

FOREWORD

*Meg Harris Williams*

In this book psychoanalysis is taken as a ‘forcing house for symbol formation’ (as Meltzer later put it), owing to the aesthetic qualities of the method. It makes clear, for the first time, the sense in which psychoanalysis may be considered an art form, as well as the sense in which personality development is itself utterly dependent upon acquiring (or Platonically remembering) aesthetic values. This picture owes its conviction to what Keats calls the ‘dovetailing’ of different vertices: clinical discovery, literary discovery, and the infant observation skills which make visible the very origins of mental development.

On first publication of this book 30 years ago, Donald Meltzer wrote for the jacket cover:

This volume has grown over the years almost as a family project of Martha Harris, her two daughters Meg and Morag, and her husband, Donald Meltzer. It therefore has its roots in English literature and its branches waving wildly about in psychoanalysis. It is earnestly hoped that it will reveal more problems than it will solve. Its roots in English literature – Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge and Blake – are as strong as the psychoanalytical branching

from Freud, Klein and Bion. Its philosophical soil is certainly Plato, Russell, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Langer, Cassirer and, in aesthetics, Adrian Stokes.

The fundamental thesis of aesthetic conflict over the obtrusive outside and the enigmatic inside of the object is traced into various dimensions: development of the personality, violence as an interpersonal and social phenomenon, and art as an active and receptive undertaking. While it is, from the clinical sense, a sequel to *Studies in Extended Metapsychology*, it also goes some distance towards uniting the Kleinian source with its later tributaries, thus mapping out a current of clinical and theoretical progress that is certainly accelerating.

Supported by Bion's distinction between mental and protomental, the possibility of psychoanalysis being an art form, individualistic and idiosyncratic, is set in contrast to the basic assumption group organisation of institutionalised psychoanalysis and the bourgeois dream of respectability which Meltzer considered already 'defunct' by 1988. Be that as it may, the coming-together of psychoanalysis, mother-infant observation, and literary criticism enabled a mutual reinforcement of the aesthetic nature of the growth of the mind, and the anti-aesthetic nature of the forces of philistinism, retreat, and false art – all the various substitutes for the quest for truth.

If from the clinical perspective, this book is a sequel to *Studies in Extended Metapsychology* (1986), from the literary perspective, it follows from my 1982 book *Inspiration in Milton and Keats* – hence the many allusions to those two poets. In that research it was revealed how the poet's relationship with his Muse (internal object) involves a constant struggle between true and false art (depressive and narcissistic) and how the developmental thrust is always the impact of beauty, Platonically sought 'through all the shapes and forms of things ... for many are the forms of things divine' (Milton quoting Plato). The object is always an aesthetic object, recognised by its beauty and instantly stirring ambivalent emotions of aesthetic conflict.

Meltzer complained that psychoanalysis didn't have an adequate notion of inspiration and that this conceptual failure

derives from the same roots as ‘the failure to take account of the aesthetic impact of objects on personality development’ (below, p. 142). Inspiration is the means of mental feeding, modelled by the reciprocity between poet and Muse – something which is only ever temporary and needs to be re-established with each ‘feed’ or poem, if the work is to reflect the glory of its source or origin and truly mediate the Muse’s metaphors, capturing abstract emotional knowledge in sensuous and beautiful form.

The origin is, in Bion’s terms, ‘O’ or the realm of Platonic ideas, which cannot be directly accessed; traditionally, the knowledge-seeker ascends logically from earthly beauty towards heavenly beauty via the neoPlatonic ladder. ‘Could Beauty help?’ asks one of his characters in the *Memoir*, trying to introduce the concept into a psychoanalytical discussion. In Meltzer’s picture (below, p. 164), the ‘noumenon’ is represented by the parental intercourse, while the baby at the breast represents the earthly ‘phenomenon’ – one of those ‘shapes and forms of things divine’, pointing to the mystery beyond. Bion calls this ‘intersection with O’ and it happens, in analysis, via the transference. The ladder metaphor supposes a heaven-directed upward climb, like Hamlet’s ‘heaven-kissing hill’; the container (Russian doll) metaphor supposes a series of shapes that interlock inwards and outwards; every internal object has its own internal objects, etc., both giving and receiving. These are different metaphors for the same thing – trying to describe the way that sensuous experience is related to the world of ideas. In the quest to ‘align the mind with O’, Bion thinks in terms of the analyst trying to find an infrasensuous equivalent to the five senses used by the physician; Meltzer thinks in terms of the inside and outside of the object. Outside is the sensuous beauty with its instant impact; inside is the infrasensuous beauty whose meaning can only be imagined or aligned with.

This is the post-Kleinian extension to the Kleinian picture of envy and gratitude, hate and love. Bion explains that envy is of ‘the growth-promoting objects’ and hatred is of the growth or development that they force upon the mind’s status quo. Meltzer says: ‘The psychopathology which we study and allege to treat has its primary basis in the flight from the pain of the aesthetic conflict.’ All recoil from growth, all attempts to damage growth

in others (the *Claustrum*), come back to escaping from the aesthetic conflict and the burden of responsibility which ensues upon the emotional impact of beauty. For the phenomenon of baby-and-breast, poet-and-Muse, incurs a sense of responsibility to humanity in general, expressed by Meltzer as ‘sermonising to siblings’, which in most art forms involves making private thinking public. In such ‘sermonising’ it is the thinking process that is identified with, as much as the thought.

Aesthetic conflict, the special kind of suffering that is the equivalent of ‘passionate love’, is the driving force:

Love, hate, dread are sharpened to a point where the participating pair feel them to be almost unbearable: it is the price that has to be paid for the transformation of an activity that is *about* psychoanalysis to one that *is* psychoanalysis. (Bion, 1970, p. 77)

In this (joyful) suffering the analyst, like the poet, is a servant of the method, rather than a master of the material; psychoanalysts, poets, and poetry-readers, are all conducting ‘conversations with internal objects’, on various steps of the Platonic ladder leading to the realm of ideas. At each stage their struggle is modelled on that of the objects, whose understanding is more advanced than that of the self. In literary criticism, each reading constitutes the manifestation of an individual ‘phenomenon’ governed by the ‘noumenal’ conjunction of poet-and-Muse that is its source. This is the only real parallel between creative writing and psychoanalysis: on the basis of observation, discovery and description, so often obscured by academic or social discussion. Only this type of ‘knowing’ (as distinct from ‘knowing about’) can usefully illuminate the kind of transformation that ‘*is* psychoanalysis’.

*Note to this edition:*

Some minor changes and corrections have been made, and the authors of individual chapters named, to avoid confusion in internet days where passages are often abstracted from the book’s containing structure.