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### The aesthetic dimension of the psychoanalytic process

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## The aesthetic dimension of the psychoanalytic process

Björn Salomonsson

Nur zu Verlierern spricht das Verwandelte. Alle  
Haltenden würgen.

The transformed speaks only to relinquishers. All  
holders-on are stranglers.  
(Rilke, 1917/1996, p. 126)

*This paper brings out one perspective on the experiences of the analytic couple, and transposes it into a general perspective on the analytic process: its aesthetic dimension. It is a combined epistemological and emotional perspective that is open to both participants. By an intense preoccupation with and distance to the object, the subject tries to reconcile the object's exterior form with its imagined content. This perspective offers itself most advantageously in highly emotional situations, in which analyst and analysand feel the pain of being outsiders to each other. They are thrown back on making guesses about the other's intimations. It can bring them into indifference or despair – or it can bring out an aesthetic experience. A situation, until now unbearable, suddenly reveals its surprising potential. The theoretical discussion will be illustrated by a discussion taken from the Talmud and by two clinical examples: one from the psychoanalysis with an infant and her mother, the other with a latency girl. The paper also accounts for the aesthetic as a philosophical and psychoanalytic concept. Some recurrent topics, especially those of form and content, reflect the aesthetic experience as our continuous struggle to reconcile outward form with interior content. This struggle will be formulated as a continuation of the infantile aesthetic conflict, following Meltzer.*

**Key words:** *aesthetic – psychoanalytic process – psychoanalysis with infant and mother – child psychoanalysis – Talmud*

Some topics in the millennial philosophical discussion, especially the one of the relative value of form and content, reflect the aesthetic experience as a continuous struggle to reconcile outward form with interior content. As analysts, we know that our quest for knowledge

about our patients is fraught with uncertainty. It is often difficult to reconcile what we perceive with what we assume about our patient's inner reality. I will link this clinical experience with that of the aesthetic, and formulate it in terms of a struggle to reconcile outward form

with internal form. This struggle continues the infantile situation, which Meltzer described by his concept of the aesthetic conflict (1988). Whether analyst and analysand discern or quench an aesthetic dimension depends on how they face this conflict within themselves. Their yield can certainly be a sense of beauty. However, I will argue that the aesthetic experience is not so much defined by a sense of beauty as by one of fascination. This appears when we discover how intricately form and content unite in a dream, a drawing, a slip of the tongue, etc.

I will illustrate my ideas by an excerpt from the Talmud and by two clinical examples. One is from the psychoanalysis with an infant and her mother, the other with a latency girl. As this material will illustrate, the aesthetic experience can be open to the analyst and to the patient alike.

#### THE CARRIER STAVES OF THE HOLY ARK

In the Talmud, Tractate Yoma, 54a, quoted in Ouaknin (1986, p.189), the rabbis discuss a passage in the first Book of Kings describing the Holy Ark's carrier staves.

Rav Judah contrasted the following passages: "They lengthened the staves. The ends of the staves could be seen from the Holy of Holies in front of the Sanctuary" (1 Kings 8:8). It is also written: "And they could not be seen from without. They are there to this day".

How is this contradiction possible? Visible and invisible!

Inside the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple stands the wooden Ark. It contains the two Decalogue tablets that define the essence of Jewish faith and ethics. God gave them to Moses to put them in the Ark. There, God reveals his will to his servants, and therefore the Ark assumes yet another function. It becomes "the symbol of the divine presence guiding his people" (Illustrated Bible Dictionary, part I, p. 110). It is an oblong case, along which a carrier stave runs on each side. It must remain transportable and the staves are not to be removed (Exod. 25:15). The Cherubim, two giant golden angels, guard the ark; "their faces shall look one to another" (Exod. 25: 20).

If we were standing outside in the Holy, a veil would separate us from the Ark in the innermost Holy of Holies. The incompatible description that puzzles the rabbis is this: The Book of Kings says that we see, and we do not see, the staves of the Ark behind the veil. The rabbis suggest that the staves remained as they were. But no, someone lengthened them! So, if

the staves were drawn out, they must tear the curtain and show forth. But no again, they could not be seen from without. The rabbis explain the contradiction by introducing an association:

How then can we explain this contradiction? They [the staves] pressed forth and protruded as the two breasts of a woman, as it is said: "My beloved is a satchet of myrrh lying between my breasts" (Songs 1: 13)...

R. Kattina said: Whenever Israel came up to the Festival, the curtain would be removed for them and the Cherubim were shown to them, whose bodies were intertwined with one another, and they would be thus addressed: Look! You are beloved before God as the love between man and woman.

R. Hisda raised the following objection: "But they shall not go in to see the holy things as they are being covered (Num. 4:20).

