

Talking to Meg Harris Williams^[1]

This interview, given by Meg Harris Williams to Thaís Helena Thomé Marques, on behalf of the Scientific Board of the Brazilian Society of Psychoanalysis of Ribeirão Preto (SB/SBPRP), took place as a preparation for the Online International Meeting “Psychoanalysis and Aesthetic Experience”, on the 26th of June, also held by SB/SBPRP. The questions were submitted and answered in writing.

1. Meg H. Williams is a writer, artist and literary critic, specialising in the relation between psychoanalysis, aesthetic experience and literature, in particular poetry. She is also one of the editors of The Harris Meltzer Trust.

Scientific Board (SB): Our society is pleased to welcome you online next June. On the occasion, you will talk about the impact of beauty causing turbulence and the importance of the aesthetic response in containing the turbulence meaning.^[2] What is the relationship between the “aesthetic response” and “aesthetic attitude” of the psychoanalyst, if any?

Meg: I would think it is important for the analyst to have the attitude that any aesthetic quality belongs not to the analyst or even the patient, but to the analytic process itself. The analyst’s task according to Meltzer is to “preside over” the process as it evolves from within the setting. The patient’s dream-material may also have an aesthetic quality of its own, but again, this is not in the patient’s or the analyst’s control or possession. You could say the aesthetic attitude is one of receptivity, responding to what is happening.

SB: During your presentation you will show us extracts from the film you wrote inspired on Bion’s trilogy *A memoir of the future*. How did you think of the film title, *The becoming room*?

Meg: The words “Can beauty help?” are those of a character (Rosemary) in Bion’s *Memoir*. The title *The becoming room* refers to the traditional idea of a never-ending “becoming” that Bion adopted; also to the “cutting room” in which films are edited.

SB: In your view, what is the most substantial relationship between art and psychoanalysis?

Meg: I think it is primarily the subject matter – namely the mind and its emotional phenomena. But also, I think we can see an analogy in the processes of observing these phenomena through the media of either art or psychoanalysis. The media are different but the subject is the same, and they both depend on the capacity to look outside and inside at the same time. (This might be one meaning of Bion’s “binocular vision.”) Art however is public, while psychoanalysis is private.

SB: Bion was a great poetry reader, and we know the influence several poets had on his life and work. In the works published in more mature times of his life, Bion declared that poetry was very important for psychoanalysis, and that it was perhaps the most important of all epistemologies. How do you understand this statement?

2. The text of Meg Williams’ presentation can be read in this issue of *Bergasse 19*, on pages 10–22. In print it is available in Portuguese only, but the original version in English can be found on *Bergasse 19*’s online edition.

Meg: Poetry is one of the oldest art forms, so has had the opportunity to investigate and accumulate psychic knowledge in a very sophisticated and precise way. Like all good art, it communicates on different levels, from infantile to adult, bringing unconscious references to light. It uses musical and non-verbal features of language as well as lexical (dictionary) meanings. These features of language are something which psychoanalysis is also learning to pay attention to and value.

SB: If we think that art entertains those who contemplate it more than life in general, and making an analogy of art with psychoanalysis, what is the importance of the analyst's personality, of the use of both his/her abilities and precariousness for his/her function?

Meg: Please remember I am not speaking as an analyst; but I would suppose that, as is usually understood, the analyst's personality is of no importance, or rather, that it is liable to be a hindrance and to stimulate the wrong kind of countertransference. So the analyst (as has been said from Freud on) needs to keep in abeyance the preferences, talents, likes and dislikes which constitute personality – they are liable to interfere with the dream-material brought by the patient. But probably as the analysis progresses, a different type of friendship can also develop, which includes shared interests. Psychoanalysis can be an interesting conversation in itself because of the shared quest for understanding. This is different however from art's requirement to entertain – both “teach and delight” in Aristotle's dictum – which is directed at a general public.

SB: In your online presentation paper in Ribeirão Preto, you offer us a very interesting reflection that the thoughts around us first present themselves as feelings. What is the relationship between feelings and the fertile ugliness to which you refer in the paper?

Meg: It is of course Bion's theory that all thinking begins with a feeling, and the problem is to detect and accept that feeling. In his view therefore, all feelings are initially experienced as ugly because they disturb the mind's status quo. However, they are the fertile ground from which thoughts emerge (Bion compares it to a compost heap).

