

## Psychoanalytical observation: the artistic analogy

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I would like to talk about the philosophy of observation: about what is happening when we claim to be observing a mental phenomenon. In so far as it is a phenomenon it is a fact - something which really exists outside our own mind and is not merely imagined or believed in. Yet because it is a mental fact it is nonsensuous and cannot be seen except through self-observation – through the ‘marks’ which its appearance makes on oneself, as Bion puts it. This is a situation which fascinated Bion in particular but also Meltzer, who agreed that psychoanalysis was the perfect science because the instrument used to make observations was almost identical with the phenomenon being observed, namely the human mind. A perfect science: and yet, the means of employing the instrument – namely symbol-formation – are artistic in nature, and this accounts for psychoanalysis being an art-science as Bion and Meltzer always saw it.

This problem of subjectively observing an objective phenomenon is one which has a long tradition of being of special interest to poets and philosophers of art. The key to aesthetic apprehension is finding a match between the sensuous and the non-sensuous or the Platonic realm of Ideas. As Coleridge said, the objective and the subjective are “in necessary antithesis”:

During the act of knowledge itself, the objective and subjective are so instantly united, that we cannot determine to which of the two the priority belongs. (1817; 1997, p. 152)

Yet the link with this tradition, which is potentially very fruitful, has been relatively neglected to date, since it is only recently that psychoanalysis has come to be seriously considered for its own artistic qualities, rather than just as a way of interpreting artworks – ‘victimising’ art as Bion called it. Bion and Meltzer believed that structural analogues with existing art forms

would benefit the implementation of its own method. It is 'A new method as old as religion and art... but more poorly implemented than the arts which have developed their craft for several millennia' (Meltzer 1980, p. 474).

Bion says that having ideas depends on acknowledging our debt to our 'ancestors'. The great poets are highly conscious of their debt to the poetic tradition, and often their work is a response to that of a previous poet - in particular to that poet's creativity or relation with his internal objects, his Muse. Every genuine poet is first and foremost a poetry-reader. They observe the experience of an admired predecessor and make it their own.

The reader or listener or viewer of art forms is in a very similar position in relation to these 'ancestors' of experience. Their thinking response is closely structured by the artwork itself and by the evidence it provides of the artist's mind in operation. The poet locates points of turbulence and works them through to an aesthetic synthesis, and this thought pattern is followed by the reader, but subjectively, evoking a dream-poem of his own. It is not exactly the *same* turbulence because it has been 'filtered' (Langer) and digested for us by the artist, so that it is modified by an aesthetic understanding, something deeper and more abstract than a mere intellectual understanding. An aspect of the object is incorporated along with the pattern of resolution of the conflict, in the developmental process that Bion calls catastrophic change.

So it is possible to learn from experience *through art*, as a result of identification with the unconscious but structured thought –processes it evokes. That is, provided we can look at the art product in a way that is not too clouded by projections of our own. Academic interpretation of art for example is frequently superimposed by our more omnipotent and limited selves, and so does not constitute a learning experience in the deep Bionian sense, and may in fact obscure observation, if theory is used to cover up the emotional facts. What is necessary is self-observation, and this is different from projecting. It entails allowing internal objects to create a symbol that will hold and contain his own personal response. 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?' For an analogous situation to reading art prevails in psychoanalysis, the science of reading dreams.

A dream-reader is by definition a type of artist, or symbol-maker: someone who “can intuit the significant potential of a form” (Langer 1942, p. 223; 1953, p. 390). Reading the dream – of whatever kind – is a far more complex process than merely interpreting it. Looking, reading, and listening, are complex processes that entail abandoning the personal intellectual “possessions” of memory and desire (Bion 1970, p. 43) in order to achieve a more accurate picture of in the feeling-present.

‘Reading’ is one of those terms that Bion adjures us to consider more carefully, like ‘experience’ or ‘thinking’ or ‘knowing’, in order to restore its value:

It is as well to be reminded by the poet Herman Melville that there are many ways of reading books, but very few of reading them properly – that is, with awe. How much the same is it true of reading people. (Bion 1985, p. 241)

How do we ‘read’ books, people, paintings, music, ‘with awe’? that is in a way that involves being internally affected by the aesthetic object beyond our control, as Meltzer puts it, or that entails an intersection with O, the Platonic realm of unknown ideas, as Bion puts it.

