The arts and psychosis

Aesthetic conflict and catastrophic change: psychic transformations modelled by artistic process

by Meg Harris Williams


These days the arts are no longer thought of in the simplistic terms of early Freudian tradition as ‘material’ for the display of psychotic or neurotic processes to be interpreted or diagnosed by an outside person. Instead the creation and appreciation of artworks is looked to as a model for a developmental process which has rich analogies to all of the therapeutic and counselling situations in which the way out of some psychic or developmental crisis makes constructive use of the transference between two minds. The two minds – or it may be more – engage in a live series of projections and introjections which may or may not re-member past conflicts but certainly are not merely re-enacting them in a nostalgic or repetitive way.

This live engagement, in which the arts invite us to partake, employs the psychic mechanisms of ‘aesthetic conflict’ (in Donald Meltzer’s formulation) and ‘catastrophic change’ (as formulated by Wilfred Bion), concepts which define the root of our human capacity to create symbols for our emotional experience. Hence the title of this talk, and I shall shortly be describing these terms in more detail, with the help also of the Kleinian aesthete and art critic Adrian Stokes. Our focus here is on the special facilitation of this process by means of the outward forms achieved through the arts – a process which Stokes calls the ‘working-out’ of inner feelings.

I would like first to say a few words about the sculptor Louise Bourgeois, whose work provides an example especially relevant to this topic. Many people will be familiar with the special and autobiographical quality of Bourgeois’ work, which is based on the reviewing of childhood experience in terms of phantasy and the drama of part-objects, in the Kleinian sense of representations of internal parental or family figures in the form of parts of the body. Probably her most famous work is the giant sculpture of a metal spider, named ‘Maman’, that was exhibited at Tate Modern some years ago, part of an iconic series. Perhaps less well known, though, is the fact that at the same time as producing her artworks, she underwent many years of psychoanalysis and in parallel with this, wrote daily diaries reflecting on her analysis, her dreams, her moment to moment emotional states, and the ways in which these provided inspiration for her work. Her Diary she said embodied her ‘relationship with an unknown’ and this reflected the way she approached her art. ‘I am passionately going somewhere, but I’m not sure where.’ she wrote; and, ‘Confine what is known to libraries and computers … I work in the unknown, in the lost.’ Her function as an artist, she insisted, was not to convince anyone of anything, but to symbolize the reality of particular emotional conflicts and anxieties:

I think that to realize an anxiety attack and to resolve it is the highest form of existence …it is a useful ‘creation.’ [diary note]
It is ‘useful’ in the sense of ‘building bridges’ to others. ‘How do we deal with our wounded?’ is how she formulates the challenge of an artistic vocation. The idea was to seek out or notice a place of unconscious anxiety or turbulence and bring it into a place where it could become symbolized or known.

Some critics (especially psychoanalytic ones) have disapproved of Bourgeois’ symbolic representations of infantile conflicts and seen them as psychotic. This however ignores the artist’s vocational requirement not to gloss over the unwanted or unpleasant, but rather to make it ‘useful’. Thus Bourgeois stresses the importance of accurate observation — mirrors and eyes being a frequent feature of her work — testifying to her endeavor to ‘see what is, not what I would like’. The expression of murderous feelings in art, she said, was the precise opposite of enacting murder in real life - a sublimation, but also a demonstration of what it is to understand rather than simply to deny. Because our understanding has increased, we are less liable to court disaster in the literal sense of making tragic mistakes by acting out our anxieties. It is self-knowledge that saves the mind from disaster, and this entails confronting and containing intolerable feelings. Bourgeois’ sculptures representing the jumbled, violent or chaotic interior of a child’s mind, its sense of isolation or of persecution by weak or superego-ish internal parental figures, perform a service of symbolization which, although starting off as personal introspection, acquires a universal quality and makes bridges to the child in everyone. ‘Art is a way of recognizing oneself’, she said, ‘which is why it will always be modern’ — that is, always find a transference echo in its viewers. The underlying subject of all her work was the education of the child, which she described as ‘the most complicated process’, equaled only by the complexity of physically creating a sculpture. One must ‘organize’ a sculpture, she says, ‘like a treatment for the sick. For Bourgeois, educating the inner child and organizing a sculpture are one and the same thing. And this applies, of course, not only to actual children but also the child within the adult, of whom an artist like Bourgeois is always acutely aware.