SB: You mention in your paper that the psychopathological processes and their defenses are indicators that the individual has had contact with beauty and did not tolerate it. Tell us about this paradox, the question of reminiscing to figure out the present moment.

Meg: This is really Meltzer's theory of aesthetic conflict, in which (following Plato) the capacity to glimpse beauty or truth is seen as innate in all humans. It does not

develop after a “depressive position” has been achieved, but is primary. If the individual cannot tolerate this glimpse, perhaps because of lack of reciprocity, or mismatch with the mother figure (or other reasons, whether constitutional or environmental), then they retreat from the aesthetic conflict and the search for knowledge that it should set in motion. Meltzer’s belief was that all psychopathologies can be understood in terms of this retreat. The personality is not strong enough to progress and learn the meaning of its emotional conflict. The corrective experience would not be reminiscing so much as re-living. Another chance presents itself in the present moment.

SB: Could we speculate that the mind is created in the transit between sensual beauty and spiritual beauty? What would be the correlation of this situation with Bion’s quote contained in his paper: “who can save psychoanalysis of its babbling childhood based on sensuality?”?

Meg: Of course the Neoplatonists saw this transit from sensual to spiritual beauty as a logical ladder of experience, always rooted in sense, though ultimately transcending sensual needs. I think Bion is referring to the old problem of when sensual gratification becomes an end in itself, divorced from any meaning, resulting in perversity. He saw psychoanalysis as a thing-in-itself that needed to develop in the world, in a similar way to individuals needing to develop and understand the meaning of their lives.

SB: When Bion says that psychoanalysis cannot be contained in the theories that it produces itself, because it is considered a probe to investigate the mental universe, can we evaluate psychoanalytic theories as an exoskeleton of psychoanalysis that can confine the apprehension of the living experience and its creative observations?

Meg: It would depend on how the theories are used – as explanation or as notation (omnipotent or tentative). Certainly Bion always stresses how different the living experience of “doing psychoanalysis” is from “talking about psychoanalysis”. The value of psychoanalysis lies in its method, not in its theories about the mind, which are still very crude and add little to the body of knowledge already attained by the various art forms. On the other hand, Meltzer would say that the method cannot be practised without a model of the mind from which to make observations; then this model is gradually refined and expanded to accommodate these new observations, and so the method and the model continue to evolve. Meltzer saw this as a gradual process towards a genuinely scientific status for psychoanalysis.

SB: Can we place the aesthetic object in the “O” category of experience, that is, can any new fact that surprises us and to which we do not have enough symbols to give meanings be understood as an aesthetic impact?

Meg: Yes, I think the aesthetic object can be understood as a manifestation of “O” – that is, a place where ultimate truth or beauty “intersects” with a sensuous reality in the form of a symbol. The new emotional fact will always appear in the form of a symbol – that is a further step up the *grid* (as it were) from a feeling. So it is already contained, as in an artwork, but in the case of an artwork it also has to be received in the form of a related symbol (something I call symbolic congruence, in the field of literary criticism). Symbols are generative, they stimulate further symbols in the mind of whoever is trying to communicate.

SB: In one of your papers, “As musas do psicanalista”,^[3] you mention that an ability to tolerate the loneliness that comes from the feeling of everyday life is necessary for analysts to get into contact with more sensitive dimensions of their and their patient’s selves. With the pandemic, when people had to isolate themselves in their homes, a slowdown of excesses seemed to be about to occur. However, what is observed is that with the easy communication offered by the internet, psychoanalysts and other professionals began to work more than they worked before, and a profusion of work and meetings took over their lives. Have you noticed the same? What do you think about that?

Meg: I think there is a difference between isolation and loneliness. Isolation suggests an incapacity to communicate, whatever the external situation. Loneliness (as the subject of Melanie Klein’s last paper) suggests a capacity for communication based on an acceptance of the “sole self”, as Keats calls it. Bion would say there is a “valency” available for linking up with another mind. Perhaps with the lockdowns there has been a sense of panic that we will lose touch with ourselves and become isolated if we do not have technological reassurance.

3. The paper was published in Portuguese in the 6th volume of *Coleção Memória da Psicanálise*, a series by *Viver: Mente & Cérebro* magazine edited by Manuel da Costa Pinto (2009, pp. 90–97).