unlike the ‘sane’ person who cannot see the holes for the sock:

If we look at it more closely, in detail, in the way we would have to look at a game of tennis, or a pair of socks, we can see that there may be insane psychotics and sane psychotics. It might be possible to help the insane psychotic to become an efficient psychotic.
(BL: 21)

How are we to make sense of Bion’s gesture toward a conception of ‘efficient psychosis’? Though rooted in cultural critique, it is not to be confused with the anti-psychiatry movement associated with R. D. Laing, and others. It seems to have something to do with observation and imagination. The efficient psychotic would see

²¹ Also quoted in Royle, *Veering*, 67.

both the sock and the holes, employing a kind of ‘binocular vision’ that multiplies the ‘vertices’ of perception and the possibilities for critical thinking. In so doing they would not foreclose on reality but hold open the possibilities of new ways of seeing:

On the other hand, being quite serious, the future may be boring. It’s possible that my children and yours will live in an eventless world, and that the faculty of imagination will die, or express itself solely in the realm of psychopathology. In *Atrocity Exhibition* I make the point that perhaps psychopathology should be kept alive as a repository, probably the last repository, of the imagination.²²

A Bionian reading of *The Atrocity Exhibition* draws attention to different levels and aspects of psychotic mechanisms at work within the text. While these undoubtedly include evocations of psychotic dysfunction that bars the development of meaning and affect, I propose that tracing what is shared in a Bionian Ballardian imaginary enables a thinking of ‘the psychotic’ as a mode (in the manner of ‘the gothic’ or ‘the sublime’) that describes productive disturbances in thinking.

²² Frick, ‘J. G. Ballard, The Art of Fiction No. 85’.

Chapter Eight

Becoming Ray: Transformations in Nicholas Royle's *Quilt*

There might be, too, a changer immenser than
A poet's metaphors in which being would
Come true ¹

The world is nowhere, my love, if not within.
Our life passes in transformation.²

Transformation is at the heart of Nicholas Royle's début novel, *Quilt*³, which describes the narrator's experience of his father's death and its aftermath. Into this story of unexpected loss and grieving comes the strange figure of the ray, the class of cartilaginous flat fish that includes the 'stingray [...], the electric ray [...], the torpedo, the flat ray, the numbfish, the narky, the fish that numbs or narcotises' (11). With prodigious enthusiasm, the narrator invites the ray into his life (and his father's house), becoming all-consumed with the details of their care and feeding, while his partner looks on in increasing bewilderment and concern for his sanity. The ray (or rays) open(s) the novel's otherwise personal and domestic narrative to a dimension both mythical and literary. 'Eerie machines for creating and overturning words' (94), the ray story (or *récit*) that begins on the periphery of *Quilt* comes to inhabit the story, the house, and the narrator himself.

An exemplary instance of writing that is both creative and critical, *Quilt* combines the narrative of the father's death with the birth of the son's new theory of ghosts and literature that proceed from the rays themselves. It is as much the story of the birth of a new idea as it is a story of death, grief, fish, and madness. The afterword develops critical themes given voice within the novel by the son and narrator, and stands both as an integral part of *Quilt* as well as a companion to Royle's other literary critical work, including *Veering: A Theory of Literature*, and more recently the essay, 'Even the Title: On the State of Narrative Theory Today'⁴.

¹ From 'Description without Place', in Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens: Corrected Edition*, 358–9.

² Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, 57.

³ Royle, *Quilt*. Subsequent references are to this edition.

⁴ Royle, "Even the Title: On the State of Narrative Theory Today."

Transformations, the third of Bion's metapsychologies, attempts to describe the ways in which an impersonal reality, O, is subject to psychical and artistic transformations of various kinds. He describes four: rigid motion transformations, projective transformations, transformations of O in hallucinosis, and transformations in O. *Quilt*, I suggest, veers precariously between a hallucinatory transformation of the son's experience of the father's death, signalling madness and breakdown, and a transformative – even transubstantive – dénouement that might realise Bion's near-mystical conception of 'becoming O'. At the end of *Quilt*, the reader is invited, along with the son's partner, to make sense of the son's decidedly 'funny turn', a turn that is also literary and theoretical. Finding 'no sign of anything anywhere' (149), the novel closes in mystery but opens to a critical afterword, in which Royle looks to 'inaugurate a new kind of writing and give it a name: *reality literature*' (153).

A Bionian reading makes it possible to describe the way in which *Quilt* is a transformative novel. Previous readings, such as those by Arleen Ionescu and Jean-Michel Ganteau, have overlooked the novel's transubstantive ending, and the ways in which the son comes to be identified with the ray. Ionescu has focused instead on the related figures of quilt, cloak or mantle, and suggests that *Quilt* is a 'spectral cover that is belatedly grafted on to Royle's theory of telepathy and the Uncanny'⁵. I suggest that the opposite may be more nearly true: Royle's afterword and theoretical incursions offer critical authority where it may not be needed, since the figure of the ray does the work of the text, which is also a kind of deconstructive undoing. Ganteau reads the novel as modern elegy, the ending of the novel staging the 'impossibility of survival and the gradual loss of agency'⁶. By contrast, I suggest that *Quilt* stages the ways in which the mind responds to loss and pain, and the role of creative response in transformation.

Quilt begins 'in the middle of the night', *in medias res*:

In the middle of the night the phone rings, over and over, but I don't hear it.
First it is the hospital, then the police.
(3)

⁵ Ionescu, "'Cloth Speaks': Cloaks of Telepathy, Melancholia, and the Uncanny in Nicholas Royle's *Quilt*," 96.

⁶ Ganteau, *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction*, 86.

Launching itself into the middle of things, the narration enacts an ironic swerve away from the heart of the ‘action’, which is, of course, inaction of a very pointed kind, for the hospital and the police seek to inform the son that his father has died that night, having fallen out of his hospital bed in unexplained circumstances. But for the son, who sleeps and misses the call, he is not yet dead. Dead to the world, son and father.

By beginning the story, the narrator has already unwittingly invited death into the novel’s purview; by not hearing the phone in the middle of the night, he postpones the moment of the novel – the story of a father dying – to another day. This is the moment of the ‘middle things’⁷: what is *in medias res* is the dead centre of the novel, death, which, echoing W.B. Yeats (who also provides *Quilt*’s prefatory quotation) ‘cannot hold’⁸, but must rather incite or entail a veering or oscillation between times, the times of the before and the after, the ‘deep time’ of the ray, and time that is refracted transatlantically between the son and his partner. Getting his father dressed as he prepares him for his hospital visit, the son hears him say:

These things happen from time to time.
(3)

The father’s stoical phrase on the eve of his death becomes the novel’s haunting refrain, emerging time and again to point *Quilt*’s meditation on death and dying. The thing that happens between times – the singular fact of death, between the time of the novel’s beginning and ending – is something that cannot be forethought, can only be improvised, *ex tempore*; an event outside of time, something that happens ‘from time to time’ in a timeframe that is not one’s own.

In *Quilt*, it is the son who outlives the father, the normal way of things. The ‘between times’ of the novel – that is the end time of the father – is also the time horizon of the son’s life. The father’s refrain recalls both Freud and Bion: ‘there is much more continuity between intra-uterine life and the earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth allows us to believe’ (TP: 37). Next to birth, death marks the even more impressive caesura; the continuity of a life post-death harder to imagine than pre-uterine life, even if the beliefs of religious communities attempt death’s disavowal.

⁷ The Latin phrase, ‘*in medias res*’, though it is understood to mean ‘in the middle of things’, may be translated literally as ‘into the middle things’.

⁸ ‘The Second Coming’, in Yeats, *Selected Poems*, 124.

Quilt takes place in this between time: an everyday sort of time, perhaps, that involves shopping for clothes and wondering ‘what does a man do on the day his father dies?’ (33), in the suspensive gap that the novel bridges with words, or if not with words, with Ω .

Ω , the omega sign, appears throughout *Quilt* between sections, between the phone in the night that rings unheard and the narrative that takes up the day before. The last letter of the Greek alphabet, omega recalls the biblical appellation of the Father in Revelations: ‘I am the Alpha and Omega’, the beginning and the end. Signalling the end of times in the Bible, the omega sign that appears two lines in to *Quilt* heralds an end already in play at the beginning of the novel, an ideographic representation of a death not yet accessible in the narrative. It is also a signature textual device, recalling Royle’s use of symbols in *The Uncanny*. Omega may not stand in or for something else, but just *stand*: a *stet* or stent that holds open the different times and spaces of the novel, or that institutes a pause, the rest played to visual effect. The idea of the stent, which the Ω resembles visually, would be a kind of internal scaffold, a canalisation, charged with holding open the space of the novel, or a bracket that might have saved the father’s life (20).

Omega (literally, O-mega, the large or capital O) can also be seen to signal the irruption of O, Bion’s figure to denote reality: the blast of a pure encounter with that which ineffably *is*: ‘What the absolute facts are cannot ever be known, and these I denote by the sign O’ (Trans: 17). O is a minimalist placeholder for that which is absolutely unknowable except through its transformations. Pictorially evocative, O – derived from the word ‘origin’ – suggests, too, a primal boundary, container, an open mouth or closed womb, wellspring, the universe, the godhead, the circle of life or infinity, *Ouroboros*. Bion’s O is both omega and alpha, but like Ω it is used to signify something that cannot be rendered exhaustively in words. Like Royle, Bion uses symbols (α , β and ψ among these) where words are inadequate or unhelpful.

The rays, like omega, are already installed prior to the beginning of the story, seemingly outside the ‘between times’ of the novel. In the prefatory quotation by Yeats, they are obliquely figured as a disinterested chorus: ‘certain Shrouds that muttered head to head’, originary ghosts anticipating the son’s discovery of a ‘new theory of ghosts’ (112) that places the ray at the origin of ghostly iconography, from the spooky bed

sheets of childish games to the imaginary of the Gothic. A series of aquatic references in the opening pages also foreshadows their first appearance: the father ‘an immeasurably beautiful strange ancient fish’ (5) whom the son stows at the hospital ‘in the entrance way next to a large aquarium’, while the son ‘struggl[es] like a fish on land to gasp’ (9), fighting back tears. When the rays finally make their entry into *Quilt*, they turn out to have been lurking all along:

The ray lurks, impenetrably, around the origins of philosophy.
(9)

Retelling the conversation between Meno and Socrates, in which Meno accuses the philosopher of being like the ray that paralyses with its sting, the novel’s first *foray* into the ray offers several striking statements about the figure of the ray: they are ‘thinking’s quandary’, the ‘figure of the already’; ‘the paralysing figuration of all knowledge as recollection’ (10–11). In each of these statements, the rays are placed in a relationship to times present, past and in question (the bafflement of the ‘quandary’ etymologically raising the query: when? – *quando?*). To understand the story of the ray, the narrator suggests:

you have to go back into what is called deep time (as if there were any means of doing so). Once upon a slime, before the creation of the Andes, prior to the earliest fossils [...], over 220 million years ago
(22)

In a second ray interlude he describes the development of the different kinds of ray (freshwater, marine) that happens between times, from deep time to deep time:

And all of this, keep in mind, took place in what is called deep time (as if there were any other).
(22)

Deep time, defined by the 18th-century geologist, James Hutton, describes the geologic time of the universe, a conception of time so abyssal and incommensurate with human experience that the mind ‘grow[s] giddy’⁹ in contemplation of it. In the days and weeks that follow the father’s death, in which the son and his partner set to work clearing the

⁹ Playfair, “Hutton’s Unconformity.”

house, there are intimations of time slipping ‘out of joint’¹⁰, giving way to disturbances in chronology. ‘Now that he has died,’ writes the son, ‘I no longer know how long anything takes’ (25). Reflecting on his father’s ‘love of time’ (26), his fascination with clocks and watches and his concern to know the time precisely, the son recalls how earlier he once imagined the father’s ‘last words, on his deathbed, looking into my eyes and asking: What is the time, please?’ (27).

