The aesthetic conflict and the psychoanalytic method

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The title of this talk, which was suggested by Dr Calich, is specially pertinent to Meltzer's psychoanalytic teaching: the focus is not on the analyst or his conflicts, nor on the patient's own conflicts which are the originating stimulus, but on the psychoanalytic method itself. Meltzer always paid meticulous attention to this and indeed, he described his own lifetime career in terms of a 'love affair with the psychoanalytic method' (KD3). The method enables the analytic process to take place and is itself the governing aesthetic object of the process: that is, the object which magnetises all the emotionality within the consulting room. Hence it arouses the primary emotions of love, hate and the desire for knowledge, denominated by Bion as LHK and by Meltzer 'aesthetic conflict'. Aesthetic conflict is the fundamental principle underlying all mental development.

Meltzer's focus on the method is perhaps unusual amongst analysts but is very characteristic of him and actually has significant implications for the role and responsibilities of the analyst, and the nature of the transference-countertransference. He says this is something he added to Klein – his view of the way the method sets in motion what is an essentially logical process of development with a 'natural history'. The analyst 'presides' over this process but not objectively, as it is guided by his own countertransference and introspection – such is the nature of what is potentially a 'perfect science' whose observational tools are the same as the subject under investigation. Yet according to both Bion and Meltzer, those tools must be employed artistically, hence the designation of psychoanalysis as an art-science.

It is important that the analyst be aware that ultimately, the LHK emotional configuration is primarily related to the method itself, rather than to the patient, or even to his own countertransference responses. For in Meltzer's view, it is the method which is the container for psychic turbulence, not the analyst. Once the transference relationship has been established, the full impact of the analyst's love-hate relationship with psychoanalysis and the psychoanalytic method will be brought into play. The method guides the aesthetic conflict aroused by the interaction of patient and analyst. It is in their unique co-operation that the 'pleasure' of the method lies, he says, which can make the communal work 'the most interesting conversation in the world'. The emotional conflicts of both are contained by the aesthetic qualities of the analysis. (Bion too said the vital relationship was with an analysis, and the truth was 'in the relationship' not a possession of either party – though he did not give details of the difficulties in implementing the method.) In the consulting room, either both participants are developing in tandem, or neither of them are developing.

What does Meltzer mean by following the method?

The psychoanalytic method, in the accepted and simple sense, is the establishment of the transference by which infantile conflicts are projected onto the analyst rather than taking a realistic view: these are not past conflicts (as seen in early psychoanalytic theory) but present ones. The analyst's job is to pay attention to minute manifestations of psychic reality which contact with

internal objects has enabled him to notice. The patient's job is to cooperate in seeking for their meaning, and together a container or symbol is found – in the first instance, through an interpretation which fits the material even if it is not definitive.

Following the method is nothing to do with responses aroused in the analyst by any characteristics of the patient (like, dislike, sympathy, aversion), and Meltzer said he never laid much emphasis on the given history which he regarded as generally a kind of myth. Indeed, being influenced by such responses could result in the danger of countertransference action.

However there is a faith that underneath all the initial symptoms and presentations there must somewhere be a 'lost child of the personality' that requires to be linked up with an equally lost adult part – and in this the analyst, relying on his experience of the method, hopes to be a facilitator. At this stage he is interested not in the patient as a person but in the potentialities that can be accessed through this beautiful method, just as – according to Meltzer – the mother sees the baby as beautiful owing to its potential for development. (He considered that unlike the mother, the baby was not beautiful in itself – whilst noting that actual mothers would universally disagree with him.) A person in distress, as typified by a patient, could be considered a representative of the ugliness that needs to be transformed, not by the analyst's illusory powers but by the method.

But the establishment of the transference is not simple or automatic – and this is the first requirement of the method. At least, it is not so simple with adults who already know too much about psychoanalysis and who have become fluent in 'talking about psychoanalysis' rather than 'talking psychoanalysis' in Bion's distinction. Meltzer terms this the preformed transference. Although it is important to recognise this and not be seduced into a fake transference, he says it is also quite easy to dispel in the case of most patients, once dreams are brought in and the patient begins to understand the kind of partnership that is required by the method: this is how psychoanalysis 'works' – it is not an intellectual debate. After this preliminary obstacle has been overcome, the analysis can begin, on the basis of the true infantile transference. 'Free association' no longer seems an accurate appellation as associations are in fact directed from within, via the transference.