A special type of identification with the aesthetic object is required in order to ‘read’ the impact on one’s own mind. It is a problem that applies with equivalent force to the situation of the analyst, or the poetry-reader, or the baby-observer. In the field of art criticism Adrian Stokes the art critic explains how, in our close viewing of art, we find ourselves “in touch with a process that seems to be happening on our looking, a process to which we are joined as if to an alternation of part-objects” (1965, p. 26). He described this projective-introjective dialogue as “envelopment and incorporation”. The projective movements are communicative, questing ones, not omnipotent ones designed to control the object. In this way we come to hold the feel of a dream that would “otherwise be forgotten”. As we observe the dream, a container forms to hold our observations, provided we maintain our orientation to the aesthetic object. As Bion puts it, we identify with O – not with either mouth or breast alone but with the link between them that points to O and makes contact with the underlying Idea of the situation.

Bion sees this container as forming within a space that is created by scientific, artistic and religious vertices operating in unison, provided the

tension between them is neither too loose nor too slack. ‘But first’, says Bion, ‘we have to look – and most people don’t – and while looking, recognize the meaning which lies beyond’ (2005, pp. 64-5). Meltzer, also, says ‘The foundation of Truthfulness lies in the quality of observation’ (1988, p. 203). Observation cannot take place (he continues) without an existing explicit model in the back of one’s mind, for without this the unknown cannot emerge into awareness and the model be extended (p. 204). This is different from applying an interpretation. He describes a space that ‘scintillates with potentiated meaning’ (1983, p. 148). We can say that this scintillating space is the space in which the symbol of the emotional experience is formed, and it is governed by these three ways of knowing- scientific, artistic and religious. The symbol comes into being as a result of high-quality observation; and in this way psychoanalysis joins other modes of imaginative inquiry - both scientific and artistic – that are founded on learning to look and listen more carefully, and that can tolerate the awe of the unknown that is at the heart of any live experience – the aesthetic conflict.

Art-symbols, Langer explains, come into being through the artist’s sense of ‘moral responsibility’ towards an ‘underlying Idea’. Awareness of such an ‘unspoken Idea’ arouses the aesthetic sense of awe and wonder, together with a sense of curiosity and obligation (Langer 1942, 259). It is not experienced as his *own* idea –but he has a duty to express its ‘dictates’ (as Milton puts it) that seem to have come from outside his own mind- via an ‘extraneous intelligence’ as Meltzer says. In psychoanalysis there is a similar sense of service to the process as aesthetic object – a requirement to trust in the method and refrain from a dictatorial mode stimulated by memory and desire.

‘How can we tolerate it?’ Bion asks (1974, I:33) – meaning, how can we tolerate the emotional impact of the type of observation that forces us to think beyond our existing knowledge. Meltzer would answer: we tolerate it through aesthetic reciprocity, both in relation to the patient’s dream, and in relation to internal objects: above all, in relation to the aesthetic object that is the psychoanalytic process. The transference and countertransference form the co-ordinates which enable the emotional experience to be held for observation. Forming the symbol is a three-dimensional function of ‘binocular vision’ (Bion) and reciprocity: the result of “the fitting of the

analyst's attention to the patient's co-operativeness" (Meltzer 1986, p. 208) – a process which he calls "counter-dreaming". The transference and countertransference form the co-ordinates which enable the emotional experience to be held for observation.

The primary symbol in psychoanalysis is of course the dream. Meltzer said in fact the only talent he had discovered in himself was reading dreams. It is the dream, he says, that 'comes to the rescue' of the analyst's sense of his own helplessness, once he has recognised that he is merely the servant not the master of the analytic process. But as Bion keeps reminding us, the dream that the patient brings is not the one he had the night before – when he had that dream he was somewhere else, in a different place, a different state of mind. Only the patient can ever know that dream. The dream that actually occurs in psychoanalysis is the countertransference dream, the only one the analyst can know.

The countertransference, Bion says, constitutes valuable evidence that a psychoanalytic situation exists and "has reality" – that it is not purely imaginary, even though imagination has helped to discover it. The most essential aid the analyst can ever acquire in his quest for self-knowledge is the patient - his partner in the investigation of observed phenomena. In order to truly observe the mind, two minds are required, so that this dialogue can be set up. This process is initiated by the dream the patient relates, but is observed by means of the 'marks' of the countertransference that the analyst discerns in his own mind. Dreams are generative – and a new dream is here created. It exists at that moment can therefore be scientifically observed. As Meltzer says, the dreamer is the thinker and the analyst the comprehender of his thought.