After the death, before the funeral, the son decides to build a ray pool in his father’s dining room, in which four rays, Taylor, Audrey, Hilary, and Mallarmé, are installed. The design and construction of the ray pool are invested with a degree of care suggestive of a reparative impetus that identifies the father with the ray:

I am not going to deny a sense of achievement at having conceived and constructed this ray pool, with its spillway design and lipped feature, at having lined it with the correct quartz sand, after picking over and assessing it, stone by stone, day after day, at having carefully selected the, I think it’s thirteen, individual, perfectly sized rocks, and at having installed the highest-quality filters, pumps, lighting and heating. Everything has been done here that could have been done to ensure an appropriate supply of water and to establish the correct mechanisms for the upkeep and replacing of water, and for the weekly gravel-cleaning and hydro-vac. But any feeling of triumph here is at once also its opposite. To achieve is to lose. To suppose that you are winning is to be undergoing absolute defeat.
(71)

The father, though clearly unwell when he goes to hospital, dies unexpectedly during the first night, falling unseen from his bed and dying, it is supposed, as he lies untended on the floor. The evasions of the hospital staff and the autopsy suggest a concern to forestall an allegation of negligence. At the funeral reception the son holds forth with apparent fluency and authority on the subject of the rays and their care. In particular, the question of a suitable ‘substrate’ for the rays is of paramount importance, given their ironical preference for a *vivisepultural* (meaning: buried alive) ‘lifestyle’:

The ray is stationary. You wouldn’t even register it there, retracted into its environs. It sees you before you see it. The ray lies on the substrate. On it, in it, what you will. The ray is prone, adoringly, to a decent bottom. Without an appropriately sandy, muddy or gravelly one, the ray cannot bury itself, which it does both in self-protection and with a view to prey. Vivisepulture is its lifestyle. Now you see it, now you don’t. Then not now again. The ray blends in with the

¹⁰ *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene V. Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 663.

substrate, altering appearance, what is around disappearing into it, eye
encrypting camouflage.
(32)

The son's concern for a suitable substrate for the rays is echoed in the terrifying 'gravel dream' that appears in part two of the novel: a repeated nightmare in which he alone is left to the enormous task of checking individually by hand the hundreds of tiny pieces of gravel that line the bottom of the pool, looking for sharp edges that might damage the rays' sensitive ventral surface:

I dream of gravel. I'm going to miss the funeral because of it. Time's recoiled and we are completely lost in the logistics of acquiring the gravel, the agitation about having the right kind.
(86)

The dream, like the gravel, is carefully selected for the work it can achieve both in the son's mind and in the text. The likely trend of an interpretation along the lines of the son's grief for his father, combined with his feelings of guilt (that his father's death might have been prevented, that he was too negligent in placing his trust in the hospital's care) is neither repressed, nor hidden. The narrator makes as much clear:

It's as if I were dreaming intermittently aware that what's happening is an allegory but I keep forgetting this.
(86)

I suggest that a metaphor of depth is at work in both the dream of the gravel that provides a substrate for the rays, and in the dream itself, which is recognised consciously as 'allegory', a dream too thin or superficial in respect of a certain Freudian conception (recalling that Freud used the phrase 'depth psychology' in place of 'psychoanalysis'). Getting to the bottom of the son's dream is not a difficult task. What he finds most disturbing is the idea of 'no substrate at all', or need for one:

A couple of days after the gravel-dream (which comes back repeatedly over the nights that follow, and which you relate to a disquiet you have about 'no substrate at all')
(88)

This recurrent nightmare proceeds, you believe, from a sense of outrage at the so-called specialists who have the gall to suggest that there is no need for a substrate. (91)

Reflecting on Freud's theory of dream, in which the work of the analyst is to bring to the surface the 'deeper' meaning of the dream, the dream 'substrate', Bion begins to formulate the rudiments of an alternative conception of dreams:

[Freud] took up only the negative attitude, dreams as 'concealing' something, not the way in which the necessary dream is constructed.
(Cog: 33)

Bion emphasises the function of dream-work in transforming reality, O, into experiences assimilable by the mind, which might even entail a making *unconscious*:

But Freud meant by dream-work that unconscious material, which would otherwise be perfectly comprehensible, was transformed into a dream, and that the dream-work needed to be undone in order to make the incomprehensible dream comprehensible [...]. I mean that the conscious material has to be subjected to dream-work to render it fit for storing, selection, and suitable for transformation [...]
(Cog: 43)

The dream-work, for Bion, is above all a creative process, though not necessarily a conscious one, that entails 'dreaming' reality in order to integrate it. The narrator's identification of the father with the ray is a part of this creative work, as is the gravel dream. But it is not an unambivalent or linear process. By locating the rays in 'deep time', the father's death takes place in a time horizon so at odds with what is thinkable in the human experience as to segue into the realm of myth. Later in the dream, the son rails against the specialist suppliers whose passion for customer service entails indifference to the ray:

Then there are the online dealers. Replaceable ray, dish of the day, this one or that! Initially set you back a hundred dollars, my friend, but if it arrives damaged or dead, refund guaranteed, we'll dispatch another within twenty-four hours! If, on the other hand, you get it home and it acclimatises and seems happy but after three weeks begins to develop fin curl or abrasions from that gravel you selected for the substrate, or if it turns out that the creature never really developed an appetite and has succeeded in starving itself, such apparently suicidal behaviour not unknown, if it dies it dies: just think of it as one of those balloons that go flat, simply pick up the phone or get online and order another one!
(86-7)

And yet, as the narrator admits, the ray, or rays – linguistically both singular and generic – are the very figure of a replaceable life form, located in a deep time that is but the ‘substrate of the present’:

The ray can be understood generically, as a term for all the rays that ever existed, including the countless millions in deep time, bearing in mind that deep time at once somewhere no one will ever be visiting and, to coin a phrase, the substrate of the present [...]
(32)

Transformations opens with the example of the painter who transforms an experience of poppies into a painted canvas. The image is a considered one: it recalls both Monet’s famous Impressionist painting, *Les Coquelicots*, as well as the poppies of Flanders and Ypres, where Bion served in the First World War. In the case of the painting, Bion writes, it is possible to identify that something – certain shapes, the colour red – remain invariant under the transformation, enabling the original to be recognisable. But what is invariant under one style of painting, or form of art, may not be so under another:

The invariants depend on the technique he employs: thus the invariants in an impressionist painting are not the invariants of a painting by a member of, say, a realist school of painting.
(Trans: 5)

The psychoanalyst who seeks to understand his or her client is concerned to identify the analysand’s transformation of his or her reality in terms both of the *process* of the transformation (that which Bion notates $T\alpha$) and the *outcome* of the transformation ($T\beta$), of which there are several kinds. In the discussion that follows, I follow the categorisation offered by Grinberg et al.¹¹ to outline four kinds of transformation: rigid motion transformations, projective transformations, transformations in hallucinosis and transformations in O. Bion leaves ample room for the elaboration of many different kinds of transformation in different fields of activity, that makes possible the development of such locutions as ‘transformation in writing’ or ‘transformation in poetry’:

Transformation may be a transference of characteristics from one situation to another, from one medium to another, a rigid motion, or a projective

¹¹ Grinberg, Sor, and Tabak de Bianchedi, *Introduction to the Work of Bion: Groups, Knowledge, Psychosis, Thought, Transformations, Psychoanalytic Practice*.

transformation. A musician or artist may transfer or project an emotional experience through $T\alpha$ to the finished product $T\beta$, which may be a musical composition or a painting.

(Trans: 97)

The first of Bion's categories, the rigid motion transformation, is the most easily accessible to the reader familiar with classical Freudian theory, implying a transformation of experience in which there is little distortion in form between O and $T\beta$: Bion includes within this category the typical transference neuroses described by Freud that include anxiety, hysteria and obsessional neurosis¹². Aspects of *Quilt* lend themselves straightforwardly to a psychoanalytically informed reading along these lines: for example, in which the son's identification with his father, and the identification of the father with the ray. This latter is apparent in the son's gravel dream, in which he battles extreme odds to master the threat of injury to (and in phantasy undo what has already been suffered by) the sensitive and beloved creature. The dream as it is recounted is an instance of the rigid motion transformation, and an awareness of psychoanalysis seems to inform the narrator 'dreaming intermittently aware' (86) that his recurring nightmare constitutes an allegory of his father's death.

In another passage, attributed implicitly to the son, the phantasy underlying the creation and maintenance of the pool draws attention to the *space* required to safeguard the rays against the contaminant of death:

Inevitably, in the case of a small aquarium, products of decay from a decomposing body contaminate the water and can rapidly bring about the death of the other creatures, but if you think big, if you can reckon on the worst with a big showcase space, you can have one be dead and decaying for twenty-four hours or more and it have no unduly adverse effect on the life of the other inhabitants.

(51)

Thinking 'big' is not, it seems, sufficient to guarantee immunity in the presence of death, as the narrator adds: 'these are not his words but she extrapolates them, in ironic form, from what he tells her' (51). Thus the thought is presented at one remove: the partner's extrapolation also an exaggeration. The image of the ray pool, big enough to survive catastrophe, approximates Bion's description of catastrophic change figured as an 'explosion and its expanding pressure waves' enacting a 'wide externalisation of

¹² Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 462.

internal objects' (Trans: 9) within a mental space correspondingly large, a hyperbolic imaginary. Bion's thinking of hyperbole in *Transformations* enables a critical consideration of the figural aspects of the ray that have to do with time and space. Despite the incongruity of their domestic installation in *Quilt*, the narration locates the ray repeatedly in 'deep time', operating 'incommensurably', located outside any means of chronological or spatial measurement. This word, 'incommensurable', is, I suggest, the token of hyperbole, drawing attention to the mechanism of projection in *Quilt*'s narration.

In a projective transformation, the material that would be 'invariant' under a rigid motion transformation is transformed more idiosyncratically, using the mechanisms not of transference but of splitting and projective identification. Bion suggests that exaggerated and hyperbolic statements signal a projective transformation at work, and may be related to feelings of envy and rivalry, a going beyond, doing one better or 'outdistancing' of material that splits off rivalrous feelings and places them, like *Star Wars*, 'a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away'. The ray, identified both with the father and the son, are the location of an identification and a relationship that is presented both at infinite remove (in deep time, incommensurably) and *heimlich*. Describing a number of instances of hyperbole, Bion gives the following illustration of a statement made by an analysand:

I knew a woman in Peru, when I was a child, who had second sight.
(Trans: 161)

To which he remarks:

The goodness of the analyst has been projected a long way in time and place. This is hyperbole; there is something in the experience with the analysand that makes this term suitable for binding the particular conjunction, and none other [...]. The term already marks a conjunction [...] which is present in the conjunction to which I want to draw attention, namely the early meaning of hyperbole as a 'throwing beyond' someone else, signifying rivalry.
(Trans: 161)

In this example, Bion reads an apparently innocuous statement in terms of a projective transformation, suggesting that a way to understand the analysand's statement would be to see it as a hyperbolic transformation of the psychoanalytic situation. In this reading,

the incommensurability of the ray conceals an Oedipal story, a way for the narrator to disavow the painful recognition that the father ‘is my flesh, so simple, his body mine’, a way to re-render the ‘rending mystery of [his] father’ that threatens a literal ‘con-fusion’ of the son-father as ‘me father’, the father’s vernacular at work in the son’s language. In the language-world of the ray, the distinction between the particular and the generic is elided, evoking the promise/threat of father/son identity, the son ‘of one being with the father’, as in the Nicene Creed.

The rays appear in the text as it becomes clear that the father ‘doesn’t have long by the look of him’ (7), that he is ‘melting to me all his body mine, mining me, me father’. The ray pool (that is strictly *not*, as the narrator makes clear, a touch pool (73)) creates an *in vitro* environment, a contained space within the house (and in the novel) in which the work of grief in all its permutations – guilt, responsibility, the expiration of a former rivalry – may be progressively achieved. The figure of the enclosed space at work in the ray pool is echoed elsewhere. In an earlier section, the son imagines taking small groups of tourists into a cave in order that they might experience the word ‘pristine’. A Platonic-ironic tour-guide, he would ‘get their complete attention’ by offering to ‘reveal the names of everyone in this cave, at the drop of a pin’:

In truth, however, it is an easy thing to do: if you attune your hearing properly in the silence of the caves and listen, most people are speaking a more or less audible version of their name in most of the things they say.
(30)

In this way, the cave provides an imaginary location in which it is possible to have an experience of others and of one’s self:

yes, this little outing to the caves is the closest thing that they will ever have of an apprehension of what it is to hear oneself and ‘be someone’.
(30)

This is also explicitly an experience of being born, a being-born-to reality:

I might very readily proclaim that it is here, in the sonic simplicity and purity of these environs, that it becomes possible to return, yes, for there is always some echo-effect, to return to that conjectural snatch of what it is to be at the very threshold of life, being born, in amniotic oblivion, and in this moment think, and speak.
(31)

More specifically, the subterranean experience of the caves ('strange well of feeling, curvature of space') evokes the quality that he associates with his partner: an evocation of that which is both 'fresh and ancient' (31). He would lead tour groups there, he imagines, in order that the word pristine's 'angelic oddity' might be 'prised aurally', 'in these delicate clinkings':

You might think they know you inside out, I begin. In these caves nothing is what you imagine: everything becomes pristine. Listen. *In these delicate clinkings prised*, I add, with a kind of irritating emphasis.
(28)

The delicate clinkings evoke a line in Wallace Stevens' poem, 'Description without Place', which draws attention to the way that 'seeming' – the use of words 'for those for whom the word is the making of the world' – creates its own reality. Stevens wrote that the poem's central idea was that 'we live in the description of a place and not the place itself'¹³:

In flat appearance we should be and be
Except for delicate clinkings not explained.¹⁴

The delicate clinkings not explained in Stevens' poem thematise an experience of poetry in which description enacts a 'revelation' of the object that is neither 'the thing described, nor false facsimile', and which, moreover, is 'composed of a sight indifferent to the eye', a 'sense to which we refer experience' that is not to be sensuously apprehended. Stevens' description resonates with Bion's theoretical writings on transformation at several points. In 'Making the Best of a Bad Job', his last published essay before his death, Bion quotes Milton in *Paradise Lost*, whose image of inward sight evokes the kind of seeing achieved by psychoanalysis:

So much the rather thou Celestial light
Shine Inward, and the mind through all her powers
Irradiate, there plant eyes, all mist from thence
Purge and disperse, that I may see and tell
Of things invisible to mortal sight.
(CS: 325)

¹³ Filreis, *Wallace Stevens and the Actual World*, 154.

¹⁴ Stevens, *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens: Corrected Edition*, 358.