According to Meltzer, as described in *The Psychoanalytical Process*, every analysis has a 'natural history' which follows a developmental template through five main phases: the gathering of the transference, the sorting of geographical confusions, the sorting of zonal confusions, the threshold of the depressive position, and the weaning process. Each of these phases depends upon work done in the previous phase, that cannot be bypassed 'since each phase has an absolute metapsychological dependence on the adequate working-through of the previous one' (p. 36). *The Psychoanalytical Process* was mainly based on work with children, but he saw it as applicable to adults also, just more clearly visible in children. The behavioural description is different but the structural implications are the same. The goal is to establish dependence on internal primal good objects, by means of the external dependence on the analytic setting and process.

Moreover even when the analysis has properly begun, on the lines of this trajectory, the problems of co-operation continue along a Ps-D oscillation in terms of resistance to the method and subversion of its dominance. At every step in the growth process, he says, there is a 'delicate balance between progression and regression' and this is intensified at the endings of time units – the session, the week, the year, the holiday breaks (SS 203). This aspect of the method is the 'setting' which is designed to highlight such moments of turbulence for experience and examination.

This oscillation applies not just to the state of mind of the patient but to the analysis itself. At its best, the movement is arrested in the perfect conversational 'fit' described by Meltzer in terms of 'sealing the container'. But inevitably the course of true psychoanalysis does not run

smooth, and much of the time the co-operation or fit is faulty; the 'pleasure' is not always present; the love of psychoanalysis and its beauty is marred by hatred of its defects and ugliness and resistance to its demands on the self – as in any art form, or any intimate relationship. It is not only the patient who is resistant to the analytical process but also the analyst, who is constantly tempted by fatigue, inertia, lack of trust etc. The method is not beautiful all the time; but 'is it beautiful *inside*?' This is the question which Meltzer says denotes the essence of the depressive position.

The transference from internal objects

Is it beautiful inside? is the question activated by the K-link - the question of interest.

By 'interest' Meltzer refers to the aesthetic conflict that is always aroused by the presence of an aesthetic object and its attendant emotional configuration of LHK (in Bion's formulation) – love, hate, and the desire for knowledge of the object. There is a hidden, internal beauty which one might call the 'spirit of psychoanalysis', Bion's underlying O – even when it appears to be not accessible and the transference is producing nothing but ugliness and misfit. The analyst needs to have faith in this hidden beauty, and it is easier for him than for the patient – this is the fruit of experience. It is in a sense the analyst's role and responsibility to maintain his own faith in the invisible spirit behind the method even when the sensuous evidence (via the transference) is lacking or disappointing.

Meltzer's clarification of the conflict between the inside and the outside of the aesthetic object replaces the earlier designation of pleasure vs. reality. The Freudian-Kleinian values of pleasure-gratification-security are not enough; what is required to sustain the analytic process is love of the truth, a post-Kleinian value. The pleasure of co-operation is subservient to this value, hence the practising of psychoanalysis (like other arts) takes place along oscillating Ps-D lines. Is the analytic method really going to work or may even the experienced analyst undergo doubts in its efficacy? The love affair is clouded by paranoid-schizoid anxieties, the beautiful reveals there is ugliness at its core.

The inside or spiritual essence of the object requires an imaginative leap of faith which then enables a capacity for introjection – as in the baby's 'hope-hours' or 'hope-seconds'. How can we stand it? as Bion asks. The true depressive position requires an implicit imaginative vision of the inside of the object, not merely to be judged by the pleasure it produces – the external beauty. The beauty of the inside of the object is not possessable but its psychic beauty is as real as the outside.

When Meltzer speaks of the 'countertransference dream' he is evoking not only the link with the patient's transference, but the analyst's link with his own internal objects, and his imaginative vision of their messages. Indeed he states specifically that the 'analytic work is done by the transference from internal objects'. The underlying communication is unconscious and nonverbal since it comes from internal objects and has to be translated into everyday language. As Keats's muse Moneta put it:

> Mortal, that thou may'st understand aright,
> I humanize my sayings to thine ear,
> Making comparisons of earthly things;
> Or thou might'st better listen to the wind,
> Whose language is to thee a barren noise,
> Though it blows legend-laden through the trees...

