

Introduction to *Counterdreamers:* *Analysts Reading Themselves*

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The idea for a book representing the personal, self-analytic experiences of some ‘counterdreamers’ arose while thinking about the implications of this term coined by Donald Meltzer. Is it a new concept or just a new term, and is it any different from the standard existing terms such as ‘reverie’ or ‘free-floating attention’ that are used to describe the transference–countertransference situation? The short answer is, no, it is not a new concept, just a new way of demarcating what goes on in the consulting and indeed supervision room. It has been practised since the earliest days of psychoanalysis and indeed has ancient parallels in artistic practice and in intimate relationships from infancy onwards. Unlike many neologisms it evolved in a natural way from Meltzer’s desire to give a final poetic description of his lifetime occupation – what had he actually been doing all those years?

Not a new concept yet, inevitably, any new description of a real-life phenomenon may draw attention to aspects that are not so evident in the existing denominations. It flows of course from ‘countertransference’ in the modern sense of the analyst’s useful personal response to the patient. Meltzer died in 2004, and the last thing he wrote was a note on countertransference which he wanted to add to my forthcoming paper ‘The three vertices’ (2005), along with another note on psychoanalytic observation. I also included the descriptions in my book *The Vale of Soulmaking* later that year. Meltzer wrote of countertransference:

This term, which has achieved a status of its own, is not merely a clever linguistic inversion. We can set it out for investigation, pinned out to dry like a skin. What is it? It is meant to be the analyst’s contribution, as in a **duet with the patient** – meant to harmonise and impose its own rhythm and cadence, in the nature of the chanter of the bagpipe [*a reference to Bion*]. ... So the first point is that the countertransference is an utterance by the attentive analyst. Second, it represents his focus of attention. Thirdly, it is alleged to contain primitive fragments of thought called ‘alpha-elements’ which, when scrutinised attentively, will seem to form a pattern: incipient symbols of emotional meaning. ... In short the countertransference is an emotional experience which must be caught in your dreams. Now the patient must attend to the analyst to interpret. How does he know what he is talking about? He doesn’t – he is ‘counter-dreaming’; he has in fact abandoned ‘thinking’ (science) for intuition (art, poetry). The verbal tradition of Homer. (Meltzer, 2005, p. 182)

From the countertransference setting comes the counterdream, or rather, as with other dreams, a specific symbolisation emerges in the ongoing, underlying process of counterdreaming (Meltzer’s ‘dream-life’) in response to the communications of a specific patient. Meltzer calls this a ‘technique’:

It is difficult to explain the technique of counter-dreaming. It is not enough to fall asleep while the patient is talking. It requires a process of working over the material, focussing and selecting interpretive configurations awaiting a state of satisfaction (rest). Remembering the material is essential, exhausting, fraught with anxiety. ... Fatigue and irritation are the result, the trial of strength (and faith). This gives substance to a term like resistance or retreat. (*ibid.*)

The technique of counterdreaming is essentially that of maintaining a stance of negative capability and tolerance of uncertainty, named by Bion 'patience' (Bion, 1970). It is not a blueprint but a response to the present situation of the participating minds, whose consequent emotional stress is relieved only by the gradually emerging shape of what Bion terms an 'underlying pattern'. The pattern may or may not be verbalisable, or not initially; the important thing is that it is imaginable, and gives 'rest' (Bion's term is 'security'). It takes place in the 'dark' of a dreamlike state of mind artificially induced by a special type of attention and communication. Meltzer describes the capture of the elements of the pattern in terms of observing the deers' tails of mental part-object movements:

The first step is to recognise that the state of 'observation' is essentially a resting state. Second, that it is also a state of heightened vigilance. I compare it with waiting in the dark for the deer, grazing at night, seen by their flashing white tails. This nocturnal vigilance is on the alert for movement of the quarry, part object minimal movements which with patience can be seen to form a pattern of incipient meaning 'cast before'. This catching of the incipient meaning cast before is a function of receptive imagination, 'open to the possible', unconcerned with probability. Being rich with suspense, it is necessarily fatiguing, even exhausting. However, it is a poetry generator. (*ibid.*)

Dreams have always traditionally been considered agents of transformation, as well as of admonition, prophecy and warning (as in the gates of horn and ivory – has the dream been sent by a good or a bad object?). The monitory dreams are often equivocal in their interpretations. But as mental spaces of transformation, dreams are not so much equivocal as ambiguous - places where things can be seen in a different light, with a potential for 'catastrophic' (developmental) change.