Bion differs from Stevens in that he does not attribute this ‘sight indifferent to the eye’ to ‘expectation or desire’ – Bion is perhaps best known in psychotherapeutic circles for his injunction that the analyst work ‘without memory or desire’ (LA: 133) – but to the nature of O, which cannot finally be apprehended by any relationship to knowledge:

It is not knowledge of reality that is at stake, nor yet the human equipment for knowing. The belief that reality is or could be known is mistaken because reality is not something that lends itself to being known. It is impossible to know reality for the same reason that makes it impossible to sing potatoes; they may be grown, or pulled, or eaten, but not sung. Reality has to be ‘been’; there should be a transitive verb ‘to be’ expressly for use with the term ‘reality’.
(Trans: 148)

The ending of ‘Description without Place’ seems to approach the experiences that Bion is trying to describe. ‘The rose *is* itself whatever it may be *said* to be’, Bion writes in *Transformations* (140). A gloss, perhaps, on Gertrude Stein (‘a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose’¹⁵), it resonates with the last line of Stevens’ poem, which ends in apparent tautology: ‘like rubies reddened by rubies reddening’. For Bion, the tautology, or circular argument, is a necessary step in the development of meaning, only requiring that there be a ‘sufficiency of experience’ or, continuing the model, adequate diameter, to sustain it:

The interpretation should be such that the transition from knowing about reality to becoming real is furthered. The transition depends on matching the analysand’s statement with an interpretation which is such that the circular argument remains circular but has an adequate diameter. [...] The profitable circular argument depends on a sufficiency of experience to provide an orbit in which to circulate.
(Trans: 153)

The phrase by Stevens quoted at the beginning of this chapter (‘There might be, too, a changer immenser than/ A poet’s metaphors in which being would/ Come true’) also seems to describe the kind of change evoked in *Quilt*’s closing pages, where the son seems literally (or *literarily*) to have ‘become ray’; that is, to have assumed the experience of his grief, and to have been himself transformed by (rather than only transformed by what he ‘knows about’) the experience of his father’s death. In Stevens’ ‘potential seemings turbulent’, we find, too, an intimation of the catastrophe that becoming O is felt to be.

¹⁵ From the poem ‘Sacred Emily’, in Stein, *Geography and Play*, 178–188.

Foreshadowings of emotional turbulence and potential catastrophe are present throughout the novel. On the day that his father dies, the son ‘becomes aware that time has slowed down to a catastrophe’ (33), that ‘there are all things at once’ (37). Royle’s description of the experience of grief recalls Denise Riley’s descriptions of the experience of losing her son: ‘that acute sensation of being cut off from any temporal flow that can grip you after the sudden death’¹⁶. It is ‘a period of implausible interference’ (36). As the son in *Quilt* awaits his partner at the bus station, the environment takes on a hallucinatory quality. A motorway accident has delayed his partner’s arrival:

He manages to establish that the crash occurred too early for her coach to be involved. He tries to shrug off the thought that the day is imitating itself. It’s something quite alien, he thinks, to that falseness in the impressions of external things that Ruskin called pathetic fallacy. It’s as if perception itself were a strange mimosa. Everything seems shadowed, shadowing something else.

It should be hallucinational news.

(34)

In what follows, the pathetic fallacy (the trope that the external environment described in poetry and literature offers a key to inward mood, the weather ‘coming out in sympathy’ to express characters’ emotions) is an effect that is both ‘eerie’ and ‘matter-of-fact’:

The gloom of uncoming buses is repeated in the sky. The brilliant sunshine is inexplicably smacked on the back of the head. Big clouds tumble over, clowns without coherence. The darkness spreads like strong, spilt medicine. Gusts of wind scrap, a chill has crept in. Is this his father’s work? There is nothing eerie about it, everything is simple and matter-of-fact.

(35)

The narrator’s hallucinatory vision brings us to the third kind of transformation, the ‘transformation in hallucinosis’. While this is most readily understood as the production of hallucination, Bion’s wording – *hallucinosis* – has a subtler implication. To describe it, he has recourse to the poet Shelley’s ‘formulation of his poetic intuition’ as it appears in a footnote in volume seven of Shelley’s ‘Hellas: A Lyrical Drama’: as ‘that state of mind in which ideas may be supposed to assume the force of sensations through the confusion of thought with the objects of thought, and the excess of passion animating

¹⁶ Riley, *Time Lived, Without Its Flow*, 7.

the creations of inspiration' (Trans: 133–4). Something like this seems to be at work in Royle's motif of the mimosa, which appears on four occasions. The mimosa is a plant, so called because the leaves recoil or 'wizen' in response to touch, and so seem to mimic or imitate sentient life. The word, 'mimosa', derives from the same etymological roots as 'mimesis'. Their etymology also suggests a curious doubling of their mimetic quality: the suffix -osa meaning 'to resemble', the mimosa is that which resembles or mimics a mimesis; the word itself a figure of the *mise en abyme*, the continual dismantling and doubling of that which would guarantee a stable representation. Royle seems to use the word to describe an experience of foreshadowing ('everything seems shadowed, shadowing something else' (34)), of a precocious or uncanny knowledge of what is to come:

That's the wizening mimosa, the madness of the truth, seeping into view before the nurse had even told him what happened, the magisterial, blankety trick-photography of the changing of the light.
(38)

As the novel progresses, the son seems to descend into madness or breakdown, his partner finding him increasingly difficult to follow in conversation. Yet the son suggests that he is on the verge of having a new idea about literature and writing:

– Everything is being stripped away. I can't express it. I'm experiencing new, incredible possibilities. It's a kind of magical sharpness, as if shadows have light [...]. It has to do with that mimosa thing I told you about. It's a kind of upside-down space of coincidence, a portal. I can't *stay*...¹⁷
(95)

Grinberg et al. describe 'transformations in hallucinosis [as] a wide range of phenomena that belong to the psychotic part of the personality [...] correlated with a primitive 'disaster' or 'catastrophe''¹⁸. Yet the transformation in hallucinosis can also seem to have something in common with Bion's fourth kind of transformation: the transformation in O. Put more simply: that which seems simply mad can seem to signal the emergence of the transformation in O that is a *breakthrough* rather than a *breakdown*. If hallucination is most easily described as 'seeing something that is not

¹⁷ An allusion to *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act 5, Scene 2. Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 1035.

¹⁸ Grinberg, Sor, and Tabak de Bianchedi, *Introduction to the Work of Bion: Groups, Knowledge, Psychosis, Thought, Transformations, Psychoanalytic Practice*, 57.

there', it is also easy to discern how the transformation in hallucinosis may be mistaken for the emergence of the wild thought, the new thought without a thinker. I want to suggest that Royle's mimosa, trembling on the cusp of a 'foreshadowing', foreknowledge of what is not yet, is the token of the peculiar madness that senses the passage of the transformation in O, or $K \rightarrow O$, in Bion's formulation. It is a change preceded by 'psychological turbulence' (compare the son's 'period of implausible interference'). Seeking to characterise this, Bion recalls the Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross, in his description of the three 'dark nights of the soul'. Bion likens the third of these, which 'has to do with the point to which [the soul] travels – namely, God', to the transformation in O. Despite the breakthrough that the transformation in O enacts, the approach to it is experienced in catastrophic terms, since it seems to place the self at risk of a megalomania, a 'becoming' that (in the religious case above) 'is felt as inseparable from becoming God, ultimate reality, the First Cause', or (in less mystical terms) 'of being responsible, that is mature' (159).

Catastrophe is also entailed in the projective transformation. Bion describes the case of a man who seems to enact a projection of internal crisis at a particular moment in this treatment:

Then a change: friends or relations who have been denying that there is anything the matter cannot ignore his illness. He has been strange: he spends hours seated morosely in a chair; he appears to be hearing voices and seeing things.
(Trans: 7)

In *Quilt*, the son, too, seems to progress down a path of increasingly strange behaviour and worrying episodes (hallucinating his mother, collapsing, disturbances in his vision) that finally prompt his partner to fly to see him immediately: 'Something in me gave way. Our separation was no longer to be tolerated' (144). Breakdown may be one of the ways in which growth is experienced, Bion suggests, and he reworks Freud's concept of latency, de-emphasising its sexual aspect, in favour of a functional account of latency as that which precedes the irruption of psychical growth. Bion proposes a reconsideration of latency not as a term with a settled meaning but inviting the question: 'what is latent?' For him, what is latent is 'emotional turbulence' (CS: 295), the period of change, of decision-indecision felt as imminent catastrophe that may nevertheless herald the onset of growth. Bion describes the experience of emotional turbulence that may be experienced towards the end of latency through the image of the tadpole:

it is as if a tadpole became very upset because it was turning into a frog. There is nothing abnormal about it; it is not an illness but a change, and the tadpole would like someone to explain what is going on.

(BL: 74)

In *Quilt*, the curious incident of the frog in the door jamb (following the vicar's visit to discuss funeral arrangements) suggests such a moment of precariousness and vulnerability:

Then there is the vicar and the frog. [...]

Only after she has driven away does he look down and see in the jamb, close by the rusty hinge, a frog, or what remains of a frog, with possibly a final throe, the throe as he goes to touch, no, not a throe, a cast of the light, a fantastical last contraction. The vicar killed the frog as she was leaving.

(50)

As with the identification of the son with the father, and of the father with the ray, the metaphoricity of the frog story seems evident, not least to *Quilt*'s self-reflexive narrator:

What is the frog's place in the yarn? What is this leap of faith into the door jamb and wait for the final crunch, as if that frog is indeed another forgery [...]

(50)

The narration identifies the son with the frog, enacting the reversal of perspective through the homophony of *throe* with *throw*: the frog's imagined final 'leap' into the door jamb echoed in the son who believes momentarily that he has seen the frog in its 'final throe', and developed further in the description of a precipitous, 'ranarian [frog-like] lucidity' over the events of the day:

And all the while leaping backwards, in an analepsis of ranarian lucidity, through the entire entraining of funeral arrangements.

(50)

The creature crushed in the door jamb also echoes the figure – noted in this thesis as resonant both to J.G. Ballard and Bion – of the 'angle between two walls'. A character in Bion's *A Memoir of the Future* describes the way that the 'angle of the walls' can be both a place of terror, and refuge:

Someone was trying to get me into a corner and club me to death. But thanks to reversed perspective I could cower in the corner where the angle of the walls protected me.
(MotF: 73)

In *Quilt*, it is not the father, but the son, who seems to suffer a ‘sea change’¹⁹ (or at least a change into a creature suited for life around water). The novel teems with eerie images of watery life. In the second part, the narrator recites Clarence’s dream from *Richard III*, in which he recalls a terrible dream of ‘joining shipwrecked souls ‘that fishes gnawed upon’ and the horror of finding oneself

overboard
Into the tumbling billows of the main
Lord, lord, methought what pain it was to drown:
What dreadful noise of waters in my ears.
What ugly sights of death within my eyes!²⁰
(85)

Clarence’s dream offers a vivid, hallucinatory characterisation of the mental turbulence that accompanies the death of a father. Bion suggests repeatedly that this is the genius of art: he returns frequently to the examples of Leonardo da Vinci’s drawings of ‘water swirling in turmoil, of hair in disorder’ (CS: 296), as well as Milton’s evocation of ‘the rising World of waters dark and deep’ that must be ‘won from the void and formless Infinite’ (Trans: 151).

In an intriguing narrative digression in *Quilt* that takes place during the funeral, the son recalls his father's love of handiwork in an account ‘concerning a period around twenty years earlier’. A seemingly abandoned scaffolding over the church lychgate prompts the son to write a parodic history, aided and abetted by his father:

One day a builder came and erected scaffolding around the lychgate, presumably with the intention of painting or reroofing or otherwise repairing it, but no one ever followed it up, the days passed and the weeks and months and no one came and no one seemed to mind, besides the son who saw it as a daily eyesore and defacement of the church. Eventually he took it upon himself to type out a statement on the subject, on a single sheet of paper.
(59)

¹⁹ *The Tempest*, Act 1, Scene 2. Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 1173.

²⁰ *Richard III*, Act 1, Scene 4. Ibid., 192–3.

The text that follows, a text-within-the-text (though in fact ‘unread at the funeral’), introduces the curious notion of excarnation:

THE SCAFFOLDING [...]

