THE URGE TO ASSIMILATE NEW IDEAS ARE EXPERIENCES EQUIVALENT TO FALLING IN LOVE

ENTREVISTA A/INTERVIEW WITH Donald Meltzer

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JSM: In your paper you stated that symbolic functions grow out of the emotional experience of the beauty of the world. Furthermore, addressing the key issue of the nature of mental pain, you claimed that we must shift the emphasis on the absence of the mother as the main source of anxiety…

DM: … to the presence of the mother… to the presence of the mother as an unbearably aesthetic object, as an unbearably beautiful object.

JSM: Could you please explain your idea?

DM: Well, it’s a concept that really grows out of the philosophy of aesthetics and art history… well… the idea of Bion is that mindlessness and behaviour in groups is a defence against having to think, and that thinking is something that grows out of the pressure of thoughts generated by emotional experiences. Now, psycho-analysis really since Freud, but particularly since Melanie Klein, has tremendously emphasized the child’s need for services, and his dependence on the mother for services. But it seems to me that the study of history, and particularly the study of art history and aesthetics suggest that the emotional experiences of the infant are extremely powerful, and that they are related to his perception of the mother as an object of great beauty… representing the beauty of the whole world, and that this experience, which is borne out really by… I mean… all the poets… that ability to tolerate this experience and beauty of the object and the wish to be known by it… and this makes a very different emphasis in the consulting room.

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A lot of this has been mistaken for erotic transference, and, of course, there is an aspect of it that is erotic… I mean, the eroticism has to be acknowledged, but what has been studied primarily of the erotic transference is really an aspect of aggressiveness that manifests itself as erotic demands, and erotic tyranny, and so on. The real erotic transference is an aesthetic response to the beauty of the object and the wish to be known by it, to explore it, and to be known by it… and this makes a very different emphasis in the consulting room.
JSM: How do those emotional experiences stir the child to form symbols? How is it that the aesthetic impact of the beauty of the mother compels the infant to form symbols?

DM: Now, that’s contained in another paper in this book called “What Is an Emotional Experience?”… this book that’s just going to the publisher, to the print… this is a paper that I read in Toronto to the Self-Psychology meeting last year… I would really have to give you that paper but I’m afraid I don’t have any extra copies of it… it’s a paper in which I do attempt to trace the nature of emotional experiences and how they demand transformation into symbols so that they can be thought about… which is Bion’s formulation that if they cannot be transformed into symbols so that they can be thought about and stored as memories, and so on, then they have to be evacuated by some means, and that the means of evacuation are generally either in mindless group identification and behaviour, or psychosomatic disturbances, hallucinations, and things of that sort. That is the core of Bion’s theory of thinking… and it’s a great theory, really.

JSM: But what exactly, then, is a symbol, in your sense?

DM: Now, a symbol… now, this is another chapter in the book [laughs]. Now… it’s very important to distinguish between symbols and signs, of course. Signs are simply designatory, conventions, and so on. Symbols are really essentially rather mysterious bringing together of formal structures which are brought into a kind of creative intercourse with one another, from which a symbolic relationship between them develops which modifies the meaning of both of them, that each part of the symbolic relationship takes on an increment, an increase in meaning, because they have been brought together into this conjunction and then brought apart again… and it’s a very mysterious process, really… it may even be essentially mysterious… but it’s the core of mental processes as against brain processes of computation and so on… and… there’s a very splendid book… I’ll show you… [gets up to check it] it propounded really a theory of aesthetics emphasizing the relationship between emotion and form in the various arts. She [Susan Langer] and Ernst Cassirer… and… it’s very much influenced… bringing together Bion’s work and the work of Langer and Cassirer,7 that this theory, or this way of looking at things has been formulated.

JSM: It seems that a lot more of your paper was what you called our basic incapacity for thought, or our deep resistance to think. Where exactly does this incapacity come from? What is its genesis… or should I call it resistance?

DM: Well, I think resistance is a good enough term… I mean, Bion’s formulation of it is that the impact of a new idea in the mind stirrs what he calls catastrophic change. It means that in order to accommodate a new idea every other idea that you have formulated in the course of your development has to be readjusted, and that in order to do this, a period of total disruption and chaos has to be tolerated before the new idea is assimilated, and that every developmental step is a step involving this catastrophic change to admit the new idea into one’s structure of the world.

