

The aesthetic conflict and psychoanalysis as an art form

by Meg Harris Williams

I would like to present a short summary of how, through a fusion of parallel disciplines in the mid-1980's, the concept of 'aesthetic conflict' came into being, with the aim of illuminating the sense in which psychoanalysis may be described as an art form.

The 'aesthetic conflict' was Don's term for a state of mind that had long been recognised by the English poets as crucial to the quality of their work, and that had been observed in infants by those following the methods of Esther Bick, but that had not yet found its proper place in psychoanalytic theory, despite Klein's recognition of love and hate as the ground from which the 'epistemological instinct' (*wissenstrieb*) springs. This primary conflict – now seen as emotional rather than instinctual - was reformulated by Bion as the 'vertices' of L, H and K, which he thought needed to achieve a mutual tension before any step in psychological development could take place. Such a step takes place under the aegis of a Platonic-Kantian source of absolute and infinite knowledge - which he terms 'O' (the equivalent of godhead). There is a constant oscillation in the human mind between narcissistic (paranoid-schizoid) values and object-dependent (depressive) values. However in the Bionic view, this corresponds not to the Death and Life instincts, but rather, to the denial of emotional tension as distinct from its toleration. Hence his formulation of the 'negative grid' of -L,-H,-K (the denial of emotional facts) which exists in opposition to the positive potential of L,H,K. Hate and love are different aspects of the same emotional constellation, and they need to be experienced simultaneously in order to be constructive. The key to development is passion and turbulence, on a qualitative rather than quantitative scale – the increments may be minute. Whereas the absence of turbulence in intimate relationships in either life or art results in a weakened, overly liberal, 'softhumanist' mentality (Williams 1986).

Using an age-old (Platonic) metaphor often reiterated by the poets, Bion says the knowledge derived by means of LHK constitutes 'food for the mind'. This food takes the form of symbols, which incorporate knowledge within the personality. Here psychoanalytic theory comes into line with Romantic poetics, as when Coleridge said that 'an idea cannot be conveyed except by a symbol' (Coleridge 1816). Klein, too, had recognised that symbol-formation was the 'basis for all talents'; and as a result of her

work with children, she was well aware that a symbol is not necessarily verbal, but is a vehicle for the expression of unconscious phantasy in any medium – phantasy, like dreaming, being the emotional drama of internal objects and part-objects. Bion termed the first step in symbol-formation ‘alpha function’, something that is performed for the infant-self by the internal mother.

The impact on Don of this Bionic vision took 2 forms: firstly, he pioneered its usefulness in clinical practice. Don always insisted the Kleinian model is essentially a theological one. However, rather than using the mystical language of ‘O’ he preferred to stick to traditional Kleinian terms of the internal mother or combined object. The English poets, similarly, had viewed their Muse as ‘mediating’ between ultimate godhead and the infant-soul on its way to achieving personal ‘identity’ (Keats 1819). In his personal process of assimilating Bion, Don helped to elucidate certain inconsistencies or fluctuations in Bion’s thinking-in-progress, such as his temporary exchange of the Ps-D value system for a more mechanical, gestalt-oriented view of Ps-D that viewed it as a process of dispersal *versus* integration. Don believed strongly that because Bion’s thinking was so far in the vanguard, he had to strive constantly to find metaphors that could capture the utmost reach of his psychic intuitions, and was painfully conscious of his own frustration in a task that he felt required a poetic medium for its expression: for only poetry could present the ineffable in symbolic form.

Beyond his personal *interpretation* of Bion, however, Don was also *inspired* by Bion, in a way analogous to the way poets and artists are inspired by those before them. In literary criticism the ‘anxiety of influence’ (Bloom) refers to a type of male competitiveness felt towards a previous poet. However in genuinely inspired writing, this is renounced for a correlation between internal objects (Williams 1981). Instead of arousing crippling doubts and suspicions the predecessor attains a higher level of abstraction – what Bion calls the internal ‘heavenly company’, and Meltzer the ‘saints and angels of psychic reality’ (Meltzer 2005, 428). This is not the complacency of idealisation; on the contrary, it evokes commitment to the cause of promulgating the beauty of such ideas and contributing to the world’s ‘harvest’ (as Keats put it). Don has described his inspiration by Bion in *Studies in Extended Metapsychology*. Here he relates how he came to understand that the emotional constellation of L,H,K corresponded to the impact of the mother’s beauty on the newborn infant, initially at part-object level:

In the beginning was the aesthetic object and the aesthetic object was the breast and the breast was the world. (Meltzer 1986, 204)

The 'new idea' impacted on his thinking as if it were something Platonically pre-existent, waiting to be known or discovered, rather as (he said) Freud discovered psychoanalysis - as an idea lying latent, waiting to be received in earthly form.

This cognitive impact occurred when a combination of influences that had existed co-operatively but commensally, suddenly fused with a magnetic attraction. Along with Freud, Klein and Bion, these influences included: Roger Money-Kyrle's Platonic 'realism' which equates perception, conception and re-cognition; Esther Bick's and particularly my mother Martha Harris's mode of getting to the heart of the emotional complexities in infant-mother observation; the aesthetic writings of Adrian Stokes which detail the projective-introjective reciprocity between the art-viewer and the art-object; my analysis of the poetic language of Milton and Keats, which revealed the passionate love-hate relationship between poet and Muse as the foundation of a learning experience that Milton called a 'search for the idea of the beautiful throughout the shapes and forms of things' (Williams 1981, 76); and Don's extensive reading in linguistic and aesthetic philosophy. Of particular significance was the key distinction between discursive and presentational forms made by philosophers such as Susanne Langer. This distinction is a modern version of the Coleridgean one between allegory and symbol (Coleridge 1817), and is analogous to Bion's between 'knowing about' and 'knowing'. All these parallel modes of humanistic exploration compound into the 'soil, roots and branches' of the *Apprehension of Beauty* – whose structure, Don said, was presided over by Martha Harris:

