

Afterword¹

By Maria Rhode

The absence of the vocabulary of aesthetics in the literature of psychoanalysis, at least in its theoretical vocabulary, is nowhere more stunningly illustrated than in Melanie Klein's *Narrative of a Child Analysis*. The terse and even harsh language of her theories, and their preponderant concern with the phenomenology of the paranoid-schizoid position, stands in astonishing contrast to the emotional, and certainly at times passionate, climate of her relationship to Richard and of his overwhelming preoccupation with the vulnerability of the world to Hitler's destructiveness and his own. (p. 25)

Readers of the *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* will find no difficulty in recognising the area of experience alluded to in this quotation from *The Apprehension of Beauty* by Donald Meltzer and Meg Harris Williams. Theoretical formulations can often seem to fall painfully short of encompassing the reality of analytic experience, however useful, productive or indeed beautiful the theory in itself may seem to be. This is not in any way to diminish the importance of theory. As the authors point out elsewhere in this book, within the psychoanalytic method dwells the theory by which it is practised, much as the inner world of the mother is felt to be located behind the surface

¹ Reprint of Maria Rhode's review of *The Apprehension of Beauty* in the *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* (1989), vol. —, pp. 115–18.

she presents to view: and they suggest that much of the mistrust evoked by theory may indeed be of a similar nature to that evoked by the mother's hidden aspects, and which is a main strand of what they term "Aesthetic Conflict". Still, from the time when Freud considered the problem of the "choice of neurosis", the particular humanity of individuals has often been felt to elude theoretical statement. More recently Bion, in his formulation of O as the essentially unknowable, the noumenon, and his distinction between "knowing" and "knowing about", has developed the idea of this elusiveness, in regard to the transference relationship in particular. One of the aspects of the present book that seems to me especially important is the way in which words denoting fundamental human emotions and concepts—truth, beauty, awe, wonder, joy—are reinstated in a central theoretical position.

Earlier studies of autistic children had led to the idea that at least some of these appeared to have been particularly sensitive to the emotional impact of their mother's beauty, and to have reacted in various defensive ways in order to evade the conflicts associated with this impact (*Explorations in Autism* (1975) by Donald Meltzer, John Bremner, Shirley Hoxter, Doreen Weddell and Isca Wittenberg). In the present book, the notion of Aesthetic Conflict is developed and discussed from many different aspects, as the sub-title makes clear.

Aesthetic Conflict is the conflict between the ravishment which the baby is felt to experience in the presence of the mother's outside, of the formal qualities of breast and face, and his mistrust of her inner world. It "can be most precisely stated in terms of the aesthetic impact of the outside of the 'beautiful' mother, available to the senses, and the enigmatic inside which must be construed by creative imagination". Beauty, a property of the "ordinary beautiful devoted mother", is thought of as a quality having the power to elicit a passionate response (passionate in the sense of involving all three of Bion's L, H and K links); and the capacity for this response is thought of as an innate property of the human mind of the "ordinary beautiful baby" through some people may "react violently from it". In many ways this conflict resembles that over the absent object, but it is essential to recognise that the authors think of the Aesthetic Conflict as concerning the *present* object: "it is the human condition".

The lover is naked as Othello to the whisperings of Iago, but is rescued by the quest for knowledge, the K-link, the desire to know rather than to possess the object of desire. The K-link points to the value of desire itself as the stimulus to knowledge, not merely as a yearning for gratification and control over the object. *Desire makes it possible, even essential, to give the object its freedom.* (p. 27; original italics).

One consequence of this formulation is that Melanie Klein's chronological scheme of the paranoid-schizoid position being succeeded by the depressive position is no longer tenable. Instead, conflict concerning the present object is held to precede conflict over the absent object, and "the period of maximal beatification between mother and baby arises very early, soon to be clouded by varying degrees of post-partum depression in the mother and ... the baby's reaction against the aesthetic impact". The use of the image of the infant retreating into the cave in reaction against the dazzle of the sunrise may be seen as the most explicit statement of a Platonist current in analytic thought that begins with Melanie Klein's idea, in *Envy and Gratitude*, that the inborn capacity for love is a precondition of a good feeding experience, and is developed in Bion's theory of innate pre-conceptions.

Evidence for these formulations is adduced throughout the book both from the clinical material of patients in widely varying states of development and from the works of poets and other imaginative writers. The mutual enrichment that is possible between analysis and literature is evident in the integration of the two authors' contributions. Passages from the poets are quoted as being particularly felicitous expressions—indeed embodiments—of crucial experiences in the realm of thought which can also be encountered in analysis: as manifestations of that inspiration which, in its reliance on the creativity of the internal parents, goes beyond the "useful productivity" in which received knowledge is appropriately applied. At the same time, we are given examples of the encounter between the critic and the work of art which embody the features of engagement with an aesthetic object; and many of the formulations concerning the task of the critic are directly applicable to the analytic situation.