Following the poetic analogy, we can say that there is in fact an authority speaking in the analytic session. But it is not the analyst, it is the those internal gods whose beauty is veiled within non-sensuous psychic reality. The analyst's difficulty is to hear the words, and then, to translate them 'humanistically' for the patient. Bion calls this finding the 'language of achievement', and compared the analyst at the beginning of each session to the newborn baby. The situation is inevitably stressful and leaves the analyst-baby (like the poet) vulnerable not just to mis-hearing but to the temptation to substitute his own familiar words and phrases for those of the aesthetic object whom he cannot decipher clearly. It is the eternal dilemma of the aesthetic conflict in the face of mystery and enigma.

In specific terms, the analytic method allows for unconscious work to take place even when all that is visible is the ugliness of distress and confusion. Here the analyst has to support the patient who is likely to have less confidence in this invisible working. In doing so, perhaps whilst acknowledging his own lack of understanding of the present conflict, this is how the analyst helps the patient introject his mode of thinking – the mental function, rather than simply the content of his thought. Not knowing is as important and valuable as knowing: it implies the recognition that the knowledge exists but is not yet attainable – through what Bion calls 'intersection with O'.

The analyst's task is to restrain the desire to help the patient (Bion's memory-and-desire) and to allow the internal objects to do the actual work. This is the key principle in following the method – which he describes as a 'conversation between internal objects'. Bion describes it as a sense of being observed by a 'third person' inside the consulting room – the analyst's analyst.

The analytic method embraces this potentiality; it is aligned to a vision of hidden spiritual beauty, the source of Platonic knowledge that is key to the post-Kleinian model, something that lies beyond both patient and analyst but that becomes accessible through the practice of the method. Meltzer saw the heroic Freud, the one he admired, in terms of his capacity to be surprised by his patient, in a way that upturned his view of what was happening – that is, he allowed his vision to be shaped by the findings of the method. When following the method, the analysis will be 'working' whether or not anybody understands what is happening; just as dreamlife and unconscious phantasy are a continuum whether or not the conscious 'organ of attention' is being directed to their contents. Of course, the analyst is meant to have special experience in deploying this organ of attention; but the analytic method allows not only for not-knowing but also for periods of not-seeing.

Fitting attention to co-operativeness and sealing the container

What can the analyst do to avoid premature interpretation and remain faithful to the method? The method requires that a 'fit' should be found between perspectives of the analyst and the patient, making constructive communication possible. Strictly speaking the 'fit' represents a correspondence between the cooperativeness of the patient and the attention of the analyst; this, says Meltzer, is what 'seals the container' and forms a symbol of the experience.

> The model of container–contained places a new value on receptiveness and the holding of the dynamic situation of transference–countertransference in the mind. But perhaps to state this as if the analyst were the container misses the point that it is the fitting together of the analyst's attention and attitudes to the cooperativeness of the patient that forms and seals the container, lending it the degree of flexibility and resilience required from moment to moment. (*Studies in Extended Metapsychology,* p. 250)

The method as aesthetic object engages and dynamises the emotional links of LHK that are present in the session within the transference-countertransference. But it does not simply call

up the hidden turbulence. It is the method that allows for the functioning presence of the internal objects of both analyst and analysand, which will enable the turbulence to be constructively resolved. For the analytic conversation is, when it is a true work-group, conducted not by the ordinary personalities but by their internal objects in conversation, and this is when it becomes the most interesting in the world, whe the consulting room becomes an intensive 'forcing house for symbol formation'.

This is not a matter of putting order into dreams or other material, but putting order into 'the confusion in our own minds' that is thereby aroused. According to Meltzer, the way to do this is through observation and description, in a way that allows for a verbal transformation of visual or dreamlike material, without enforcing a specific interpretation at that point.

The process of 'sealing the container' in communication with the patient has two main components – the visual and the verbal, the dream and the music that accompanies what he terms 'interpretive reverie'.