Is the scaffolding now a permanent feature at last, a monument in its own right? And if so, should it be attributed symbolic significance? [...] Suffice to bring to notice the philological endeavours of one local historian who has noted the word ‘scaffolding’ as etymologically of obscure origin but nevertheless as bearing the less widely known sense of ‘a raised framework, as for hunters, or among some primitive peoples for disposal of the dead’ (Chambers). Given the etymology of ‘lychgate’ (Ger. *Leiche*, corpse), the notion of an alternation in church policy, with regard to the practice of excarnation, irresistibly suggests itself.
(60)

Excarnation, or defleshing, was the practice of removing flesh from the cadaver, enabling the transport of bones, as with devotional relics, or allowing a body to be picked clean over a scaffolding, as per the son’s suggestion. It is a funny but disturbing story for a funeral, where the question of how to deal with the remains of the dead is unusually pertinent. The scene is suggestive for a number of reasons. The father (strikingly, referred to impersonally in this scene: ‘the dead man screwed down this little text about ‘THE SCAFFOLDING’ under a carefully cut plastic plinth’) is depicted as the arbiter of language, literally screwing down the son’s words that have come undone of their mooring since his death. Introducing his partner at an earlier point, the son narrates:

The post is past. Words come away. Letter capsize. She is digression, syncopation, asyndeton, ontradiction. Her ‘c’ curls away invisibly, leaving the shoreline of a new language: *ontra*.
(27)

Throughout the novel, there are unexpected words, suggestive portmanteau: *mimosa*, *mimesis*, *mimosaturation* (52); frogs that are forgeries; ‘synapothanumena’ (42). It is language that gives way in the aftermath of learning that his father has died (‘speak English, no, not a word, nary that, all awry, telephoning home, no, never mind, already impossible, hallo, my father has died, he’s gone, given the world the slip’ (21), and language ‘wreck[ed]’ by the ray whose monosyllabary prompts the son’s invention of the world’s first ‘*dictionaray*’:

No, the horrifying conviction comes when he tells me about some writing project he's begun elaborating and proceeds to read it aloud to me over the phone. It is a work of lexicography devoted to the buried life of anagrams and homophones, each word with its own idiosyncratic definition, a dictionary, yes, as he is pleased to declare: the world's first English dictionary. It would be a verbal laboratory, a dictionary testamentary to the way the ray leaves its mark in everyday language, a vocabulary that might constitute a new species of bestiary, and generate an altogether other estuary English.
(121)

The dictionary, 'this new English dictionary on hysterical principles' (144), begins with the letter A for 'Airy, Awry, Anniversary, Anteriority, Arraign, Arrange', filling 22 pages of *Quilt*. Mad and maddening, it is impossible thereafter not to hear or see the ray in rain, *in medias res* (137), the middle things become the middle rays, reified: the ray realising language. Bion writes about the way that words and ideas come to be 'constantly conjoined' in a person's mind as the result of emotional experience, enabling meaning to accrete in and around words. Words stabilise meaning not because there is any necessary connection between signifier and signified but because the work of naming is the psychical act upon which meaning is based; in the terminology of the Grid, it is the 'definitory hypothesis':

Once the name has been given and the scattering thereby prevented, meaning can begin to accumulate.
(EoP:88)

In a poignant section in *Learning from Experience*, Bion describes this process in detail in regard to the word, 'daddy':

Let us suppose that the infant repeats an emotional experience in which the following elements are constantly conjoined; the sight of a man, a sense of being loved by the man, a sense of wanting the man, an awareness of the repetition of a phrase, by the mother, of 'That's Daddy.' 'Da, da, da' says the child. 'That's right; Daddy,' says the mother. From the emotional experience the infant abstracts certain elements, what they are depending partly on the infant; these abstracted elements are given a name 'Daddy' in other situations in which the same elements appear to be conjoined; thus a vocabulary is established. This is not a description of fact; I give it the status of a model from which I abstract a theory and expect to find that it is a representation to which some realisation corresponds. The theory I abstract is: 'Daddy' is the name of a hypothesis.
(LfE: 66)

The death of the father threatens to send this process into reverse, to undo meaning, words, the constant conjunction of elements around the idea and the language and the body of the father. The scaffold seems to figure ambivalently the mechanism that enables meaning to accumulate, the constant conjunction of words and meaning that I also liken to the *potence*, the French word used by Perec²¹ for the first words in a crossword that are also a gib, or a gallows. Semantically, excarnation suggests itself an antonym to *incarnation*; the ‘word made flesh’ through the incarnation of Christ giving way to its opposite, which would be... what? The flesh made word? The body placed outside of itself, exo-skeletally, a literal/literary instance of projection? At the lychgate, however, the body has already gone: all that remains is the scaffolding, and ‘already it is so long ago that few locals can easily picture the church without its parergonal complement’ (60). That which is secondary, the scaffold, is all that remains: excarnation suggested by an exoskeleton. This section is followed by the first of the book’s statements of literature:

Excarnation is literature. Its music strips you. Literature is excarnation.
(62)

Quilt makes a number of statements about literature itself, both in the novel as well as the afterword. Some, but not all of these, are explicitly voiced through the character of the son and his narration. Indeed, it is hard not to recall Jonathan Culler’s comments, quoted by Royle in ‘Even the Title’, in which he provides a narratological/analytic gloss on Royle’s more diffuse evocation of a literary ‘telepathy’ as the ‘extradiegetic homodiegetic narrator display[ing] special knowledge’²². The declaration that ‘excarnation is literature [...] literature is excarnation’ might be re-worded in Bionian terms to the effect that literature enables the *realisation of a pre-conception*: it resonates with or realises an intuition and enables a transformation of evolving reality, O, along the frontier of the contact-barrier. Royle’s formulation additionally suggests a negative aspect, that which Bion might call its ‘column 2’ aspect²³, since the model of excarnation and a ‘stripping’ effected by literature implies that something is lost – changing the metaphor slightly, a denudation – rather than added.

²¹ See discussion of the French word, *potence*, in chapter two, in relation to Georges Perec.

²² Royle, “Even the Title: On the State of Narrative Theory Today.”

²³ See chapter three for a fuller discussion of the column 2 formulation.

The scaffold – not strictly a necessary part of excarnation, but foregrounded in *Quilt* – suggests that the vulnerability and exposure that is at the heart of an experience of literature can be mitigated in phantasy by the idea of external structure which does not prevent excarnation, but safeguards the exo-/endo- distinction: an outside *and* an inside. The role of the scaffolding in Royle's formulation of literature might be likened to the self-binding of Odysseus in order both to experience and withstand the music of the Sirens. Bion is deeply alert to the implicit use of models to describe emotional states and psychical processes. His formulation of the container-contained model for learning and growth is derived in part from the ubiquity of conventional statements that model psychical pain as being 'in' something else:

If a patient says he cannot take something in, or the analyst feels he cannot take something in, he implies a container and something to put in it. The statement that something cannot be taken in must not therefore be dismissed as a mere way of speaking.
(EoP: 6)

He returns repeatedly to imagery and phantasy in which visual and verbal descriptions of scaffolding, carapaces, shells, and other exoskeletonous structures feature prominently, not least in his own descriptions of his war experiences and his development of the Grid, which provides a 'mental climbing-frame' (TWT: 5) for psychoanalysts. There is a tension, he suggests, in the process of ideation that always risks closing the mind to new and disturbing thoughts, and the necessity of having to 'think again':

Falling back on metaphor, one could say that when we secrete an idea, or when we produce a theory, we seem at the same time to lay down chalky material, we become calcified, the idea becomes calcified, and then you have another impressive caesura which you can't break out of.
(Ital: 11)

It is a question, for Bion, of the necessary modulation between security and insecurity that a process of creation requires. The scaffolding in *Quilt* is a complex, undecidable figure that simultaneously exposes the body to being stripped, and reinforces the body that it surrounds. It can also subject the body within to an unbearable pressure, prove too mighty a shell. The motif of 'a house bigger than a heart' appears on a number of occasions in *Quilt*, seeming to allude to the way that poetical refuge is sometimes inadequate against reality, as well as refiguring the role of the rays within the father's

house, with their pools and pumps, as an artificial heart installed to replace ‘the heart pulverised, faked within, beyond repair’:

Sometimes a house is bigger than a heart, an apparently crazy thought, scarcely stands to irreason: a house is always bigger. But the thinker of the heart knows that in its pull, voracity, embrace and engulfing power it is at least as colossal as the mouth: it sucks up an ocean, casts out decades, burns down at a quiver forest after forest, searing soaring seeking or holding onto its prey, its inseparable maker, in a valley of kings of its own making. But sometimes a house is bigger. You can huff and you can puff but the walls won’t give, making the heart collapse, taking it all in at its own pace, a matter of a minute or a year and the house has prised open the heart and built itself so big inside it sprawls out finally standing alone with the heart pulverised, faked within, beyond repair.
(76)

Later on, the narrator declares:

There is a new literature. It does something new with people. It has different slownesses and spectralities. It celebrates nanothinking.
(82)

‘Nanothinking’ appears in Royle’s essay, ‘Even the Title’, where it appears alongside the related word *nanoment*, ‘the literary slowing down of the moment in order to be faithful to its quickness, a written testimony to what might be called the quick fiction of every moment’. Where the nanoment is the ‘art of [...] taking the moment to pieces’, nanothinking evokes, I suggest, the detailed and precarious attentiveness that enables the new thought to come into being. Bion quotes John Keats’ famous statement on ‘negative capability’, that capacity to be ‘in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (A&I: 125). It is the frame of mind able and willing to receive the ‘wild thought’, the thought without a thinker (TWT: 27). The new thought is not a *fait accompli*: it requires a mind – one or several – able to receive and sustain it. What kind of mind is this? It is, perhaps, the mind that dreams:

We might get a clue [to the question of the wild thought] by wondering in what frame of mind or in what conditions this wild thought turned up and became enmeshed in our method of thinking. It could be that it seemed to occur to us when we were asleep. I am using this expression, ‘when we were asleep’, because it is a state of mind with which most people think they are familiar, so we can start with this somewhat familiar idea.
(TWT: 27)

Bion suggests that people often dismiss dreams from the altered vantage of the waking state: “Well, of course, I had a dream – but then, it was only a dream”. Freud, he writes, ‘was one of these peculiar people who seemed to think that dreams are worthy of further consideration’ (TWT: 28). Like Coleridge’s ‘Person from Porlock’, the waking state tends to interrupt the receptivity of the dreaming mind, yet some aspect of dreaming, Bion contends, remains active even while awake. Dream is nevertheless only one word – the most familiar – to describe the variegated states of mind in which the new thought can develop. Elsewhere, he writes:

The night, the dream, is a ‘roughness’ between the smooth polished consciousness of daylight; in that ‘roughness’ an idea might lodge.
(MotF: 268)

The roughness of the dreaming mind suggests a nanoscopic terrain in which a wilder, ‘smaller’ kind of thinking takes place, a thinking not quite worthy of the name – wayward and untutored, yet unconsciously etymological; the mind of portmanteau and atrocious puns; tmesis and expletive infixation – but nevertheless vital in the creation of new ideas which would find no place in a formal taxonomy. Bion does, nevertheless, attempt one:

In case one of these strays comes along, I think I shall try to be prepared for its reception by arranging certain categories that might be suitable for placing the stray in a temporary – what? It is difficult to find the word for it. I do not find that the vocabulary that is available to me is very suitable for the purposes for which I want it just now, so I am going to call it a ‘box’. The first box I am thinking of is really not suitable for anything so ephemeral as what I usually call a thought, namely, something that is physical; I shall call it a ‘beta-element’. I don’t know what that means and I don’t know what it is, and as it hasn’t turned up I am still ignorant. But anyway, there it is, in case that strange creature should exist and should it swim into my ken.
(TWT: 29)

A Bionian nanothinking aims at sustaining the longer-term project of bringing the new idea to a timely maturation that can be foreclosed by premature and excessive scrutiny:

So you are always under pressure prematurely and precociously to produce your idea. Poor little thing! Pull it up by the roots and have a look at it – it hasn’t got a chance. So you have to act as a sort of parent to the idea – protect it and give it a chance to grow in spite of these pressures; you have to be able to tolerate this state of ignorance.
(Tav: 23)

‘A sort of parent to the idea’, the writer is cast *in loco parentis*. The final scene of *Quilt* evokes the possibility that the son has undergone not only a breakdown, but a sea-change: that he has in fact become a ray, transubstantiated from human to manta, a wholly efficient transformation with no remainder. Arriving back in the country from the airport, his partner returns to the house, finding not disarray but its eerie opposite: an array of rays, now multiple. The original four in the dining room are supplemented by a further installation of eagle rays in the drawing room. But she writes: ‘Everyone knows. This is no whodunit’ (147), as she surveys the scene with tears in her eyes, and heads upstairs. The parents’ bedroom is the stage for a kind of final-primal scene, in which the achievement of parenthood is the birth of a uniquely fabulous creature:

As I opened the door of his parents’ room the light seemed at once to stream in and hold. Tears were running down my face. It was a translucent cave. [...] The sky had disappeared. It was a manta, the biggest ray, the strangest thing I had ever seen in a house.
(148)

The novel’s resolution is also a ray-solution: dissolving and resolving the son, who does not reappear after his confession that he has been ‘making it up as [he] went along’, improvising the dictionaray, *ex tempore*, giving his language over wholly to the morphemic music of the ray as it appears insistently, repeatedly, within the fabric of the English language. In this final scene, the son has possibly fallen out of the novel, beyond language: psychotic, perhaps, or dead, his partner looking ‘for some kind of note, a letter, the briefest message’, but ‘no sign of anything anywhere’ (149). Alternatively he has become the very thing that he has been identified with – his father, the ray, father-as-ray – through the mechanisms of a spectacular transformation in hallucinosis or in O.

In the undecidability of its outcome, the ending of *Quilt* recalls the final scene in Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *The Yellow Wallpaper*, where the female narrator, subjected to a brutally restrictive rest-cure, becomes one with the woman ‘trapped’ in the wallpaper, going round the room in circles. *Quilt*, which ends not with the curious scene of the parents’ bedroom, but with its afterword, closes similarly with a gesture of narrative circling. ‘In the middle of the night the phone rings, over and over...’ (159). But unlike Perkins Gilman’s tale, the ending of *Quilt* is more equivocal with regard to its central character’s prospects. The gesture that brings the novel full circle seems

rather to inaugurate the possibility of a new cycle of transformation leading to a progressively fuller integration of the emotional experience that is at its heart.

