

Speeches at Donald Meltzer's funeral

August 2004

Meg's speech

(stepdaughter)

I started to work with Don 46 years ago at the age of seven. After being my analytic father he became my stepfather (following my own father's death), and we talked and exchanged drafts of written work till the end of his life.

Don's own parents were Jewish émigrés from Lithuania. He described them as 'the miracle in his life'. They did not force him in any particular direction but encouraged his emerging interests – such as the riding lessons in Central Park. His admiration for his father, a builder and businessman, increased in intensity with time. An early photograph shows him as a child mounted on a beautiful Arab stallion, in company with his father, who was riding a donkey. Don himself was very paternalistic, although as his writings demonstrate, his personal religion was that of 'the mother' and the male role in supporting the mother.

As a child he was not studious. Like Keats he never read a book until his early teens, but instead established himself amongst his peers as a fighter. As a result of his physique, name and bellicose propensities, he became known at school as 'Tubby Belcher'. This early pattern found a repetition when later in his career he quarrelled with the British Psychoanalytic Institute and eventually got himself ejected. The subject of the dispute was in fact dear to his heart, and a matter on which he could not compromise: it concerned his firm belief that 'education' must be distinguished from 'training'.

In his middle years, after having married into our very literary family, he became more and more fond of reading – 'addicted' he said – and ultimately outread us all. At that time poetry was a significant feature of the family conversational diet with all its fierce argument and debate. From this background emerged the Clunie Press, started by Don and my mother in memory of my father.

Don's lifelong passion for art and architecture however dated back to the time when, aged eight, his parents took him on a six-month tour of Europe. This led ultimately to his core philosophy of the 'aesthetic conflict', as formulated in *The Apprehension of Beauty*.

In childhood, he said, he had been fascinated by the country that produced *Winnie the Pooh*. Then while a medical student at Yale, his brother-in-law introduced him to the writings of Melanie Klein. After practising for some years as a child psychiatrist his desire to come to England and have analysis with her became overwhelming.¹ His analysis he described in terms of a breathless and dangerous ride ‘but wonderful’. He knew she knew he was not simply a nice sporty American boy. But he was not an uncritical Anglophile. Anti-semitism and xenophobia enraged him, and he saw these as endemic in the British establishment.

He developed a great interest in teaching, as a means of widening the impact of psychoanalysis; and together with my mother became a ‘prophet outside his own country’ through their constant, almost weekly, journeys abroad to give seminars and supervision in Europe and South America. He was very precise in his stipulations to students for unvarnished clinical material; he did not want clever theoretical diagnoses but to access the emotional essence of the transference-countertransference situation, its ‘music’ as he called it. He could make disturbingly piercing comments, but students always found him considerate and non-judgemental if they were prepared to engage in his method of ‘listening to the music’. Indeed, until the last few months of his life, music of many kinds was always playing in his house. When bored, however, he had no compunction about falling asleep on the spot. He was himself not arrogant, and joked that the Greek lessons he began in his old age gave him valuable insight into his ineducable aspects.

Until the car accident with my mother in 1984, he had considerable physical strength, which he liked to use working on the land. At weekends he cultivated fruit and vegetables – enjoying not only the produce but the process of wrestling with the soil and machinery. He had a passion for trees, which he planted wherever he lived. He was also a good tennis player. Of the various houses in which he lived, his favourite was perhaps the farm on the hill at Brill, near Oxford, where his son and daughter-in-law kept his horses. ‘There’s trouble even in paradise’, he once commented wryly after

1 To read more about Meltzer’s advent in England, see James Gammill’s account on <http://www.harris-meltzer-trust.org.uk/people/DonaldMeltzer/pdfs/Gammill.pdf>. Meltzer describes it himself in <http://www.harris-meltzer-trust.org.uk/people/DonaldMeltzer/pdfs/Meltzer-Mayers.pdf>. In Mrs Klein’s last paper, ‘On the sense of loneliness’, there is a description of Meltzer’s analysis with her (in *Our Adult World and Other Essays*, pp. 107-8). (The following case described in that paper is Arthur Hyatt Williams.) See also ‘Some personal statements’ in *A Meltzer Reader* (ed. M. H. Williams, 2010) for Meltzer’s description of Mrs Klein.