The point which I would like to emphasize is the constructive potential of apparently negative or unwanted, hostile feelings: something which artistic media have always sublimely recognized and turned into fruitful motivation and energy, on the lines of William Blake’s ‘Marriage of heaven and hell’. The ugly or hateful need not be psychotic — it depends on the way it is worked upon — which offers a valuable opportunity, given a chance to develop and find a symbolic container for the unwanted feelings. Ugly feelings are part of the life instinct; only when unsymbolised do they evacuate into murderousness or death instinct. This is a something emphasized also by Stokes, who describes how the work of art, ‘though by definition a complete and enclosed system, strongly suggests to us physical and mental states of envelopment and of being enveloped. These identifications vary from strong manipulation of the object to an absorption of it and a sinking into it’; whilst simultaneously with this primitive envelopment, ‘as the senses are the feelers by which we apprehend the otherness of outside things, the otherness or objectnature of the work of art is stressed in this act of its contemplation’. With respect to bad or ugly feelings, he writes that ‘these drives, and the objects imbued with them, could not figure in art — and they figure prominently — except under the sign of co-ordination, of the form in art that stems from the presence of good objects.’ In other words, once the bad feelings have found a symbolic form their meaning changes; they have been detoxified, and the idea of a ‘good object’ shines through the formal qualities of their organization. The very fact of working-out entails creating a ‘psychic distance’ which, as the philosopher of art Susanne Langer has said, ‘makes emotions conceivable.’

Stokes’ writings consistently demonstrate how the artist works his inside feelings outward in a type of fugue with the external aesthetic object, representative of the internal Mother. He never loses sight of the fact that art makes concrete the inner world, and then reflects back to modify the inner world’s structure. The search for self-knowledge is conducted in this outwards
way, using an external object as a means of exploration. In this way Stokes conveys vividly how at times the internal object and the external aesthetic object can fuse together psychically in what he calls a quest for ‘sanity’. In this quest, there is an alternation between an enveloping type of union and a contemplative one, that corresponds to the original picture of the baby feeding at the breast, or to the Kleinian formulation of paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, projective and introjective identification. Both positions are necessary to life and development; and destructive or ‘schizoid’ impulses have their function. Every work of art begins with an initial attack on its material; indeed without attack, says Stokes, ‘creativeness ceases’ – and it ceases equally if the ‘fact of attack is entirely lulled, denied’. But there are different types of attack – one that guides feelings toward symbol-formation and self-knowledge, and another driven by unmetabolised envy or perversity. The aim and hope of therapy, just as in the continued self-therapy of living, is to convert one mode into the other. For as Stokes maintains ‘There is no hard-and-fast division between the appreciator and the creator of art.’ The appreciator, the creator, the patient in art therapy, the therapist – all are engaged in some mode of relating constructively to an aesthetic object, seeking for the beauty that is truth. Bion formulated it in terms of the creative tension between Love, Hate and Knowledge (LHK). This is what drives development forward, or when this fails, can result in stagnation, regression or psychosis.

This brings us to Meltzer’s picture of the aesthetic conflict, that core feature of the developmental or therapeutic process. The psychoanalytic process is itself an artistic one, in his view, with ‘mysterious compositional qualities’, and it becomes an aesthetic object in itself that contains the awareness of the knowledge that has arisen collaboratively between the participants. Any collaboration can be seen in this way – as an attempt to form a work group by using the transference between two (or more) minds, to create something which would not otherwise have come into existence: a symbol of the emotional situation.

On the evolution of symbols an individual’s entire worldview is built up. As Meltzer writes: ‘If we follow Bion’s thought closely, we see that the new idea presents itself as an emotional experience of the beauty of the world and its wondrous organization.’ (Apprehension of Beauty; 1988, 20)

The apprehension of beauty lies at the heart of human mentality, growth, symbol formation and thinking. As Susanne Langer has written: ‘Aesthetic attraction, mysterious fear, are probably the first manifestations of that mental function which in many becomes a peculiar tendency to see reality symbolically, and which issues in the power of conception, and the lifelong habit of speech.’ (Philosophy in a New Key; 1942, p. 110).

In her writings Langer considers all types of symbol formation, not merely the verbal ones: but they all derive initially from this emotional tension between attraction and fear, or love and hate, which then propel the mind to seek for knowledge through symbolic expression. This is the fundamental feature of human nature and its view of external reality - that can be tapped into by the arts and art therapies in order to resolve internal blockages and unresolved developmental conflicts.

Meltzer elaborates on Bion’s formulation of LHK by describing how the conflict relates specifically to the discrepancy between the mother’s or object’s beautiful outside, and enigmatic invisible inside: a tension which simulates the desire to find a way to know the inside, the hidden contents or motivation of the object, on which depends his own psychic survival. The emotional tension, if intolerable, may also stimulate a temptation to false forms of knowledge – intrusive, possessive, tyrannical, in which the self, or baby, seeks to control the inside of the object. The object is not an automatic container, but rather a transformer, based on a relationship of aesthetic reciprocity. This allows the baby to satisfy its curiosity about the mother’s inside in a constructive, imaginative way, by pursuing the time-honoured means of scientific
or artistic investigation. Only art and science of course lead to genuine knowledge; while the omnipotent belief of ‘knowing it all already’ tends towards psychosis.

All this illustrates the difficulty and complexity of what we assume to be normal development, or of ‘becoming oneself’ as Bion puts it; and the innumerable obstacles that present themselves at every point of change. An awareness of the extreme emotional tensions that are essential to ‘normal’ development, not just at significant phases such as latency or adolescence but at all points that involve some intimate emotional connection, makes it easier to understand and empathise with the times when development for whatever reason fails to proceed. The intensity of bliss and terror that is so evident in infants, continues to exist in the adult but is simply better concealed from himself and from others.

