

On having ideas: the aesthetic object and O

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'The new idea presents itself as an emotional experience of the world and the beauty of its wondrous organization' (Meltzer, *The Apprehension of Beauty*)

I would like to talk about what we mean by 'having ideas', using as reference points Meltzer and three of the Kleinian thinkers who had an influential bearing on his own ideas: Wilfred Bion, Adrian Stokes and Roger Money-Kyrle, to sketch a composite picture of their idea of how we have ideas. This is equivalent to asking, how do we learn from our internal objects, without being overawed or inhibited by them: such objects being those advanced aspects of the mind which are formed progressively from a complex mixture of external influences, intimate relationships, and innate internal qualities.

Psychoanalysis, Meltzer said, works through holding 'conversations between internal objects': those of analyst and analysand working together to form a symbol for the idea of the current emotional experience. As the definition of mental health shifted to one of self-knowledge, the goal of psychoanalysis changed from one of cure to one of facilitating the formation of ideas, through finding symbols. Psychoanalysis is only one of the fields specializing in this; it is the same in all artistic fields, as it is in life. Meltzer especially in his later talks and writings tried to convey the 'simplicity' of this process, by which he meant its complexity. But the message itself is a simple one. To quote Martha Harris:

Introjection remains a mysterious process: how do involvement and reliance upon objects in the external world which are apprehended by the senses (and, as Wilfred Bion has pointed out, described in language which has been evolved to deal with external reality) become assimilated and transformed in the mind into what he calls 'psychoanalytic objects' which can contribute to the growth of the personality? This is a process about which we have almost everything to learn'. (*The Tavistock Model*, p. 176)

The great psychoanalytic thinkers are well aware that psychoanalysis has to date added only a little to our knowledge about the mind. It is not surprising when we consider the awesome global cultural heritage. Meltzer saw the cultural significance of psychoanalysis as contributing a new aesthetic object – the psychoanalytic method – a way of using the transference that is a fundamental feature of human nature and that already exists and operates in other human relationships. Meltzer, Bion, Money-Kyrle all repeat that the 'new idea' we are considering is really an old idea, in a new context. It is the new link, the new context, that brings it to life so it begins to mean something, either to a particular person, or to a whole school of thinking or an artistic-scientific methodology such as psychoanalysis. 'Meaning something' means it becomes 'known', not just 'known about'.

At the end of his final paper, 'Making the best of a bad job', Bion cites Plato's *Theaetetus* on the difficulty of ensuring a young man's education fill his head not with 'phantoms' but with 'live thoughts'. Bion made it clear that we don't invent our ideas, we discover them, after they have somehow made their way into our mind – what the poets call inspiration, or psychoanalysts introjective identification. As Bion's heroine Rosemary says in his *Memoir*, 'I don't make up my mind – I let my mind make *me* up', or as Meltzer has said, 'I haven't done psychoanalysis my way – I've been done its way.' Ideas 'make up' the mind. Having ideas is a 'passive' if strenuous process (with its connotations of turbulence and suffering), accompanied by a sense of dependency – not on external objects or persons but on internal objects.

The Platonic quasi-theological system, adopted by all these thinkers, is the philosophical bedrock for object-relations psychoanalysis, as it has always been for poetry. It supports the view of mediated levels of knowledge, in which truth or reality filters down to the self, via internal objects, finding a symbolic form which is an aspect of truth, even though never the whole truth, but clothed or fictionalized in a digestible way. All cognition is essentially re-cognition. On the cultural level, psychoanalysis is seen as a pre-existing thing-in-itself, waiting to be discovered (as Meltzer describes it in *The Kleinian Development*), to be digested and become part of modern society. Bion often speculates on the ‘non-Mendelian inheritance’ of ideas and the mysterious way in which they pass from the global treasury (as it were) into individuals, so it is worth thinking of ideas in the context of their origins or tracking system – for which Bion uses the classical metaphor of the River Alpheus. It is a pity that our current academic culture pushes us towards a false presentation of this tracking system: in citing only the first source of a reference we lose the individualistic colouring of how a particular thought has entered a particular mind and mated with the existing contents.

It is a great help to consider all ideas in the sense of waiting for us, as an individual, to notice them and integrate them in our mind. The act of ‘noticing’ entails developing a certain type of perception, a link between internal objects and subject. The part played by the self in ‘having ideas’ is to make these links, or rather, to notice different vertices so that links can form between them. The essential pre-requisite for this is a capacity for self-scrutiny, for looking inwards, as in Bion’s binocular vision or observer-observed. The only ideas that come within our observational orbit will be those that our existing mental structure is ready to incorporate; they are new to us. We ‘notice’ them when they impinge via an emotional turbulence, not necessarily a crisis, just a feel-ing. Given the universality of human nature and the logical functioning of the brain, some will have had the same idea hundreds of years before us; others may never get it (for whatever reason). The alternative to authentically incorporating an idea is to appropriate it (colonization), to ignore it, or to fossilise it.