For Bion, it is the ‘adequacy of the circle’s diameter’ that makes circularity in thought permissible, the ‘sufficiency of experience’ that enables meaning to develop. As such, the novel (and the ray pool) can be conceived as a space of play, a containing space in which grief itself undergoes a transformation. But it is also a birthing pool for the emergence of the new idea: *Quilt* is richly generative in terms of the thinking of new ideas for literary theory. Eschewing the word, ‘theory’, Bion described his own theory-making as transformation:

The accounts that I have given, and the one that I am about to give, might be described as ‘theories’ of what took place. In view of the associations that belong to the term ‘theory’ I prefer the term ‘transformation’.
(Trans: 58)

Quilt performs, I suggest, a number of different kinds of transformations of the emotional experience of grief, staging the complete range of transformations described by Bion. The novel installs a number of identifications – father identified with ray, the son identified with the father – which exemplifies the kind of transference transformation that Bion described as ‘rigid-motion’. It also does something more complex, more ‘mad’, in its development and perseveration of the ray theme: projective transformation. The son’s encroaching breakdown entails explicitly hallucinatory aspects (transformation in hallucinosis), and suggests that what the partner encounters in the novel’s dénouement may be something too mad to describe, a psychotic reality. But it also holds open the possibility that the son has been transformed in some ineffable way. Even for Bion, words fail to describe adequately the experience of the transformation in O, which comes at the end of his taxonomy:

To rigid motion transformations, projective transformations, transformations in hallucinosis, I shall now add transformations in O. That is to say I propose to extend the significance of O to cover the domain of reality and ‘becoming’. Transformations in O contrast with other transformations in that the former are related to growth in becoming and the latter to growth in ‘knowing about’ growth; they resemble each other in that ‘growth’ is common to both.
(Trans: 156)

The transformation in O involves more than 'knowing about' reality; it entails becoming who one is. Of O, he writes: 'the most, and the least that the individual person can do is be it' (Trans: 140).

Chapter Nine

Dream I Tell You: Bion's *A Memoir of the Future*

[Freud] took up only the negative attitude, dreams as 'concealing' something, not the way in which the *necessary* dream is *constructed*.
(Cog: 33)

I think it is good to give your imagination an airing – never mind how ridiculous, stupid or intolerable it is. I am not talking about undisciplined, rhapsodical display of just saying anything that comes into your mind. At the same time I do not want to be limited by having to be scientific, precise and exact.
(CW 15: 50–51)

In the last years of his life, Bion wrote his strange *magnum opus*, *A Memoir of the Future*¹. Initially published in three parts between 1975 and 1979 (the year of Bion's death), it was supplemented by a key/index section (completed by Francesca Bion) in 1981, and finally published in a single edition in 1991. Part-autobiography, part-Victorian melodrama, part-dream, the *Memoir* is a disturbing and unclassifiable piece of writing that roves indeterminately between the domains of creative and critical writing. Strange, lengthy, repetitive – replete with idiosyncrasies and personal references – the *Memoir* was dismissed with some embarrassment by many of Bion's peers as evidence of his senility, and it has remained relatively neglected in the nearly forty years since its original publication (with some notable exceptions within the psychoanalytic community, such as Grotstein, Meltzer, and Sandler²). Since 2010, Meg Harris Williams' *Bion's Dream: A Reading of the Autobiographies*, has provided an artistic reading³. More recently, there have been stirrings of critical interest in the *Memoir* by Jacobus⁴, ffytch⁵, and Tarantelli⁶.

¹ Wilfred Bion, *A Memoir of the Future* (London: Karnac, 1991). Subsequent page references in this chapter are to this edition.

² The Brazilian psychoanalyst Paulo Cesar Sandler is in the process of publishing a three-volume 'appreciation' of the *Memoir*; only the first of these has been published to date (London: Karnac, 2015).

³ Described as a 'writer and visual artist with a lifelong psychoanalytic education; her mother was Martha Harris of the Tavistock Clinic, and her stepfather Donald Meltzer' (Harris Williams, 2010: ix).

⁴ Mary Jacobus, *The Poetics of Psychoanalysis: In the Wake of Klein* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵ Nuno Torres and R. D. Hinshelwood, eds., *Bion's Sources: The Shaping of His Paradigms* (London: Routledge, 2013).

My intention in this chapter is to continue the work of exploring *A Memoir of the Future* from a literary and creative perspective via a discussion of the book's major themes: dream, war, death, and the birth of the mind. The *Memoir* can be seen as Bion's 'dream book', recalling the name given to Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams*⁷. In very different ways, both books elaborate a theory of dreams and involve a self-analysis. Bion's experience of war also looms large across the pages of the *Memoir*: the 'story' recounts the lives of a fractious group of characters during a time of war that seems to reference both the First and Second World Wars, and includes vignettes of his war experiences (especially the case of the injured private, Sweeting) recognisable from his other autobiographical works: *War Memoirs 1917–1919*, *The Long Week-End*, and *All My Sins Remembered*. Bion's 'deaths' – the one to come and the psychical 'death' that he describes having experienced during the war – haunt the text, alongside the fantastical *mise-en-scène* of his own birth, as well as the birth of mind that is the result of the central group's growing capacity to give birth to the thought without a thinker. It is impossible within the scope of this chapter to do justice to the *Memoir* in all of its bewildering range and provocation. Nevertheless, I hope to contribute to the re-integration of Bion's neglected text and draw attention to Bion's interest as a creative writer.

Dreams proliferate in *A Memoir of the Future*: characters go to sleep and wake up within their own (or someone else's) dream: there are dreams within dream, dreams recounted and experienced, dreams of psychoanalysis and writing, and characters whose dreams are disturbed by unconscious parts of their own self. The first volume ('The Dream') opens with an unnamed narrator exhausted from an over-full night of dreaming:

I am tired. It is quite bad enough having a full day's schedule without having a full night's programme too. I do not remember what happened anyway. Something about reversed perspective. I was writing something about it.
(3)

The narrator's 'reversed perspective' recalls the mechanism used by patients to 'preserve a static hallucination' (EoP: 60) rather than countenance a new point of view.

⁶ Howard B. Levine and Giuseppe Civitarese, eds., *The W. R. Bion Tradition: Lines of Development – Evolution of Theory and Practice over the Decades* (London: Karnac, 2016).

⁷ All references in this chapter are to SE 4 and SE 5 except where specified as 'ID', which refers to the new translation by J. A. Underwood, published as *Interpreting Dreams*, 2006.

He gives the example of the popular visual illusions that can be seen in two ways (e.g. the silhouette of two faces, or a vase) as a model for the way that the discovery of the selected fact crystallises the moment in which a reversed perspective becomes possible. The beginning of the *Memoir* is an invitation to observe dreaming 'from the inside out':

Suppose I used my alimentary canal as a sort of telescope. I could get down to the arse and look up at the mouth full of teeth and tonsils and tongue. Or rush up to the top end of the alimentary canal and watch what my arse-hole was up to. Rather amusing really. It depends what my digestive tract felt about having me scampering up and down the gut all night.

(3)

Whose dream are we observing in the *Memoir*? In the prologue, it is the narrator who wakes up after a dream, wondering what Alice has been doing in her sleep. Alice appears in the first chapter, where, like her Wonderland namesake, she is 'rubbing her eyes and pushing away the shower of leaves which had awoken her: 'I had such a queer dream about the Empress of India'' (7). Unlike Carroll's Alice, she awakes *into* a dream in which an enemy invasion is on the horizon. Her maid, Rosemary, begs to be allowed to rush away to the final train. Imperious and complacent, the upper classes refuse to run away, assuming that their world of privilege and ease will be retained even under enemy rule. 'Now I remember a bit of a dream about violence and murder,' Bion writes in the prologue: 'Something about Albert and Victoria' (3). Bion's dream of the dreaming Alice depicts the world into which Bion was born: one of privilege and class distinctions fuelled by colonial expansion in India, and sustained by the public school education system. In the scenes that follow, that world is turned on its head, with master and servant changing places (Alice becomes Rosemary's servant on the basis of her sexual submission), and the men of the old order (chiefly Roland and Robin) unable to resist the character of 'Man', who has a gun.

The prologue announces that 'this is a fictitious account of psychoanalysis including an artificially constructed dream' (4). This remarkable statement signals a dream-project markedly different to Freud's. Writing in his journal in 1959, Bion reflected that Freud 'took up only the negative attitude, dreams as 'concealing' something, not the way in which the necessary dream is constructed' (Cog: 33). The necessary dream, Bion suggests, is the one that enables the subject to integrate more of their reality through alpha-function. For Bion, reality is not chiefly apprehended by the cultivation of

conscious thought but by expanding the mind's capacity to 'dream', the work of the mind that he initially calls 'dream-work- α ' (Cog: 62) and later, alpha-function. The figure of the dream (Fr. *la rêve*) is also at work in the mother's reverie – her capacity to receive and transform the infant's feelings – setting dream-work- α developmentally in train. James Grotstein has described the role of the analyst as a 'dreaming co-pilot' who enters the analysand's 'continuing dream [...] in order to complete the dream'⁸. Row C of the Grid ('dream-thoughts, dreams and myths') is 'intended for categories of sensuous, usually visual images such as those appearing in dreams, myths, narratives, hallucinations' (TP: 3). The unsaturated dream-thought is the basis for creative dream-work that enables the development of meaning and further abstraction.

Thus the dream takes on a very different role within Bion's metapsychology. For both Freud and Bion, dreams are the object of psychoanalytic enquiry. But unlike Freud, Bion sees the dream as the very location of psychoanalytic work rather than simply an artifact of psychical process. The Italian psychoanalyst Antonino Ferro writes 'in praise of row C', characterising psychoanalysis 'as a particular form of literature'⁹ in which both participants of analysis contribute to the narration – sequencing and elaboration – of the 'narrative derivatives' of alpha-elements that can take place in row C. This leads to a very different conception of Freud's term, 'dream-work':

But *Freud* meant by dream-work that unconscious material, which would otherwise be perfectly comprehensible, was transformed into a dream, and that the dream-work needed to be undone in order to make the incomprehensible dream comprehensible [...]. I mean that the conscious material has to be subjected to dream-work to render it fit for storing, selection, and suitable for transformation [...]
(Cog: 43)

While Bion's characterisation of Freud is correct, there are hints of a train of thought similar to Bion's within *The Interpretations of Dreams*, which nevertheless comes to be dominated by the theory of repression and the dream as wish-fulfilment. Dreams, he writes, are 'not only reproductive but productive' (SE 4: 84), and can be 'excretions of

⁸ James Grotstein, *A Beam of Intense Darkness: Wilfred Bion's Legacy to Psychoanalysis* (London: Karnac, 2007), 286.

⁹ Antonino Ferro, *Psychoanalysis as Therapy and Storytelling*, trans. Philip Slotkin (London: Routledge, 2006), 27.

thoughts that have failed to germinate'¹⁰, a comment that comes close to Bion's articulation of wild thoughts as seeds seeking germination (MotF: 224).

It can be helpful to make a few further remarks of comparison between Freud's and Bion's 'dream-books'. The *Interpretation of Dreams* is Freud's founding document of psychoanalysis, marking the decisive moment, in his early forties, that his researches into psychology and hysteria took on the status of a new clinical field. As he candidly admitted, his book had a 'further subjective significance for me personally – a significance I only grasped after I completed it. It was, I found, a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to father's death – that is to say, to the most important event, the most poignant loss, of a man's life' (SE 4: xxvi). The work is notable for its inclusion of Freud's own dreams (such as the dream of Irma's injection) and personal analysis.

By contrast, *A Memoir of the Future* was written in the closing years of Bion's life. Like *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Bion's dream-book is a deeply personal, auto-analytic document that enacts a kind of 'wild' psychoanalysis in concert with the exposition of theory. What differs, I suggest, is the relationship to writing and literature. Bion makes clear that the *Memoir* is a 'fictitious account of an artificially constructed dream', making dream itself a kind of mode or genre. The *Memoir* is beset by the 'shadowy figures' of 'Science Fiction' (36) and the proliferation of characters (such as Sherlock Holmes) who lament the inadequacy of their imagination by dreamers on whom their existence depends:

SHERLOCK (to Watson) Has he gone? It's humiliating to think that dreams are at the mercy of people who dream.
(96)

The phrase, 'dream-imagination', appears seven times in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Thereafter, it disappears entirely from Freud's terminology, while the related term, 'dream-work', remains in use for the rest of Freud's career. Freud attributes the term to K. A. Scherner, who theorised dreams as the product of dream-imagination: a faculty that, freed of waking rational thought, was available for the creation of dreams charged with symbolic significance. Freud's reference to the potentially productive quality of dreams comes in a long passage devoted to Scherner, whom Freud credits as having

¹⁰ ID: 92. In SE 4: 79, this is given as 'Dreams are excretions of thoughts that have been stifled at birth.' For the purpose of my discussion, I prefer the alternative translation.

recognised the psychical (rather than purely mechanical) contribution to dreams. A special faculty of mind, the dream-imagination ‘never depicts things completely, but only in outline’, and ‘does not halt [...] at the mere representation of an object [but] is under an internal necessity to involve the dream-ego to a greater or less extent with the object and thus produce an *event*’ (SE 4: 84-85). I suggest that the ‘dream-imagination’ has similarities to Bion’s conception of the dream-work- α , active equally during waking hours and sleep; the part of the mind that draws, as for Scherner, on ‘somatic stimuli’ in order to generate unsaturated dream-images (or Ferro’s ‘narrative derivatives’¹¹) that are not merely representative, but actively creative. ‘For Scherner,’ Freud writes, ‘dream-formation begins at the point where others believe it dries up’ (ID: 98).

Scherner’s contribution is important to Freud’s thinking on dreams, though subject to Freud’s characteristic ambivalence to his intellectual forebears (‘I have held fast to the habit of always studying things themselves before looking for information about them in books, and therefore I was able to establish the symbolism of dreams for myself before I was led to it by Scherner’s work on the subject’ (SE 14: 19)). Introducing Scherner’s book as ‘written in a turgid and high-flown style [...] inspired by an almost intoxicated enthusiasm for his subject which is bound to repel anyone who cannot share in his fervour’ (SE 4: 83), he will, however, subsequently credit Scherner as ‘the discoverer of dream-symbolism’, noting that ‘psycho-analysis has confirmed Scherner’s findings, though it has made material modifications in them’ (SE 15: 152). Where Freud repudiates Scherner’s argument is in replacing ‘dream-*imagination*’ with the idea of a ‘dream-*work*’ in the service of repression. Bion’s contention that Freud ‘took up only the negative attitude, dreams as ‘concealing’ something’ draws attention to the path not taken by Freud, in placing repression at the centre of his theory.

