

CHAPTER FIVE

A psychoanalytic revolution from a speculative to an empirical point of view¹

Didier Houzel

With Donald Meltzer, Martha Harris was one of the architects of the GERPEN. They were invited to Paris by James Gammill, Geneviève Haag, and Jean and Florence Bégoin for the first time during the winter of 1974. The first work session that we had with them was a private one, in the Bégoin's apartment, in which some twenty or so of our colleagues took part. That work session turned out to be so interesting that we decided to invite them several times per year from then on. The number of participants increased steadily, and we came to realize that we needed a more structured organization in order to manage the weekends properly. It was for that reason that the GERPEN was set up in 1983.

Those weekend sessions were highly successful, thanks in no small measure to the teaching and exceptional creativity of

¹ Part of this chapter was written as an introduction to a scientific meeting set up by the GERPEN (*Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches Psychoanalytiques pour le développement de l'Enfant et du Nourisson*) in honour of Martha Harris. This part has been translated from French to English by David Alcorn. The remaining part was written directly in English by the author.

Donald Meltzer – and also to the presence by his side of Martha Harris, who would always add a personal note to what Meltzer was saying. Sometimes, indeed, she would moderate his standpoint if she felt it to be too cut-and-dried, too indicative of a masculine desire to take a firm stand on things. Don and Mattie, as we called them informally, were a well-balanced and creative couple who gave the impression that they were constantly and deeply in love with each other and shared a real passion for psychoanalysis. We were extremely fortunate to be able to benefit from their joint teaching several times per year, from 1974 until 1983.

One day, Mattie suggested that we should devote part of our seminars to the Infant Observation method that Esther Bick had devised at the Tavistock Clinic. I can remember just how puzzled I felt during the initial sessions when observation material was being presented. My mind, trained as it was in the orthodox French manner, just wasn't getting enough theoretical speculations or metapsychological references! Gradually, all the same, I began to be convinced that she was sharing with us a fundamental way of working – to such an extent, indeed, that I myself embarked upon an infant observation, supervised by Anik Maufras du Chatellier. That experience led to a sea-change in my conception of psychoanalysis. I am now convinced that psychoanalysis is an empirical science based on observation – but a particular form of observation that I would call “psychoanalytic observation”. That revolution, which brought me from a speculative point of view to an empirical one, I owe it above all to Martha Harris – and I am sure that many of my colleagues will have had a similar experience.

Martha Harris was one of Esther Bick's first pupils, when in 1948 training in child psychotherapy was initiated in the Tavistock Clinic; it was John Bowlby, at that time the director of that prestigious institution, who asked Esther Bick to take on that task. Martha Harris took over from Mrs Bick in 1960 as head of that training programme, which included infant observation as a compulsory subject (nowadays in the first and second year of the programme). It was Martha Harris who had the

brilliant idea of broadening infant observation to include professions other than that of psychotherapists; she was convinced that anyone professionally involved with children – teachers, nursery nurses, special needs workers, paediatricians, etc – would be able to benefit from this particular mode of learning. Her activity was not, however, limited to applying Esther Bick's method of observation. She was herself an outstanding child and adolescent analyst. The papers that she wrote – published in French by the *Éditions du Hublot* – bear witness to that.

Infant observation and the psychoanalyst's activity share a common denominator – what I earlier called “psychoanalytic observation”. I did not in fact invent the term “psychoanalytic observation” – I am borrowing it from Donald Meltzer. Here is what he has to say:

Psychiatric diagnosis with children as carried out in most hospitals or child guidance clinics is a rather elaborate and unstandardized process in which history-taking, psychological testing, and play interviews with the child play a variable part in different centres. But the basic method is to amass data and, in conference, to reach a group impression by reviewing the data. My own experience in running a large child guidance clinic as against an extensive experience in private psychiatric consultation convinces me that the psychoanalytic method of observation is far more accurate, both diagnostically and prognostically, if psychotherapy or child analysis is a real possibility. (Meltzer 1994, pp. 37-38)

This is how Don Meltzer describes “psychoanalytic observation”:

