

CHAPTER TWELVE

Signs, symbols and allegory

Introduction by Grete Tangen Andersen, Morten Andersen, Trond Holm, Jon Morgan Stokkeland, Lilian Stokkeland, Eirik Tjessem

In this selection of extracts from some of his later papers and talks, Meltzer elaborates on the essential distinction between signs and symbols. This is perhaps a good place to start for new students of his work: it marks the difference between mind and mindlessness; mindlessness here signifying all the essential adaptational and conventional processes (the use of signs) which do not require the meaning-generating and symbol-forming mind.

This vital distinction has many different roots and ramifications. Among the sources that he mentions are Wittgenstein's linguistic philosophy, Cassirer and Langer on symbolic forms, and—of course—Bion's work. One of the many, and highly interconnected, implications is the difference between received (conventional) symbols and autonomous (original) symbols. What distinguishes the autonomous symbols is that they “are created in the mind of the speaker.” It makes one wonder; how is it that

simple and even conventional words uttered, suddenly become true and meaningful? To convey emotional meaning by language is “not just a matter of symbol, not just a matter of words; it is also a matter of the music”. This leads on to the relation between “saying it” and “meaning it” (Wittgenstein, 1953)—being sincere—and to Bion’s distinction between “learning from experience” and “learning about”. Learning from experience rests upon symbol formation, which in its essence is an intuitive and mysterious process. It cannot be controlled or negotiated. This gives an answer to the question about what kind of science psychoanalysis is: an observational and descriptive science—it cannot explain and predict.

In many ways this is a *leitmotif* in Meltzer’s writings, but perhaps most thoroughly elaborated in *Dream Life* and *Studies in Extended Metapsychology*. Meltzer’s work on symbols and signs is, in our view, a major contribution to psychoanalytic theory. As he concisely expresses it: “I think what we have to do is make the most of the language that is available and to be as poetic and precise as we can”.

*On the cruelty of symbol formation*ⁱ

(1995)

Bion has made it very clear to us that the essence of thinking is symbol formation....The thing about poetry, is that it captures something. I am thinking about the techniques for capturing wild birds. You set up a net and you set up a means of throwing this net suddenly. You attract these birds to the area that would be covered by the net when it’s thrown and then when they’re gathered you suddenly arrange for the net to be sprung and to cover the birds. That seems to me to be a good metaphor for the way symbols are formed and they way they work: that they capture these wild birds of meaning. If you want to say “oh,

ⁱ This paragraph is taken from a talk by Meltzer on “Thought Disorders” (1995), unpublished, supplied by R. Oelsner.

but there's something cruel in that", I'm inclined to agree that there's something cruel in the whole process of symbol formation. There is something cruel about the way in which it surrounds the emotional experiences and captures them.

*Signs and symbols*ⁱ

(1997)

My paper on "Sincerity" was inspired by reading the later work of Wittgenstein in linguistic philosophy. In the *Philosophical Investigations* [1953] he spends quite a long time discussing meaning, the difference between "saying it" and "meaning it". It drew my attention to the problem in analysis of both the analyst meaning which he says to his patient, and the patient meaning what he says to the analyst. In the course of investigating this problem I became aware that language is not a very disciplined way of "meaning it" because language is so conventional. This led me on to a clearer differentiation in linguistic structures between signs and symbols, which tend to be equated with one another in the work of people like Saussure and Lacan. The thing about signs is that they are just a way of pointing at things; they use words to point. They consist almost exclusively of the conventional naming of things and functions. In so far as people use signs in communicating with one another, they cannot "mean" anything, they are simply pointing to the world. Now symbols are entirely different and very mysterious, because they are utterly intuitive and are containers for emotional meaning. One would be inclined to say that when people do use symbols in communicating with one another they automatically "mean it".

But a difficulty arises because not all symbols are autonomous—that is, created in the mind of the speaker. Most of the symbols we use in our communication are conventional, received symbols—received from other people [...].