some blazing family row. We had a lot of fun there in our student days, talking, arguing, laughing, doing a bit of work on the farm, dancing Scottish reels at New Year. He delighted in the antics of his foals and grandchildren and was a keen observer of their development, never blindly indulgent (except in babyhood which he considered sacrosanct), but always interested in the burgeoning growth-points of character formation. He appreciated craftsmanship and wanted us to understand the humanity of labour. When we wanted something he instructed us to 'make it' – never to buy it. When something was broken he insisted we take it apart and try to mend it – as in the weekend spent disemboweling the cooker, despite the usual ongoing requirements of producing meals for 10 or 14 houseguests.

He was an excellent public speaker, and believed in spontaneous speaking without notes, always mindful of the obligation not just to instruct but also to entertain the audience. The worst day of his life, he said, was when he had to *ad lib* before a cinema-full of spectators who had come from all over Italy to watch the Indian film based on Bion's *Memoir* which he had sponsored and supported – and the Indian film never arrived.

Although he defined his attitude to life as one of 'adamant cheerfulness', he confessed that he was always a little depressed, owing to the state of the world. Like Blake, he saw hope for humanity in passionate individual relationships and desires, and saw these as synonymous with mental health. He felt mental disease or atrophy was rooted in people's submission to hierarchy – a particular feature of institutions – obeying the whip of what he called 'irritability'. He believed that psychoanalysis could help the world by withdrawing people's reliance on their adaptational shell and strengthening instead the world within.

Owing to his ability to make distinctions that pinpointed the essential heart of a problem, many people have seen him as a person of exceptional intellectual brilliance, and interpreted his achievements in this light. He however disagreed. In his view theory was always subordinate to practice, and the practice of psychoanalysis he saw not as *doing things* to other people but as a 'state of rest' in which if you listened sufficiently quietly, the miracle of your internal mother and father and all the knowledge they contain, would simply present itself to you.

He loved life to the end and certainly did not 'go gentle into that good night'.

Adrian's speech

(son-in-law)

I first met Don in the summer of 1971, when a few months after my mother died our two families met up at the Vienna psychoanalytical congress. We hired a large Ford car together and drove to Venice, staying in Selina Marsoni's palazzo [Van Axel]. I was recently looking at old cine film from that trip which shows Don first waving at the camera and then plunging into a rushing river in the Austrian alps, arms and legs going like pistons. Further footage at a later date shows our eldest son Gawain, then about five, helping Don push a wheelbarrow. Playing. Don seems about twice the size he was at the end of his life. 'There's big Grandpa again', said our youngest son, watching the film.

Indeed Don was always playing or working. On Sunday afternoons at Buttermilk there would be a thunderous rattle from the typewriter: Don bashing out his latest book or paper, and once a month, his bills or correspondence with ex-patients or supervisees, which he called his 'crogglesponce'.

In my work as a family doctor, I always found Don a huge help in considering difficult patients. On many occasions his thoughtful ear and apparently simple advice enabled me to make progress with them. He was never intimidated by other people's strong feelings or paranoia. His fearlessness was incredible. He also had an astonishing ability to correctly predict the outcome of cases. When I asked him where he got his inner strength, he said from faith in his internal objects. From this stemmed his belief that if you trust people it brings out the best in them. He was quite happy to tolerate the occasional sorry deception by some practised con-artist that would have convinced the rest of us to be less trusting and more cynical in the future.