Our source of information is our own relatively analysed mental apparatus, by means of which we can experience a degree of identification with the patient and follow the affective and phantasy processes in ourselves resulting from partial identification. This is not understood, yet it is no different methodologically from the calibration of any scientific instrument as an extension of the human sensorium. And of course it is to the extent to which we have succeeded in what other scientists call standardizing the apparatus that we become accurate psychoanalytic observers. (ibid., p. 41)

Obviously, a personal analysis, one that has been as thorough as possible, is by far the best calibration tool for our mind so as to prepare it for psychoanalytic observation. That said, Esther Bick's method of observation also makes a significant contribution to this, whether simply as part of a one-off training programme or linked to the person's own psychoanalysis and development thereafter. These are two personal experiences in which observers can observe their own mind in the situation in which they find themselves immersed. That is what characterizes psychoanalytic observation and distinguishes it from other kinds (experimental observation, ethological observation, etc) in which observers must leave aside their own subjectivity and focus on an object or a situation external to them. It is what the French anthropologist Georges Devereux (who trained as a psychoanalyst) called "participant observation", in the sense that the observer is part of what he or she is observing. Esther Bick described those who observed infants as a special kind of participant observer.

In 1980, Mattie invited me to visit the Tavistock Clinic and attend some seminars of the course for child psychotherapists. I went to London with my wife and we stayed at Don and Mattie's home for several days. I remember the kind welcome Mattie gave us. I can still see her cutting from her garden some beautiful flowers to decorate the room she had prepared for us.

That visit was decisive for my thinking on child psychoanalysis and child psychotherapy in my own country. At that time there was no official training in child psychoanalysis in France. The French psychoanalytic societies affiliated to the International Psychoanalytic Association were not involved in that field of psychoanalysis. People who wished to be seriously trained in child psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic psychotherapy either asked for supervision the small number of private psychoanalysts practising with children, or even crossed the Channel and came to London to have an actual training as child psychoanalyst or psychotherapist.

We have in France a long tradition of theoretical speculation which, I think, is quite respectable and which created some brilliant thinkers in several intellectual fields like logic, mathematics,

and philosophy; but hindered to some extent not so much the exploration of nature, but the possibility of easily connecting empirical data with thoughts. We remain essentially dualistic as in Descartes' definition: on the one hand a thinking substance, – the soul – without extension; on the other a physical substance – the body and the material world, extended and known through the mediation of our sense organs. But there is also another kind of dualism in Descartes' legacy which has influenced French thinkers, including psychoanalysts. This kind of dualism is correlative of the first one, but it deserves to be stressed considering its importance within the psychoanalytic field. I mean the opposition Descartes underlined between thinking, which brings us an absolute certainty about our existence (“I think therefore I am”), and our deceitful senses which never assure us whether what we are perceiving is actual or not, perceived or dreamt. The problem for psychoanalysis is that it is based on the hypothesis that there is a consubstantiality between body and mind, that the thoughts stem from the body through complex transformations, that there are not two substances – body and soul connected by the pineal gland as Descartes hypothesized it – but a psycho-soma as Bion stated, which belongs to both our physical and our spiritual natures. I think the contempt that many French psychoanalysts have for child psychoanalysis is linked with this aspect of Descartes' dualism. Treating a child with psychoanalysis does not permit of ignoring the body and the bodily needs as may be possible with an adult patient.

After my visit to the Tavistock Clinic I had a dream of setting up another Tavistock in France. Unfortunately I never met the patron who wished to give the amount of money that plan required. So, with some colleagues, we found another way. As soon as we could we formed a small group of psychoanalysts to organize a training course for child and adolescent psychotherapist on a background similar to that I had discovered at the Tavistock.² This group affiliated itself to the European Federation for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy in the Public Sector (EFPP)

2 The first group set up in Normandy was comprised of Louis Edy, Didier Houzel, Bianca Lechevalier, and Albert Namer.

founded in 1991 by Brian Martindale. Shortly after, a second group was formed in Bordeaux, then another one in Paris; the *Centre d'Études Martha Harris* was set up in Brittany in the 1980's by Gianna Williams (at Larmor Plage near Lorient); Hélène Dubinsky, Alexandre Dubinsky and Odile Gavériaux wished to join us. In 1999 the different groups combined as the FFPPEA³ and the federation affiliated itself to the EFPP. Since this date other groups, set up in Lyon, Lille, etc., have joined the Federation.