Meltzer says that it was in the context of observing Martha Harris's supervisions of baby observations that it became clear to him that our conscious interpretive formulations are woefully inadequate for transcribing the sensitive 'nuances' of this 'primal relationship' (1981, p. 503). And the problem in the consulting room was analogous. He felt we should pay more attention to the 'compositional' aspects of the analytic situation in order (he writes):

to extend the scope of our observation of our functioning in the consulting-room, [because] a wider range of self-observation by the analyst could increase his technical mastery of his behaviour in keeping with the individual patient's needs.' (1981, p. 499).

The sign-language of interpretation, like an explanatory science, could not cope with the needs of observation and description and needed to be expanded into more artistic symbols of the sort named 'presentational forms' in the philosophical tradition of Langer and Whitehead.

A 'presentational form' in whatever medium conveys an 'underlying Idea' in a way that ordinary verbal discourse cannot do. Everyday language can 'talk about' things but cannot *evoke* their inner spirit – what Bion calls the 'sleeping beauty' of their mysterious hidden meaning. The baby's minute gestures and vocalizations can do this, in the context of a mind to receive them. Becoming able to observe the non-verbal nature of the baby's communications made it easier to comprehend the kind of meaning that can exist 'beyond' the verbal. [Bion too says he found the analytic encounter became more 'lifelike' as he acquired a better apprehension of non-verbal qualities, which expanded his picture of the emotional situation.] Passion, he says, is 'evidence that two minds are linked' and this primal link or bridge between mouth and breast ultimately reflects the passionate love between internal objects that he terms 'O' and that for Meltzer constitutes the mystery behind the aesthetic object.

It will be noted that the aesthetic picture of development adopted by Bion and Meltzer is very different from the popular softhumanist model of mother-baby interaction and its associated picture of creativity. The differences apply to both the psychoanalytic encounter and the encounter between artist and art observer. The softhumanist view holds that the 'baby' or learning mind cannot create itself without retreating from reality both external and psychic. The task of mother, muse or analyst is to protect against its pressures by providing a space for infantile omnipotence to operate unchallenged. This is a space of non-scientific non-observation which is often wrongly termed 'imagination'. The aesthetic view, on the other hand, holds that development depends on *facing* the aesthetic conflict, not on avoiding it.

Indeed the object that is merely comforting or containing has its own dangers – essentially those of lack of imagination, the questing instinct. Martha Harris writes:

The infant that is in all of us probably requires in stress from time to time throughout life an external manifestation of that presence. But holding is not the same as enclosure – the personality is ossified by identification with closed minds and can be preserved alive only through developing and risking itself. (Harris 1987 p. 178)

Money-Kyrle has suggested that our differing responses to aesthetic forms are the result of differing degrees of maturity in our perception: all responses are not equally valid since some are fuller, more accurate, less contaminated by projections than others (1961, p. 113). When we appreciate that the psychoanalytic process is itself an aesthetic object we can see the relevance of this to quality of observation. Some responses represent a personal imposition on artwork or the material; others are more open to being led by its inner, central significance. The limited types of response might be called single-vertex: they do not take account of the tension from other vertices or minds. When a psychoanalyst, or an art-viewer, misses the evidence and cannot “see” the commanding form of a piece or situation, it is likely to be owing to a failure of self-knowledge – missing “something taking place silently in himself” (1961, p. 25). Hence Money-Kyrle classes psychoanalysts as being either ‘realists’ or ‘nominalists’. For the realist, psychic reality is something that exists: not something to be invented or played with or tested, but something to strive towards *knowing* (1978, p. 418). And symbols are not creations of the infant-mind - they are the result of a scientific spirit of imaginative inquiry, an artistic mode of receptivity, and a religious awe of the mystery of the aesthetic object.