I remember asking Don when it was right to resist tyranny – how hard or severe does it have to be? His response was, '*always*'. A few years ago, when we were persecuted by some paranoid and sadistic neighbours, he pointed out that if we refused to accept their projections they would eventually self-destruct (as indeed they did). I nicknamed this strategy 'ho hum' because Don said this is what you tell yourself when trying to prevent being seduced into action. Yes, there it is 'ho hum'. You observed that the action conforms to the predicted pattern, and strenuously do nothing in response.

Dealing with the less psychotic, Don believed that anger helped protect the inner world.

So, with a religious faith in his internal world, his was a scientific mind. He always wanted 'the evidence'. A few days he died he grilled me for the evidence for my stating that he seemed to be getting better. Of course, he knew that no evidence could outweigh the toll of Parkinson's disease, strokes, heart attack and renal failure.

Elaine's speech

(daughter-in-law)

Don had a lifelong love of horses. I remember seeing a photograph of him, aged about nine, doing the 'grand tour' with his parents. Don was riding a beautiful Arab horse and his father was on a donkey!

I met Don 34 years ago and at that time he owned some woodland near Wargrave. He had already embarked on breeding horses and favoured the elegance of the Arab. When he bought Buttermilk Hall in 1971, I persuaded him to use thoroughbred stallions, to increase their size, and he bred some wonderful horses. His favourite was Dear Girl. She was very fiery and as Don commented on many occasions, a lovely mover.

Don was terrifying to ride with as he was completely without fear. One minute he would be walking along and the next he would break into a gallop without any warning. He would return to the yard with Dear Girl and dismount saying 'wonderful, wonderful'.

I last rode with Don about five years ago, after he had had a hip replacement and been advised not to ride again. He rode against my advice as Bibby was extremely lively and inclined to shy suddenly and without warning. Unfortunately Don did fall off, on the road. I asked him to sit by the road while I took the horses home and then came back for him in the car. I had untacked the horses and was getting in the car when Don hobbled into the yard. 'That was fun', he said.

In recent years Don enjoyed coming to see the horses, feeding them carrots and admiring them. He just liked to know that they were there.

Don outlived all his horses but we had some hunters spending their summer holidays at Buttermilk and Don was just as interested in them. It was only a few weeks ago when I brought him to see them and he fed them carrots and admired them.

Michal's letter

(daughter)

Dad and I shared a love of nature and trees in particular. He told me he loved thuja and copper beeches best. Dad built our 'wet weather shed' in the middle of dedicated woodlands near Wargrave. It was there on top of the beautiful beech knoll that Dad and I spread my brother Keithy's ashes. It was there also that my brother Jonathan's ashes were also spread (at his request).

Dad loved to grow more than trees and breed horses. I have fond memories of him trying to grow mushrooms in our ripe horse manure pile. No mushrooms surfaced but a nest of baby vipers hatched beautifully. We took them to London where Dad put an ad in the newspaper claiming that they made wonderful family pets. However, by the time we received some responses, the babies had all escaped, never to be seen again. Dad also loved his orchard and grape arbour, but the wine he persisted in making was undrinkable.

My Dad was a brilliant man and he loved to teach. He taught me tolerance and understanding of people and their needs. This enabled me to do my work more effectively. We shared a love of music and spent many pleasant hours together listening to classical and Latin music. He also loved to hear me play my flute and watch me dance for him. He always encouraged me to learn new skills such as ballet and various sports such as tennis which he enjoyed teaching us kids how to play. He also built a beautiful arbour, weir and bridges that connected our two little islands where a pair of swans nested every year.

We spend many happy hours touring museums, ancient sites and art galleries throughout Europe where Dad would share with us his knowledge of all we saw. It didn't seem to matter that Dad, Jonathan and I were all colour-blind. Our walks in the country were spent talking about life. Dad lived a rich life in the pursuit of knowledge. I wish that I could have known him as a young boy when he was the apple of his parents' eyes. He started off as a skinny little lad wearing round wire glasses but he grew into a powerful man who greatly influenced the world around him.