Counterdreaming recognises that meaning has to be constructed, by means of a certain match, congruence or counterpoint between the fantasy world of the analyst and the analysand. The key is detailed observation of 'flashes' so minute and ephemeral that they are more disturbing than illuminating (deers' tails, alpha elements), until they can find a place in a wider network. And indeed, the process of counterdreaming may be continued outside the session, for example in supervision or discussion, as well as in the wider dream-life of the counterdreamer, where the pattern is gradually processed unconsciously, in search of the kind of knowledge that will feed back into the analysis (and secondarily, self-analysis), and emerge as thoughts.

So the term 'counterdreaming', when tied to Meltzer's poetic description of psychoanalytic observation, amplifies those of 'reverie' and 'suspended attention' in a way which gives a proper recognition to the strenuous autobiographical input of the analyst who is (in the modern term) 'dreaming the session'. The analyst's dreams or dreamlike responses to the analysand's communications are crucial to the method. The congruence sought for depends on the belief that human nature is essentially the same, for good or bad, even though its elements may be organised differently. Yet in a therapeutic situation, it is the patient who leads the way to their resolution, and is simply enabled by the analyst's introspective capacity, and any gain in self-knowledge by the analyst is a secondary one.

Counterdreaming and the mother-baby model (Bick & Harris)

Counterdreaming is thus by definition something that happens in a relationship between minds. To bring out the emotional tensions involved in counterdreaming, I think it is worth going back to a clear formulation of the mother-baby model of the analytic relationship, as expressed by my mother when this training model was just becoming established and needed to be justified.

Psychoanalysis has always been hindered as well as helped by its dependence on the verbal medium. There are dangers in being a discursive rather than a presentational form (to

use Susanne Langer's distinction). Hence the relevance of infant observation to the training of a psychoanalyst: it is a supportive, structured means of becoming less word-dependent and of seeing beyond or behind words which may readily be used as a mask or defence against emotionality. Infant observation in a proper educational context can thus be an aid to counterdreaming. Martha Harris writes of the dangers of relying on 'apparent meanings' and of 'talking about':

In work with adults one can so much more easily be misled by the apparent meaning of the words than in work with children. This applies particularly to the training analysis. And as an adult, especially as one aspiring to treat disorders in other people, one tends to become rather clever at learning about more vulnerable or nastier parts of one's personality: to develop a facility to talk about them in oneself as well as in others in a way that keeps them at arm's length.

The dangers of 'talking about' apply not only to the patient's psychopathology, but even more, to the analyst's self-scrutiny or the trainee analyst's presentation of themselves to a supervisor. It is easy to make a clever confession of one's failings before a superego-god and thus be absolved of their consequences: in a real emotional sense, they are still disowned, kept 'at arm's length'.

By contrast, there is another attitude, not exclusive to infant observation but which structured infant observation can help to develop:

The infant-observer attitude helps the aspiring analyst to take not only the words, but also the details of the patient's total demeanour and behaviour into account: to read between the words and to discern the nature of the experience which is being conveyed or avoided. It can help him to wait until he gathers from his own response to the patient some intuition of what may be happening. If he cannot bear this period of uncertainty and confusion he is likely to pre-empt the emergence of the emotional experience in the patient by explaining it first.

In the baby who relates 'unintegrated parts of himself to parts of mother' may be seen 'what we all know and talk about fairly glibly: the reality that emotions at the most primitive level are rooted in bodily states and sensations located in particular parts of the body, sensations that are educated and achieve meaning through the mother's emotional responses.' Martha Harris points out the relevance here to psychosomatic symptoms and to how we may find that 'hidden in the presentation of narratives about people in patients' material, is concealed another layer of meaning concerned with the earliest part-object relationships, centrally the combination of nipple and breast: the giving-withholding-organising, receptive-comforting-indulgent qualities of the primary object.'

