

## Dreaming the session

Talk at a conference on Dreamwork and the Psychoanalytic Process: clinical work inspired by Donald Meltzer, Seattle, November 2009

Meltzer said there were two reasons psychoanalysis was likely to survive: firstly because it helped with symbol-formation, and secondly, because of the transference- countertransference communication that constituted a special *mode* of doing so. By symbol-formation he meant: finding the symbol that expresses the underlying emotional reality of the session. Bion called this the “language of achievement”. And it is found by “dreaming the session” (Bion) or “counterdreaming” (Meltzer).

In this talk I would like to expand on these terms and their significance, borrowing some passages from the poets to set alongside and illuminate Meltzer’s own descriptions of counterdreaming; but first, I would like to review the basic question, why is dreaming so important?

Dreams (says Meltzer) are a “theatre for the generating of meaning”; they are where our attitude to reality is generated. The dream is a sampling of the underlying fabric of mentality that he called “dream life”. Dream life goes on continuously, day and night, and whether we notice it depends on whether the organ of attention (as Freud described consciousness) is turned inwards or outwards. The psychoanalytic consulting room, or the children’s play therapy room, provides a containing structure like the artist’s canvas on which psychic reality in the form of dream or phantasy may be screened and observed, held by the co-ordinates of the transference-countertransference. Dream life is thus our key to observing and getting in touch with psychic reality. This is not the same as “belief” as is sometimes believed. On the contrary, psychic reality is the way things *actually are* in the mind, and with adults, dreams are our main – sometimes our only – access to knowledge about the internal condition of the mind, the self and its objects.

Meltzer said “the dream is my landscape”. He said that reading dreams was the one talent he had discovered in himself. He also said that without

dreams he could not work. He did not select analysands, but took anyone who came; yet if they did not eventually bring dreams he would stop the analysis, for in fact he would consider it had not even started, but was still stuck in a state of “preformed transference”, that is, of preconceived ideas *about* analysis. It therefore had no psychic reality. The preformed transference was more likely to seduce both analyst and patient, he believed, if there was a selection process beforehand. But there is no denying the authenticity of dreams. However confusing their impact or enigmatic their meaning, they cannot be invented by the self, but are generated by internal objects. In Blake’s terms, the “daughters of Beulah” (the Imagination) stand by the sleepers and feed their minds “with maternal care”. Dreams, said Meltzer, make psychoanalysis “the most interesting conversation in the world”.

With regard to this authenticity, or psychic reality, we can look to the words of some of the poets to confirm the importance of not just individual dreams but of dream-life itself. Byron for example wrote the following note in his journal:

Attend for the moment to the action of Mind. It is in perpetual activity... independent of body: in dreams for instance incoherently and madly, I grant you: but it still is *Mind*, and much more Mind than when we are awake. (*Detached Thoughts* no. 96).

Dreams, thought Byron – along with most poets - are the place where Mind is to be found in its most concentrated form. There is “more Mind” in them than in other states of consciousness; so our interest should be aroused not just by their content but by the strange immaterial stuff of which they are made. The daughters of Beulah, like all internal objects, are equally capable of disturbing and of soothing the mind; they are the source of mind-stimulating aesthetic conflict. Thus Coleridge spoke of dreams that have been “the very substances and foot-thick calamities of my life”. Bion termed dreams mental “events” and wrote of the “terrifying dreams” on the walls of Lascaux and the caves of Elephanta (dreams of the combined object). Keats, on the other hand, wrote in his “Ode to Psyche” how a seminal dream emanating from the internal object actually re-constructs the mind itself; it creates an area

In some untrodden region of my mind  
Where branched thoughts new grown with pleasant pain  
Instead of pines shall murmur in the wind.

Again, Emily Bronte's heroine in *Wuthering Heights* speaks of "dreams that have gone through and through me, like wine through water, and changed the colour of my mind". Or as Shakespeare put it in a familiar passage from *The Tempest*:

We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep –

Shakespeare's point is not simply that we are *only* as real as our dreams can make us. Life, like a play, is not *only* a dream. The reverse emphasis is also true: that we are indeed made by our dreams, and they bring us to life – their mind-stuff is the source of the aesthetic quality that "rounds with a sleep". This means that when the old world is played out, and it is time for a catastrophic change, there may indeed be a "brave new world" in the next state of mind. The aged Prospero-self (the worn-out infantile magician) may not live to see it, but the young Miranda (the faculty of wonder) may inherit his dream.

The main point about dreams therefore is that they express "the facts of feeling" (Bion) in a way that we are unlikely to be able to do for ourselves. When at the end of *King Lear* Edgar says we need to learn to "Speak what we feel, not what we ought to say", we know that even if we wish to, we cannot – we need Shakespeare to do it for us. Like Keats we need to "burn through" that experience again and again – re-reading and re-dreaming. Yet Keats also wrote:

Who alive can say,  
"Thou art no poet, may'st not tell thy dreams?" (The Fall of Hyperion)

Dreams represent the poetic faculty even of non-poets. Of course the aesthetic quality of dreams is variable – their clarity and condensation. This is one of the ways in which dreams generally differ from artworks; though like art, their very "vividness" (says Meltzer) makes them liable to

be taken “pornographically” and acted out (*Dream Life*, p. 160).