JSM: Is there any close connection between this basic resistance to thinking and the aesthetic experience of the beauty of the mother?

DM: Well… the idea is that it is essentially the aesthetic impact of new ideas and new objects that represent these ideas which creates this catastrophic pressure for thinking in order for the new idea to be assimilated.

JSM: But what exactly is it that stirrs in us the urge to assimilate new ideas?

DM: Well, essentially, each of these is an experience equivalent to falling in love… and it is a momentous experience that generates creative thought… or if it is withdrawn from, of course, the experience is abandoned.

JSM: So the form, then, is thinking? Why the nuance in your paper between ‘think’ and ‘thought’?

DM: Well, this also is following Bion who’s introduced, really, into philosophy, a reversal of traditional philosophical thought. Traditional philosophical thought has dealt with thoughts as something generated by thinking. Bion has reversed that [idea] and has suggested that thoughts come first and that thinking is the process of manipulating them, generalizing them, abstracting them, raising them to levels of coordination, organization, and so on. But those thoughts are generated through symbol formation and dream, and that it is those thoughts that then have to be manipulated and used for thinking; and it’s that differentiation between thoughts and thinking that I follow. It’s a very fundamental step, philosophically.

JSM: Once Van Gogh cried out: “If only I had raised my voice from the beginning instead of being silent in every language of the world… Don’t you think that most people have eventually learnt to be silent in every language of the world, although in the opposite sense of Van Gogh’s, that is, to be silent in the language of deep affection and of creative thought?”

DM: Yes, well, I mean… obviously only a very small number of people persevere in the direction of creative thought…

JSM: Why?

DM: … and in the direction of art and science that embodies creative thought. Why is it? Well, one answer is that we are only a few thousand years old in the caves… that we are a very primitive people from the point of view of mental and social development; that’s one type of answer to it. The other type of answer is that our way of raising children is still more tribal than familial, really, that our educational system is more training for conformity than it is encouragement of development, and so on. That’s another type of answer.

JSM: Is this what you had in mind when you wrote that you are sure where to begin, that we have to change our methods of rearing and…

DM: … yes… and this is why I devote myself really to problems of child development and child psychiatry bearing on family life and the rearing of children… that seems to me to be the essential starting point. And of course, I’m not the first one, I mean, it’s been going on now for fifty years and it’s the hope of the world… I mean, nobody thinks that political solutions are going to accomplish anything anymore. Everybody who thinks realises that political solutions accomplish nothing, that they are just circular, and come back where they start… until values have changed, in a really deep way, you know, this is Nietzsche all over again, as it were… until the values have changed nothing permanently is altered… that there won’t be any change in the armament race until the atom bomb is unthinkable.

JSM: I would like to relate Van Gogh’s very impressive claim with the idea of a universal language of meaning, as it were, and to be able to share it…

DM: … and be able to speak in every language of the world which is art.

JSM: You ‘burden’ the whole attitude towards children with no less than the hope of the world… On the other hand, media seems to be constantly echoing, giving many voices to unthinking parts of ourselves in ways which seem themselves to be unthought and unthinking…

DM: … what Bion distinguishes between knowing and learning about… that one knows about it out there and one knows it in here…
JSM: You opened your paper with a comment on the way we often weigh the unparalleled threats that our planet, looked at within the span of recorded times, now seems to face. But first of all, what is fear which seems to be such a powerful manipulative tool?

DM: Fear?

JSM: Yes.

DM: Well, I think one has to distinguish, first of all, between anxiety, fear and cowardice. Now, anxiety is a manifestation of thinking process's influx. There is no possibility of thinking, as in catastrophic change, without anxiety. Fear is largely a matter of unwillingness to face the consequences, and it is based largely not on thinking, but on prospective phantasy, and most of Melanie Klein's work deals with fear in the form of unconscious phantasies in which prospects, outcomes and consequences and so on are envisaged. Now, there's no possibility of acting in the world without fear, just as there's no possibility of thinking without anxiety. But cowardice – which is, of course, really what people mean when they say 'I'm frightened', they mean 'I'm coward' – cowardliness is a matter of fantasy-ing, it is not a matter of unconscious phantasy in which the possibilities are explored. Cowardice is based on fantasy-ing all the dire consequences that you can possibly imagine, intimidating oneself by fantasy-ing. Now, this distinction between unconscious phantasy and fantasy-ing, or daydreaming, corresponds very much to the distinction in literary philosophy, say, Coleridge's distinction between imagination and fancy, and Milton made the same sort of distinction, in different words, between imagination and fancy, and so on. So I think one has to make those distinctions between anxiety, fear and cowardice... Now, anxiety is mental pain... and Melanie Klein's differentiation between persecutory and depressive mental pains is, I think, very fundamental. But those are mental pains; fear is not a mental pain... fear is a mental state.