This concealed meaning, we might say, has to be counterdreamed; it is not accessible to other, more superficial, modes of narration. Counterdreaming provides a means of holding an unknown, intuited meaning in mind before it is verbally pre-empted or explained away. It requires cultivating an ability to distinguish between real feelings and pretend ones, even if they sound plausible: 'Let us, for instance, consider the education of one's capacity to utilise the countertransference to perceive the quality of the emotion or lack of emotion in a patient's verbal communications; the meaning or lack of meaning'. In Bion's scheme, negativity does not refer to bad or nasty emotions but to non-emotions or fake emotions, which can easily be given a convincing verbal clothing.

So counterdreaming circumvents the dangers of 'talking about', since verbal sounds (like other sensuous signs) can be read in different ways: not just in their everyday discursive sense, but as part-object flecks of significance forming part of a deeper pattern. In terms of psychoanalytic theory, this pattern refers to something far beyond Freudian slips and puns, and can be more precisely viewed in terms of what Money-Kyrle calls the 'base' of concept formation: the nipple-and-breast combined object that gives meaning to the baby's emotional crux.

This combined object, with its inherent dynamics of projection and introjection, is hidden in *every* psychoanalytic narrative: it is fundamental, universal. The infant-observer is required to enter into a kind of counterdream in the face of the signs of this primal relationship: to abandon dependence on words and to learn to notice the deer's-tails of part-object relationships.

In her paper on 'Maternal containment and good-enough mothering', Martha Harris summarises the post-Kleinian position, describing the importance of the infant feeling understood not just comforted:

He receives back the evacuated part of his personality in an improved condition together with an experience of an object which has been able to tolerate and to think about it. Thus, introjecting what Bion called the mother's capacity for "reverie", the infant begins to be more able to tolerate himself and to begin to apprehend himself and the world in terms of the *meaning* of things.

In a parallel way, Esther Bick's observations of the projections and introjections made by actual babies emphasised the containing and integrating function of the mother, developing in relation to the infant's mind-body. The focus is on knowledge and meaning (not comfort) as being the container; and good-enough is actually better than good, not just because it is less narcissistic, but because it includes the mother's own epistemophilic instinct, which is always in quest of further knowledge. It is the introjection of this function that encourages strength of character. And we can consider counterdreaming as the operation of this questing function, this search for a flexible ongoing container that creates itself to precisely match or 'counter' the present quality of distress or emotion. It is *felt* by the receiver/mother/analyst but not in the same way as the patient feels it, since the counterdreaming process raises it to a greater level of abstraction. The mother's distress is not the baby's distress, it is her own baby-self distress transformed as in a dream or reverie; her efficacy as an agent of transformation depends on identifying with but not mixing up the baby's identity with her own. This emotional network is then received and echoed by the observer in their own counterdream. Correspondingly, counterdreaming is more than empathy; indeed it may have a certain quality of detachment, as the analyst is taking on the role of a thinking object – something which is over and beyond his own personal identity, and for which he relies on making contact with internal objects of his own. In a sense the analyst, by using his own feelings in this detached way, is becoming someone other than himself (as religious priests are traditionally supposed to do). Indeed, this is what is meant by the analyst 'learning from experience' alongside the patient - it is a process of growth or becoming for both parties.

Counterdreaming and conversations between internal objects

Bion speaks of a 'third eye' or of there being *at least* three people (or minds) in the psychoanalytic consulting room. The observer who is trying to detect the deer's-tails in the dark, by means of his own feelings, is himself being observed. But by whom? Clearly not literally another person – though some similarities may be found with the infant observation seminar, where it is not the observer in a personal sense who is under scrutiny, but rather, the universal drama between thinking and acting: 'the problems of understanding the projections and provocations to action through countertransference reactions to the baby's or the mother's distress are to some extent common to all, and can be shared learning experiences' (Martha Harris). It is possible for the supervision group to take on the role of thinking object, to enable shared learning in a genuine work-group.

The understanding of a presentational, deep or 'hidden' meaning, entails a special kind of observation in which the observer is guided, whether consciously or unconsciously, by a sense of being observed by a greater power and of feeling accountable to it – in the same way

as poets describe their relationship to their muse. Counterdreaming is not just empathy with the patient or immersion in their distress or confusion. Neither is it a wide-roaming fantasy stimulated by material brought by the patient, but that then veers off according to free associations of the analyst. It is a very specific response to a specific moment in the patient's dreamlife, that can only be received by the analyst's dreamlife, freed from the ego's control (as in conscious verbal interpretations etc).