In a note which he calls a “reverie” about the baby’s interior preoccupation, Meltzer writes about the “birth of meaning” in the infant mind:

It is not surprising if it comes out sounding like Genesis.... It is not, in the beginning was the formless infinite, but the placenta as the primary feeding object. We might call this the experience of *surprise* ... at an extraneous intelligence, the beginning of revealed religion. All the functions described are the fruits of identification with the extraneous intelligence. In the beginning object relations and identification are simultaneous. (“A reverie on the baby’s interior preoccupation”)

This capacity to be surprised is essential to the ability to observe new facts, and is dependent on the religious vertex. The ‘integrated internal object learns in advance of the self and is almost certainly the fountainhead of creative thought and imagination’ (Meltzer 1992, p. 59). This is

not simply a matter of containment or protection or comfort or pleasure and so on. It’s a question of *an object that can perform* this particular function, that creates the symbols through which dreaming and thinking can proceed. (1995; also 1983, p. 38).

Bion reminds us that in the analytic situation, it is not just the patient who is the baby, but the analyst who each session is placed yet again in the position of a 'new born infant' just opening its eyes (1997). This is the strenuous nature of observation – hence the need for support from the object.

One of the last passages Meltzer wrote was a note designed, he said, to “make precise” the meaning of observation and to show its centrality to “the technique of counterdreaming”:

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.

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. (Meltzer, qtd. in Williams 2005 p. 182).

Observation stimulates alpha-function and generates poetry – which is of course *thinking*, but not in the propositional sense of a single-vertex science that is ruled by the ego. And here Meltzer, like Bion, stresses the emotional fatigue of this “resting” contemplative condition – the state that Freud called “evenly suspended attention” and that Coleridge called “the willing suspension of disbelief” - a formulation that is often misunderstood as escapist daydream. The poets always maintain that the hunt for meaning is a strenuously passive state of inspiration.

Amongst many poetic references in this passage are that of Plato's Cave with its shadowy light, and the traditional poetic metaphor of the hunt for meaning – showing how a new window on the poets has modified Meltzer's own symbolic language and made it more evocative. Instead of talking about “compounding the data of an emotional experience” with the aid of

a “selected fact” (after Bion/Poincare), he is talking about deer’s-tails flashing in the dark. While the pattern of meaning “cast before” is a reference to Shelley’s definition of the poets as conveyors of a hitherto “unapprehended inspiration” that casts the “gigantic shadow of futurity upon the present” – a favourite metaphor also with Bion. This describes in sensuous terms the emotional context in which it becomes possible to observe the appearance of a new mental event - a “fact” as Bion calls this emotional experience.

For Bion, also, saw himself as engaged in a hunt for meaning: like a Miltonic-Galilean astronomer with his telescope gazing into the void and formless infinite, “in darkness and with dangers compassed round” (*Paradise Lost* VII: 27). He saw Satan-Milton as a heroic explorer in the dark world of deep depression, that “obscure sojourn”, learning to observe mental facts that other people would have found intolerable and therefore “invisible to mortal sight”. It was a scientific-religious quest in which Milton was led by the Heavenly Muse. So Bion, instead of glimpsing the deer’s-tails which might indicate the patterning of the herd, he seeks for specks of light amongst the galaxies of the universe that leave traces of that “ferocious animal Absolute Truth”. Our reversed perspective on this hunt shows it to consist of “an extremely active, flexible and speedy unconscious [being] pursued by a slow, rigid, lumbering conscious” (1977, p. 25). Bion talks about the “abyss” of ignorance which the analyst finds himself in at the start of each session with its hunt for meaning, and in which nothing seems observable. The “morass of material” is so overwhelming it is equivalent to nothingness. In this situation he says he finds it useful to make “boxes for beta-elements... in case that strange creature should exist and should it swim into my ken” (1997, p. 29). ‘Swim into my ken’ is a quotation from Keats who expresses how on first reading Chapman’s Homer a new world opened up for him as it did for the explorer Cortez with his ‘eagle eyes’.

The visual analogy of the countertransference dream - as something that comes into focus as a result of light-holes in the shadowy abyss - is extended by both Bion and Meltzer into the realm of music, especially in their later informal talks. Bion said we should allow Wordsworth’s “music of humanity” into the consulting room – or at least “a little bit of it” (2005, p. 74), so I would like to end with a few remarks about the music of the countertransference. This may seem odd in a talk about observation,

given that music is the only non-visual art form; and yet there is a sense in which music exists in all art forms including psychoanalysis, and this musical dimension is often the key to the way it communicates its ‘ineffable’ meaning, its underlying spirituality or poetry – what Bion calls the ‘sleeping beauty’ of the psychoanalytic spirit. He asks, how can we make contact with this sleeping beauty or the oracle at Delphi: ‘is that voice in any way audible?’ (1977, p. 37).