ⁱ Extracts from "Concerning signs and symbols", *British Journal of Psychotherapy* (1997), Vol. 14(2), pp. 175-81.

It is the dream that comes to the rescue of the patient, as it does for the poet. Our language is very rich in words for describing objects and functions, but very poor in words for describing emotions. The poet is very dependent on his dreams as the gold mine where he finds his autonomous symbols. He finds them in his dream life. The same with the patient: if he cannot remember his dreams he is in the position of feeling absolutely paralysed to convey his emotion to his analyst except by acting out or acting in the transference. His dreams come to the rescue of his incapacity for conscious symbol formation. The dream language begins to fashion a poetry of its own, that is special to that patient and that analyst in their particular and unique transference counter-transference relationship.

While it is true that the analyst may introduce into the discourse with the patient certain amount of his own poetry—his own symbol formation—the discourse is largely (in so far as it is creative) of the patient's creation, through the symbol formation contained in his dream structures. One of the most important indicators of analytic progress, to my mind, is the progress in the nature of the patient's dreaming. The general development is from long anecdotal dreams to short condensed symbolic dreams [...].

One of the things Esther Bick taught us was that the meaning of baby and child behaviour is not obvious. It is a matter of interpretation, and interpretation is something that grows out of careful observation. The meaning of a baby's behaviour comes as an intuition to the observer that grows out of noticing what is happening to the baby. Now this lesson of Mrs Bick's is one which she herself learnt first in psychoanalysis, and I think to some extent from Melanie Klein. The lesson is that the activity of the analyst is not primarily interpretation; it is first of all observation and description. When a description of what is happening in the transference and counter-transference can be agreed upon by patient and analyst, then its meaning or interpretation may gradually become apparent to both of them.

This orientation leads to certain difficulties which have been very apparent in the psychoanalytic movement: in particular, that people like Melanie Klein and Esther Bick who rely on careful

observation for generating intuitions, develop a capacity to know what they think and what they feel, and to know it with great certainty. The problem is, when you know with certainty what your intuition is and you put it into words, it sounds as though you are speaking with omniscience, with great certainty of being correct. People like Mrs Klein and Esther Bick were always accused of being arbitrary, of being omnipotent, of trying to force their opinions on everybody by the degree of certainty with which they expressed them. But this was not due to their conviction of being right. It was due to their sense of knowing precisely what they thought and felt about a particular situation. This means that when they “said” something they “meant” it, and when they meant it they meant it was not there for negotiation. The negotiation of meaning is the usual way that people come to think that they think alike. These rather fruitless peace processes that we see going on all over the world are negotiations where everybody is trying to find some way of compromising by overstating their demands and being happy to settle for half. Now that kind of negotiating is not possible when a person knows with clarity what they think and feel.

The next difficulty occurs when you complain to Mrs Klein or Mrs Bick: “But you said something different yesterday!” and they reply: “I changed my mind”. How can anyone change their mind if they saw so clearly the day before? New evidence.

*Symbol and allegory*ⁱ

(2000)

I am going to talk about two wonderful dreams that illustrate some things that have exercised and fascinated me for some time. The first dream we call “Bottom’s Dream” because like Bottom’s dream in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* [IV.I. 99-217] it “hath no bottom”—it has material you could dig into and dig into and always come up with an interesting discovery, indeed

ⁱ Transcript of a talk on “Symbol and allegory” given in Florence in February 2000, unpublished.

electrifying. The patient, a middle-aged woman, began her account of the dream by saying “nations were on the move”. I didn’t know what she meant by that but was certainly alerted to something interesting, and she described it geographically:

There was a first level that seemed to be on a flat arid African plain. The masses of people moving on this plain seemed urgent, hurrying as much as they could, not quite like refugees carrying their belongings on their head, but obviously going somewhere.