JSM: In every mature and active scientific branch it often happens that scientists see themselves edging towards the frontier of research. Then, it is sometimes useful, even important to put in sequence what at that stage of research appears to be the more interesting open research problems, the so-called frontier-problems. When taken together, these are expected to give a fair picture of the frontier line of research in that particular area at that particular moment of the advancement of research. What are, in your view, the most interesting open research problems at the frontier of psycho-analysis today?

DM: Well, I think that the most interesting problem is... this... the problem of struggling out of group identification toward individuality. That seems to me to be the most interesting clinical problem.

JSM: Clinical problem?

DM: Yes... and a corollary of it is the problem of thought disorder... because in order to achieve this movement from group identification to individuality, thinking, the capacity for creating thoughts and thinking them has to be developed; and it is very poorly developed in most people. So, those two seem to me the frontier of psychoanalytic research.

JSM: In what directions would you like to see psycho-analysis develop?

DM: Well... I mean, organizationally, I'd like to see it dismantled... organizationally, I would like to see it treated as an art form and for it to be taught in different ways, as the arts are taught... I would like to see psychoanalysts drawn from other professions than medicine, primarily, and for it to divorce itself more from psychiatry and to ally itself more to the humanities, particularly to literature, and so on... so that I would like to see psychoanalysis become, in a certain sense, more academic, in terms of its alliance with philosophy and the humanities; but I would like to see its practice developed more as an art form... and I think it will happen... I think that the institutionalization... [I mean] the quasi-medical institutionalization of psychoanalysis is collapsing, really... And because of the poor quality of the people attracted to it. Psycho-analysis has not attracted the right people, by and large. And, of course, I would like to see it lower its economic expectations — but that is largely a matter of the quality of the people attracted to it... I mean... in allying itself to medicine, it is assumed the necessity of analysts being people of high income, and so on... and that will change, when it modifies its position in the world.

JSM: Are you actually working in this direction? I mean, are you actually planning to form such a group?

DM: Well, I have such a group...

JSM: Oh, you already have such a group?

DM: Well, an informal group in Oxford of people who've had analysis with me and whom I've taught, and so on... my wife has analysed and taught other colleagues... and it's a little informal group that teaches one another and practices and teaches other people; very much an analytic atelier... that is a fact... that we have done... and we hope that other people will follow our example.

JSM: Is there any other group already following your example in this direction?

DM: Oh yes... that's a group in Oxford, and of course my wife and I have centred our teaching on the teaching of child psychotherapy, here and... well, mainly in France and Italy and Norway, and a bit in America, South America, and so on, and there, too, to develop psychotherapy as a non-medical and non-institutionalized art form semi-profession, and so on. And, of course, it has made very great strides... I mean, in Italy and in France, psychoanalytic child psychotherapy has developed outside psycho-analytical societies, as child analysis has withered and died in the Societies. And that's largely because of the structure of the Societies, and their insistence that people must train to be adult analysts before they become child analysts, which is obviously exactly the wrong procedure. Well, the psychoanalytic societies that have aspired to teach child analysis have all insisted that people must train to be adult analysts first, and then go on to do child analysis. The result is that hardly anybody has done that, whereas it's young people in their twenties who need to be trained to do child psychotherapy, and then, in their forties, go on and develop to work with adults. And this is what happens here at the Tavistock, and with the people we teach abroad, and so on. It's quite a widespread movement, but quiet and unformalized... quiet... Working; not talking. (Laughs.)

JSM: ... and publishing as well!