Bion and Meltzer reached their conclusions about the difficulty of normal development in a roundabout way via severely disturbed patients – hallucinatory, schizophrenic or autistic – but this then led to a sea-change in the way that psychotic or neurotic blockages could be viewed and therefore treated. In order to convey the character of these everyday crises Bion adopted the term ‘catastrophic change’. Catastrophic change looms on the horizon at each potential crisis of development. It is an ordinary and essential feature of mental life – in fact without it the mind fossilizes, or in a sense dies. Each of these points involves the navigation of the aesthetic conflict.

What is perhaps initially hard to grasp about Bion’s view of catastrophic change (because it contradicts the Freudian pain-pleasure principle) is that all feelings are intolerable, and it is natural for the personality to instinctively defend itself against anything that will disturb its equilibrium – even if that is an unhappy type of stability. Because of the ambiguities in the term ‘catastrophe’, it is sometimes assumed that Bion must mean ‘disaster’. In fact, as so often, he chose the word because it contains a kind of pun, whose meaning may go in different directions, depending on what is happening in a particular situation. Any new idea makes contact with the unknown and occurs as a result of proximity to a new, unknown idea, and is first heralded by a feeling – ‘the facts of feeling’ as he calls it. The personality feels as though this new idea has arrived from outer space, with premonitory waves of warning; it has an alien quality. Actually it arrives via the internal objects, whose knowledge and awareness of emotional conflict is always in advance of the self. It is a ‘new’ idea – not in any absolute sense, but in terms of the evolution of a particular person’s mind or personality – it is new to them and no merely intellectual formulation is capable of conveying it to the inside of the mind. [Containing or receiving the new idea is a strenuous activity that involves ‘suffering’ or ‘patience’ – or in the phrase of Keats that Bion adopted – ‘negative capability’ – and the difficulty in tolerating negative capability should not be underestimated.]

Bion’s rather startling use of the term catastrophic change alerts us to the seriousness of a situation which could go either way, to survival or extinction. ‘Wisdom or oblivion’, he states the problem – ‘take your choice’. This applies not only to the human race itself, but to each individual member who is engaged in the perennial struggle for knowledge and the self-knowledge which can only be achieved with the help of the object, whether fully internalized or temporarily embodied through the transference with another mind, as in therapy or indeed any intimate emotional situation.

In this post-Kleinian view therefore, it is thinking, taking place through symbol-formation, that is the therapeutic factor; it is founded on acceptance of contrary emotions both loving and hostile which are the stimulus to a quest to know or understand the nature of the internal object, that mysterious and beautiful part of the mind which is – as Meltzer says – the ‘most advanced’, and draw the rest of the mind along with it. Bion describes this, in another of his famous puns, as ‘at-one-ment’, namely, a process of evolution carried out by more than one person or aspect of the personality. He stresses, as does Meltzer, the aesthetic nature of this
experience: the only indicator that ‘at-one-ment’ has been momentarily achieved is a sense of aesthetic harmony – a ‘feeling of confidence in seeing the truth’ or an inner voice saying ‘that is true’. Problems are contained not simply by the therapist or mother, but by the mysterious properties of the communication system set up between them – a revelation to both.

Meanwhile, the corollary of anti-developmental states of mind becomes much clearer. The mind is not destroyed by its feelings of envy or aggression but by the absence of emotionality. In Bion’s formulation this is minus L, H, K, the failure to experience on the pulses love, hate, and the desire for knowledge, and the tension between these links. This is what leads to disaster-catastrophe – not hate but minus hate. But for this tension to become tolerable it must find a symbolic form – that is, in Stokes’ terms, it must ‘work-out’ the inner feelings, meaning quite literally, finding an outward form of expression that makes communication possible. Otherwise as Bion says, it is possible to kill a foetal idea – that is, a feeling that is seeking for a realization. The damage is pertinent both to the individual, and to society.

Hence the value of Stokes’ definition of outwardness for the underlying psychological rationale of arts based therapies – since it makes an immediate and obvious link with the possibility of achieving a depressive or integrated approach to the internal object.

The achieved work of art, which serves as a model and encouragement for both the art-appreciator and the patient in art-therapy, always manifests its own struggle for the acceptance and integration of conflicting emotions. Painful emotion has been given a place in an aesthetic symbolic whole rather than denied and deadened. As Meltzer says: the artist projects into his ‘siblings’ (that is, viewers or imitators) ‘both the restored object and those capacities for the bearing of depressive pain which have been achieved by the artist in his own development’.

[IMAGE: As an example of this I would like to show the ‘Maman’ giant spider of Louise Bourgeois, whose giant scale makes so clear the world of the infant and its mother-god, the potentialities of moving inside and outside, the combination of male and female qualities in its construction, and the siblings contained in the egg-sac.]