So now we have a wide network for providing a training in child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapy in the spirit of Martha Harris, which combines a scrupulous respect for what is psychoanalytically observed with a profound empathy and a genuine modesty.

This spirit seems to me beautifully summarized in Mattie's commentary on the therapeutic consultations that she had provided for a little boy who had important relationship problems, she wrote:

It was important that the parents had come together, jointly responsible for their son, and that they were enabled to express their problem, their feelings of helplessness as parents, to an 'expert' who was supposed to have some experience in dealing with these problems. But not an expert, who from the height of superior knowledge, treated them as helpless children, instructing them in what to do, or in what they should not have done, thereby confirming them their own childish fears of being discovered to be inadequate and fraudulent parents incapable of responsibility and dependent therefore upon some higher authority. The helpful expert in such a situation is the one who can have a role analogous to that of the understanding mother with the distressed baby, who receives the projections of the infant's anxiety, is with it, and enables it to cope better with the pain because it no longer feels alone. (Harris & Bick, p. 48)

3 *Fédération Française de Psychothérapie Psychanalytique pour l'Enfant et l'Adolescent.*

The role of Martha Harris from the beginning of the GERPEN¹

James Gammill

Some of those who came in the first years of our seminars centred on the psychoanalytical psychotherapy of children considered that the central role was given to Donald Meltzer, with only an accompanying role to his wife, Martha Harris. For me, however, a *true and dynamic dialogue* focussed on case presentation and analytic theory had a central importance for me, and to transmit to our audience.

I made the acquaintance of Martha Harris in the autumn of 1958, thanks to Melanie Klein, who was then supervising my analysis of a boy of three. One day Mrs Klein said to me, “I want you to meet Mrs Martha Harris who is also having supervision with me. She is one of the best people I have ever known for the psychoanalysis of children. With her there is always a veritable discussion of the material of the sessions, an authentic dialogue. And she has *a mind of her own*.” Mrs Klein did not appreciate those who seemed too submissive to her theories or to what she formulated in supervisions about technique. At about this time

¹ This paper was given in Paris in November 2010 at a conference in honour of Martha Harris organized by the GERPEN [see Chapter 5].

she had spoken to me about reading *Le Temps Retrouvé* of Proust during her summer vacation and had indicated to me a passage in the book in which Proust speaks of the readers of his work: “I would ask of them neither to praise nor to denigrate me, but only to indicate whether the words they read in themselves correspond to that which I have written” (*my translation*).

The memory of having tea at Mrs Klein’s on a Saturday afternoon with Martha Harris (Mattie) and the family of Hans Thorner remains precious for me, and the affectionate friendship with Mattie that day continued over the years until her tragic and untimely death, and within me ever since in my internal world.

In January 1959, Mrs Harris invited me to attend a seminar at the Tavistock, which Mrs Esther Bick gave for the students of child psychotherapy (in fact psychoanalysis) in training there. There I benefited from being in on the animated *dialogue* between Mrs Bick and Mattie. With her pertinent comments and questions about the clinical material, Mattie helped the students often to recall other details and to comment on their own reactions. I was also impressed by her capacity for understanding and sympathy for the parents’ suffering and their defences.

Invited to dinner at the Harris’s, in addition to benefiting from the excellent cuisine prepared by Mattie, I was able to appreciate the quality of exchange between her and her husband, Roland Harris. Roland was a specialist in the study of children’s education, with also a great knowledge of psychoanalysis including the works of Melanie Klein and W. R. Bion. Tragically, his sudden death several years later put an end to his contributions to his field of work. But fortunately, Mattie was able to keep what she had gained from him and develop it in her teaching and writings.