Perhaps the central concept is that of the mystery of private spaces, a mystery which the authors repeatedly contrast with secrecy: secrecy

being to do with the projection of curiosity and feelings of exclusion, and with the stimulation of the intrusive curiosity that culminates in violence. The sense of mystery and wonder inspired by the idea of the mother's inner world and the parents' "nuptial chamber" can be at best unevenly sustained: oscillations between the sense of awe and intrusiveness, between knowledge as exploration and knowledge as control, between Bion's "knowing" and "knowing about", are traced in the attitude of Hamlet just as in that of a little girl patient who was severely damaged at birth. Violence, both mental and physical, is seen as an extreme form of the impulse to violate the privacy of the parents' "nuptial chamber"; and the impulse to do violence to the baby that is the issue of this nuptial chamber provides the link with the perversions.

One of the ways in which the aesthetic impact of the mother, with its challenge to pride and envy, is felt to be made more bearable, and the impaginative relation to her private spaces therefore more tolerable, is delineated in the chapter "On Aesthetic Reciprocity". Here it is shown how a mother's failure to experience anything about her damaged little girl as beautiful was linked to the child's mechanical, intrusive and controlling "knowledge about" the parental intercourse, while the apprehension of its mystery could evolve through the therapist's acknowledgement of the child's genuine drive towards exploration and enquiry. Thus it is emphasized that the baby's initial response to the mother is to do with what it can perceive, while that aspect of "babyishness" that elicits the mother's aesthetic response is not to do with the baby's formal qualities, but with its potential for development. (This links with observations of some of the possible consequences when there has not been adequate containment of the conflicting responses to the object: for instance, psychosomatic symptoms when this impact can no longer be evaded ("the recovery of the aesthetic object"), or the avoidance of thought and meaning in favour of sensory experience that Frances Tustin has described in autistic children.) As one of the authors has said elsewhere, the development of an analysis is furthered if the analyst can keep in mind that he is "presiding over a process of great beauty".

This mental attitude, and the potentiality for symbolization and the apprehension of meaning that it generates, is also what characterizes

the critic who engages with a work of art in such a way that he is himself open to transformation. In Meg Harris Williams' words,

We expect from the critic who is genuinely involved in the aesthetic mentality, some overriding sense that his encounter with art constitutes one of life's formative experiences: that is, to use Bion's terms, a species of identifying with the evolution of "O"—O being the "absolute essence" or "central feature" of an emotional situation, translated by Bion and others as equivalent to "the state of being in love". (p.

"Commitment should be to a process rather than an interpretation": the language of aesthetic criticism should be such as to make it possible to generate "new realms of meaning through exploration and discovery, based on passionate congruence between the forms of the inner self and those of the aesthetic object". Form and verbal imagery are seen as essential manifestations of the symbolic activity by means of which the emotional experience embodied in the work of art is contained, rather than as some kind of clothing which may be removed or analysed away in order that a secret meaning may be "got at". Meg Harris Williams quotes extensively from the work of Adrian Stokes to show how a psychoanalytic criticism may be based on a spatial model in which the viewer both incorporates and is enveloped by the work of art, and is impinged upon both by its surface and by its depths. Such a mode of criticism involves "thinking with" the work of art rather than "thinking about" it: tracing the formal qualities of its composition in such a way that meaningful resonances are set up within the critic, who then seeks to find a symbolic form that may convey these to the reader. The work of art "does not yield the *meaning* of its message, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty', to the viewer who has not committed his *self* for observation and exploration". Williams shows that such an approach is equally fruitful with poetry as with visual works of art. The careful attention of "practical criticism" to the quality of the words and their sounds in "On Westminster Bridge" evokes an image of the evolving relation between the poet and the scene he is contemplating that is truly analytically meaningful in the terms of this book, though very far from being a "categorisation of art's phantasy contents". The relevance of such a

position to the analytic situation—particularly to such issues as the difference between “explaining” and “explaining away”—perhaps hardly needs further comment.

An approach to the poem that merely involved a “translation” of its “central underlying idea” would, as Williams suggests, lead merely to some conclusions as: “Wordsworth says the city is beautiful for once, but only because it appears dead, and as much like the country as possible”. Instead, she shows how, for the reader “thinking with” the poem, by the end of it “the city’s beauty exists both in opposition to the ugliness, noise or confusion of its mighty heart underneath ... and also *because* of it”. The greatness of the work of art consists in encompassing this conflict, indeed in embodying it. Similarly, in the dream of a poet reported at the beginning of the book, the patient “was seeming to shift his perception of beauty from the idealised good object to the struggle itself, thus including the malign and random, along with the good, as participants in the drama, and thus in his love of the world.”

Maria Rhode
Professor of Child Psychotherapy,
Tavistock Clinic/University of East London