

Donald Meltzer on Martha Harris

Mattie as an educator¹

By both background and inclination, Mattie was a scholar of English literature and a teacher. Nothing was more foreign to her nature than the administrative requirements that eventually devolved upon her at the Tavistock. If ever anyone had “greatness thrust upon them”, it was the reluctant Mattie at the time when Mrs Bick left the Clinic and it was either up to Mattie to take over or let the infant Child Psychotherapy Course fade away.

The way in which she came to terms with this crisis in her life – and here Roland’s encouragement and help was essential – was by framing a radical pedagogical method. Many of the central ideas came from Roland, who was at that time deputy headmaster of a large comprehensive school in London, prior to his going to the Ministry of Education and later to Brunel University. The central conviction, later hallowed in Bion’s concepts of “learning from experience”, was that the kind of learning which transformed a person into a professional worker had to be rooted in the intimate relations with inspired teachers, living and dead, present and in books. Roland himself, as poet and scholar, was an inspired teacher and the many textbooks he wrote concentrated on the development in the student of the capacity to read in both a comprehensive and a penetrating way.

The second central thesis was that learning takes place in a group context and that the management of the atmosphere was an essential task of the teachers. The prevention of elitism, the avoidance of competitiveness, and the replacement of selection by self-selection through hard work-tasks were the essential components of this task. But Mattie’s experience as a teacher, during the war years and after, before she trained as a child psychotherapist and psychoanalyst, had taught her the importance of meeting the formal requirements of the Establishment if there was to be established a profession of Child Psychotherapy with positions in clinics and schools for the graduates of the Course. Here again Roland’s extensive administrative knowledge was an invaluable aid to Mattie, not naturally given to

¹ *Quaderni di Psicoterapia Infantile* No. 18 (1989), pp. 10-11. Rome: Borla.

orderliness, let alone to giving orders. Eventually she became an impressive negotiator and even, some claimed, politician in the interests of the Course and of the Association that was later formed in conjunction with the Hampstead Clinic and the Margaret Lowenfelt group.

Here again Bion's teaching about groups, and later about the structure of the personality, with its endoskeletal structure and its social exoskeletal carapace, played a central role in her thinking. In keeping with the differentiation between Christ and Caesar, Mattie worked out her method for meeting the requirements of the Establishment without sacrificing the ethos of the learning work-group. But it cost her a lot, which only the support of Roland made it possible for her to sustain. When he died suddenly in 1969 of a ruptured cerebral aneurism, she developed an acute aplastic anaemia from whose fatal consequences she was saved by timely diagnosis, medication with cortisone, and a dream in which Roland told her she still had work to do for the family and the Course.

Portrait ²

Mattie had a particular way of talking that often seemed at first a stutter but was in fact a complicated process of accommodation between the complexity of her thought and the minute responses of her audience. A typescript from a tape looked terrible, but the effect on a listener was like standing well back from the brush-strokes of a Van Dyke, amazed to see that the mass of wiggly lines suddenly fused into silk and lace and jewels. The slight soft Scottish furriness of her voice tempered her vehemence in debate and her laugh chimed out in a most infectious way. While easily entertained by wit, she was not witty or entertaining herself, but her gaiety could fill a room and encourage the sallies of others, keen for her admiration.

She did not write easily but had to revise and revise. Her handwriting was the opposite of her mode of speech, for it looked lovely from a distance but was almost unreadable because she never took the pen from the paper. Everything was fused together, like Mrs Bick's description of 'looping'. Animals did not attract or interest her much, despite her childhood on the farm, but the beauty of the landscape ravished her. The works of

2 Preface to *Collected Papers of Martha Harris and Esther Bick* (1987). Perthshire: Clunie Press

man made perhaps less impact, with the exception of literature, and there her knowledge and memory and comprehension often astonished. She read voluminously, but only very unwillingly of the psycho-analytic literature. Even Bion, whose supervision had been her great inspiration after Mrs. Klein's, she read half-heartedly.

Though she'd been keen on sports in her youth (the broken front teeth came from the hockey field), games of any sort bored her. One couldn't imagine Mattie playing cards or chess, though Roland had been an enthusiast of the latter. But Scottish dancing – that was another matter. No reel was long enough for her. She was devoted to children, but I never saw her dote on a child, nor talk over his head, nor violate his privacy. Her warm reserve was almost paradoxical, charming without effort, generous without being indulgent. She seemed always to mean what she said, but never said all she meant and when something hurtful had to be spoken, she could 'tell the truth, but tell it slant', as Emily Dickinson would say.