Meltzer says that 'no material that a patient brings to his analyst is as powerfully evocative as his dream material' (*Dream Life*, p. 178) and he quotes Ella Sharpe's phrase 'poetic diction of the dream', highlighting the supremacy of the dream itself rather than its limited interpretation. Probably the one innate qualification needed by the analyst is the one talent that Meltzer said he discerned with himself, namely the ability to read dreams. Dreams are the key to 'reading people with awe' as Bion put it. The dream as an aesthetic object whose presence arouses complex emotions, focuses the analytic task and, says Meltzer, comes to the rescue of the analyst's incapacity for symbol formation in the face of non-visible psychic phenomena: 'The dreamer is the thinker; the analyst the comprehender of his thought'. The analyst has to try to match the poetic diction of the dream, by means of a communal dream that takes place in the session under the aegis of the psychoanalytic method:

> It allows for the formation of an object which the therapist and patient can examine together from a certain distance, in the same way that one steps back from most paintings to allow the composition to impinge, and then steps forward to appreciate the brush strokes and craftsmanship. (*Studies in Extended Metapsychology,* p. 251)

The psychoanalytic method, as aesthetic object, facilitates this secondary object that has been created by the two minds but not by the two egos; it is distanced from the personalities and yet contains and reflects the emotional links. In other words, it is a symbol of the analytic experience, founded on the original material of the patient but with transformations – an analytic dream.

The private language through which this communication takes place is the 'interpretive reverie'; it is a dual link with the patient and with the internal object. Here, according to Meltzer, the music of the voice plays an essential part in helping to find a formulation that fits, that can be 'agreed on' by both people:

> I think that the music of the human language and human voice is very primal. It is the link between mother and baby while it is still in utero: the music of the mother comes through to the baby. I think that the deepening of the analytic transference is very dependent on this music and much less dependent on the intellectual insight that you can communicate by interpretation. ('On supervision', interview with R and M Oelsner, 1999)

Given that the mind is not a unity and consists of many parts – adult, infantile, tyrannical, male and female, and other 'classes' to which the patient belongs – the analyst's voice, used as an exploratory and inquiring instrument rather than a declamatory one, can direct itself to which-

ever part is in the foreground, and in his paper on 'Temperature and distance' Meltzer reviews the tone, distance and music that modulate the interpretative exploration.

He considers that the 'music' of interpretative exploration traces, beyond words, the movements of the internal object relationships that are not yet ready to be transformed into verbal expression – to find the mother-baby link of the analytic couple. Interpretative exploration has nothing to do with trying to be poetic; it represents the dominance of the capacity for musical listening, tentative and flexible. The danger, according to Meltzer, is acting-in-the transference, which can also be hidden behind the 'blank screen' demeanour advised by Freud. The analyst needs to refrain from projecting aspects of their own personality – their own voice – and instead, to receive the deep grammar of the patient's voice or voices. The 'atmosphere of communication' needs to be carefully controlled through temperature and distance, using an interplay of lexical and metaphorical (dream) language notation. The same musical elements would be involved – tone, rhythm, key, volume and timbre (including silence) – but not on an operatic level.

Meltzer distinguishes between 'modulation' (a musical transformation) and 'modification' of mental pain (attempting to deny or remove it) (*Psychoanalytical Process,* p. xviii). The function of the analytic voice is to modulate, not to modify, by means of interpretations that are part of an overall 'interpretative activity' sensitive to the types of pain and the different parts of the personality which are in pain at a given moment.

The crucial point is that the tone and music of the voice is not imposed by the analyst, nor should it demonstrate his verbal virtuosity, but should reflect his attempt to recognise the patient's own internal object-relations drama of many voices. This is the reality, the truth, of the analytic situation. The analytic voice is not a thing-in-itself, for pride and display, but an instrument employed in a search for truth. From this perspective, the objective qualities of a person's voice (range, musicality, accent, vocabulary) do not matter, nor does it matter if the voice is modified by technological media, since what is important is the motivation to use whatever language is available to identify with the patient's emotionality and achieve a 'fit', a symbolic congruence, using elements meaningful to both partners even if to nobody else. It is the orderliness and harmony of this complex vertex on the truth that accounts for the aesthetic satisfaction.