DM: Publishing what's necessary, but not publishing for status... publishing what has to be published... and what has to be published is primarily extraordinary clinical experiences, that really discover phenomena... because it's the phenomena of mental functioning that needs to be published. Theories one doesn't... I mean, there's only one Bion, one Melanie Klein, and so on, who need to publish theories... I mean, I have no theories, my theories are only just extensions and clinical elaborations of Melanie Klein and Bion. I have no theories of my own. Melanie Klein and Bion were people who had original ideas...
was just out of theendeavourtocarefullyobserveandsolvecomplexproblems
that emerge in the lab, even apparently simple problems which, the moment
you really try to ask the right questions about them, you find out that, after all,
they may surprise you being critical questions. And then, occasionally, an idea,
or a hypothesis grows out of the...

**DM:**...yes, I mean, when it comes to teaching psychoanalysis, what needs
to be taught primarily is observation — for people’s eyes, and ears, and nose to
be open to the experience with the patient... and you must observe inside and
outside simultaneously. What Bion calls reversible perspective.

**JSM:** Let me turn back to the beginning of this interview and ask you about a
famous, and indeed most impressive passage in Macbeth. Just before the soldier
announced to Macbeth that the forest of Birnam was...

**DM:**... coming to Dunsinane... yes...

**JSM:** ...yes... and we hear him murmuring: “Life is but a walking shadow, a
poor player...

**DM:**... that struts and frets his hour upon the stage.”...Yes... (laughs)

**JSM:** I wonder if you could comment on this extraordinary passage, and this
disconcerting figure in the light of what you said before about the emotional
experience of the beauty as the mother and the incapacity for thought, as well
as the distinction between anxiety and cowardice.

**DM:** Well, Macbeth is a group creature, who has been driven by ambition;
ambition to rise in the hierarchy of the group. And for him, life is a walking
shadow, that is, the meaningless of life in the group; and it is a very beautiful
description of it, really. But Macbeth is a groupie, he’s not an individual, you
see, and that’s why he is such a tragic figure — not despicable, just tragic.

Whereas his wife is a more despicable figure. But Macbeth himself is just
a tragic figure... caught in the group and unable to escape from it: Lady
Macbeth should be played by a beautiful woman. Because Lady Macbeth
really illustrates the great aesthetic problem: is the mother as beautiful inside as
she is outside? And, of course, Lady Macbeth should be played by a beautiful
woman because she is obviously very evil and ugly inside. And this is... what
one has to guess what sort of mother Macbeth had, whose external beauty
was contrasted with internal ugliness... but dishevelled, deeply disillusioned...
that’s why he is a tragic figure... and why they are represented as childless... their
intercourse is not creative, it’s political.

**JSM:** Your group doesn’t pay much attention to the unborn child?

**DM:** Oh, no... that is what we’re most interested in at present. Studies...
one of our group is doing ultrasound studies, of foetal behaviour, and so on.
Something we’re tremendously interested in is the pre-natal personality... and
really to try to do away or to minimize this old concept of constitution... of
constitutional differences... but to emphasize that babies at birth already have
had months of emotional experience and personality development.

**JSM:** The way you see the unborn’s mental life must make a huge difference

**DM:**... quite, quite.

**JSM:** Do you think that it is possible to speak about thoughts and thinking
within the womb...

**DM:**...yes, the problem of trying to imagine what kind of symbol formation
could take place... and this is why this book of Susan Langer’s is of some
importance; that one can imagine primitive symbol formation in the form of...
especially of music and dance, as being the symbol formation by which
the foetus experiences and represents his emotionality. Primarily, dance, in
response to the music of the intra-uterine situation. She has a wonderful
chapter on that.

**JSM:** Let me go back again to this puzzling question of what is a thought.

**DM:** Yes... Now, this is what three of Bion’s four books are about... about
thought formation and the processes of thinking. Learning from Experience, The
Elements of Psychoanalysis, and Transformations. Those are the first three, after
the group book on experiences in groups. And they are about how thoughts
are formed and he has developed what he calls the “grid”, to illustrate the way
thoughts are made and the way in which they grow in complexity, abstraction,
generalization, and so on. And this “grid” is like a kind of chemical periodic
table of thoughts used for thinking. It’s quite a lovely conception of it, a lovely
way of representing it, the genesis of thoughts, and the different uses to which
they are put, and how a thought develops in its genesis and in its uses, and so
on. It’s quite a poetic... It’s very much like Mendeleev’s periodic table. It has
the same format to it. Very, very imaginative.