Ideas are absorbed through internal communication, ‘symbiotic links’ between vertices as Bion terms them. The original communicative link, or ‘base’ for having ideas, is the baby’s first feeding experience (as Money-Kyrle explains, in his paper on ‘Cognitive development’). He lists three essential innate preconceptions on which all subsequent conceptions are based:

- that of a good breast (and we note this must logically precede the idea of an absent breast – as in the idea of aesthetic conflict);
- that of a good parental intercourse (based on nipple-in-mouth experience; must be achieved by 6 months or never will be)
- a fear of death, which gives awareness of time and realisation that no good thing can last for ever, hence need to mourn loss, hence establish capacity for introjection – which is key to thinking and mental evolution. Without the innate awareness of death and loss, symbols can have no structure, no three-dimensionality; and the new idea can have no container.

When Meltzer came to formulate the ‘aesthetic conflict’ for psychoanalysis, it became clear that all three of Money-Kyrle’s ‘preconceptions’ needed to be engaged for the ‘baby’ in the human personality to experience the aesthetic conflict of a new idea entering the mind: the baby-link, the combined-object link, and the end of all links.

So in having ideas we put two vertices together and allow them to communicate, that is, find where they adjoin or complement each other in a way that accrues meaning rather than depletes it. Keats in his famous formulation of Negative Capability calls this ‘dovetailing’:

Several things dovetailed in my mind, and at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement especially in Literature and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason—...

He doesn’t specify what the ‘several things’ are, though we can guess from the context they are likely to be to do with his preoccupation with learning poetry, both technical skills and poetic

inspiration from the ‘great poets’ such as Shakespeare and Milton. We note that even dovetailing is an involuntary act – something that happens and strikes the personality, the self, rather than being deliberately pieced together. A congruence suddenly manifests itself and this results in a new idea.

When Bion adopted Keats’s formulation he was paying homage not just to the idea but to Keats’s capacity to think for himself, his demonstration of how to think – by means of thinking about the poets before him. He was incorporating Keats’s way of thinking, in order to become introduced to himself, a ‘marriage that will last as long as he lives’, as he defined the aim of psychoanalysis. Minds can encounter one another in a teaching–learning experience outside their bodies or earthly lifespans. This encounter generates an ‘emotional storm’ and the chance to form (or deny) a symbol of the emotional experience: either to dovetail in conversation, or to split or cover over with dogma or denial.

Bion called the dovetailing ‘intersecting with O’, the ultimate source of knowledge; it is something that happens throughout life not only in psychoanalysis, and not only between mother-baby or analyst-analysand but between any two minds that spark a contact, or any two parts of a mind (such as prenatal and postnatal), any two art forms, or any two fields of knowledge of any sort (amongst these Bion emphasizes the three basic vertices of art, science, religion). Following Socrates, we can know nothing without the knowledge of our ignorance. The formulation ‘O’ (as Bion uses it) has two levels of reference: the unknowable world of absolute reality, and the unknown, underlying idea or meaning of an emotional encounter. The greater O is like the godhead, whose function is to emphasise dimensions beyond time and space that we can never penetrate, hence giving us the concept of infinite possibility, ever beyond our comprehension. The smaller or lesser O refers to the underlying but abstract idea of a specific conflict or situation at a specific time; we become aware of its existence through an emotional experience; this is Money-Kyrle’s conceptual ‘base’ of the mouth-and-nipple.

Hence Bion concludes *Attention and Interpretation* with the declaration that we need both the ‘restoration of god the mother’ and ‘the evolution of god the ineffable’. God the mother is the first object, the conceptual base; god the ineffable is the larger O, the guarantee of the evolutionary quality that will extend that first oneness (‘at-one-ment’) to othernesses in the future: unbounded, unknowable, infinite in potential. (We note that to Money-Kyrle’s three preconceptions, Bion seems to add another, the infinite; though this is probably really a sub-category of the idea of death.) The object’s own capacity to develop depends on this belief in the infinite source of all qualities, a source which cannot be tapped directly but only mediated. Its existence, though unknowable, is an essential feature of our innate worldview.

