

The 'Process' into fiction¹

A paper about writing a novel based on Shakespeare's Hamlet. The novel (A Trial of Faith: Horatio's Story) was written in collaboration with Donald Meltzer and is here related to the view of analytic work that he first described in The Psychoanalytical Process.

In *A Trial of Faith* (Williams 1997), the character Horatio is taken to figure the psychoanalyst in a situation of trial, and the nature of his trial emerges as the novel progresses. The 'demands of the task' illustrated in this way emphasize the aesthetic nature of the Meltzerian view of psychoanalytic activity.

In 1987 Donald Meltzer asked me to write a chapter on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* for *The Apprehension of Beauty* (Meltzer & Williams, 1988). His intuition was that this play could provide a unique concentration of insights into the conflictual nature of aesthetic 'apprehension' which was coming to be the focus of his psychoanalytic thinking. This chapter was a straightforward literary appreciation of the play, founded rigorously on the play's artistic integrity: in particular, its poetic language. It was not intended to introduce psychoanalytic insights into *Hamlet* (as for example with Ernest Jones's classic essay) but to elucidate what *Hamlet* had to offer psychoanalysis: to make Shakespeare's discoveries available to psychoanalytic workers (a process which is always longed for, yet is frustrated by pre-emptive interpretation). Subsequently, Meltzer and I did a series of interdigitating seminars on the subject of *Hamlet and Creativity*. During the course of these, it became apparent that another story was emerging and demanding to be written down: it was the story of Horatio and psychoanalytic creativity.

How could this story be 'read' - that is, drawn out from between the lines of the play? Following Hamlet's direction at the end of the play that Horatio should "tell his story" I wrote my 'reading' of it in the form of first a short story and then a short novel, taking as protagonists a turbulent adolescent (Hamlet) and his middle-aged analyst (Horatio). This form suggested itself in response to structural configurations within the play: namely the importance of Hamlet's 'dreams', which override all the generic stipulations of a traditional revenge tragedy; and the complementary importance of Horatio as a near silent observer who is nevertheless regarded by Hamlet as an essential figure in the unfolding of his inner drama. The enigmatic description of Horatio as one who 'in suffering all, suffers nothing' seemed to be full of potential in its implications regarding both Shakespeare as playwright and (analogously, in certain respects) the emotional transference pertaining to a psychoanalyst.

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Writing in this field is of little value unless it embodies in itself a process of discovery. The entire project was undertaken not with a view to dressing-up in modern clothes yet another interpretation of *Hamlet* (although it is, also, an interpretation), but in order to satisfy my curiosity about what the play implicitly tells us of this fascinating yet almost silent relationship between Horatio and Hamlet: the playwright and his hero, the analyst and his analysand. For the playwright's own struggles are inevitably etched into the play's structure, though in the normal course of reading there is no means of providing a 'receiving screen' for them (to borrow a term of Bion's).

This experimental form of 'reading the play' was supervised by Meltzer as it progressed, with regard to the authenticity (not 'correctness') of the psychoanalytic process: in particular with regard to the experience of the analyst in his failures in the countertransference which eventually lead to his failure with Hamlet (as a character - not *Hamlet* the play, as T.S. Eliot maintained [1920]). As the nature of these problems began to take shape during the writing of the novel, in response to the hero's developmental conflicts, Meltzer was able to fill in some of the Shakespearean silences in the sense of imagining the possible personal circumstances which might correspond to this type of disturbance in the analytic countertransference. There is no explanation here of either the play or of Shakespeare's creativity; there is simply a receiving-screen for the play's impact. It is all speculation, but it is a 'truthful' response to factors inherent in the play's artistic structure. It is a response which has taken shape not through any omnipotent shortcut, but through following various necessary stages (i.e. analyzing the poetic language; arriving at an aesthetic appreciation; shaping a fictional vehicle; and finally, a psychoanalytic reception).

Meltzer has always stressed throughout his work that while correctness of interpretation has its value, this is secondary to the function of what he first, in *The Psychoanalytical Process*, described as 'the psychoanalytic attitude':

We must turn our attention to the fundamental unit of the setting, the state of mind of the analyst, and explore the various aspects that are embodied in the concept, the psychoanalytic attitude (p. 79).

The maintenance of the analyst's state of mind, his 'attitude', in 'race-horse condition', depends on the interaction of two factors: 'scientific curiosity and devotion to method'. Taken separately, these factors may lead to either wild speculation or dutiful dullness. But acting upon one another, they become the foundation of his strength and resilience. And this in turn becomes the foundation for the patient's healthful stability. This rests not on the correct diagnosis of his complaint, but on his identification with the analyst's interpretative activity, such that it becomes incorporated into the equipment of his own internal objects.