The second level, which seemed to be somehow behind her, was on the top of a high plateau and these people seemed particularly ragged and depressed, more like refugees from somewhere like Kosovo, dragging themselves forward. She felt there was something dangerous about them. She thought neither of these two groups – those on the arid plateau below, or on the equally arid table-mountain plateau above – were able to see the horizon; everything looked flat to them. They were in a sense flat-earthers, people to whom the earth seemed flat. (The implication was of course that we were all flat-earthers who would fall off at the end.)

The group that she was with herself was on the verdant side of this plateau, rich in grassland with some trees. The people she was moving with were not indolent but leisurely; they didn’t seem either to be in a hurry to get somewhere or in a hurry to leave some place—neither fleeing nor desirous to attain.

Her association was that these different tiered levels seemed to have not only geographical but geological significance. It reminded her of the way in which geological shifts cause earthquakes and volcanic eruptions and so on—geological levels with catastrophic implications. She thought the implications of the two groups of people fleeing, and people pursuing some goal, were very sociological. The picture certainly reminded me of the situation that pertained in the Civil War in the United States when there were massive liberations of Negro slaves. Marching caravans were formed of

freed slaves believing they were to cross the river Jordan and gain the Promised Land, as in the Biblical ideology captured in their famous songs. The tragedy was that when these columns of slaves came to the river, they marched on, entered it and drowned. It was a bit like the lemmings, a kind of mass suicidal delusion leading them forward, and very different from the refugees on the plateau who were obviously fleeing from persecution and dread and were themselves felt to be dangerous and aggressive in their flight.

Now I thought myself that this was also a commentary on mental states: related for instance to Freud's dictum that neurotics suffer from recollections, always looking backward and thinking about what happened in the past, and bound by what he called the repetition compulsion to repeat the conflicts and anxieties of the past. What he didn't make so clear was that patients like Emmy von N., for example, were constantly peering into the future and were always saying "what if this" and "what if that". They suffered constantly from the imaginary dangers conjectured through their "what-if"ing. One meets a lot of both these states in clinical practice: people caught between "if only" about the past and "what if" about the future; and between these two levels of conjecture about the past and conjecture about the future, the present moment was somehow compressed and was not experienced as the reality. The reality was all past and future; the present was the evanescent moment which was just passing like the view from a rapidly moving train—flashing past, it couldn't be lived in.

This seems to me to be the essential structure of symbol formation—complex moving at many different levels. The movements along the arid African plain also reminded my patient of animals in search of waterholes. So there are references to many levels of ideation within this symbol of symbol formation—geographical, geological, animal, human, and probably some attempt at discovering the present, represented by the verdant level between the arid plain and the arid plateau. On this verdant level it was possible for people to live in some sort of peace and to see the horizon in a way that informed them the earth was not flat, but that they were living on an object moving in space, in

a system that had its own laws, which could be discovered and have predictions made about it, measurements taken and so on. So the system touched on the very ancient science of astronomy and its relation astrology. Just as, as archaeology discovers one ancient civilization after another, it always seems to be discovered that they had astrological ideas and ways of measuring the movements of the sun, moon and stars—that is, an awareness that we live as part of a planetary system.

This idea of a planetary system is in many ways the origin of religion, and really is applicable to everything. It would appear to be a fairly universal method of organization for individuals, whatever the level of abstraction within their unit self: they organize themselves as planetary systems. And of course the human family is the planetary unit of human life: it is natural that children circle in a planetary way around the parents, as sun and moon of their particular planetary system. And should any one of the children leave this planetary system (as Martha Harris and I tried to describe in our model)ⁱ they fall outside the planetary pull of the parents into what Kierkegaard would have called “despair”. The most despairing situation being of course the schizophrenic type of illness, in which individuals have floated away from the human race and seem to be engaged nowhere, doing nothing, having no experiences—a vacuum of mental events that invites the systematic formation of delusions as a substitute for the self-evident facts of the planetary system of the family.

