

# Donald Meltzer<sup>1</sup>

14.8.1922 (New Jersey) - 13.8.2004 (Oxford)

by Irene Freeden

Donald Meltzer died in Oxford on the eve of his eighty-second birthday. The tributes at his funeral described a beloved only son, the youngest child of three, whose romance with European culture started when he was taken on a grand tour as a young adolescent. He loved nature and working in the soil, trying his hand at basic carpentry, fascinated by making and repairing things. An early desire was to be a sculptor working in stone. In his private life he displayed physical strength, muscular energy and a particular passion for horses. In his professional life, his patients, supervisees and colleagues encountered his mental and emotional strength and a particular passion for psychoanalysis.

The two types of strength and the two passions were highlighted at a conference in Barcelona in October 2002 when a Spanish participant recalled his reaction to reading Meltzer's *Dream Life*. 'This fellow has *duende*<sup>2</sup>, he thought to himself. Meltzer responded with his thoughts on Lorca's essay<sup>3</sup> (which presents a bullfight as a metaphor for creativity). He described *duende* as 'the love of the matador for the horns'. A turbulent creativity was at the heart of his passion for 'serving the art of psychoanalysis', for persistent search for the truth, for facing—day in and day out—the danger located in the perverse and destructive parts of the personality.

Donald Meltzer graduated in medicine at Yale University, continued his medical education at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York, and trained as a child psychiatrist in St. Louis, Missouri. There he discovered the works of Melanie Klein. He arrived in London in 1954 to take his place on Mrs. Klein's couch and commence his psychoanalytical training with the British Psychoanalytical Society. He became a member of the society and then a training analyst, a position he would retain until

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1 An obituary published in the Journal of the BAP, 43 (19), 88-92, 2005.

2 Meg Harris Williams (personal communication). "An appropriate translation might be 'demon' as was used by the English romantic poets especially Keats and Byron – the 'demon poesy', seen as a female. Also the demon/daemon of Socrates – Lorca writes of Socrates's 'happy demon'".

3 Federico Garcia Lorca, 'Play and theory of the Duende', in *In Search of Duende* (New York: New Directions, Bibelot series, 1998)

ideological differences with the psychoanalytical establishment led to his departure in the mid-Seventies.

He soon proved himself to be an original theoretician and a talented clinician. He leaves an impressive opus of eight books and numerous papers (a few are collected and published in *Sincerity*, 1994). Amongst his many contributions to psychoanalytic theorising, many practitioners find Meltzer's theory of aesthetic conflict most illuminating. It postulates a link between aesthetics and psychoanalysis in a search for the forces of creativity in the inner world. Alberto Hahn<sup>4</sup> points out that Meltzer's thinking on the subject started with a dialogue with Adrian Stokes: *Painting and the Inner World* (1963). It finally flourished in *The Apprehension of Beauty* (1988) co-written with his stepdaughter, Meg Harris Williams, a writer and artist and a longstanding collaborator. There he draws on Klein's concept of the concreteness of psychic reality and on Bion's notion of internal space for reverie. According to Meltzer, a baby meeting the beauty of its mother (which stimulates its aesthetic sense) is also faced with the enigma and uncertainty of the nature of her inside, as compared with her outside. The baby experiences both pleasure and pain in his contact with the mother and the ensuing conflict gives rise to the growth of the epistemophilic instinct with its search for knowledge. The struggle to resolve that conflict, to integrate L(ove), H(ate) and K(knowledge), forms the basis of creativity. That theory questions Klein's view that the paranoid/schizoid position precedes the depressive position. For Meltzer, ambivalence towards the object exists from the beginning and the splitting mechanisms constitute a defence against the resulting mental pain. The creative process entails working through the aesthetic conflict, rather than the sublimation of the depressive position, in a search to recreate the lost object.

The next year saw a short piece entitled 'Concerning the stupidity of evil' (1989) that graphically explains what happens when the aesthetic conflict is avoided. That, and an earlier seminal paper 'The relation of anal masturbation to projective identification' (1966), led to the development of a new theory in *The Claustrium: An Investigation of Claustrophobic Phenomena* (1992). The book describes in detail the internal world of a person whose epistemophilic drive refuses to bear the pain of learning from experience, and instead seeks knowledge through intrusive projec-

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4 Hahn A. An obituary of Donald Meltzer (6.9.2004) *The Times*.

tive identification. These narcissistic, borderline and psychotic patients become ensconced very concretely inside the object and have very little capacity for observing external reality from their ‘retreats’.<sup>5</sup> John Steiner (1993) describes a similar unconscious mechanism, but conceptualises the psychic retreats as metaphorical, whereas Meltzer adheres to Klein’s notion of the concreteness of psychic reality.

Donald Meltzer had a phenomenal capacity for observing minute nuances of the verbal, bodily, cognitive and emotional expressions of a patient. They were, in turn, transcribed for his listeners or readers in intricate and lively detail. One can see this in an early paper, ‘Note on a transient inhibition of chewing’ (1959) and in the 1960 *Tavistock Lectures and Seminars in Kleinian child Psychiatry* (in collaboration with Esther Bick)<sup>6</sup>. This rigorous yet delicate presentation of the complex interaction between transference and countertransference in a single session is at its most impressive in chapter 7 of his first book, *The Psychoanalytical Process* (1967), a publication that is a *tour de force* description of the development of the internal world in the course of analysis.

