

# Genesis of the 'aesthetic conflict'

by Meg Harris Williams

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The new idea is clearly something like 'in the beginning was the aesthetic object and the aesthetic object was the breast and the breast was the world.'  
(Donald Meltzer, **Studies in Extended Metapsychology**, 1986)

'Aesthetic conflict' is the concept that underpins **The Apprehension of Beauty**, (Meltzer & Williams, 1988). Donald Meltzer saw this book as containing the clearest statement of his philosophy of mind. It expressed for him the 'new idea' which had been gradually taking shape in his mind. He would have agreed however that it was not in any absolute sense a new idea, but rather, a very old idea that was waiting, platonically pre-existent, to find a home in new circumstances – namely the field of psychoanalysis. Distinct elements formed links and then coalesced to result in the psychoanalytic formulation 'aesthetic conflict'. These were: clinical work with autistic children, baby observation, philosophical reading about symbol formation and aesthetics, and literary criticism, of poetry in particular. I would like to summarise the contribution of these various elements, and say more in particular about the type of literary criticism involved.

**The Apprehension of Beauty** was written with a sense of urgency after Martha Harris' serious road accident. However it had already in a sense been written – being the culmination of many years of thinking and research, that needed to be gathered together and consolidated in a single volume. As Meltzer wrote on the jacket cover of the book:

This volume has grown over the years almost as a family project of Martha Harris, her two daughters Meg and Morag and her husband, Donald Meltzer. It therefore has its roots in English literature and its branches waving wildly about in psychoanalysis. Its roots in English literature – Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Coleridge and Blake – are as strong as the psycho-analytical branching from Freud, Klein and Bion. Its philosophical soil is certainly Plato, Russell, Whitehead, Wittgenstein, Langer, Cassirer and, in aesthetics, Adrian Stokes.  
(Meltzer, jacket cover to **The Apprehension of Beauty**, 1988)

Martha Harris, he suggests, was herself the tree around which these various elements circled. The philosophical soil relates to symbol-formation and the origins

of language, and the nature of aesthetic appreciation as explored in particular by Adrian Stokes. Meltzer was not a poetry-reader but was very well-read in linguistics and his preoccupation with symbol-formation is evident in **Dream Life** (1983) and **Studies in Extended Metapsychology** (1986), and in some later papers. The influence of the major poet-philosophers such as Shakespeare, Milton and the Romantic poets on the psychoanalytic model of the mind I have described in detail in other books (**The Chamber of Maiden Thought**, **The Vale of Soulmaking**); thinkers such as these wrote poetry because (as Bion said) it was 'the most serious way of writing'. The essay on *Hamlet*, 'The undiscover'd country: the shape of the aesthetic conflict in *Hamlet*', was written for this book at Meltzer's request. The poetry analysis that originally went into the formation of 'aesthetic conflict' however was my doctoral dissertation work from the 1970's on **Inspiration in Milton and Keats**, which became my first book (1982).

Both Milton and Keats are exceptionally direct, explicit and sensuous in their depiction of the Muse (internal object). The link with the infant's love-hate response to the mother's ambiguity became clear, as did the idea of the combined object lying behind all other symbols (and the creative artist's sense of service to it, on behalf of humanity); also the drive for knowledge and awareness of the pitfalls of false knowledge. Words as signs are liable to be an invention of the poet's ego (Bion's 'lies'), a manipulation or even a claustrum. By contrast, exploration and discovery take place under the aegis of the Muse or object. The task of the poet is to create the container, the apparatus for receiving thoughts – the 'wreathèd trellis of a working brain' as Keats described it.

This information about the poets' model of the mind was not derived from what is usually termed 'psychoanalytic criticism' – imposing an interpretive scheme in a way that (as Bion says) 'victimises' literature. Rather, it arose from a mode of reading which has analogies with the way the transference works in the psychoanalytic process.

The mode of reading that has an organic rather than a reductive relationship with psychoanalysis is founded on a synthesis of two methodologies which are sometimes seen as contradictory. On the one hand, it requires the kind of 'close reading' with its techniques for analysing poetic diction that I. A. Richards formalised in the Cambridge school of 'Practical Criticism'; and on the other, it also depends on a 'reader-response' or 'New Critical' awareness of the reader's subjectivity as developed in the American schools of literature. Ultimately, this synthesis goes back to Coleridge, whose philosophy of symbol-formation made explicit how in poetry, the objective and subjective fuse at the moment of knowledge. I called it 'symbolic congruence' ('Knowing the mystery', *Encounter*, 1986) owing to the reader's striving to match the knowledge contained in the art-symbol by means of a symbolic mode of their own, whether verbal, artistic or dream-like.

Meltzer summarised the need to join psychological and structural approaches in a note he wrote for the jacket cover of **Inspiration in Milton and Keats**:

Literary criticism has often been taxed with a lack of psychological insight while psychologists, and perhaps psychoanalysts in particular, when writing about literature, have been accused of being beside the point, aesthetically. This book explores the nature of creative thought, through its focal concern with the phenomenon of inspiration. It approaches the works and lives of Milton and Keats from two directions, and with a dual purpose. Equipped with both formal and informal training in literature, art and psychology, the author has mounted a most complex and fascinating attack on this long-avoided problem: is the Muse a formal figure of speech or a psychological reality?  
(Donald Meltzer, in M. H. Williams, **Inspiration in Milton and Keats**, 1982)

The attempt to consolidate these links and to find a more constructive relation between psychoanalysis and literature is one of the main areas of research that lay behind **The Apprehension of Beauty**. In the chapter on ‘Holding the dream’ I elaborated the distinctions made in an earlier article (in *Encounter* 1986), in which ‘aesthetic criticism’ was differentiated from both ‘softhumanism’ and academic criticism. I used passages from the art criticism of Adrian Stokes both as a model for the theory and to illustrate its practice. The central feature is the nature and quality of the reader’s identification with the inspiring mind of the poet (or artist) who is themselves in communion with internal objects. As in the process of psychoanalysis itself, the reader’s identification is liable to swing between Ps $\leftrightarrow$ D when faced by emotional turbulence. But the poet, like the analyst, pioneers the way forward, in learning from experience.