Nonetheless according to Meltzer, dreams are not primary-process material in the sense of being chaotic and meaningless; on the contrary, dream-sequences form a continuous narrative that may be “sampled periodically” through psychoanalysis (or artworks); and there is continuity not merely of content but of form.

It can be seen that a number of central *formal* structures are being drawn up into juxtapositions to create a space scintillating with potentiated meaning. Sometimes words and visual forms are seen to interact... At other times spaces are being created as containers of meaning. At other times the movements from one type of space to another, and the emotional difficulties of making such moves, are made apparent. (*Dream Life*, p.148).

Like Bion, Meltzer frequently lamented the inadequacy of the analyst’s language for describing mental states, and the crudity of psychoanalytic jargon. Although psychoanalysis is predominantly a verbal medium, there is a problem in using words symbolically rather than just as a sign-language. And it is the Dream, says Meltzer, that “comes to the rescue” of the analyst’s poverty of symbolisation.

In his book *Dream Life* Meltzer draws on the philosophical tradition of Wittgenstein, Cassirer and Langer to explain how the reading of dreams is a symbolic activity, not just a matter of sign-reading; and this makes it a “presentational” or art form. The analyst “reads” the dream not merely by interpreting it according to some preconceived theoretical framework, but by “striving to match its poetic diction” (a phrase Meltzer takes up from Ella Sharpe, in order to pursue further its implications). This involves a special type of mental re-alignment, analogous to the poetry-reader, art-viewer or music-listener. It is an essentially aesthetic experience, founded on reciprocity. It is *thinking with*, rather than *thinking about*. It is responding to the “evolution of the analysis” (Bion), the analytic process as Aesthetic Object (Meltzer).

In a letter of 1818 to his friend Reynolds, Keats compares the process of thinking to a spider weaving its web from the inside outwards, becoming gradually more complex and spatially adventurous:

...almost any Man may like the Spider spin from his own inwards his own airy Citadel – the points of leaves and twigs on which the Spider begins her

work are few and she fills the Air with a beautiful circuiting; man should be content with as few points to tip with the fine Webb of his Soul and weave a tapestry empyrean – full of Symbols for his spiritual eye, of softness for his spiritual touch, of space for his wandering, of distinctness for his Luxury. (19 Feb 1818)

Keats's metaphor of the spider's web sensuously describes the non-sensuous – the “spiritual eye” - in the way that Bion hoped psychoanalysis could try to do through “intuition”. The Spider is the internal aesthetic object governing the multiple strands and tensions of the dream.

Keats then develops his metaphor to describe spiritual communication not just within one mind but between minds: ‘The Minds of Mortals are so different and bent on such diverse Journeys that it may at first appear impossible’ for them to find any track in common; however (Keats suggests),

it is quite the contrary – Minds would leave each other in contrary directions, traverse each other in Numberless points, and at last greet each other at the Journeys end – an old Man and a child would talk together and the old Man be led on his Path, and the child left thinking ...

The dream of the spider's web now becomes the countertransference dream between different parts of the self who “talk together” to their mutual advancement, traversing at numberless points, and leaving the inner child “thinking”. The points at which they cross represent the symbols of each emotional encounter, each new item of spiritual knowledge. And the total pattern of their traversing is always oriented to the spider at the core of the web, the aesthetic object. An aspect of the object is incorporated along with the pattern of resolution of the conflict – the child learns *how* to think.

As Bion always reminds his listeners, the dream brought by the patient is not the same as the one he had the previous night; this has already undergone some processing, up or down the Grid of thinking – it has been “remembered”. It is the remembered dream that activates the analyst's countertransference dream. Bion for a long while resisted acknowledging the usefulness, in fact necessity, of the countertransference. But he said it had changed its meaning; and when inspected closely, it is clear that what he objected to was what Meltzer calls “the ambush of countertransference

activities”. This is what constitutes a failure of psychoanalytic “faith” (*Psychoanalytic Process*, p. 92). Countertransference *activities* are verbal action in the form of pseudo-knowledge or moralistic interpretation. The countertransference *dream*, however, is another matter.

Meltzer’s own description of the way the countertransference dream weaves itself is as follows:

The state of observation is essentially a resting state. It is also a state of heightened vigilance. I compare it with waiting in the dark for the deer, grazing at night, seen by their flashing white tails. This nocturnal vigilance is on the alert for movement of the quarry, part-object minimal movements that with patience can be seen to form a pattern of incipient meaning “cast before”. This catching of the incipient meaning cast before is a function of receptive imagination – open to the possible, unconcerned with probability. Being rich with suspense, it is necessarily fatiguing, and fraught with anxiety. It is a trial of strength – and faith – that gives substance to terms such as resistance or retreat. However, it is a poetry generator.

(Meltzer, qtd. in Williams *Vale of Soulmaking* p. 182).