Meltzer’s persistent search for the truth, by means of a ruthlessly detailed and comprehensive examination of the patient’s material and his own countertransference, is paramount. His paper, ‘Temperature and distance as technical dimensions of interpretation’ (1976), for example, concentrates on the ‘ingenuity of verbal expression’. In this paper he considers the need for honest spontaneous communication on the part of the analyst without falling into an all-too-ready trap of acting out in the countertransference. Verbal communication can be much enriched by understanding: the primitive innate roots of language (as in Wittgenstein and Chomsky); the lexical level for conveying information; and the poetic function which uses external metaphors to describe the inner world. Through the modulation of the interplay of those three levels of language, the analyst can control the temperature and distance of his communication. By controlling the musical emotionality of the voice one can heighten or dampen the atmosphere while observing the different parts of the personality that emerge on the couch from one moment to the next. The complexities of

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5 The theory has recently been analysed in Mary Adams’ paper (2004).

6 Meltzer never tired of his commitment to children and their emotional development. He and his late wife, Martha Harris, established centres of teaching child psychoanalysis and treatment of children all over Europe.

such intense observation of various parts of the personality are ‘... a useful preparation for the patient’s introjection into his internal objects of analytical qualities of mind in view of the hope of his becoming capable of self-analysis in the future...’(p.377).

Another paper, ‘Routine and inspired interpretations: their relation to the weaning process in analysis’ (1973), shows Meltzer’s courage in laying himself open to the full intensity of a patient’s massive projective identification and the use of his countertransference to make a new discovery. He states almost nonchalantly ‘...patients in states of projective or other types of narcissistic identification with the analyst hold up a fun-fair type of mirror, full of distortions and exaggerations no doubt, but revealing the truth in caricature.’ (p.292). He describes in detail his patient’s dream, associations and attempts at self-interpretation. Meltzer also recounts with great candour his own thoughts and associations, paying particular attention to his experience of a persistent intrusion into his mind of Velasquez’s ‘Rokeby Venus’. Having ascertained that the patient had discussed the painting with friends a few days before the session, the analyst was able to present an alternative interpretation, which in turn created an atmosphere of passionate co-operative exploration and discovery. The ‘inspired’ interpretation described in this paper was made possible by his special interest in the creative aspects of dream interpretation.

Meltzer always claimed that good clinical work was made possible by the analyst’s faithful reliance on good internal objects; on the psychic reality of a good, beautiful and creative parental couple at the centre. His patients underwent such experiences on his couch. His audiences enjoyed such experiences listening to him talking, without any notes, with his eyes closed, his narrative punctuated with gaps while he was ‘listening’ to his internal objects and formulating the next spoken paragraph.

It was Donald Meltzer’s absolute conviction that life both was, and should be, lived from the inside out and not the outside in; that is to say, that it is in the internal world that meaning and understanding are generated, and that this meaning and understanding is not only communicated to but also profoundly influences the external world of the person and the actual events that happen. This conviction was clearly exemplified in his placing of dream life at the centre of his work in the consulting room. The truth about the patient’s psychic reality at any given moment becomes

clear at the intersection between the patient's dreaming and the analyst's counter-dreaming (Meltzer's development of Bion's concept of maternal reverie). The interpretation of those dreams was where his profound understanding of unconscious phantasy and unconscious processes joined the art with the science of psychoanalysis.

He sat in a characteristic pose – with his eyes mostly closed -- coming up for air, as it were – from time to time, while the dream was told. Some dreams would be met with a one sentence response, given like a précis of a passage of prose read from a page, amazingly illuminating the state of mind of the patient and telling you something also about their character and personality. Others were approached more like a difficult poem – a few questions would be asked, a thread would appear and you could feel him working his way into the heart of the dream – separating out the images, unpacking their elliptical content, then joining one image to another until the underlying meaning of the dream-poem gradually emerged. He was enormously patient in this process, fully prepared to be baffled and puzzled, as he quite clearly believed that, over time, the dream would eventually yield its secrets. As either patient or supervisee, one did not always understand the detail of the steps Dr. Meltzer had taken to reach his understanding, and this not knowing would sometimes be quite painful to bear. But it could be borne, because one felt safe—contained by his kindness. At the same time, enough of the courage required to descend into the depths of the human psyche was conveyed to help one stay with the task and continue in the best way one could—one's own psychoanalytical process.

Meltzer often used the metaphor of Virgil guiding Dante to describe himself as guided by his internal objects. The Barcelona conference suggests another metaphor. It seems that Donald Meltzer's internal objects, like Ariadne, created the *duende* that enabled him to help Theseus/patient to overpower his internal Minotaur and use the provided thread (of the psychoanalytic process) to emerge from the labyrinth/ claustrum.

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