It is evident that this view of the link between the two disciplines (which Meltzer says are both ‘art-forms’) is the opposite of the traditional view that psychoanalysis is equipped to make judgements (diagnoses) about the poet’s mind. It supposes that the interpreter is secondary to the poet and on a lower rung of the ladder of knowledge. Such a view inevitably encountered resistance from both academic literary scholarship and from establishment psychoanalysis. (The former became plain to me when Oxford university rejected my dissertation on the grounds that inspiration was a matter of personal ‘belief’; and most older-generation analysts still do not accept the idea of ‘aesthetic conflict’.) As Sandra Gosso writes, on considering the question ‘What kind of psychoanalysis for art?’:

The invitation to put together the two disciplines [*psychoanalysis and literary criticism*] encounters obstacles both from psychoanalysis, which is in many respects anchored in a pseudo-scientific medical, biological, and positivist matrix, and from literary criticism, which from the 1970’s onwards privileged formalizations based on a logico-mathematical model.  
(Sandra Gosso, **Psychoanalysis and Art**, 2004)

The pseudo-scientific ‘formalizations’ of literary criticism that Gosso refers to and that held sway in the latter part of the 20th century are those of structuralism, deconstruction, etc. We remember how Bion kept stressing that his model of thinking – in which the thoughts pre-exist the thinker – is the opposite of the traditional view in which the thinker thinks up (invents) thoughts. It fits very well, however, with the poets’ concept of ‘inspiration’ and the relation with the Muse that this entails. As Meltzer put it in a talk on creativity:<sup>1</sup>

A creative genius is someone who permits his own internal objects to give him new ideas - even if he does not understand them or cannot use them; his function is to receive them, and he possesses the art of transmitting them... Invention is a function of the self - discovery, a function of the creative self.  
(Meltzer, ‘On creativity’, 1992, in M. H. Williams, **The Vale of Soulmaking**, 2005, p. 175)

This takes us back to the link with infant observation that underpins the ‘aesthetic conflict’, where poet-and-muse join hands with baby-and-mother. The poets demonstrated that inspiration depends on aesthetic reciprocity, and this has to be re-established each time with each new poem, each new phase in development. It cannot be taken for granted; reparation is not under the ego’s control – it is a function of the internal object. The Oxford academics, as Meltzer said, did not ‘have the concept’, so they could not see the evidence – it was un-thinkable. Yet, from the psychoanalytic vertex, inspiration with its clear recognition of knowledge coming from outside the self is probably a more accurate description than Kleinian ‘reparation’ for the internal orientation underlying ‘the force that through the green fuse drives the flower’ (Dylan Thomas). It is the key to learning from experience:

The integrated internal combined object learns from experience in advance of the self and is almost certainly the fountainhead of creative thought and imagination.  
(Meltzer, **The Clastrum**, 1992)

This applies equally to the ‘creative genius’ and to the earliest internalisation by every baby of the combined object in the form of the enigmatic mother. Meltzer described how accompanying Martha Harris to her supervisions of baby observation at weekends in Italy, during the 1970’s, influenced his model of psychoanalysis:

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1 In 1992-93 Donald Meltzer and I gave a series of joint talks on creativity in Stavanger, Munich, Barcelona and Biella, based on *The Apprehension of Beauty*.

Perhaps it has been the experience of listening to mother-baby observation seminars in the last few years that has so impressed on me the inadequacy of the psychoanalytic model...to describe the nuances and complexities of that primal relationship  
(Meltzer, 'Money-Kyrle's concept of misconception', p. 503)

While Bion's theory of thinking proposed a view of mother-baby communication based on 'speculative imagination' (as he called it), infant observation as a discipline was an art-science like psychoanalysis itself. The analogy with the 'aesthetic criticism' of poetry and its focus on the minutiae of poetic diction in the wider process of symbol-formation became more understandable and mutually enhancing. It followed naturally 'as the leaves to a tree' (to cite Keats on poetry) that there should be a complementary inquiry into the nature of psychoanalysis as an art form in itself (see **The Aesthetic Development**, 2010). Again this was not a new suggestion (it is in both early Meltzer and Bion), but the link with another verbal art form gave it shape and substance.

Finally, to return to Meltzer's aesthetic 'family tree', what completed the picture of an organic evolution was the clinical work he and others did with autistic children, whose frequently artistic sensitivity led them to recoil from the impact of the aesthetic object, as summarised at the end of **Studies in Extended Metapsychology** (p. 207). This refined the picture of the container-contained within the psychoanalytic transference, making it clear that it was the 'fitting together' of the analyst's attention and the patient's co-operativeness, that constituted the container and made the psychoanalytic process itself into the aesthetic object. The analyst who, like the poet, the artistic literary critic, or the baby-observer, can be 'divested of the expectation of knowing', is in a position to apprehend how the process of coming-to-knowledge is itself an aesthetic experience. It is governed by what Bion calls 'O', the mystery of an object which lies beyond and detached from the mind of either patient or analyst, reader or poet. Meltzer calls it a 'conversation between internal objects'.

These paths to knowledge dovetailed to produce the concept 'aesthetic conflict'. So it is not the word – the term 'aesthetic conflict' – that is the new idea; it is its new life in the context of clinical psychoanalysis. The idea takes root and changes the perspective of the entire operation. Meltzer called it 'the new psychoanalysis'.