In the *Memoir*, there are a number of scenes in which what is most striking is Bion’s permissive approach to material that is vulgar, bawdy, or low-brow. Indeed, much of the book’s capacity to shock and disturb comes from the apparent incongruence between the ostensibly ‘respectable’ Bion – a former President of the British Psychoanalytic Society – and the ‘new’ Bion who seemed to break with everything that had come before. Where earlier Bion writes tersely and in numbered paragraphs, late Bion is prolix. Sex, rarely mentioned in his earlier work, is everywhere in the *Memoir*: from

¹¹ Ferro, *Psychoanalysis as Therapy and Storytelling*, 27.

Alice's 'rape' by the farm-hand, Tom, and the discussions of Rosemary's mother, a prostitute. Though Edna O'Shaughnessy finds continuities between the phases of Bion's work, she finds the *Memoir* 'less disciplined', 'too open, too pro- and e-vocative, and weakened by riddling meanings', with a tendency of 'sliding between ideas rather than linking them'¹². Meltzer and Harris Williams, writing together in 1985, described the general reaction to the *Memoir* as 'one of shocked rejection':

'He was a great man, but he had no experience of writing fiction', a well-known literary critic is reported to have said, declining to review the books.¹³

The recoil of the *Memoir*'s early readers is understandable, especially given the way in which the work appeared. Bion's three volumes of (more or less) 'straight' autobiography had not been published at the time when the first volumes of the *Memoir* appeared, and much of the autobiographical detail becomes clearer when the *Memoir* is read in conjunction with these. Moreover, Bion had surprised the British psychoanalytic community by resigning his positions of authority in favour of moving to Los Angeles (at the age of 71) to begin anew with clients and teaching. Meltzer and Harris William note wryly that when 'the slim volumes of the *Memoir* began to appear in their shoddy and error-ridden Brazilian edition (1975, 1977) [...], it seemed that perhaps Dr Bion had not left us but, rather, had been kidnapped and was being tortured or degraded, or perhaps was just becoming senile' (521).

An instance of *Memoir*'s strangeness is given in the following example. In an early chapter, a character called 'Captain Bion' (who appears only once in the *Memoir*) launches into a strange soliloquy:

CAPTAIN BION I stared at the speck of mud trembling on the straw. I stared through the front flap at the clods of earth spouting up all around us. [...] I got out and hovered about six feet above us. I knew 'they' would... and saw trees as wood walking. How they walked – walk! walk! they went like arfs arfing. Arf arf together, arfing's the stuff for me, if it's not a Rolls Royce, which I'd pick out for choice. [...] Cooh! Wot 'appened then? 'E talked a lot more about Jesus and dog and man and then 'e sez, all sudden like, Throw away the uvver crutch! Cooh! Wot 'appened then? 'E fell on his arse. And 'is Arse wuz angry and said, Get off my arse! You've done nothing but throw shit at me all yore life and you

¹² Edna O'Shaughnessy, 'Whose Bion?', *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 86 (2005): 1524–5.

¹³ Donald Meltzer, *Sincerity and Other Works: Collected Papers of Donald Meltzer* (London: Karnac, 1994), 546.

expects England to be my booty! Boo-ootiful soup; in a shell-hole in Flanders Fields. Legs and guts... must 'ave bin twenty men in there – Germ'um and frogslegs and all starts! We didn't 'alf arf I can tell you. Let bruvverly luv continue. No one asked 'im to fall-in! No one arsed 'im to come out either—come fourth, we said, and E came fifth and 'e didn't ½ stink. Full stop! 'e said. The parson 'e did kum, 'e did kwat. 'E talked of Kingdom Come. King dumb come. (54)

Elements of Captain Bion's remarkable monologue become clearer in the light of the autobiographies. Bion's experiences as a tank command officer impressed him deeply; at twenty years old, he found himself in command of working-class soldiers whose voices he ventriloquises, and witness to innumerable horrors. The song of the mock turtle in *Alice in Wonderland* ('beautiful soup') becomes a grim elegy to the fallen men of Flanders Field. 'Arf arfer' recalls the young Bion, who confused the 'Our Father' of the Lord's Prayer with an ever-present bogeyman called 'Arf Arfer', threatening punishments for childhood crimes (LWE: 9). In this scene, 'arfing' has been transformed into a verb connoting the monstrous march of dead soldiers and the 'trees as wood walking'. The demotic word play, proliferation of voices and disarming address recall the experiments of other experimental Modernist writers.

Bion was evidently aware of these trends, mentioning Joyce and Pound on several occasions. In a densely punning, allusive passage, a 'Voice (out of the smoke)' seems to allude to *Finnegans Wake* ('Fin I gain' (135)), alongside Marlowe and Coleridge. Throughout the *Memoir* there is a pressure on language that seems to signal both the irruption of trauma and the possibility of language giving way to new ideas, the thoughts without a thinker. When the character 'Half Awake' launches into a stream of bad puns ('Toot and come again'), 'Paranoid Schizoid' complains:

PARANOID-SCHIZOID I can't stand this damned noise. It is like being bombarded with chunks of feeble puns, bits of Shakespeare, imitations of James Joyce, vulgarisations of Ezra Pound, phoney mathematics, religion, mysticism, visions of boyhood, second childhood and visions of old age. Possibly, it could be old age itself. (51)

Matt ffytch has commented directly on Bion's apparent 'preference for demotic, or 'low-brow' genres of writing'¹⁴, and Meltzer and Harris Williams describe *Memoir* as a

¹⁴ Torres and Hinshelwood, *Bion's Sources: The Shaping of His Paradigms*, 175.

‘Shavian, Socratic semi-novel, semi-drama’. In *Bion’s Dream*, Harris Williams suggests that it was Bion’s intention to write a ‘pornographic novel’¹⁵, while Francesca Bion describes *Memoir* as a ‘psycho-analytically orientated autobiographical fantasy’ (LWE: 7). Part of what is disturbing about the *Memoir* is that it resists expectations of genre and readability. Who is the *Memoir for*? In an epilogue that seems to recall the autobiography of another war writer, Robert Graves¹⁶, Bion writes:

All my life I have been imprisoned, frustrated, dogged by common-sense, reason, memories, desires and – greatest bug-bear of all – understanding and being understood. This is an attempt to express my rebellion, to say ‘Good-bye’ to all that.
(578)

Reading the *Memoir* in terms of dream enables the reader to account for its excessiveness and repetition, for the absurdity, word play, and the myriad cast of characters and part-characters, and characters drawn from other stories (such as Sherlock and Mycroft). *A Memoir of the Future* can be boring; it does not always ‘read well’. Like the critic who refused to review it, the reader may be put off by long passages in which characters circle endlessly in fractious discussions of morality, mathematics and psychoanalysis. *Memoir*’s readability brings into question the literary and aesthetic value of dream. If, as for Freud, the recounted dream is ‘brief, meagre and laconic’ (SE 4: 279) compared to the latent thoughts from which the dream is spun, then Bion’s dream suggests a reversed perspective: the reader encounters the experience of the dream ‘from the inside out’ in all its repetition and absurdity.

The first part of the title of this chapter references the book of the same name by French writer and theorist, Hélène Cixous. *Dream I Tell You* is a sample collection of around a hundred ‘dreams’ derived from Cixous’ long-standing practice of recording her dreams in a bed-side notepad. A ‘book of dreams without interpretation’¹⁷, it offers a provocation to the literary critic: presented ‘in their entirety, unpolished, innocent’¹⁸, Cixous’ dreams document the mental products of an artist without laying any claim artistry, describing her dreams as ‘larva’ that she could, ‘by brooding on them have

¹⁵ Meg Harris Williams, *Bion’s Dream: A Reading of the Autobiographies* (London: Karnac, 2010), 30.

¹⁶ Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Cassell & Company, 1957).

¹⁷ Hélène Cixous, *Dream I Tell You*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic, *The Frontiers of Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 7.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

transformed [...] into butterflies'¹⁹. As literary objects, the dreams are of equivocal merit (they bear all the hallmarks of dreams: fragmented, nonsensical, with abrupt changes in place and mood), and as a reader it is unclear whether we should be impressed by the vividness or frequency of her dreams, or admire her discipline in writing them down (she notes that she has perhaps collected some ten thousand dreams in this way²⁰). Cixous' dreams are left instead as 'limbo things' that she does not seek to develop into the 'analysis and literature [she has] kept at arm's length'²¹. Bion is doing something very different: he is trying to 'construct' a dream that is 'necessary' to make sense of the events of his life as it draws to a close, but it is also an attempt to communicate, a 'public-ation' (Cog: 169²²). The artfulness of Bion's endeavour derives not from *Memoir's* verisimilitude to the dreams we remember in the daytime but from the attempt to find a form that can give birth to the thought without a thinker. He writes:

The night, the dream, is a 'roughness' between the smooth polished consciousness of daylight; in that 'roughness' an idea might lodge.
(268)

Meg Harris Williams invokes the idea of 'counterdreaming' in her poetic and theoretical appreciation of the *Memoir*. Elaborating on her term in his review of *Bion's Dream*, James Grotstein suggests that 'the task of *Memoir* [is] to 'counterdream'— that is, to 'undream' and then 'redream'' Bion's traumatic war experiences²³. One incident in particular stands out from the many scenes of death and carnage that Bion witnessed during the First World War. At the Battle of Amiens, a young tank gunner beside him called George Kitching²⁴ (whom Bion later calls 'Sweeting') is hit by a bomb that rips open his chest, leaving the heart exposed, and the boy complaining, bathetically, that he cannot cough. The young man pleads with Bion to write to his mother before dying. Bion writes about the event on no fewer than four occasions. A brief but politically angry account first appears in his war memoirs, written for his parents shortly after the war:

¹⁹ Ibid., 9.

²⁰ Ibid., 11.

²¹ Ibid.

²² See also chapter four where 'public-ation' is discussed in relation to B. S. Johnson.

²³ James Grotstein, 'Bion's Dream: A Reading of the Autobiographies (review)', *American Imago* 67, no. 3 (2010): 465.

²⁴ George Kitching lies buried in a British military cemetery in Namps-au-Val, France: <http://www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead/casualty/38294/KITCHING,%20G> [accessed 1 March 2016].

I mention it in such detail, horrible as it is, because it had a great effect on me. The look in his eyes was the same as that of a bird that has been shot – mingled fear and surprise.
(WM: 127)

In *The Long Week-End*, the scene appears again, this time marked sharply by his own self-loathing in memory of the anger and disgust he felt at the boy's entreaties: 'Sweeting, *please* Sweeting... please, *please* shut up' (LWE: 249). Later on he writes: 'And then I think he died. Or perhaps it was only me', declaring 'Sweeting. Gunner. Tank Corps. Died of Wounds. That, for him, was the end' (250). Sweeting is mentioned again briefly in *All My Sins Remembered*, under his real name, Kitching (AMSR: 44), and yet again in 'Amiens', a third-person account 'aroused by [a] train journey in France on August 3rd 1958' (WM: 214). Written forty years after the event, it provides the fullest and most devastating account of the death:

Bion was aware that Sweeting was trying to talk to him. Above the sound of the barrage it was impossible to hear any ordinary speech. Bending his ear as close as he could to Sweeting's moving lips, he heard him say, 'Why can't I cough, why can't I cough, sir? What's the matter, sir? Something has happened.'

Bion turned round and looked at Sweeting's side, and there he saw gusts of steam coming from where his left side should be. A shell splinter had torn out the left wall of his chest. There was no lung left there. Leaning back in the shell-hole, Bion began to vomit unrestrainedly, helplessly. Then, somewhat recovered, he saw the boy's lips moving again. His face was deadly pale and beaded with sweat. Bion bent his head so that his ear came as near as possible to Sweeting's mouth.

'Mother, Mother, write to my mother, sir, won't you? You'll remember her address, sir, won't you? 22 Kimberly Avenue, Halifax. Write to my mother –22 Kimberly Road, Halifax. Mother, Mother, Mother, Mother.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake shut up', shouted Bion, revolted and terrified.

[...]

He fell limply into Bion's arms, now no longer attempting to press himself into the hole. His face, ghastly white, turned up to the sky. The fog swirled as thickly as ever around them. Every moment they seemed to be bathed in showers of bright sparks of red-hot steel from the bursting shells.

