

CHAPTER FIVE

A psychoanalytic revolution from a speculative to an empirical point of view¹

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With Donald Meltzer, Martha Harris was one of the architects of the GERPEN. They were invited to Paris by James Gammill, Geneviève Haag, and Jean and Florence Bégoin for the first time during the winter of 1974. The first work session that we had with them was a private one, in the Bégoin's apartment, in which some twenty or so of our colleagues took part. That work session turned out to be so interesting that we decided to invite them several times per year from then on. The number of participants increased steadily, and we came to realize that we needed a more structured organization in order to manage the weekends properly. It was for that reason that the GERPEN was set up in 1983.

Those weekend sessions were highly successful, thanks in no small measure to the teaching and exceptional creativity of

¹ Part of this chapter was written as an introduction to a scientific meeting set up by the GERPEN (*Groupe d'Etudes et de Recherches Psychoanalytiques pour le développement de l'Enfant et du Nourisson*) in honour of Martha Harris. This part has been translated from French to English by David Alcorn. The remaining part was written directly in English by the author.

Donald Meltzer – and also to the presence by his side of Martha Harris, who would always add a personal note to what Meltzer was saying. Sometimes, indeed, she would moderate his standpoint if she felt it to be too cut-and-dried, too indicative of a masculine desire to take a firm stand on things. Don and Mattie, as we called them informally, were a well-balanced and creative couple who gave the impression that they were constantly and deeply in love with each other and shared a real passion for psychoanalysis. We were extremely fortunate to be able to benefit from their joint teaching several times per year, from 1974 until 1983.

One day, Mattie suggested that we should devote part of our seminars to the Infant Observation method that Esther Bick had devised at the Tavistock Clinic. I can remember just how puzzled I felt during the initial sessions when observation material was being presented. My mind, trained as it was in the orthodox French manner, just wasn't getting enough theoretical speculations or metapsychological references! Gradually, all the same, I began to be convinced that she was sharing with us a fundamental way of working – to such an extent, indeed, that I myself embarked upon an infant observation, supervised by Anik Maufras du Chatellier. That experience led to a sea-change in my conception of psychoanalysis. I am now convinced that psychoanalysis is an empirical science based on observation – but a particular form of observation that I would call “psychoanalytic observation”. That revolution, which brought me from a speculative point of view to an empirical one, I owe it above all to Martha Harris – and I am sure that many of my colleagues will have had a similar experience.

Martha Harris was one of Esther Bick's first pupils, when in 1948 training in child psychotherapy was initiated in the Tavistock Clinic; it was John Bowlby, at that time the director of that prestigious institution, who asked Esther Bick to take on that task. Martha Harris took over from Mrs Bick in 1960 as head of that training programme, which included infant observation as a compulsory subject (nowadays in the first and second year of the programme). It was Martha Harris who had the

brilliant idea of broadening infant observation to include professions other than that of psychotherapists; she was convinced that anyone professionally involved with children – teachers, nursery nurses, special needs workers, paediatricians, etc – would be able to benefit from this particular mode of learning. Her activity was not, however, limited to applying Esther Bick's method of observation. She was herself an outstanding child and adolescent analyst. The papers that she wrote – published in French by the *Éditions du Hublot* – bear witness to that.

Infant observation and the psychoanalyst's activity share a common denominator – what I earlier called “psychoanalytic observation”. I did not in fact invent the term “psychoanalytic observation” – I am borrowing it from Donald Meltzer. Here is what he has to say:

Psychiatric diagnosis with children as carried out in most hospitals or child guidance clinics is a rather elaborate and unstandardized process in which history-taking, psychological testing, and play interviews with the child play a variable part in different centres. But the basic method is to amass data and, in conference, to reach a group impression by reviewing the data. My own experience in running a large child guidance clinic as against an extensive experience in private psychiatric consultation convinces me that the psychoanalytic method of observation is far more accurate, both diagnostically and prognostically, if psychotherapy or child analysis is a real possibility. (Meltzer 1994, pp. 37-38)

This is how Don Meltzer describes “psychoanalytic observation”:

Our source of information is our own relatively analysed mental apparatus, by means of which we can experience a degree of identification with the patient and follow the affective and phantasy processes in ourselves resulting from partial identification. This is not understood, yet it is no different methodologically from the calibration of any scientific instrument as an extension of the human sensorium. And of course it is to the extent to which we have succeeded in what other scientists call standardizing the apparatus that we become accurate psychoanalytic observers. (ibid., p. 41)

Obviously, a personal analysis, one that has been as thorough as possible, is by far the best calibration tool for our mind so as to prepare it for psychoanalytic observation. That said, Esther Bick's method of observation also makes a significant contribution to this, whether simply as part of a one-off training programme or linked to the person's own psychoanalysis and development thereafter. These are two personal experiences in which observers can observe their own mind in the situation in which they find themselves immersed. That is what characterizes psychoanalytic observation and distinguishes it from other kinds (experimental observation, ethological observation, etc) in which observers must leave aside their own subjectivity and focus on an object or a situation external to them. It is what the French anthropologist Georges Devereux (who trained as a psychoanalyst) called "participant observation", in the sense that the observer is part of what he or she is observing. Esther Bick described those who observed infants as a special kind of participant observer.

