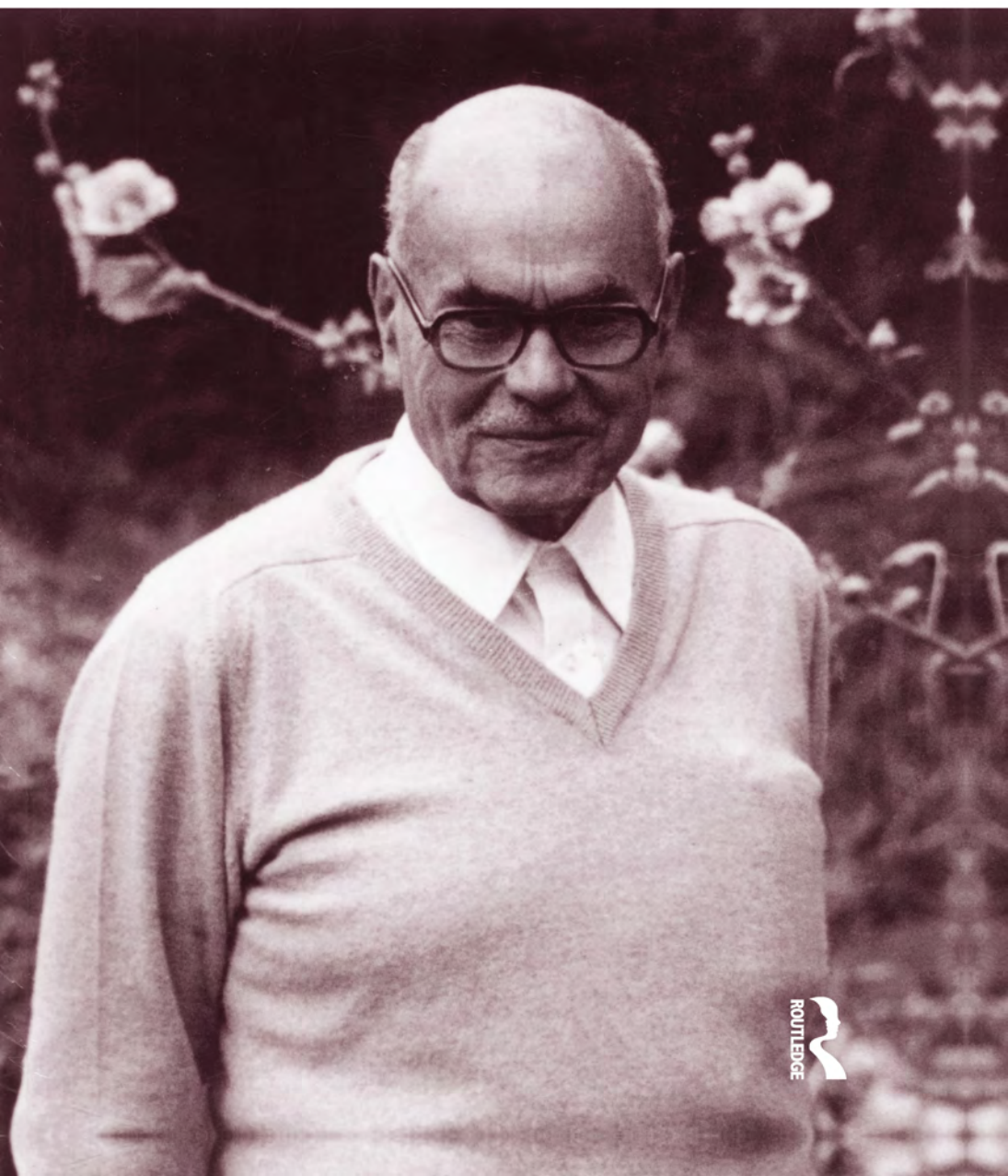


*The Tavistock Seminars*  
*Wilfred R. Bion*



# THE TAVISTOCK SEMINARS



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Wilfred R. Bion

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Edited by  
*Francesca Bion*

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## *BION SEMINARS AT THE TAVISTOCK CLINIC*

**D**uring the summers of 1976, 1977 and 1978 we spent some weeks in Europe, dividing the time between London, Italy and France. In 1979 we visited London twice—in March and again in September on our return from almost twelve years in California.

While in London on those occasions, Bion was asked to hold seminars at the Tavistock Clinic—fourteen in all. Unfortunately the few surviving video recordings came to light only recently and are of variable quality. Nevertheless, these survivals give a clear picture of the areas of analysis that were of major, continuing importance to him during the last four years of his life.

Transferring the recorded word to the printed page is by no means a straightforward process, especially if the speaker expresses his thoughts extempore (as Bion always did). At the same time, it is necessary to aim to retain the style and personal characteristics of his written work. Any changes I have made are in accordance with this aim.

*Francesca Bion*





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## SEMINAR ONE

28 June 1976

*[This was the year of the record-breaking heatwave and drought. The videotape shows Bion wearing a short-sleeved, open-neck shirt rather than his usual long-sleeved shirt, bow-tie and jacket.]*

**B**ION: It took me a very long time to realize that the actual experience of being psychoanalysed was a traumatic one and it takes a long while before one recovers from it. In physical medicine you usually have to go through a period of convalescence; you then hope that if you are fortunate you will reap some benefit from the violence that has been done to you physically. I was introduced to the kind of idea that violence is not done to you by psychoanalysis—that in the course of time you gradually got more and more cured. That doesn't seem to me to fit in at all; it was quite a long time before I began to feel that I knew where it was "at" and what sort of niche I occupied in this peculiar universe or domain that we call "psychoanalysis"—for want of a better word. But I can't say I have got very far with that particular line of thought. Part of the difficulty is that one has to borrow the terminology from all sorts of sciences, religions, aesthetic activities, in order to attempt to formulate a language of our own. There isn't

a suitable language for this extraordinary domain, but I am convinced that there *is* such a domain, that there really is something which it is fair to call a mind, or character, or personality. The problem is having to use a debased currency, a language that has lost a great deal of its value and has therefore lost its cutting edge—in so far as one has to use it for a particular purpose.

Freud described the situation in which people suffer from an amnesia—a gap, a space where there ought to be some sort of memory—and then fill this gap with paramnesias. That's fine, and a very profitable sort of idea it has been. But after a time when we get more and more accustomed to hearing about psychotherapy, psychoanalysis, the more we wonder whether there isn't another great gap—not amnesia—the vocabulary is so difficult we don't know what to call it. But anyway, when we are at a loss we invent something to fill the gap of our ignorance—this vast area of ignorance, of non-knowledge, in which we have to move. The more frightening the gap, the more terrifying it is to realize how utterly ignorant we are of even the most elementary and simplest requirements for survival, the more we are pressed from outside and inside to fill the gap. You can do that perfectly well—with art, with religion, you can multiply theory. You only have to ask yourself what you do individually in a situation where you feel completely lost; you are thankful to clutch hold of any system, anything whatever that is available on which to build a kind of structure. So from this point of view it seems to me that we could argue that the whole of psychoanalysis fills a long-felt want by being a vast Dionysiac system; since we don't know what is there, we invent these theories and build this glorious structure that has no foundation in fact—or the only fact in which it has any foundation is our complete ignorance, our lack of capacity.

However, we hope that it isn't completely unrelated to fact that psychoanalytic theories would remind you of real life at some point in the same way as a good novel or a good play would remind you of how human beings behave. Leonardo could draw things that remind you of what human beings look like. If you look at his drawings of hair and turbulent water in his Notebooks, there is an attempt to give an aesthetic representation of the sort of turmoil I have described.