I had met Donald Meltzer in 1953 and we did the analytic training in London at the same time, as well as working together daily at the US Air Force Hospital near London for three years.

Given these links of friendship with Meltzer, I saw him often after my installation in Paris in 1966 (after several years in the USA). On the occasion of a European weekend of the British

Psychoanalytical Society (around 1970, I believe), he announced to me that he and Mattie were to marry, asking for my comment. Of course, I was delighted to learn that two of my dear friends and colleagues were to be together, as was Mrs Bick who was so fond of them. On this occasion, Don said to me: “Mattie appreciates enormously the work of Bion, with whom she did a supervision for her training at the Institute. I have considerable reservations myself, for Bion does not seem to accord sufficient place for affects nor for the elaboration of fantasies.” I answered: “I do not know Bion’s work well, but I think he emphasizes the affects that accompany the L, H and K links, and it seems to me that alpha-function is essential for the elaboration of fantasies.” However, very soon afterwards, under the influence and stimulation of Mattie, Don developed a passionate interest in Bion’s work, becoming one of the analysts in the world who knew Bion’s work best, giving it his own developmental and clinical applications, as seen in *The Kleinian Development* and *Studies in Extended Metapsychology* and other works.

After the International Congress in Paris in 1973, I invited Donald Meltzer and Martha Harris, and I think also Meg and others, for several days in my country house south of Chateaudun. There they shared with me their experience of work with groups of child analysts in Italy, in Norway and other European countries as well as in America. Then I said to myself, “Well, why not in France, also?”

In a group for discussion of child psychoanalytic psychotherapy cases, created by Geneviève Haag with me in 1970, there were many cases of severe psychopathology including autism – a category which very much interested Geneviève but also Anik Maupas du Chatellier and Didier Houzel, who belonged to this clinico-theoretical work group. So I felt it would be very useful to create links with Martha Harris, Donald Meltzer, and also separately with Frances Tustin, to further our understanding of autism and other severe problems in children. Also, I had noted the great interest of Florence Guignard and Jean Begoin in a seminar with them.

So, with the support of my colleagues, on the occasion of a visit to the Meltzers in their beautiful country house near Oxford, I extended an invitation to work with a larger group here. This took place the first time in January 1974, and was the beginning of what later became officially the GERPEN. At the third meeting after our discussion of clinical material, Martha Harris emphasized the importance of including baby observation (after the method of Esther Bick) in our programme. Already, Michel and Geneviève Haag had met with Mrs Bick in London and were very interested.

Some people who came regularly to our meetings tended to appreciate Don more than Mattie, underscoring his “genius and charisma”, and failed to appreciate the fundamental contribution of Mattie to the discussions, with her own points of view, which were so enriching and stimulating for so many of us. Also, I found that Don’s books became more clear, with an improved literary style, after their union. In “Acknowledgements” in *Studies in Extended Metapsychology*, he himself writes: “Many of my vague notions have been given greater precision by Martha Harris”.

I tend to think of Martha Harris in an analogy with Nadia Boulanger who had the gift of stimulating creativity in composers of music, or like Marguerite Long, who I feel favoured the development of the works of Ravel and of Debussy during long walks together at the seaside, sending back inspiration through the beauty of her performances as pianist of their creations.

For those of you who did not know Martha Harris directly, it is fortunate that much of her written work exists in French translation, (with a bibliography included in our programme). These writings reflect her qualities of warmth, intelligence and her generous spirit. Also in the programme that follows you will have the opportunity of hearing three of Mattie’s former students, who became collaborators and then successors as teachers and authors at the Tavistock – Maria Rhode, Margaret Rustin and Gianna Williams. Their writings translated in French are also in the References. But first of all, you will come to know and listen to Meg Harris Williams, Mattie’s daughter, who following the

inspiration of her mother and that of Don Meltzer has developed her own work linking psychoanalysis with art and literature – “a mind of her own”, also.



Don and Mattie teaching for the GERPEN

Photo: Jean-Marie Gavériaux