



Melanie Klein Trust

(Re)discovering Bion in Nicola Abel-Hirsch's new book, *Bion: 365 Quotes*

By Eleanor Sawbridge Burton

London-based psychoanalyst and Fellow of the British Psychoanalytical Society, Nicola Abel-Hirsch has recently published a book on one of the most original and stimulating analytic thinkers: Wilfred Bion. *Bion: 365 Quotes* is an exploratory, wide-ranging compilation of quotes from Bion's work, drawn from his clinical and theoretical books and papers, autobiographical writings, personal letters, and his only novel. Based on years of reading through the whole of Bion's body of work, Abel-Hirsch's book sets out to introduce his ideas to newcomers, meanwhile offering those already familiar with his theory a compelling new angle on his remarkable contribution to psychoanalysis.

Born in Mathura, India at the end of the 19th century, Bion was sent to boarding school in England at the age of eight. As a very young man – still in his teens – he fought in France during the First World War, and was awarded the Distinguished Service Order and the Légion d'honneur. After the war he studied history and then medicine, specialising in psychiatry. Later, on becoming a psychoanalyst, he would develop theories influenced at a deep, formative level by Sigmund Freud's foundational psychoanalytic discoveries and Melanie Klein's bold innovations. Bion would, however, depart from both Freud and Klein's work in some significant respects, advancing ideas that were markedly his own. Having been intrigued by psychoanalysis for several years, Bion's first real encounter with it was in treatment with John Rickman. This analysis was cut short by the Second World War, after which he entered into analysis with Klein. One of the most crucial of Klein's concepts for Bion was that of projective identification, which he later developed in relation to countertransference – a striking development that would shape the thinking of analysts to this day. He also considered Klein's investigations into psychotic mechanisms to be of fundamental importance and, along with contemporaries Hanna Segal and Herbert Rosenfeld, he deepened and extended them throughout his career.

As Bion's written output is both copious and challenging – informed throughout by his deep reading in philosophy, literature and mysticism, as well as psychoanalytic theory – Abel-Hirsch wanted to find a way to draw readers into dialogue with his compelling ideas without overwhelming them. The structure of the book is modelled on that of a 'poem a day' anthology, with a quote from Bion's writings for each day of the year, often accompanied by

short pieces of commentary, insights, clinical vignettes or literary extracts. As Abel-Hirsch explains, “what he writes is often dense in the way a poem can be,” so these short extracts from his papers and books allow readers the space to delve into their complex, multi-layered meanings, one at a time. The decision to create the book around brief excerpts also sprang from Abel-Hirsch’s experience of teaching Bion to students in Taiwan. Faced with the difficulty of translating his sometimes highly distilled, sometimes oblique writing into Mandarin, she focused on short passages instead of whole papers, using these as the basis for discussion. This method was so successful that she decided to adopt it as the structuring device for her book.

Abel-Hirsch does not place her own interpretations or theoretical approach front and centre here; rather, she draws on her extensive knowledge and understanding of Bion to provide a “map” through his thinking. In the process, she brings to our attention some of the most curious, illuminating and profound moments in his writing. With the aim of engaging as broad a readership as possible, she offers elucidations of particularly difficult or obscure ideas, and follows some quotes with perspectives and reflections on Bion’s thought from leading contemporary analysts in the UK and internationally. These component parts of the book combine to convey something of the scope and power of Bion’s work, and the diverse ways in which his thinking continues to inspire today’s analysts, in both their clinical work and theory.

Reflecting Bion’s own efforts not to ‘over-digest’ ideas in his writing – to exhaust or overdevelop them – Abel-Hirsch has provided a stimulating sample of his thinking, whilst also leaving space for readers to explore their own connections and lines of enquiry. To this end, she has left ample white space on each page, so that readers might use it as a kind of workbook, making annotations and notes as they go. She was careful to edit her own commentaries on selected quotes, rewriting them until she, “had it down to what [she] thought was the essential point – with everything else taken out.” Just as Bion saw psychoanalytic theory and practice as an ongoing project, requiring continued exploration with each generation and each individual, so this book acts as an invitation to readers to explore, question, and build on his brilliant insights in their own work.