While Bion stresses the presence of more than two minds, or mental vertices, in the room, Meltzer specifically organises these modes of airy linkage into a 'conversation between internal objects'. It takes place on a higher level of abstraction, or perhaps a deeper subconscious level, than any ordinary verbal conversation, and makes use of all the barely observable nuances that a discipline such as infant observation helps to bring to light. Meltzer used to say you can only work with the adult part of the patient; but his later formulations focus rather on the internal object(s) of the patient, a more advanced and ethical source than even their adult part. But in the state of counterdreaming, the 'counter' or congruence is actually a dialogue between the internal objects of both patient and analyst. Increasingly Meltzer stressed the analyst's helplessness, and total reliance on internal objects to help his patients; as in his last talk, 'Good Luck', in Barcelona:

You discover that all you have been doing is reading dreams. And you said all along that you were quite good at reading dreams, although you didn't know what that meant, but that it had something to do with the patient's symbol formation, and your intuitive reading of his symbol formation, and attributing meaning to it all. ...

The enemy is retreating – not from your wisdom but from their folly, from their having attempted to capture a frozen space and getting themselves frozen in the process. That's the kind of game you've been playing. Now the survival in this kind of game depends on what is called good luck. Good luck. And when you translate 'good luck', it means, trust in your good objects. ... Good luck for the survival that you never could have planned, and which happened in spite of all your cleverness and ingenuity.

The 'enemy' is the narcissistic 'Napoleon' part of the personality that believes it is in control of the situation, owing to a phantasy based on intrusive identification with the object. It is the archetypal bad object, which of course is not really an object at all, but a fake object composed of egotistical projections. Meltzer says he discovered this through clinical experience, not through the application of any theory; and the original clinical experience was his own analysis or self-analysis:

I have discovered things – of course, discovered things about myself really, which turned out to be also about other people. The main thing is the exploration of projective identification: the intrusive activity of entering into other people's worlds, uninvited, where you have suffered the pains of claustrophobia, felt trapped, didn't know how to get out – because you couldn't remember how you got in in the first place. I think I can claim that I did not invent that; I really discovered it, in myself, and secondly, in my patients.

He also used to point out that the door to the claustrium is always open. The way out, is by first making contact with the internal objects who send the dreams, and then finding a receptive and organisational counterdream through which the other's internal objects can converse. As a result of this conversation, the analyst receives the wisdom of his internal objects in the form of a dream or dreamlike state – the counterdream. The conversation may even be verbal (in fact has to be primarily verbal in psychoanalysis), but it will be the language of description not of explanation, because it is governed by the counterdream with its close contact with what Bion calls 'O', the world of objects, the place where meaning originates.

'Because the heart of the matter is the meaning', affirms Meltzer; and understanding the meaning rests on the analyst's recognition of his helplessness, the 'peacefulness of ignorance.

It is I suppose a kind of religious passivity. Somebody else will have to do it, because you can't do it yourself. This takes you back to childhood again – Mummy and Daddy will do it; you can go to sleep.'

As Bion similarly said, the analyst is like a newborn baby at the beginning of every session. The analyst relies on being fed by his counterdreams if he is to be able to read the dreams of his patient, and refrain from believing he is a Napoleon conquering the frozen wastes of the claustrum. The counterdream is the most effective mouthpiece for the internal object, and the analyst can allow the internal object to do the talking, which means that he can say things whose meaning he doesn't even understand himself ('How does he know what he is talking about? He doesn't – he is counterdreaming'). The conscious, formulable interpretation becomes apparent later; the immediate task is to observe the deer's-tails, to 'focus attention'. Indeed the means is more important than the end: for it is the introjection of the thinking function, rather than the thought alone, that underlies mental health. This can only be conveyed by inviting the patient to identify with the analyst's efforts to think, or to allow thinking to take place on his behalf, owing to his own identification with a thinking object.