This feature of the analytic method, seeking for a 'fit', is accompanied, says Meltzer, by 'a sense of being in the presence of an aesthetic object' (*Dream Life*, p. 150), the equivalent we may deduce of the poetic muse.

Meltzer distinguishes interpretive reverie or exploration from 'interpretation proper' ('Temperature and distance as technical dimensions of interpretation', 1976) in which it may result, though Meltzer says he enjoys the exploratory phase more. Interpretive exploration is perhaps similar to an artist's sketch, using multiple drawing lines, seeking for what he calls the 'compositional qualities' of the session. Most importantly, this activity keeps the need for explanatory interpretation at bay, whilst maintaining some kind of musical connection. For any premature explanation dissolves the link to the transference from internal objects.

'Interpretation proper' can be written down, remembered, published; it belongs to a formal linguistic notation – the lexical level of language. 'Interpretative exploration' however is less easy to describe outside the confines of the consulting room. This is on the lines of Susanne Langer's distinction between discursive and presentational forms – all art forms being 'presentational' in their import, even when their medium is words. Both types of verbal language have their place but the importance of interpretations is greatly lessened when their main function is viewed as 'confirming for the patient that you really are listening and thinking', rather than advocating their correctness: 'Either they fit the material or they don't fit the material' ('On

supervision'). Ultimately, he concludes, 'The rationale of technique is really just the rationale of human communication'; this requires 'tact, delicacy and clarity' and 'that's all there is to it'.

This sounds simple but of course, all the complexity and ambivalence of aesthetic conflict aroused by the method lies behind its implementation, with all its dangers. Meltzer says that Bion's distinction between thinking and basic assumptions, truth and lies, is the framework that helps the analyst to avoid these pitfalls.

The danger of perverted links

The psychoanalytic method sets in motion an active inquiry dominated by the K-link, under the aegis of the method as aesthetic object. Inevitably this is a different realm from everyday discourse and the habitual or automatic use of received symbols, which is in essence 'protomental' or unthinking, so is unconcerned with aesthetic conflict or the anxieties produced by developmental change (Bion's catastrophic change).

But the sense of being in the presence of an aesthetic object comes with all the attendant dangers aroused by aesthetic conflict. It should not be assumed that either the patient, or the analyst in his intimate countertransference, is pleased to hear the truth about themselves. In Bion's view the truth is always resisted by parts of the personality.

Imaginative curiosity that has faith in the beauty of the inside, owing to the link with the aesthetic object, turns to intrusive curiosity that cannot tolerate its enigmatic quality and, as a defence, tries to control and possess the unknowable interior of the object. There is always a danger of 'damage' to the analyst.

How would this type of retreat from aesthetic conflict manifest itself or be recognised by the analyst - not solely in regard to the patient, but in his own countertransference? The analyst, beset by aesthetic conflict with regard to the method, and tormented by lack of understanding or by inappropriate personal countertransference, may interpose an interpretation in unconscious resistance to the method. In terms of analytic failure this would correspond to tyrannical modes of interpretation by the insecure analyst, or to respectable modes of interpretation by the inexperienced analyst:

> Until the analyst's experience is wide on the one hand and his character has been stabilised by analytic treatment on the other, this structure of theory is continually toppling down under the stress of analytic work, its pain, confusion, worry, guilt, disappointment. (*The Psychoanalytical Process*, p. xxii)

– that is, the application of taught theories which have been tried and tested by others and found to be satisfactory in previous contexts. Outside the analysis itself, this retreat from aesthetic conflict can manifest itself in institutional hierarchies.

In fact Meltzer considers that the main danger for the analyst is to allow his mind to become 'poisoned' by dead ideas or interpretations promoted by an institutionalised mentality which rigidifies basic assumptions. Flight from the truth is retreat from aesthetic conflict. Bion's idea of lies as 'minus LHK' clarifies the temptation to 'compromise', and being aware of this temptation helps the analyst to resist the BA mentality and to tolerate the state of not-knowing:

> Even if you don't always succeed in understanding the internal state of the patient, the analyst should nonetheless be under the dominance of K, that is, of the desire to understand. (Foreword to M. H. Williams, *The Vale of Soulmaking* [2005], p. 178-9)

The Negative Grid is a 'powerful tool' for scrutinising 'cynical attacks on the truth' in their many forms of equivocal language, pseudo-logic, and basic assumption groupings both internal and external, for both analyst and patient (*Studies in Extended Metapsychology*, p. 253).

