

Donald Meltzer

OBITUARY

International Journal of Psychoanalysis 2005,86:175-178 Donald Meltzer (1922-2004)

Donald Meltzer died on the 13th August 2004. His passing deprives psychoanalysis of an innovative thinker, an inspirational teacher and a prolific writer whose pioneering work over the last 50 years influenced a whole generation of colleagues, psychotherapists and mental health workers all over the world. He made an outstanding contribution to the understanding of the mind of the infant, the emotional development of object relations and the psychoanalytical treatment of perversions, narcissistic states and autism. The range and depth of Meltzer's work, his particular gift for analyzing the deepest strata of the mind and his sensitivity for primitive modes of functioning made him a supervisor who was much in demand by students of psychoanalysis all over the world. Born in New Jersey (USA) in 1922, the youngest of three siblings, Donald Meltzer was brought up in a Jewish home, a loving and stable environment which provided him with the background to pursue his medical training and his budding interest in psychoanalysis. During his medical training at Yale University and at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York he did an elective at Loretta Bender's ward at the Bellevue Hospital where the pioneering work with psychotic children was done, and where he first heard of Melanie Klein. After completing his psychiatric training in St. Louis, Missouri, and having undergone a first analysis he decided to go into child psychiatry and somehow find his way to London to have analysis with Mrs. Klein herself. He enrolled in the US Air Force, working as a child psychiatrist with the families of military personnel, and in 1954, after two years of mandatory service, requested to be posted to London where he did in fact start his analysis with Melanie Klein and his analytic training in the British Psychoanalytical Society soon afterwards giving up his commitment to the military. He supervised his adult training cases with Hanna Segal and Herbert Rosenfeld and later his child cases with Betty Joseph, Esther Bick and again Hanna Segal. In later years he specially acknowledged the influence of Esther Bick, Roger Money-Kyrle and Wilfred Bion whose work he would develop. Meltzer's written contributions to psychoanalysis began in 1955. From then on and particularly after 1963, his writing was prolific and innovative with more than 10 books and some 50 papers, that cover an extraordinary range of interests. In the late fifties the British object relations school, having discovered the potential of "projective identification" as a tool for understanding early object relations in childhood development, psychotic states, sexual states of mind and defensive organizations, spawned a wealth of literature from the Kleinian group to which Meltzer made an active contribution. It was in 1965, with his paper "The relation of anal masturbation to projective identification", together with his first book, "The Psychoanalytical Process", in 1967, that he opened up a new panorama for the understanding of projective identification with internal objects and for the observation of the development of the analytic process as following a natural model that allows the observation of a live growing mind (or two, as he would later add) in the consulting room through the development of the transference-countertransference interaction. In "Sexual States of Mind" (1973), Meltzer proposed a structural revision of the theory of psychosexual development, perversions and addictions, with an emphasis on the

introjective quality of adult sexuality, in particular in adolescent states of mind. Chapters on “Tyranny”, “The Psychic Reality of Unborn Children” and “On Pornography” also appeared as applications of his theoretical findings. 1975 saw the publication of his book “Explorations in Autism”, which was the result of a cooperative effort with five supervisees and deals with the fascinating discovery of clinical phenomena in autistic and post-autistic states like dismantling, the impairment of spatial and temporal dimensionality, mindlessness and adhesive identification.

“Dream-Life: A Reexamination of the Psychoanalytical Theory and Technique” (1984) provides us with a revised theory of dreaming as unconscious thinking in which meaning is generated. The important differentiation between signs, symbols and the expression of lies through pseudo-symbols is explored and the practice of dream investigation is thoroughly investigated.

In “Studies in Extended Metapsychology: Clinical Application of Bion’s Ideas” (1986) Meltzer considered the importance of the development of emotional states, and adds clinical congruity to much of Bion’s theory, in particular the interrelation between “Container-Contained”, the concept of “Vertices”, “Transformation in Hallucinosis” and “Turbulence”. His ideas on the Claustrium, about which he would write extensively in his last book in 1992 and which had been incubating since his anal masturbation paper, get a new airing in these studies.

In “The Apprehension of Beauty” (1988) Meltzer introduces the “aesthetic conflict” as an early phenomenon in the baby’s relation to the external world where the aesthetic experience of the budding relationship to the mother stimulates both the wish to know her and the frustration created by the mystery of the unknown aspects of the object. This book, written in cooperation with Meg Harris Williams, reflects also his growing interest in literature, the process of writing and creativity - a subject he had been writing about twenty-five years earlier in a book called “Painting and the Inner World” (1963) and which appears as a dialogue with the author, art critic Adrian Stokes.