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. 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. (Meltzer and Williams, 1988, jacket cover)

These literary and philosophical vertices then dovetailed with Don's clinical experience to shed new light on his view of the psychoanalytic process itself. As *The Psychoanalytical Process* shows, he had always regarded this as an organic entity with a natural history of its own, and thereby as an object of devotion - whose requirements should be served, not forced or manipulated (Meltzer 1967). But from *The Apprehension of Beauty* onwards he also makes clear the extent to which co-operativeness or non-co-operativeness can be linked to the patient's toleration or recoil from the impact of the beauty - not of the analyst's mind - but of the *psychoanalytic process as aesthetic object*. This particular clarification came, he says, from his work with autistic children, where he was impressed both by their aesthetic sensibility and by their attempt to seek refuge in two-dimensionality in order to flatten out the aesthetic turbulence resulting from the object's manifest beauty but unknowable interior, which awakens both love and hate simultaneously. They recoil from the 'catastrophic change' (Bion) entailed in a three-dimensional relationship with the object. They are artists manqué. By contrast with this autistic ingenuity in not-seeing and sense-dismantling, Don defines artists as those who (in their art, even if not necessarily in their personal life) have enough strength to tolerate what they see. And in this, he is very much in line with Plato's description of how in transmigration, 'the souls that have seen the most, enter in to a human infant destined to become a seeker after wisdom or beauty or a follower of the Muses and a lover' (*Phaedrus*). One could say that psychoanalysis is one of the educational forms which enables the human soul to work through its aesthetic conflict and re-incarnate itself on a richer level of experience.

Bion asked 'what kind of poets and artists can we be?' as psychoanalysts (1980, 73). It was a rhetorical question intended to stimulate curiosity and defy answers - which after Pascal he always felt to be 'malheureux'. Nonetheless he did answer it, when he came to write his own experimental masterpiece *A Memoir of the Future*. The *Memoir* is essentially a 'presentational form' in Langer's sense - where meaning is shown, rather than stated. But Don perhaps came closer to formulating how the experience in the consulting room could be an art form, because his language absorbed proportionately more from the world of the arts and less from that of mathematics and philosophy, much as he respected both disciplines. He wrote of the 'mysterious compositional qualities' of the process, as distinct from the 'iconographic' aspects of interpretation; and how it is not the mind of the analyst alone that forms the symbolic container for the

experience, but rather, the ‘fitting together’ of the analyst’s attention to the patient’s co-operation. (Meltzer 1986, 208). He said that he believed psychoanalysis would survive owing to 2 things: the transference relationship, and its facilitation of symbol-formation (Meltzer 2000). These factors are of course interdependent, and they operate under the aegis of the psychoanalytic process as aesthetic object.

To conclude, therefore, the ‘aesthetic conflict’ reformulates the therapeutic aim of the psychoanalytic method in terms of enabling the normal, innate struggle of the infant or patient to learn from experience with the aid of their internal aesthetic object. This revolves around a passionate response of love and hate and the need to ‘know’ the experience by finding autonomous symbols. But the term also describes the struggle of the infant *analyst* (Bion 1997) to seek a countertransference congruence with the patient’s internal objects that will enable the beauty of the process to become tolerable. It becomes tolerable when a containing symbol for the emotional experience mysteriously takes shape, whose verbal contours define an inner poetry rather than preach a moral diagnosis (Bion 1970, 118). Such a symbol is not simply a verbal referent (a sign or pointer) but a three-dimensional container formed by two dream-transferences engaged in a ‘conversation between internal objects’ (Meltzer 1983, 44). This is the equivalent, in art forms including that of artistic criticism, of finding a ‘symbolic congruence’ to the underlying idea contained by the aesthetic object (Williams 1986). This congruence expresses personal learning-from-experience, but is not solipsistic, since it is bound to the formal qualities of the object. As Emily Bronte put it:

The soul to feel the flesh, and the flesh to feel the chain. (Bronte 239)

The autonomous symbol of a particular emotional experience is facilitated by the restrictions of its medium (the chain). It is not free; it is held by the underlying idea that guides it through the medium. The inexpressible ideas of psychoanalysis will always be in advance of its verbal formulations, but they can none the less be held symbolically, in dreamlike form, within the session.

Bion could at times seem almost consumed with pessimism about whether the poetic psychoanalytic spirit could survive the onslaught of people ‘knowing’ too much about it. He saw the poetic ‘spirit’ of psychoanalysis as a Sleeping Beauty neglected by those who were waylaid by the surrounding bramble-thickets of jargon and complacency (Bion 1997, 34-7). In Meltzer’s view, in so far as psychoanalysis is an artistic procedure

which enables symbol-formation, the aesthetic conflict must be the basis of everyday psychoanalytic communication: just as it is in poetry, music and art and in our response to those forms.

Hazlitt said that the true poet does not seek admiration for himself, but homage for the 'eternal forms of truth and beauty that are reflected in his mind' (Hazlitt Vol.5, 144). The same is true of literary criticism, or of psychoanalysis. In the case of the former, writing that is a vehicle for the critic's own pronouncements (smugness) is ugly; whereas writing that seeks to symbolise the impact of the art-object can take on a reflective beauty. Writing 'about' psychoanalysis is not an art form in itself - it is a necessary teaching aid to enable the method to be practised. But the Sleeping Beauty that 'is psychoanalysis' (Bion) lies within the analysis in the development of two participating personalities, who between them constitute a reflection of the aesthetic object – the psychoanalytic process itself.

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