

Inauguration of the Harris Meltzer Trust

Talk by Meg Harris Williams

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The HMT was launched with the publication of:

The Story of Infant Development – Martha Harris and Romana Negri
Your Teenager – Martha Harris

Donald Meltzer, who died in 2004, wished that the educational work disseminated over the course of over 30 years by the publications of the Clunie Press should continue to benefit both psychoanalysis and its applications in the world outside the consulting room. Clunie Press was started originally by Meltzer and his wife Martha Harris (Mattie) in memory of Roland Harris (poet and teacher, who died in 1969). The new educational charity, the Harris Meltzer Trust, has been founded to continue the publishing work of the original Trust, in the spirit of these three widely loved and inspirational figures. It seems fitting therefore that it should be launched by two books associated with Martha Harris and spanning the period of her publishing career. They are books which in complementary ways present Mattie's legacy as an educator.

The first book, *Your Teenager*, reprints in a single volume three small books originally published in 1969 that were designed for “ordinary beautiful devoted parents” (to adapt Winnicott's wellknown phrase), to help them cope with their child during the turbulent secondary school years. The language is straightforward yet elegant and concise, revealing Mattie's talent for expressing complicated thoughts in simple everyday terms. For if we look a little beyond the surface prescription, we realise the primary interest of the books is really in helping parents cope with their own turbulent emotions, that are aroused in response to their child's adolescence. The structural hinge of her approach is her empathy with the struggling child in all of us; it shows in the gently piercing, detective quality of her location of the root of the trouble – namely, the difficulty of becoming educated, in the deepest and widest sense of that term. If the “central task of the adolescent” is defined as one of “finding their individual identity”, then the task of parents is a reciprocal one: it is to “re-educate themselves”

through questioning their own relationships, values, emotions and principles, which will inevitably be stirred up and flung into the melting pot by their normally aggravating teenager. Her aim is that children and parents may make the most of this opportunity to develop in tandem, with a view to ultimately taking their place in “the great social class of the truly educated people, the people who are still learning”.

At the same time these are also practical books, rooted in the everyday life without which no principle can find a local habitation and a name. A child develops mentally in the context of real failures and achievements, at the core of his or her personal solar system (in the analogy of Money-Kyrle and Meltzer), whose waves ripple outwards from a “little society” of expanding diameter. This relates to another interesting aspect of the books: namely the opportunity for comparison between the social context of today and that of 40 years ago, which is in various ways both surprisingly different and surprisingly similar; we have both progressed and regressed. Also this is probably about the minimum passage of time required before it is feasible to inquire whether a work has any “classic” or enduring qualities. In my view it is Mattie’s consistent focus on the growth of self-knowledge and on the very principle of education as something that takes place between an inner child and an inner parental object, that gives these books their classic – and deeply psychoanalytic – quality. Interestingly, they have remained in print in foreign translations despite being out of print here for many years.

The second book to be published simultaneously by the HMT is very different in format and content, and yet, as readers new to Mattie will discover, it is essentially the same in spirit. It consists of her supervisions (recorded on tape) of infant and young child observations made by Romana Negri in Italy during the 70’s and early 80’s. The major part of the book concerns one particular child, observed from birth till age three, who delighted Mattie as representing a model for normal infant development, as distinct from the pathological or disturbed. She was among those who emphatically maintain it is impossible to help disturbed children (or adults) without having a clear conception of the thread of normal development with its mingled joys and sorrows, triumphs and frustrations, at the forefront of one’s mind. For this reason the book has been entitled *The Story of Infant Development*.

As with the *Teenager* book, what we may learn from reading *The Story* is something more than the pattern of development. We also learn about the process of observing itself and the pattern of symbol-making that it engenders. Bion describes the two equally difficult mental exercises that are required in the process of symbol-formation: firstly the necessity of perceiving the “facts” on the sounding-board of one’s emotionality; secondly, allowing this overwhelming amount of confusing information to find a pattern in one’s mind without imposing one’s preconceptions (memory and desire) upon it. These two processes interdigitate in the partnership between the two authors of this book. Many readers will be familiar with Romana Negri’s work with premature infants (*The Newborn in the Intensive Care Unit*, 1994); the new book demonstrates how to acquire those essential sensitive observational skills with the aid of a teacher who also becomes an internal teacher. For as Bion says: “Who is to put all this material in order?” In Mattie’s speaking voice there will be found none of those words that Bion objected to so vehemently as being “long, ugly, impressive and devoid of meaning” (his example being “psychoanalysis” itself!).

More work will subsequently be published from amongst the wide repertoire of Meltzer’s and Harris’s teachings abroad; but meanwhile the Trust is looking forward to forthcoming books: Martina Campart’s work in Sweden with reflection groups in an educational environment, and a historical survey of the Kleinian interest in aesthetics by Nicola Glover (*Psychoanalytic Aesthetics*). Suggestions for future publications that correspond with the Trust’s aims and objectives are warmly invited.