“The Claustrium: An Investigation of Claustrophobic Phenomena” (1992) revisits the concept of projective identification not in terms of quantity or quality of projective mechanisms but in terms of the choice of object that is being projected into. In his thorough phenomenological examination of intrusive identification (as he prefers to call it) Meltzer suggests that this object is in unconscious phantasy the mother’s body (as stated by Melanie Klein) and that parts of the self that take residence, as it were, inside the various compartments of the internal mother’s body will determine the identificatory disturbance that accounts for the quality and degree of pathology that is present. The various technical aspects of treating these difficult narcissistic patients is discussed, with a particular emphasis on adolescents.

It is also worth mentioning here a three-volume work published in 1975: “The Kleinian Development” (1975) which was born out of a series of lectures on Freud, Klein and Bion at the Tavistock Clinic where he exercised a much appreciated influence in the development of the profession of child psychotherapy, and “A Psychoanalytical Model of the Child-in-the-Family-in-the-Community” (1976) commissioned by the United Nations and co-written with his then wife, psychoanalyst Martha Harris who was for many years the head of Training for Child Psychotherapists at the Tavistock Clinic. In 1994, his Collected Papers, featuring thirty-four papers, fifteen of them previously unpublished, appeared in “Sincerity and Other Work: Collected Papers of Donald Meltzer”. Meltzer viewed psychoanalysis as an art form and essentially a process in which passion, personal commitment and the concern for patients were the main components of the “equipment”

required for fostering their development. He believed that integration through the acquisition of previously rejected knowledge, or parts of the self, created the conditions for the creation of new objects in the internal world, and that the mind had an intrinsic ability to do this in the sequestered intimacy of the transference-countertransference interaction in the context of the analytic setting. His interest as a clinician led him to develop a practice first in London and later, in the early seventies, in Oxford. Since the sixties he had been teaching regularly at the Tavistock Clinic in London and for some years at the British Psychoanalytical Society earning himself a reputation as a highly stimulating teacher whose love for psychoanalysis and profound devotion to his Kleinian roots were always appreciated. After qualifying as an analyst he became a Member of the Society and soon afterwards a Training Analyst, and he retained this position until 1985, when ideological differences with the psychoanalytic Establishment brought about his departure. It is with some sadness and concern that one must register the fact that since that date Meltzer's work has never been taught as part of the curriculum of the British Society and that there are many generations of British analysts who completed their training without being exposed to his innovative contributions. A mixture of reasons might account for this unfortunate turn of events. On the one hand there was the Institution's political structure that for some reason was unable to contain a character whose creativity pushed out the boundaries of psychoanalytic thinking and whose individual personality was felt to be more disruptive than his work was admirable. Meltzer on the other hand was never really an 'Institutions' man: he felt that politics within the Kleinian group and its relations with the hierarchical structure of the Society created a climate which detracted from the creative endeavour of psychoanalysis and of the training in particular. And from having been emotionally very attached to the Kleinian group that had been so welcoming to him in the fifties, he had become quite disillusioned with its politics. As he once said in his endearingly rueful way: "...So I have actually lost interest in politics of all sorts. I could no longer honestly call myself a socialist, I'm an ex-socialist. I'm an unsociable person." He strongly believed that mixing politics and psychoanalysis impoverished the development of the method and its practitioners, though he did feel that there was something to be said for the "housekeeping" function of Societies. The arguments that followed Meltzer's being defrocked as a Training Analyst, without any reasonable explanation or discussion, created a distinct atmosphere of "family strife" and jeopardized the possibility of a more healing and containing outcome. He let his displeasure be known by withholding his annual dues and showed a strong determination not to compromise through obedience, genuinely expecting that a climate of opinion might be created in which a democratic discussion was possible. But this determination, on the contrary, fostered the kind of antagonism that only the study of group dynamics and of Institutional behaviour can seek to explain. And so it was that his membership of the British Psychoanalytical Society lapsed. Since the sixties Donald Meltzer travelled abroad with some frequency, with speaking, teaching and supervising commitments. And it was mainly abroad that his work received the appreciation it deserved. Over almost forty years his trips took him to various cities in Italy, where he helped to develop an important psychoanalytical school for training child psychotherapists, to France, Germany, Norway, Spain, Stockholm, Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Uruguay and the USA. In every one of these places a group of grateful colleagues were able to take advantage of his warmth, his generosity, his unique clinical

acumen and sensitivity to unconscious processes, his uncompromising integrity and his genuine capacity to care for his patients and students. On a more personal level he had a keen interest in rearing livestock, horses in particular, as well as beekeeping and forestry. Himself a father of three children Meltzer was always interested in the mysterious development of “parental capabilities” in child rearing and psychoanalysis, a subject about which he wrote extensively. And it was precisely these personal capabilities which were recognized by those who learned from him personally. In addition to his own work Donald Meltzer leaves behind a very rich legacy in the lives he touched and in all those who were privileged to know him as a talented analyst, a sensitive supervisor, an inspirational teacher, a reliable colleague, an affectionate friend and one of the most original psychoanalysts of his generation.

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