This interaction of factors is what Meltzer also terms being 'in love with' the method (in line with the passionate linkage of Bion's L, H, K). This is experienced by both analyst and analysand, looking in the same direction, as together receiving

the impact of an object of beauty. The concept of the structural and health giving importance of the experience of beauty which later becomes a vital feature of Meltzerian theory is adumbrated here in *The Process*. Here he compares the psychoanalytical work to that in the fields of education and medicine; while later, he elaborates more on the artistic quality of the method. This is an expansion rather than a change of view; they are essentially the same thing. But the 'artistic' parallel gives greater scope for consideration of the symbolic nature of psychoanalysis as a mode of human communication, which is very much at the heart of the Meltzerian view.

In *The Psychoanalytical Process*, Donald Meltzer made clear his view of the process as something which has its own 'natural history': just as mental development in general is a recapitulation of cultural evolution, so does its encapsulation in the psychoanalytic setting entail a series of necessary hurdles, each evolving from the previous one. This process of evolution is not managed or shaped by the analyst, but 'presided over'. In this lies the essence of the analyst's faithfulness to the psychoanalytic method; in this consists his 'negative capability' (to borrow Keats's term, later adopted by Bion). This is the 'analytic attitude'. There is no place, or only a negative one, for 'therapeutic zeal' in the strict or traditional medical sense. In the novel, Horatio is seduced by his own attraction toward Hamlet, by the potential of the 'prince' who is an analytic son for him; and in the context of his own unrecognized marital problems, he finds his true analytic attitude is undermined. He loses the sense of parental responsibility which enables him, through the countertransference, to perceive the child in the patient and to submit himself to serving those childish needs, while restraining his own hopes and desires for the patient; instead he is drawn into inappropriate relationships with his patient and his idea of his patient's family. Therapeutic zeal takes over in the form of implicit demands for action - submission, moral improvement, pairing. As with Horatio in the play, his interpretations are correct but ineffectual.

In Meltzer's view, Horatio loses Hamlet (Hamlet 'dies') not because Hamlet is a difficult patient nor because psychoanalysis is a difficult task, but because he fails to faithfully follow the psychoanalytic method. He appears to be following it, but rigorous self examination afterwards illuminates his failings at the time. He is tempted into breaches of faith not with the patient, but with the method. Nothing short of being 'in love with' the method can sustain the analyst in a situation of trial. Horatio loses touch with the *symbolic* nature of psychoanalysis, and becomes of no use to his patient. Though impressed by the richness of imagination in his dreams, he ignores their 'heart of mystery' (as Hamlet complains) because he has lost his own receiving-screen faculty. Nonetheless it is ultimately Horatio who triumphs, in the sense of learning from experience; his failures, reviewed and understood, are the making of him as a psychoanalyst. Horatio's mind develops. Was it worth it? The price he pays involves the loss of not only Hamlet but of his wife and family as well. The artist's price: 'costing not less than everything' as T. S. Eliot said ('Little Gidding'). If Shakespeare had not written *Hamlet* he could not have written the subsequent dream plays

such as *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale*, or *The Tempest*; he would not have had the inner propulsion which told him it was an absolute necessity to override the previous limits of dramatic form and to make the Dream paramount. After *Hamlet*, Shakespeare realized it was imperative to invent a genre in which the Dream was the central, dynamic, organizing feature of the play's structure. Much of his mature oeuvre can be seen in terms of further developments of Horatio's story

In Meltzer's view, the real 'damage' sustained by the analyst who is unable to digest the consequences of his own trial (in particular, at the threshold of the depressive position) is 'failure of development':

It must overtake almost every analyst eventually, for the vitality and concentration required for continued growth are not to be found except in the rare genius a Freud, a Melanie Klein. Nor is it harmful to the movement for its tired members to fall back into conservative ranks, to become the moderators of exuberance. But it seems fairly clear that others who fall back from negligence or revulsion against the demands of the task become destructive critics and not modulators of progress. (Meltzer 1967, p. 95)

Continuing development is not necessarily required of an analyst, possibly hardly even to be hoped for. Analysts are no different from anybody else in this respect. What is required however, Meltzer suggests, is sufficient self-analytic perception for the analyst who has reached the limits of his own endurance to retire into a mode of 'modulation' rather than of envious destruction of the work of those who are still striving to progress. And the key to this lies not in relationships with either patients or colleagues. It lies in love and (when this fades) respect for 'the demands of the task'. In this way the Meltzerian view places the activity of the psychoanalyst squarely in the tradition of the philosopher-craftsmen from the ancient Greek demiurge onwards, weaving the web which will make manifest the meaning of their culture.

References

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