In 1980, Mattie invited me to visit the Tavistock Clinic and attend some seminars of the course for child psychotherapists. I went to London with my wife and we stayed at Don and Mattie's home for several days. I remember the kind welcome Mattie gave us. I can still see her cutting from her garden some beautiful flowers to decorate the room she had prepared for us.

That visit was decisive for my thinking on child psychoanalysis and child psychotherapy in my own country. At that time there was no official training in child psychoanalysis in France. The French psychoanalytic societies affiliated to the International Psychoanalytic Association were not involved in that field of psychoanalysis. People who wished to be seriously trained in child psychoanalysis or psychoanalytic psychotherapy either asked for supervision the small number of private psychoanalysts practising with children, or even crossed the Channel and came to London to have an actual training as child psychoanalyst or psychotherapist.

We have in France a long tradition of theoretical speculation which, I think, is quite respectable and which created some brilliant thinkers in several intellectual fields like logic, mathematics,

and philosophy; but hindered to some extent not so much the exploration of nature, but the possibility of easily connecting empirical data with thoughts. We remain essentially dualistic as in Descartes' definition: on the one hand a thinking substance, – the soul – without extension; on the other a physical substance – the body and the material world, extended and known through the mediation of our sense organs. But there is also another kind of dualism in Descartes' legacy which has influenced French thinkers, including psychoanalysts. This kind of dualism is correlative of the first one, but it deserves to be stressed considering its importance within the psychoanalytic field. I mean the opposition Descartes underlined between thinking, which brings us an absolute certainty about our existence (“I think therefore I am”), and our deceitful senses which never assure us whether what we are perceiving is actual or not, perceived or dreamt. The problem for psychoanalysis is that it is based on the hypothesis that there is a consubstantiality between body and mind, that the thoughts stem from the body through complex transformations, that there are not two substances – body and soul connected by the pineal gland as Descartes hypothesized it – but a psycho-soma as Bion stated, which belongs to both our physical and our spiritual natures. I think the contempt that many French psychoanalysts have for child psychoanalysis is linked with this aspect of Descartes' dualism. Treating a child with psychoanalysis does not permit of ignoring the body and the bodily needs as may be possible with an adult patient.

After my visit to the Tavistock Clinic I had a dream of setting up another Tavistock in France. Unfortunately I never met the patron who wished to give the amount of money that plan required. So, with some colleagues, we found another way. As soon as we could we formed a small group of psychoanalysts to organize a training course for child and adolescent psychotherapist on a background similar to that I had discovered at the Tavistock.² This group affiliated itself to the European Federation for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy in the Public Sector (EFPP)

2 The first group set up in Normandy was comprised of Louis Edy, Didier Houzel, Bianca Lechevalier, and Albert Namer.

founded in 1991 by Brian Martindale. Shortly after, a second group was formed in Bordeaux, then another one in Paris; the *Centre d'Études Martha Harris* was set up in Brittany in the 1980's by Gianna Williams (at Larmor Plage near Lorient); Hélène Dubinsky, Alexandre Dubinsky and Odile Gavériaux wished to join us. In 1999 the different groups combined as the FFPPEA³ and the federation affiliated itself to the EFPP. Since this date other groups, set up in Lyon, Lille, etc., have joined the Federation.

So now we have a wide network for providing a training in child and adolescent psychoanalytic psychotherapy in the spirit of Martha Harris, which combines a scrupulous respect for what is psychoanalytically observed with a profound empathy and a genuine modesty.

This spirit seems to me beautifully summarized in Mattie's commentary on the therapeutic consultations that she had provided for a little boy who had important relationship problems, she wrote:

It was important that the parents had come together, jointly responsible for their son, and that they were enabled to express their problem, their feelings of helplessness as parents, to an 'expert' who was supposed to have some experience in dealing with these problems. But not an expert, who from the height of superior knowledge, treated them as helpless children, instructing them in what to do, or in what they should not have done, thereby confirming them their own childish fears of being discovered to be inadequate and fraudulent parents incapable of responsibility and dependent therefore upon some higher authority. The helpful expert in such a situation is the one who can have a role analogous to that of the understanding mother with the distressed baby, who receives the projections of the infant's anxiety, is with it, and enables it to cope better with the pain because it no longer feels alone. (Harris & Bick, p. 48)

3 *Fédération Française de Psychothérapie Psychanalytique pour l'Enfant et l'Adolescent.*