This passage, written late in his life, is the countertransference dream-space, “scintillating with meaning”, a dark space animated by bright white flecks that indicate the state of the patient’s mind. The hunt for meaning is compared to waiting in the dark for the deer – an observational hunt in which meaning is the quarry. The analyst hopes that its underlying pattern (the movements of the herd) will emerge by a process of weaving together the part-object movements that are glimpsed like the white deers-tails. The white flecks, like the points of Keats’ spider-web or Bion’s alpha-elements, imply an aesthetic underlying idea which can hold together contrary tensions in a meaningful way. Ultimately the structure of the symbol will become apparent, with the way its various elements relate to one another woven into a “tapestry empyrean”.

Meltzer stresses the strenuousness of this state of intent observation. As he says elsewhere, “The foundation of Truthfulness lies in the quality of observation’ (*Apprehension of Beauty*, p. 203). This is what generates the psychoanalytic dream. High-quality observation is imaginative: it is “open to the possible, unconcerned with probability”; in other words, it cannot relax into premature interpretations but must relinquish memory and desire (Bion). This self-restraint is what makes it an emotionally fatiguing

process. But it is a poetry-generator: dreams generate further dreams, in a continuous process of thinking through dream life. In his description of the countertransference, Meltzer continues:

In short, the countertransference is an emotional experience that must be caught in your dreams. Now the patient must attend to the analyst to interpret. How does he know what he is talking about? He doesn't – he is “counter-dreaming”; he has, in fact, abandoned “thinking” (science) for intuition (art, poetry): the verbal tradition of Homer.

Bion similarly advocates “abandoning oneself” to the analysis. The idea of abandonment is of course a pun in both Bion and Meltzer: it really refers to the abandonment of preconceptions and reliance on psychoanalytic jargon, in favour of the real experience of seeking an emotional “congruence” with the patient's dream. The container for the experience is formed, Meltzer says, not by the analyst's mind alone but rather through “the fitting of the analyst's attention to the patient's co-operativeness” (*Studies in Extended Metapsychology*). There results a “conversation between internal objects” (*Dream Life*, p. 46). The objects are the most advanced part of a person's mind, and it is this aspect of the minds of both analyst and analysand that collaborates in creating a language of achievement for the analysis.

Probably any dream, even an impoverished one, always has a sense of being an aesthetic object, owing to its dependence on the most advanced part of the mind – the internal object – for its generation. It carries an aura of mystery. Every point in the web resonates back to the spider at the core. Observing the impact of an aesthetic object and forming a symbol to contain the impact are inextricable from one another, and simultaneous. As Meltzer puts it, “Which comes first, the saying or the describing?” (*paper on Money-Kyrle*). Psychoanalysis is the kind of activity in which observation and description are co-extensive with dreaming – in particular, with dream-thinking in the way that poets and artists have always seen and practiced it. So nobody has really abandoned thinking: it is just that one type of thinking has been replaced by another, more authentically feeling-based type. The categorising, conscious type of thinking has its place too, but this is outside the session – “recollecting in tranquillity”, as Bion quotes from Wordsworth. Essentially therefore, the reliance on redreaming or counterdreaming is what makes the psychoanalytic process an art form – as

Meltzer always saw it, though he felt this concept awaited more definition before its usefulness would become apparent.

To conclude then with a few brief words about counterdreaming and art, in particular music.

All art forms, says Susanne Langer, have their own “semantic” - their own deep grammar which infuses all the incidental images and sounds with a sense of formal integrity. However concrete the medium, the art-symbol has an abstract capacity to “articulate the life of feeling”. It is a dream and it evokes a dream in us. We identify with the originating emotional complex, but we do not *feel* it in the same way as the original sufferer – it has been “filtered” for us and we experience its *meaning*, as an abstraction – “not joy or sorrow but the poignancy of both” says Langer. In music, it is especially clear how the composer, the performer and the audience are all united in listening to the same underlying Idea. Keats calls this listening to “ditties of no tone” – through the sensuous, we actually hear something beyond the sensuous (*Grecian Urn*). For this reason, music provides one of the closest artistic analogies to the transference-countertransference situation, and is often used by Meltzer and Bion to define its particular quality. Every dream, every transference communication, has its “music”; and the “music of the countertransference”, says Meltzer, is “absolutely what the patient hears” and is far more important than the content of his statements (*Oelsner interview on Supervision*).

It is this music that guides the process and gives substance to the flat – not to say sinister – jargon of “co-operation”. From the point of attaining a symbolic congruence, the analytic couple are engaged in a process of “evolution of the analysis” (Bion), a process in which aspects of dream-life are held for observation in the countertransference spider’s web, ready for emotional digestion or re-dreaming into new autonomous symbols. It is what Keats calls “the redigestion of our most ethereal musings on earth”, leading progressively towards the achievement of “the philosophic Mind” (22 Nov 1817). And it takes place under the aegis of the analysis itself as aesthetic object, spinning its web and sensitive to all the tonal and rhythmical nuances that cross its path.