**JSM:** Why have you crossed out the original title of your paper ‘Swiftean
diatribe’ and instead written ‘Science and Social Structures’? Why science?

**DM:** Well...

**JSM:** ... because there is a saying by Max Born that science is everything
through which we succeed in disclosing what was veiled before; through which
we finally succeed in understanding what was not understood before.

**DM:** Yes... I mean, the division between art and science is unfortunate
and spurious. I mean, art has to do with all of the representations of our
understanding of the world, and science has to do with the exploration of
these representations, whether they be chemical or physiological or emotional,
and so on. So that is really art-science, it’s really the creative activity. I mean,
every painter is a scientist of painting and is studying space, and studying
representations, and studying formal structures. I mean, the whole division
between art and science has been misled really by the failure to distinguish
between science and technology. I mean, so much technology has gone into
science in this century that has been rather confused with science. But all
scientists are great artists, really. They have imagination, they have intuitive
visions they dream about it... And they see the beauty of it. Mathematicians
are all artists, really...
DONALD MELTZER
Vida e Obra

Donald Meltzer nasceu a 14 de Agosto de 1922 em Nova York de mãe norte-americana e pai estavam recentemente imigrados nos EUA. Morreu na noite de 13 para 14 de Agosto de 2004 em Oxford. Fascinado pelos enigmas da vida mental, Meltzer decide tornar-se psicanalista. É com esse propósito que se forma em medicina, na universidade de Yale, especializando-se em psiquiatria e depois em psicopedagogia. Trabalhos num hospital pediátrico público em St Louis e fez a sua primeira formação como psicanalista no Instituto de Psicanálise de Chicago. Essa primeira formação foi dominada pela figura tutelar e pela obra de Freud. A Dra. Laurreet Bender (1897-1987), médica neuro-pedopsiquiatria e sua professora no Instituto, e que foi pioneira no ensino do tratamento da esquizofrenia em crianças pela terapia electroconvulsiva, que lhe deu a conhecer todos os trabalhos de Melanie Klein publicados até então. Esses trabalhos viram a transmutar a vida de Meltzer para sempre. É que, deu-se de tal modo impressionado com o que leu, que decidiu fazer uma segunda formação em psicanálise, desta vez em Londres, e com a própria Melanie Klein. Quando deu a conhecer à direcção do Instituto de Psicanálise de Chicago o seu projeto, foi informado de que não valeria a ser admitido como membro daquele Instituto.


Como de costume, Donald Meltzer continua a fazer conferências e a orientar seminários clínicos em Inglaterra (Oxford e Londres), Noruega, Suécia, Finlândia, Alemanha (Frankfurt e Munique), Itália (Florença, Veneza e Roma), França (Paris), Espanha (Barcelona), Argentina (Buenos Aires) e Brasil (Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo e Porto Alegre). Para além da direcção de grupos de estudo e de supervisão, Meltzer continua a fazer conferências e a orientar seminários clínicos ocasionais em Amesterdão, Viena, Lisboa, Nova York e Chicago. Recebe em supervisão analisando e analisando oríundos de vários países da Europa em que não existem grupos de supervisão estruturados de orientação teorica leitneriana e pós-leitneriana (Holanda, Austrália, Suécia e Portugal).

Já a sua teoria do conflito estético, que, apesar da sua natureza essencialmente clínica, tem profundas implicações metapsicológicas fúndadas, cujo alcance está ainda muito longe de ser devidamente investigado. Trata-se, assim, de uma teoria sem clara fimluação psicanalítica, em relação à qual se pode quase afirmar que não tem, na história da psicanálise, que antecessores, que, até agora, sequer, por aí, a teoria do conflito estético, apesar de ser essencialmente clínica, permanece ainda hoje basicamente ignorada no campo teórico e epistemológico da psicanálise. Finalmente, Donald Meltzer é um dos psicanalistas mais profínuos da história da psicanálise, com mais de 90 trabalhos publicados até agora, já que os seus trabalhos permanecem inéditos. As suas obras mais conhecidas estão traduzidas em francês, italiano, alemão, catalão, brasileiro, búlgaro e japonês. Em 2020 e 2021 Meltzer começou a ser ensaiado na Rússia e na China.