Never have I known a bombardment like this, never, never—Mother, Mother, Mother—never have I known a bombardment like this, he thought. I wish he would shut up, I wish he would die. Why can't he die? Surely he can't go on living with a great hole torn in his side like that. (WM 255–256)

In her companion essay to Amiens, Parthenope Bion Talamo notes the way that ‘some episodes are carried over almost unchewed and apparently undigested into *A Memoir of the Future* [...] as though no further working-through were possible’ (WM: 309). It is a more compressed version of the Sweetening story that appears in the *Memoir*, spoken through the character ‘P.A.’, but three details are invariant: the gaping hole in the boy’s chest, his entreaties that Bion ‘write to [his] mother’, and Bion’s recoil and rejection:

P.A. A runner who was crouching beside me in a shell hole had his thoracic wall blown out, exposing his heart. He tried to look at the ghastly wound across which an entirely ineffectual field dressing dangled. ‘Mother, Mother – you’ll write to my Mother, sir, won’t you?’ ‘Yes, blast you,’ I said. If I could believe in God I would ask him to pardon me. ‘Dieu me pardonnera. C’est son métier.’ (256)

Bion marks the date of the Battle of Amiens – 8th August, 1918 – as the day that he ‘died’ (a month short of his 21st birthday), a date that is inscribed, moreover, not within the common era or the ‘year of our Lord’ but in ‘minus-K’, in a dimension of time that is ‘inchoate, it is not past’ (155). Minus-K appears in *Learning from Experience* as the reversal or dismantling of the K link, where ‘K’ stands for knowledge, or knowing. A relationship in K is one in which someone is ‘getting to know about’ someone or something else, and its reversal or negative implies a relationship of phantasied mastery over the object that is a species of false knowledge, not in the trivial sense of ‘getting the facts wrong’, but in the sense that the ‘facts’ that are ‘known’ (such as the date of 8th August, 1918) are substituted for the emotional experience itself. Knowledge, for Bion, is always in transit, a refuge but not a terminus:

P.A. [...] I regard any thing I ‘know’ as transitive theory – a theory ‘on the way’ to knowledge, but not *knowledge*. It is merely a ‘resting place’, a ‘pause’ where I can be temporarily free to be aware of my condition, however precarious that condition is. (462)

‘Of course,’ Carole Beebe Tarantelli writes, ‘we can take Bion’s assertion that he had died as a metaphor’. But to do so would not do justice to the meticulous way in which Bion used language: ‘Bion used language with utter precision, and he does not say that

he almost died, or that he felt as if he had died. He states that he died'²⁵. Sweeting's death 'kills' Bion because it is the occasion of an unmasterable trauma in which Bion's alpha-function – his ability to contain, make sense of, and process the event – failed him. The blasted container of Sweeting's thoracic wall is identified with Bion's mind:

P.A. I am sorry if I am rude; I didn't mean it. I use the saddest words in the language – 'I didn't mean it to happen.' They hang across the gaping wound of my mind like a ridiculous field dressing. August 8, 1918, that was.
(256)

The image of a man who cannot be alive with injuries of such severity who yet continues to talk ('why can't I cough, sir?') figures the uncanny horror of being dead and alive at the same time. Bion writes:

I would not go near the Amiens-Roye road for fear I should meet my ghost – I died there.
(257)

Figures of this post-dead state abound in the *Memoir*. The character of Roland is shot by Man, but later returns during the Party of Time's Past (406) which precedes the close of the second volume ('The Past Presented'):

PRIEST [...] One prophet said, 'The Kingdom of Heaven is within you'.

ROLAND Psycho-analysts deprecate these Kleinian statements.

ROBIN Good lord! Don't say you have psycho-analysts in Heaven.

ROLAND You rush to conclusions. I didn't say I was in Heaven – or Hell. I did say I was dead.

ROSEMARY I never regarded physical death as a necessary qualification for being dead.
(408)

The collected party find themselves on a train where they are required to change at Purgatory (418), which is 'some sort of Transit Camp' (423). The Ghost of Auser, one of Bion's fallen comrades, mistakes P.A., Bion's avatar, for the Ghost of P.A., who declares that 'when you knew me I was a ghost of myself – at Berles aux Bois. I loved

²⁵ Levine and Civitarese, *The W. R. Bion Tradition: Lines of Development – Evolution of Theory and Practice over the Decades*, 48.

you, but I couldn't save you' (423). Bion the soldier was already the 'ghost of himself' during the war, dead in mind while still alive, wearing his 'Hero dress' but secretly afraid of nervous breakdown, of going 'sane long before the war was over' like another soldier, Gates (423). A character called Beta identifies the 'alive dead' with *mindlessness*:

That includes the living who might as well be dead for all the thinking they do and the dead who remain obstinately alive long after it's time they were dead.
(59)

Bion depicts a kind of 'dinosaur mentality'²⁶ that threatens to turn the functions of the mind into a carapace that is, in fact, a kind of death-by-mindlessness. The characters of Albert Stegasaurus and Adolf Tyrannosaurus appear in a short early chapter, enacting the failed meeting of two rigid, 'saurian' minds who cannot receive each other's thoughts except as a kind of violent assault:

ADOLF [...] Ow! What's that? You've shoved your thoughts into me, you vile creature.
(84)

Images of saurian mentality appear throughout *Memoir*. In volume two, the character of Mycroft sings a bathetic ditty 'as the Saurian lay-a-thynkyng' to the dinosaur mind: 'prettily lay the thought in its shell' (353). A character called Alpha recalls Bion's description of his own situation as one 'loaded with honours and sunk without trace' prior to quitting his institutional seniority in England for a new life in California:

I knew a delightful old stegosaurus who thought he had found *the* answer to the tyrannosaurus. But the 'answer' was so successful that it turned him into a kind of tyrannosaurus itself and loaded him with such fame – not to mention exoskeleton – that he sank under its own weight. In fact, he was so loaded that the only trace of him left was his own skeleton.
(60)

It is the answer, the 'fact' in 'minus-K', that is, as Bion cites Blanchot, the '*malheur de la question*': the dead thought that kills the question. Established thinking poses a greater danger to the mind than the confusion and projection that occurs in the pre-thinking position of the paranoid-schizoid position, since it threatens to create a

²⁶ Harris Williams, *Bion's Dream: A Reading of the Autobiographies*, 29.

suffocating exoskeleton, a death-within-life, that entombs its wearer and entails an extinction analogous to that of the dinosaurs. And yet Bion remains hopeful that even the dinosaur mentality can, with effort, develop afresh the capacity for thinking:

Yes, but those same dead bones gave birth to a mind.
(60)

Sweeting's entreaty (to 'write to my mother') is what Bion, identified with him, cannot do. The writing *of* trauma that is a writing *to* the mother-mind (the exercise of alpha-function modelled originally on the mother's capacity for reverie) fails in this moment as Bion also 'failed' to contain Sweeting's confusion and distress. It is Bion's recoil – his anger and contempt for Sweeting, the failure of his fellow-feeling, more than the extremity of Sweeting's wounds – that is so profoundly traumatising. Bion cannot write to his 'mother' and is unable to bring to bear his alpha-function for either Sweeting or himself. In the aftermath of the event, he can only make successive attempts, even some forty years after the event, to attempt to integrate the experience or help him accede to what Bion ironically and ambivalently calls 'the dawn of oblivion' (the title of the third book of the *Memoir*). The word oblivion, it should be recalled, has its roots in the idea of forgetting. The post-traumatic writer seeks to create the artificially constructed, necessary dream: writing itself constructs the container or the apparatus for the psychical stuff that otherwise comes out, 'unchewed' in Bion Talamo's words, or as 'undigested facts' (beta-elements) in Bion's. 'I have to manufacture the apparatus as I proceed' (88), writes the character 'Bion' in a long monologue on writing in part one:

BION The whole of this book so far printed can be regarded as an artificial and elaborate construct. I myself, here introduced into the narrative, can be regarded as a construct, artificially composed with the aid of such artistic and scientific material as I can command and manipulated to form a representation of an author whose name appears on the book and now, for the second time, as a character in a work of fiction.
(88)

The *Memoir* is also, I suggest, a paradigmatic instance of what Edward Said, following Adorno, has called 'late style'. Said has characterised late style as 'a special ironic expressiveness well beyond the words and the situation'²⁷. In the final section of the

²⁷ Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006), xiii.

Memoir, Bion declares that it is his intention to ‘write a book unspoiled by any tincture of common-sense’ (578), but suspects that he will fail. Adorno declares that ‘in the history of art late works are the catastrophes’²⁸; we must nevertheless remain sensitive to the idiosyncrasies of that catastrophe in each case. Where, in Adorno’s study, Beethoven’s late works are characterised by the ‘abbreviation of his style’ (566), Bion’s late style achieves a prolixity notably absent from his earlier work. The short epilogue with which the ‘Dawn of Oblivion’ closed is signalled not once, but four times:

...& Epilogue
 ...Fugue
 ...Dona Es Requiem
 ...Many
 (578)

Death, of course, is never far away. As Adorno notes, death enters the scene in late style not ‘in a refracted mode, as in allegory’ (566), but as the limit of an exploded subjectivity that ‘disappears from the work of art into truth’. What is interesting with the *Memoir* is that it occupies the space between two different deaths – the death-in-life constituted by trauma, and the other, biological death, the death ‘of the future’ that is also the ‘dawn of oblivion’ in which traumatic material can be laid finally to rest. Bion is also alert to the *deadness* (if not death) of mind that can accompany advancing age. He describes the way that something like a ‘psychical osteo-arthritis’ (447) can develop as the mind becomes rigid and inflexible: ‘I borrow the terms from medical descriptions of arterial degeneration; there is reason to suppose some spiritual counterpart, some unwillingness to entertain new ideas, which is inseparable from advancing physical age’ (545).

Bion’s late writing should also alert us – if his laconic formulations in *Experiences in Groups* and the terse, almost programmatic style of *Learning from Experience* have not already done so – to the breadth and interest of his writing styles. In a similar vein, Freud’s status as a writer, though recognised in some measure during his lifetime²⁹, has undergone a significant re-appraisal by those, such as Patrick Mahoney³⁰, who have rightly drawn attention to Freud’s mastery of rhetoric and the productively circuitous

²⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Essays on Music* (London: University of California Press, 2002), 567.

²⁹ Freud was also awarded the Goethe Prize in Literature and was nominated several times, but was never awarded, the Nobel Prize for his contributions.

³⁰ Patrick Mahony, *Freud as a Writer (Expanded Edition)* (London: Yale University Press, 1987).

pathways of his thought. Freud, however, rarely strays from a tone of qualified authority – or, what often amounts to the same thing – a perhaps too-insistent sense of his humility in the face of received or anticipated responses to his conjectures³¹. Bion, by contrast, is frank in describing his difficulties in communicating his ideas, as when he writes: ‘I have experience to record, but how to communicate this experience to others I am in doubt; this book explains why’ (LfE: v). Like Freud, Bion communicates almost entirely through the written and spoken word, and yet neglects to attend directly to the question of writing throughout his career, though there are suggestive references to the role played by *words* in his characterisation of even the most rudimentary psychological particles, the beta-elements. The character ‘Du’ (an unborn, somatic aspect of Roland, who appears in ‘The Past Presented’, disturbing Roland’s sleep) evokes *Hamlet*³² in his reflection on the constraining relationship of words to the birth of a new thought:

Words; words; words have no right to be rigid definitory caskets preventing my birth. I have the right to exist without depending on a thinker thinking all day and night.
(276)

Like Melville’s *Bartleby*, Bion declares repeatedly that he would prefer not to write, but does so recognising the responsibility of the writer to ‘prevent someone who KNOWS from filling the empty space’ (578). If words risk being ‘rigid definitory caskets’, which are one kind of container, that can prevent the birth of the thought, the practice of writing itself can also be a way to hold open and sustain the possibility of thinking, a *containing* that is not a *closing*, a place where thoughts go not to die but to be born. The figure of birth is signalled in the opening chapter of the third and final section of the *Memoir*. A new character, Em-mature, begins:

This book is a psycho-embryonic attempt to write an embryo-scientific account of a journey from birth to death overwhelmed by pre-mature knowledge, experience, glory and self-intoxicating self-satisfaction.
(429)

³¹ A notable exception appears in his 1916 [1915] essay, ‘On Transience’, an abrupt tonal change marking the horror of WW1: ‘A year later the war broke out and robbed the world of its beauties.’ (SE 14: 307)

³² *Hamlet*, Act 2, Scene 2. William Shakespeare, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 666.

Em-mature (later 'Em') represents 'Embryonic Maturity', and is one of several pre- and post-natal facets of a central self that enact the life of Bion (and the character, 'Bion'). Em is joined by a host of others – including the ironical Pre-mature (who appears on one single occasion to interrupt Em with 'Get on with it – when were you born?' (430)), Twenty Months, Infancy, Eight Years, Twenty-Four Years, Thirty Years, Forty Years, Forty-Two Years (and so on), for the post-natals; along with Term, Four Somites, Somite Eighteen, and a chorus of Somites *en bloc* who speak with exasperation for the pre-natal group whose somatic, intra-uterine preferences threaten to be disregarded by the post-natals: 'We don't want a nipple! We want an erection!' (431). The caesura of birth provokes a new and uneasy relationship, meanwhile, between the two fledgling personalities of Mind and Body (this latter Em's sequel), who agree to call each other Psyche and Soma respectively and inaugurate an uneasy truce between their competing claims on knowledge:

EM Now you have muddled me. I shall be body; for ever I shall gird at your mind.
 MIND Hullo! Where have you sprung from?
 BODY What – you again? I am Body; you can call me Soma if you like. Who are you?
 MIND Call me Psyche – Psyche-Soma.
 BODY Soma-Psyche.
 MIND We must be related.
 BODY Never – not if I can help it.
 (433)

Bion emphasises repeatedly that the conventional date of our birth signals only very poorly the reality of our being born. Being born, for Bion, takes place at innumerable moments unregistered throughout the course of our lives – including our lives prior to being born. P.A. says:

I don't want to know your birthday because I am sure you will tell me a date which does *not* outrage ideas of genital intercourse, midwifery, surgery. What I want to know is, when was your character or personality born?
 (486)

In 'Caesura', Bion develops Freud's claim that 'there is much more continuity between intra-uterine life and the earliest infancy than the impressive caesura of the act of birth allows us to believe' (TP: 37). In determining our many births to various aspects of experience, we have to contemplate the possibility of reckoning with precursor, pre-

caesural states that bear witness to our history. Em-mature describes a pre-history of vision registered as pressure on the optic pits of the embryo:

EM I don't know when the amniotic pressure made my optic pits hurt; the stars were so brilliant, I kicked out.
(433)