The two levels of O are both necessary to picture learning from experience. As Bion says, ‘the Absolute is not so biting as a toothache’; O does not impinge on human experience or sensation in any direct way. What impinges and ‘bites’ is the emotional experience, which becomes fictionalized in the form of a symbol – something which is an incomplete or slanted version of the abstract or absolute truth, but is nonetheless truthful and therefore mind-building. According to tradition, Truth enters the world in pieces, as in Milton’s description: ‘The Absolute enters the human world in many pieces, these pieces are perceived by our senses ...’ (*Areopagitica*). A symbol is produced by the intersection of O with the life of sense. The mother is knowable on the sensuous level, yet contains the abstract or unknowable god-principle that is infinite and ineffable, hence is the source and guide of vital curiosity. In Meltzer’s version of the myth this idea takes the form of the aesthetic conflict and the tension between the mother’s beautiful exterior and enigmatic interior. Where the traditional neoPlatonic system envisaged a ladder ascending from sensuous to divine beauty, stepping towards the heart of meaning, the aesthetic conflict describes the interaction of outside and inside, in which the search for the inside is stimulated by the contrast between the sensuously known and the unknown meaning or truth.

Every symbol demonstrates the intersection of the abstract noumenon with a sensuous phenomenon - as described by Coleridge when he says that a symbol, as distinct from an allegory, always

'partakes of the reality which it renders'. The abstract or noumenal level allows for the evolution of the internal object as it searches in the world of Platonic forms for the next little piece of truth required by the infant-self at its current phase. This mediated communication with the object via different levels of intersection (towards godhead) thus allows the self to introject not only the object's understanding of its present emotional experience (via the symbol), but the object's capacity to think, which entails its dependence on a greater object or O. For although the object knows more than the self, it must be simultaneously learning from a further O, a fount of truth which has no logical endpoint, since mental development is not circumscribed by bodily growth or decay.

For this reason it does not make sense to talk about 'becoming O', any more than 'being O'. Bion likes to speak of 'becoming' but in the context of becoming oneself, not becoming one's object or object-source. Instead, to designate what happens when we have ideas, he suggests alignment with O, or 'at-one-ment' – 'transformations in O' not transformations *into* O. (Milton pictures this as the earth hanging from heaven by a golden chain.) It is more like iron filings in a magnetic field, or 'consensuality' as all the senses come together and point in the same direction in an act of recognition. Alignment is not the same as fusion or unity in the primitive oceanic sense, but rather indicates a sense of direction and proportion. Alignment with truth results in our ingestion of a particular truth about ourselves, a piece of self-knowledge; and every piece of knowledge has an aspect of self-knowledge about it; it is never purely objective (neither in art nor in science). The idea of alignment stresses the aesthetic quality that accompanies having ideas. It fits. It is known not to be the absolute Truth: this nonetheless governs it, since it gives the sense of evolution of the object, or rather its infinite potential for evolution. Alignment means aligning oneself with this evolutionary potential, the O that lies beyond the concept containing the present small experience. O is infinite; there is more to come, if we align ourselves with an evolving internal object.

Aligning with O requires a paradoxical sense of feeling contained and feeling left out, that Adrian Stokes analysed in terms of two modes of aesthetic experience required to either create or to creatively appreciate any work of art. One type allows for partiality, closeness, and evolutionary process; the other type allows for inviolability, inscrutability, unknowability and inviolable otherness of the object. Even though the object (O) can never be known, changed into, or possessed, these very qualities initiate our quest for self-knowledge. In aesthetic conflict, the desire to imaginatively know the object establishes the container-contained, reciprocal, symbol-forming dialogue.

Stokes notes the dialectical structure of all philosophical quests. Two basic principles or positions are required, which need first to be distinguished, and then integrated. This certainly applied to his own lifelong preoccupation with the way the two fundamental modes of object-relationship operated in aesthetic experience: otherness and fusion, separateness and possession, the whole-object and the part-object viewpoints – for which he adopted the idea of an interplay between 'carving' and 'modelling' approaches to the object. He came to see that the two modes are both essential to object relations, and are in fact complementary, each with a necessary function: one ensuring the aesthetic harmony of a particular achievement, the other ensuring a continuing process of development: being and becoming. Both play their part in having ideas, and are founded on the vision of an aesthetic object with an inside and an outside which invite different modes of contact. This is indeed the basis of the deep grammar in poetry. The function of any form of art is to model this educational process of flux and stability so that the viewer can 'appreciate', that is, imitate and introject it. Through art and psychoanalysis we become more aware of the internal dialogue that is awoken by the aesthetic object's O with its intimations of infinity, of eternal development. The psychoanalytic reverie has its antecedents in the artistic or poetic reverie.

There is aesthetic conflict in the coming together of art forms or other disciplines as well as of minds, with the attendant temptation to divide or split these internal objects or their mediators. Yet all thinking relationships have the capacity to be generative, that is, to inspire others who introject the dovetailing in their own way, evolving autonomous symbols. 'Just think – the idea might be generative!' say Bion's postnatal group at the end of the *Memoir*. It is not the term 'aesthetic conflict' that is the new idea; it is its new life in the context of clinical psychoanalysis. And perhaps ideas can

only become generative if they are conveyed in their true colours, with their mediators and tracking systems, their progenitors, as felt on the pulses.