Meltzer speaks of the “harmonic response” of the countertransference (1983, p. 164) and says that its “music” is “absolutely what the patient hears; what he hears of the meaning through interpretation is quite secondary” (qtd. in Oelsner--). The music of the countertransference therefore expresses the analyst’s listening to the conversation of internal objects – which, Meltzer says, is ‘absolutely what the patient hears’, and this music is far more significant than the content of any interpretation.

Neither Bion nor Meltzer profess any particular musical talent – indeed they both disavow any in the usual sense - yet they both regard the stirring music of the transference as of prime importance, and are aware that there is much yet to be investigated here if we had the tools for doing so. In his paper on “Temperature and Distance” (1976) Meltzer enumerates some of the significant factors employed in the analyst’s speaking voice to “modulate” emotionality – such as tone, rhythm, key, volume and timbre (p. 377). Yet speaking is itself a form of paying attention to internal speaking objects (Meltzer). Langer points out that *listening* is the “primary musical activity”. The fact is, *listening* is also a form of observation, and very much a part of the psychoanalytic poetry. And the “duet” engaged in with the patient has “its own rhythm and cadence, like the chanter or the bagpipe” (Meltzer).

Bion, in his attempt to make vivid the penetrating power of music as a symbolic form, provides a musical memory of his own:

The nearest I can get to it is probably the sort of thing the musicians know about and have developed very successfully. I remember seeing some kind of animal in a zoo when I was very small: it was rattling its horns on the bars of the enclosure. The peculiar thing about this creature was that it kept on entirely rhythmically.... (1997, p. 31).

The “very perceptive grown-up” who accompanied him in this “peculiar” little adventure agreed that here was “an established rhythm that could be written

down”. The interstices of this container are filled with a primeval music. They are the holes in existing knowledge through which the spiritual can find a path. He concludes, “I am still stirred by these rhythmical communications.” Perhaps this highly perceptive grown-up was Bion’s first internal analyst – that is, an early contributor to his combined object. As Meltzer said, the dreamer is the thinker: the analyst merely the comprehender of his thought.

Sometimes the music of the meaning may consist simply in its “monotonous reiteration” (Bion 1980, p. 45). Nothing could be less pleasurable to the outside ear; yet the analyst searching for the meaning may find it here. The underlying Idea of the communication may consist in this very repetitiveness – it may be the sound of sincerity. Bion gives another example of an incoherent stammerer who, like a one-man band, produced a “pattern of sound... from different parts of his anatomy” each with “a personality, like a real person, and each... ambitious to make use of your phonation” (1977). In this case the deep grammar or underlying poetic spirit has taken on something of the quality of a performance. It is a prelude, perhaps, to what he calls the “Bedlam” of his internal dialogue with the stammerer within, in the *Memoir*: the poet struggling to get out and achieved “disciplined debate”.

Where there is music there is also “anti-music”, or a category of the anti-poetic: as in the barkings of a Hitler, composed of beta-elements that lie “outside the spectrum of thought” (1977, p. 23), or “the clamour of gang warfare” that issues from external groups – Milton’s “savage clamour that drowned both harp and voice” (*Paradise Lost* VII. 36). This is different from the meaningful repetitiveness described above. A patient may bring a musical instrument instead of a gun – such as a “scream” (1977, p. 44); or in a more sophisticated way, use the power of their instrument to attempt to subvert the psychoanalytic process, like the pianist who could not respect the “discipline” of the analyst’s minimum conditions (1997, p. 45). These did not include literally listening to piano music; this would simply constitute an evasion of the proper verbal medium that, as Meltzer says, acts as a “forcing house” - in the horticultural sense - for the growth of symbols (1986, p. 81). Even an accomplished musician may use their talent to block their ears to the different music of the psychoanalytic process – which as Keats would say is properly a “ditty of no tone”. Well-played music can still be a cloudy or “excrementitious covering” of lies, as Blake

put it – a projection needing to be withdrawn. The analyst may be seduced into a genre error by borrowing the clothing of other art forms in order to evade the stress of the art of psychoanalysis; there are many possibilities for misconception. But once the clamour of anti-poetry has died down, “As my ears became used to the silence, little sounds became easier to hear” (Bion 1977, p. 22).

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