The discussion between the different age-selves is a fractious, uneasy one, though P.A. thinks 'it might some day be possible for them all to be awake and carry on a fairly disciplined debate' (443). Most of the *Memoir* is structured as a series of group discussions (in book two, it is primarily the main characters of Alice, Rosemary, Roland, Robin and Man, along with Priest and P.A./Bion; in book three the group expands to include the pre- and post-natals), and it should not be forgotten that Bion began his psychiatric career with the study of the *group*. At the end of the first volume, 'Bion' declares that the 'idea of the individual being a 'group' – like Hobbes' idea of the group being an individual – could be an illuminating one' (215). The meeting of Bion's different age-selves effects a dramatisation of a psychoanalysis in which competing 'voices' clamour to have their differing and partial realities acknowledged. In a note on analytic technique made in 1960, he differentiates his view from other theorists:

Winnicott said patients *need* to regress: Melanie Klein says they *must not*. I say they *are* regressed, and the regression should be observed and interpreted
(Cog: 166)

Later on Robin suggests that these different and competing levels of the personality might be reconciled topographically:

ROBIN If we could come together we could still preserve our identity – like the hills on a map in which all the same levels could be joined by a contour [...]
(470)

Unlike Freud, focused on an archaeology of the mind, Bion proposes that greater attention be paid to the moment – or caesura – in which the new personality or aspect of mind emerges, and that we develop our imagination in order to be able to investigate both sides of the caesura: the before as well as the after. Noting these changes in state should not blind us, however, to the emotional experience, as the following anecdote,

taken from Bion's war experiences, dramatises. His twenty-year old self pours scorn on the representative of 'army intelligence' who fails to see the wood for the trees, the deep impact of tank warfare for the change in geological landscape:

TWENTY YEARS [...] You're as bad as our Army Intelligence Officer. When I came out of the Third Battle of Ypres and hardly knew whether I was alive or dreaming, he asked me if I had noticed when the alluvial changed to the cretaceous. I couldn't even laugh.
(453)

The character of Alice is identified ambiguously as both Bion's/the narrator's partner (as she seems to be in the prologue) and his mother. At the beginning of 'The Dawn of Oblivion', Alice retorts to the character 'Term' (the foetus at full term) who describes struggling to get out of the uterus that it 'nearly lost me my life' (446). Later on, she appears to be happily pregnant by her husband Roland (575), and the world, no longer at war, is returned to rights. Though P.A. is 'sometimes consoled by the possibility that the goodness, the capacity for love and concern for our fellows may be a greater force than hate' (573), 'The Dawn of Oblivion' nevertheless ends on the sombre note that the existence of the mind compels 'the growth of a capacity for discrimination – or catastrophe' (576). The figure of a nuclear Third World War looms into view in Alice's closing words, a possible outcome of a world in which human beings do not learn to *think*, seeking instead easy 'solutions', 'answers' or 'cures' that are the 'wrong choice' (576). Book three closes with a declaration by Bion *qua* psychoanalyst:

P.A. There are no labels attached to most options; there is no substitute for the growth of wisdom. Wisdom or oblivion – take your choice. From that warfare there is no release.
(576)

So much a part of his experience, war is an abiding metaphor for Bion. In 'Making the Best of a Bad Job', written in the year of his death, he compares the practice of psychoanalysis to the experience of war, reflecting that it is the job of the analyst to be able to think even while under attack by the patient:

In war the enemy's object is so to terrify you that you cannot think clearly, while your object is to continue to think clearly now matter how adverse or frightening the situation.
(CS: 322)

Despite its difficulty, *A Memoir of the Future* stands testament to a mind that is ‘senile’ (of old age) but by no means ‘demented’ (indicating a mind – in Latin, *mens* – in decline). The late Bion is at the peak of his powers, finally throwing off the shackles of respectability and drawing the many different threads of his life and work together. The *Memoir* attempts a seriously playful disquisition on the related questions of the birth of the mind and the ability to think, reflecting his understanding that the mind is finally defined neither by a physical boundary (‘mind’ grows up also in the group, and in society) nor by a date. It is also an experiment in form that is ‘mindful’ (full of mind) through the elaboration and distinction of the many different ‘minds’ inside his head, and wary of the different aspects of mindlessness at work in the saurian mentality or the unthinking ‘Yes I know’ response (500) that produces a ‘lifeless society’ (501). The *Memoir* is also an auto-psycho-biographical attempt to integrate the dead and traumatised areas of his own mind through a post-traumatic writing that can create the ‘apparatus’ of the mind and enact alpha-function.

I want to close with a comment about the mind of the reader. Bion writes suggestively about the possibility of an evocative writing that is able to communicate ideas between the writer and the reader. Two Bionian avatars discuss the point in ‘The Dream’:

BION [...] You must often have heard, as I have, people say they don’t know what you are talking about and that you are being deliberately obscure.

MYSELF They are flattering me. I am suggesting an aim, an ambition which, if I could achieve, would enable me to be deliberately and *precisely* obscure; in which I could use certain words which could activate precisely and instantaneously, in the mind of the listener, a thought or train of thought that came between him and the thoughts and ideas already accessible and available to him.
(191)

His statement echoes the melancholic remark made by the prologue’s narrator when he declares that he writes in the absence of another mind:

If I were there, with the companion to whom I wish to communicate, I could appeal to him to see the evidence I cannot formulate, but on which I wish to build my structure.
(4)

The strange – and strangely creative – writing exemplified by *A Memoir of the Future* can be thought of as the deliberate creation of a container that gives birth to the new thought (and attempts to think what was previously unthinkable), while also seeking to evoke the reader-mind able to receive it. Writing as P.A., Bion declares:

in fact, the greatest thinkers are very difficult to read unless you find great readers to read them.

(240)

Chapter Ten

Conclusion: Is Writing an Alpha-Function?

I put the term ‘conclusion’ in inverted commas because I am using it in a special way unrelated to any belief that some discussion has been ‘concluded’.
(Trans: 67)

He doesn’t suggest that you misuse [his concepts]; he suggests you might put them to better use than he does.
(NYSP: 61; audience question)

The possibilities of a literary critical approach that draw on the work of Wilfred Bion are by no means exhausted by the foregoing chapters. It has rather been my experience that Bion’s work – his theoretical ideas, models, literary allusions and turns of phrase – seem ever more richly suggestive. The ideas for which he is best known – such as the container-contained relationship used as a basis for thinking about *The Unfortunates* – are easily enough ‘won’ from what at times is the ineffable experience of reading Bion, while other aspects of this work are either theoretically intimidating (the ‘algebra’ of *Transformations* a case in point) or deeply idiosyncratic (*A Memoir of the Future*).

I was fortunate to be briefly in correspondence with the prominent Bion scholar Dr James Grotstein in 2012. A practising analyst who was himself analysed by Bion for five years during the 1970s, Grotstein wrote that he ‘got used to his idiosyncratic style of speech’ but was amazed to discover that Bion was also a ‘regular guy’ at a dinner party that he held for him and his wife on their last night in Los Angeles. He agreed that the task of connecting Bion’s work to creative writing could be worthwhile. He added:

If I could hazard to guess, I would say that Bion’s writing stands on the frontier between the conscious and the unconscious with twists of O contained cryptically within it. In other words, I think his language occupies the contact-barrier which he designates stands between consciousness and the unconscious and mediates their binary-oppositional function. Bion was fond of word patterns. His language is an attempt to discern and link patterns. Put another way, his writing is very much like a very sparse jigsaw puzzle, which takes considerable patience and profound thinking to put together.¹

¹ Personal communication: 24th October, 2012.

The ‘considerable patience’ that Bion’s work requires is not only due to his frequent recourse to a technical vocabulary (to which the first part of Grotstein’s comment abundantly attests) but to his desire that understanding his work should be born of an ‘emotional experience’ provoked by his writing: an experience that may begin as an ‘realisation in K’ (as he declares in *Learning from Experience*), but become a ‘transformation in O’ (*Transformations*). Far from the coolly clinical writer that he can appear to be, Bion is profoundly concerned with the ways that writing has a responsibility to effect transformations in thinking. Where Freud’s authoritative style is undercut by the unintended detours of his unconscious, Bion is a post-traumatic writer who writes in order to rebuild the possibility of an unconscious that could replace the ‘“Yes, I know”, ‘You know’, ‘I mean to say”’ response that he identifies as a ‘modern version of the unconscious’, in which ‘you can go on like that for ever because you just don’t have to think’ (Tav: 36–37). This concern to decalcify a hardened modern consciousness populated by pre-fabricated ideas and cultural cliché connects Bion to writers such as Stevie Smith, B. S. Johnson, and J. G. Ballard.

The writers and works brought together in this thesis are not readily grouped in conventional terms, but they have each, in different ways, benefitted from a reading based on ideas drawn from Bion’s work. Along the way, I have also tried to showcase the breadth of Bion’s writing, and the way that his motifs lend themselves to repeated and different uses. The work that is started here cannot yet be concluded. Indeed, the resurgence of interest in Bionian ideas that I outline in my introduction suggests that Bion may be a writer whose time has now come. He was himself alert to the seductions of concluding thoughts, quoting Blanchot on numerous occasions to remind us that ‘the answer is the misfortune of the question’, liable to harden into dogma and to form ‘another impressive caesura’ (Ital: 11) from which we are unable to break free. He recognised the role of phantasy in allaying the anxiety that comes from trying to grasp the ‘ineffable experience’ of reality, O. Where the matter at hand exceeds our capacity for alpha-function, we are wont to look instead to more narrow indicators, such as the ‘facts’ on record, which might in this context include citations, deadlines and word counts. At the close of *Transformations* Bion remarks ironically on the tendency to institute a ‘premature mathematisation of a subject which is not sufficiently mature for such a procedure’, offering as an example the way that the full experience of an analysis is instead approximated to ‘the rules for its practice [...]: ‘five times’ a week and for

‘50’ minutes are readily ‘won’ from the ineffable experience’ (Trans: 171). As Dave Eggers writes: ‘the ceaseless pursuit of data to quantify the value of any endeavour is catastrophic to true understanding’².

Celebrating Bion’s ideas places them at risk of reification, and he stressed repeatedly that ‘to allow ‘Bion’s theory’ to operate in a rigid way [...] would be ridiculous’ (Tav: 114). Incompletion, as he noted in *Bion in New York and São Paulo* (NYSP: Author’s Note), was to be regarded ‘as a virtue’ if it stimulated others to go on thinking. Indeed, Chris Mawson suggests that a ‘sign of life in [Bion’s] ideas is the fact they can be developed further and not remain static, or stagnate into ‘received wisdom’’ (CW 4: 252), noting how his ideas have been developed by other psychoanalytic writers. This thesis paves the way for a fuller consideration of his work within the literary critical field.

At an earlier point I thought that my thesis question (or at least the title of a chapter) might be ‘Is Writing [an] Alpha-Function?’. Alpha-function, it seemed to me, provided the easiest way to begin to connect creative writing to Bion’s thinking, since the term, ‘intentionally devoid of meaning’ (LfE: 3), left as an open question the nature of the mental activities that could be a part of it. Don DeLillo’s contention that ‘writing is a concentrated form of thinking’³ informed my hypothesis that writing could enact containing and generative elements both in phantasy and reality. Georges Perec’s description of the two moments of crossword-setting⁴ (an unusual form of writing, but writing, all the same) seemed to describe the way that there could be different kinds of writing that installed aspects of thinking into writing itself.

Another thought along the way was the idea that literary analysis based on Bion’s work could be the basis of a ‘new’ literary criticism, but Bion’s essay ‘New and Improved’, only recently published, sounded a timely warning against such a claim. While the prospect of a ‘Bionian psychoanalytic literary criticism’ does offer new ideas for a field that has been dominated by Lacan and Freud, Bion alerts us to ‘the silent operation of manic delusions in our field’ (Mawson, in CW 15: 6). He borrows the phrase ‘new and improved’ from ‘Kellogg’s Cornflakes’, noting ‘it is a very seductive idea – one could

² Boxall, *The Value of the Novel*, 1.

³ Begley, ‘Don DeLillo, *The Art of Fiction* No. 135’.

⁴ See chapter two.

almost sum it up in one word – cure. It carries with it a connotation of good times coming, an improvement, *better*' (CW 15: 49).

Peter Boxall has suggested that scholarship in the humanities is now emerging from a long period in which 'theory' predominated over 'literary value'⁵, which came to be associated with the production of bourgeois cultural values and an uncritical 'humanism' that foregrounded romantic conceptions of authorial intent, and a naturalised conception of realism, to the neglect of textual effects, polysemy, and a critical thinking of the production of realism. Bion's attention to psychotic modes of thinking, to the thought without a thinker, and to what is inexpressible or unthinkable places a number of tools in the hands of the literary theorist who seeks to relate textual effects to questions of the individual, the group, or the culture. Questions of plagiarism, for example, a topic for another thesis (and an earlier strand in the development of my thesis), are complicated by Bion's displacement of the *idea* to a transpersonal dimension:

It may fall to a particular individual to be able to formulate the thought or idea. But I don't think the actual germination of the idea can be attributed to any particular individual. It is very difficult to locate that. It crops up in practice chiefly with people who think that they own ideas and are very sensitive to plagiarism.
(Tav: 69)

Bion describes the achievement of a capacity to talk as 'an achievement [that] floats' (CW 15: 47). The achievement of writing, I suggest, might be thought of in the same way. Bion's ideas enable us to see more of the psychical work – the alpha-function – that writing enacts, and the way in which writing enables writing to *float*.

⁵ Boxall, *The Value of the Novel*, 2.

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