But it is not just the inexperienced analyst who is at risk from minus LHK, the retreat from aesthetic conflict. It is a perennial danger, since as Bion is always pointing out, the present emotional context has by definition not been encountered before: it is not enough to recognise it, it has to be lived through – this is what the psychoanalytic method demands – the interaction of love, hate and awe 'sharpened to a point' that (says Bion) may be compared to 'passionate love'. This is the authentic conversation – not love of the patient, or analyst, but of the method.

But even a focus on dream material is not an automatic guarantee of authenticity. Dreams, Meltzer says can be taken 'pornographically' (*Dream Life*, p. 180) – by which he meant, acted out; the pornographic element is in the mode of response not necessarily in the overt content of the dream. This also is the result of an analytic failure, different from a misunderstanding, which can be expanded or corrected later. A misreading is therefore a non-analytical interpretation resulting in action rather than contemplation.

This type of tyrannical interpretation is to be distinguished from a sense of conviction in the analyst. An interpretation does not have to be tentative, any more than a tentative interpretation is necessarily truthful. There is always a temptation to obscure a painful glimpsed truth with a comforting covering of meaninglessness, a soft tyranny. The key distinction is in the motivation – whether it is to impose order on the patient (or rather, the whole 'analytic situation' as Mrs Klein called it) in order to relieve the analyst's anxiety; or whether it is to convey a moment of insight or illumination which the analyst may have in regard to the material, and therefore present his interpretation forcefully and emphatically. It is a personal vision of the meaning and therefore authentic, whatever its correctness. Insofar as at the time, it represented a feeling of inspiration by internal objects, listening to the voice of the muse, it was following the psychoanalytic method.

And according to Meltzer this imposes a responsibility on the analyst to continually scrutinise, not just his own motivations, but what precisely he means by practising the method which supports the analytical process:

> It is not unlikely that the process varies from analyst to analyst, perhaps from patient to patient, in essential ways. But all would agree that each analyst needs, eventually, to have formulated his own conception of the type or range of processes that he considers useful in an analysis that is progressing. It is clear that he cannot use therapeutic criteria, either observed or reported. (*Studies in Extended Metapsychology,* p. 253)

The only solution, other than this advice to rigorously scrutinise one's procedures, is to accept one's helplessness and dependence on the internal object. As he ended his last talk in Barcelona:

> 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.

The method allows, in fact dynamises, moments of vision, that are always felt to come from outside the self, as with poets and their muse. Whereas the omnipotent or tyrannical mode of insisting on an interpretation, which might appear equally compelling, derives from a different internal motivation: to assert control rather than to convey conviction. In such a case a paranoiac covering of lies is being substituted for the depressive requirements of negative capability that come into focus with the sense of closeness to the aesthetic object that governs the psychoanalytic method.

The diamond cutter

Both Bion and Meltzer have likened the psychoanalytic method to that of the diamond cutter. In fact Meltzer quotes a note that Bion sent him, although actually Meltzer had independently used the same analogy:

> Bion wrote me a kind and interesting note when I sent him the paper ['Reversal of alpha-function'], referring to my phrase, 'aesthetic (beautiful?) way': 'Now I would use a model the diamond cutter's method of cutting a stone so that a ray of light entering the stone is reflected back by the same path in such a way that the light is augmented – the same 'free association' is reflected back by the same path, but with augmented 'brilliance'. So the patient is able to see his 'reflection', only more clearly than he can see his personality as expressed by himself alone (i.e. without an analyst).' (*Studies in Extended Metapsychology,* p. 136)

The ugly becomes beautiful when its meaning is revealed, and the Idea (the truth) pierces the obscure sensuous covering of the stone to reveal its inner beauty – what Bion calls 'intersection with O', and Meltzer transference from the object. This is how the method works.

And finally, two images by Piero della Francesca that illustrate the same idea of the diamond cutter: 1) Resurrection; 2) the Madonna del Parto.