The concept of the restoration of the good mother is the foundation for Stokes' declaration that successful art is a representation of 'sanity', and that likewise, sanity is 'an aesthetic achievement'. Meltzer founded his view of the psychoanalytic process as an aesthetic object (promoting sanity) on this central humanistic vision, writing about its 'compositional' and 'iconographic' aspects (in the paper on Money-Kyrle's concept of cognitive development). Then in *Studies in Extended Metapsychology*, as a result of reflecting on the work with autistic children, he describes how the 'new idea' of psychoanalysis gradually became clear to him: 'In the beginning was the mother and the mother was the world...' Psychoanalysis itself is the O, the idea-generator; individual psychoanalysts and analysands can be mediators in relation to this object, if they have an artistic capacity for self-scrutiny, which is what enables the reception of emanations from the object. Meltzer states the analytic couple form the 'container' for the meaning between them (the symbol), by means of the conversation between internal objects. He goes on to relate how the key of alpha-function and the lock of symbol-formation dovetailed in his mind to form his own new picture of the self's three-dimensional relation to the object and how meaning can be flattened out of it, preventing the formation of symbols. In normal development, the container for an emotional experience takes on a certain shape (the symbol) reflecting the world-mother – the partly or fictionally knowable O – which is itself an elaboration of Money-Kyrle's mouth-and-nipple 'base'. If the analysis as aesthetic object has its compositional aspects, so do all relationships, seeking to achieve fit or congruence, and to avoid the 'paramnesias' that arise through 'envy of the growth-promoting objects' (Bion).

The process of symbol-formation therefore is the same thing as having ideas, and depends on inspiration or introjection-and-projection. Bion doesn't really delve very much into the nature of symbols; until he starts to specifically evoke aesthetic experience in his late writings, he tends to equate symbol with verbal symbol. Money-Kyrle too says a concept is grasped once it can be named – which is a signing action, not a symbolic one. But Meltzer, steeped in the 'origins of language' tradition which flowered in the philosophy of Wittenstein, Cassirer and Langer, emphasizes the dreamlike quality of the symbol that contains the new idea. This is not a new thought; it was brought into focus by the 18th century philosophers of language and was given its essential modern shape by Coleridge who said that an idea cannot be had except through a symbol. But it didn't really dovetail with psychoanalytic thinking until Stokes made vivid the connection of the Kleinian drama of part-objects with exploring the inside and outside of the art-object. This could then be connected with the philosophy of poetry, deep grammar, organic form, musical diction, etc, as distinct from didactic statements and the manipulation of words in a conventional or superficial manner. Knowing vs knowing about; or in literary criticism, 'thinking with' rather than 'thinking about' the book. New symbols, transformations in O, can only be formed by thinking with the aesthetic object, of whatever type: an attitude of dependency, but oriented inwards, not outwards to external or social figures. 'Trust in your good objects' as Meltzer said in his 'Good luck' speech in Barcelona (2002): 'Good luck for the survival that you never could have planned, and that happened in spite of all your cleverness and ingenuity.' Inspiration, he believed, must be happening all the time, but 'if it were not for the transference from internal objects we would be absolutely helpless to assist our patients ... it enables us to seem to perform functions for the patient that are essential to the development of their thinking' ('On signs and symbols').

But the problem of types of knowing starts a conflict of identifications. The mental and the 'protomental' now 'compete for the soul of the child' (Meltzer). In professional terms it is hard not to let cleverness and ingenuity get the upper hand, to defend against doubts about the enigmatic interior of the psychoanalytic object, to believe that we are 'developing' ideas rather than scavenging (as Meltzer called it), relabelling or parasitizing (as Bion called it), or 'misconceiving' as Money-Kyrle kindly yet very precisely put it. (He said he had encountered in patients almost every phantasy of the internal parental intercourse 'except the right one'.) It is worth remembering that the meaning of an idea is inseparable from a sense of its having arrived in our mind from somewhere else,

undoubtedly from someone else, via some type of internal intercourse, or combining of objects. It is generative outwards because it has generated inwards. The fact that it will undoubtedly have been 'had' before doesn't matter, because that is not where originality resides; ideas are alive and useful when they are authentic, that is, when we can incorporate them in our existing web of life without needing to claim we have invented them.

Keats said his friend Dilke could never 'come at a truth' because he was always 'trying at it'. If we can remove the clouds of misconceptions and obfuscations that are created by our own cleverness and ingenuity, we will find that ideas can dovetail or propagate themselves; all we need to do, or can do, is develop our skills of self-observation, which means, awareness of being observed by internal objects not external ones. When the idea gets through the smog, a sign of its arrival is our astonished sense that (as my mother said of Bion) it is 'blindingly obvious' (*Tavistock Seminars*). We have been put in touch with its ancestors, in the Platonic realms of being and becoming. In conclusion: we do not develop ideas, but if we could stop trying, then ideas would develop us.