To conclude: the benefit of treating the consulting room as a place where conversations between internal objects can take place, is the ease of maintaining an attitude of negative capability – the sort of 'patience' that enables meaning to become symbolised, that ultimately achieves 'security' (as Bion describes the oscillation of Ps–D) –the opposite end of the spectrum being the 'nameless dread' of an unsymbolised, uncontained fear.

Counterdreaming and aesthetic experience

Counterdreaming is also an *aesthetic* response to the emotional conflicts brought to the session: similar to the 'symbolic congruence' with which the reader of poetry tries to capture their experience in a dreamlike way and to write it down. (I wrote about this in 'Holding the dream' in *The Apprehension of Beauty*). Although it begins with immersion, it then separates, in the way described by Adrian Stokes as 'modelling and carving' (for the artist) or 'envelopment and incorporation' (for the art-viewer). In the quest for a response to the aesthetic object (whether as viewer or as creator), the exploring mind enters and retracts: the key question being whether this is a genuine imaginative exploration or a conquistador style colonisation - conducted by the real baby or its alter-ego Napoleon.

Stokes writes that in the face of art, we become 'in touch with a process that seems to be happening on our looking, a process to which we are joined as if to an alternation of part-objects'. This kind of joining could also appropriately describe the empathy invoked in the analyst as he observes the patient - the almost visceral feeling of recognition that is awakened at that moment, 'happening on our looking'. The feeling phenomenon responds to being noticed and observed, and reaches out its tentacles to begin a dance or intertwining of part-object movements. The observing mind is engaged in an alternating rhythm of closeness and separateness to the object, like Bion's Ps-D, but is not swamped nor adhesively identified with the object (this leads to two-dimensionality, or flatness of emotion – as in the idea of an oceanic oneness – a state of fusion with the object that probably 'never was on sea or land' [Wordsworth].) Bion uses metaphors such as 'caesura' and 'receiving-screen' to convey the permeability, yet separation, of two states of mind that are confronting one another. The repeated rhythm of projective and introjective identifications gradually sorts out the confusion, and the underlying pattern emerges in the form of the countertransference dream.

For the aesthetic object, in art as in life, demands a counterdream for the proper appreciation of its 'message' – the meaning that cannot be reductively summarised but that finds a

reflective container in the mind of the other. Not just reflective in the sense of mirroring, but hopefully also transformative, owing to the conversation between internal objects that is taking place, beyond the conscious control of both parties. It is also beyond the personality restrictions of either artist or viewer, and the same applies to the consulting room as to the appreciation of the arts.

In the consulting room, what is the aesthetic object that arouses curiosity and demands to be imaginatively explored (or tyrannically conquered)? On one level it is the dream or dream-material brought by the patient, which may or may not have aesthetic qualities of its own. But even if it is a beautiful dream, that is just the beginning of the drama in the consulting room – the drama of transformations that comes about when dreams ‘counter’ or respond to one another, and when tyrannical control is relaxed so the internal objects are allowed to converse. For as with all aesthetic objects, both positive and negative reactions are set in motion: the aesthetic conflict of love, hate and knowledge is set against the retreat from emotionality in the form of minus love, hate and knowledge.

For ultimately, the aesthetic object in analysis is the analytic process itself. It is the invisible, ineffable, aesthetic form that facilitates this conversation between internal objects – a ‘duet with the patient’. It is probably this formal quality that differentiates the ‘counterdreaming’ view of analysis from the ‘intersubjective’ one. There is a structural basis in the primal nipple-and-breast view of knowledge as necessarily acquired through projective and introjective identifications, in a way that builds itself block by block. Between them, analyst and analysand build up an aesthetic response to the field of emotional conflict and confusion that initially fills the air of the session. On one level the analyst is the ‘mother’ and the analysand the ‘baby’, but on another level, they are both babies, when measured against the mysterious conversation that is the essence of the analytic process and that can reveal things previously unknown to either, and even unknown to their internal objects (as individuals) but only discovered when dream and counterdream are set in creative response to one another.

This means of course that (as Meltzer said) the analyst is always engaged in his own aesthetic conflict with the analytic process itself – its demands and mysteries, and the love and hate that are evoked by the task – in a similar way to the love-hate relationship with poetry that the poets always express. It is difficult to cultivate the ‘wise passiveness’ (Keats) that the task requires.