Today, of course, there is much worrying that this planetary system of the family has fallen to pieces—that owing to the number of divorces children are thrown from one planetary system into another, with step-parents, or thrown onto the community from neglect and so on. This deterioration of the family is believed to be consequent to the deterioration of religious beliefs—what is called (after Nietzsche) the “death of God”, the collapse of the Catholic church and the arising of a plethora of religious cults of one sort or another. It does seem to threaten chaos, and as Virginia [Ungar]

ⁱ Meltzer & Harris, “A Psychoanalytic Model of the Child-in-the-Family-in-the-Community” (1976), in Hahn 1994 (ed.) *Sincerity: Collected Papers of Donald Meltzer*. See extract in Chapter 4 of this book.

was describing in her paper, reminds us of what we assume to be the mental state of the baby either before or after birth. But it is probably unfounded really. We forget that the genetic structure of the baby is something that has been prepared over millions of years and is in no sense chaotic. The speed with which children adapt themselves and learn, is evidence of the degree to which development is programmed from limitless past generations. The developmental roots are there, inbuilt. Techniques of parental care, whether at the level of the family or of local or state government or other assumed parental situations, need to reflect the fact that these programmed developmental roots already exist. The function of parents is not to prescribe progress, but to assist the growth from these roots....

Now I'd like to leave this first dream, which came at the beginning of a week two weeks before a holiday break, and to present a dream from two weeks later, just two days before the break. The patient dreamed that

she was in a rather large, luxurious boat, some sort of pleasure cruiser, very elegantly built. She was looking at the flooring and particularly admired the fine wood, brass fittings and so on. She was in what seemed to be a lounge with tables and chairs and a bar—clearly a luxury cruise. She didn't remember whether there were other people there, but she thinks probably there were. She went out on deck and was surprised by what she found there. On the deck towards the prow of the boat, at the front, she found an elaborate flower garden—not the sort of thing you expect to find on an ocean cruiser. Then she walked round to the stern of the boat, and there discovered a churchyard with tombstones, which also surprised her.

Her association to this dream was that this boat was very similar to a type of boat that is actually built in a boatyard by the canal near which she lives. One boat is built at a time, a sort of Rolls-Royce of nautical elegance. However this canal is only suitable for long-boats, it is too narrow for these "Rolls-Royces", so that when one is finished it has to be lifted by crane several miles to the Grand Union Canal which is wide enough to float it down to the sea.

Combining these associations with her dream's description of an elegant holiday cruise style of boat, I came to think of this as a "ship of fools", a mediaeval construction which has been the subject of various novels (for instance, by Katherine Anne Porter [1962]). This elegant and luxurious interior leads to the flower garden in the prow of the ship but also to the tombstones in the churchyard at the stern of the ship. Clearly this is meant to be an allegory, of birth and life and death: you spend nine months in elegant comfort and luxury in the womb, then you are born to a relatively evanescent blossoming but inevitably head for the graveyard. It is a ship of fools because it mocks at human optimism; and the way in which optimism is mocked indicates that the planning and planting of this ship is all a matter of human ingenuity. Human ingenuity has set up this ship with its garden and its tombstones—like a surrealist painting, with its surprises and paradoxes, where objects and shadows are dissociated from one another in a surprising way.

Consider now this dream in juxtaposition to the first dream. It seems to me (and I'd ask Meg to comment on this) that what we have here is a distinction between allegory and symbol. Allegory I take to consist of the rather ingenious substitution of known elements for what is mysterious and unknown; it is a kind of cheat because it pretends to bring the unknown within the sphere of the already-known (that life is folly...and so on). Symbol, on the other hand, is like Bottom's dream, full of mystery, and inexhaustible however much you dig into it, like the varied dimensions of the first dream which really do embrace the history of the world; its many levels are not just an ingenious emblem. A symbol carries with it the gift of humility; you know perfectly well you will never understand it completely.