The rabbis reflect on the inconsistent description of the staves. They pack their discussion with biblical references, which need some clarification. They visualise a piece of cloth behind which something protrudes. Two associations enter their mind, one from a Biblical love poem, the other from an instruction on how to handle the most holy things inside the Temple. While the high-priests are allowed into the Holy of Holies, the Qehati priests that Num. 4: 20 mentions, are forbidden to enter. If we look for a logical explanation to the rabbi's associations, we fail. The Song of Songs, Numericus, and the Book of Kings, are unconnected in time. And, what does a satchet of myrrh have to do with two temple staves?

As I see it, the rabbis relate to the text's description as to an aesthetic object. This object is connected with sexuality *and* with a quest for knowledge. They associate to the intertwined bodies of the Cherubim angels, to love between man and woman, to love between God and man, and to prohibitions against entering a place when holy things are covered. Via the Song of Songs, the Temple staves are associated with a woman's breasts behind her clothes, and further on to man and woman joined in love. A 16th century commentator, Maharsha, (Ouaknin, 1986, p. 224) extends its meaning into an interpretation of how we learn to know God. The staves behind the curtain become a metaphor of God's revelation. Just like with the staves, Maharsha implies that we can only intuit God behind a veil. As I see it, we can apply this to any object; our epistemophilic efforts also contain a sexual and an aesthetic dimension.

## THE AESTHETIC CONFLICT

Freud linked sexuality with curiosity in his concept of sublimation. "The progressive concealment of the body, which goes along with civilisation keeps sexual curiosity awake. This curiosity seeks to complete the sexual object by revealing its hidden parts. It can, however, be diverted ('sublimated') in the direction of art, if its interest can be shifted away from the genitals on to the shape of the body as a whole" (1905, p. 156). Freud conceived of an epistemophilic instinct (1916-17, p. 327), an instinct for knowledge (*Wissenstrieb*), in which curiosity derives nourishment from the child's sexual research. In the Little Hans case (1909), he linked this instinct to a sadistic research of the interior of the infantile objects. Melanie Klein developed this theme in her analyses of children. "The sadistic phantasies directed against the inside of her [the mother's] body constitute the first and basic relation to the outside world and to reality" (1930, p. 221).

Meltzer (1988) developed Kleinian epistemological theories by introducing the concept of aesthetic conflict. He suggested an attitude in the infant towards obtaining knowledge. It appears developmentally earlier than the sadistic intrusion, which Klein characterized as typical for the schizo-paranoid position. In the child's mind, what he desires to know hides inside mother's body. Her beauty incites this fantasy in the child. He is enthralled, but can never penetrate into her unknowable interior. The child lives in a conflict between experiencing the aesthetic impact of mother's outside, and having to construe her "enigmatic inside" by his own "creative imagination" (Meltzer, 1988, p. 22). He has to live with the same riddle that the rabbis approached: "How is this contradiction possible? Visible and invisible!"

The infant thus finds himself in a conflict. By avoiding the pain of the aesthetic position, the infant paves the way for psychopathology (Meltzer, 1988, p. 29). On the other hand, if he can meet and stay with the pain he opens himself up to an aesthetic experience.

To have aesthetic experiences we must first expose ourselves to rapture by the external formal qualities of the object. Then we must grapple with our doubts and suspicions about its internal qualities (p.157).

The aesthetic situation is conflictual because it is founded in the infant's ambivalent relation to the mother, whose inner essence eludes him. He fantasizes about a knowable content inside the primal object. He wants to get into it – and has to realize that intrusion is impossible. This creates a conflict that he, at best, transforms into

an aesthetic experience. The conflict continues as our lifelong efforts at staying by our perceptions of form and content in tension – and our sometime reward of delighting in their interplay.

Meltzer's views on the roots of the aesthetic experience differ from other thinkers who rather bring out a symbiotic fusion state as the basis of the aesthetic experience. Bollas (1993, p. 41) describes how: "the aesthetic induces an existential recollection of the time when communicating took place solely through the illusion of deep rapport of subject and object". The mother gives new form to the infant's experience of content and discontent "through her aesthetic of handling" (p. 43). Handler Spitz (1985, p. 141) offers similar views, speaking of the analogy between the "sense of fusion that the infant experiences with the "all-good" mother ... " and "the aesthetic pleasure, aesthetic emotion, the privileged moment, or the sense of beauty".

To Meltzer, the aesthetic experience is coupled with painfully working through a conflict, rather than with an illusory fusion. The infant gives form to his own experiences, rather than receiving it from the mother. The aesthetic object is a continuously beautiful, awesome and enigmatic object that the baby fantasizes about, rather than fusing with it. Since this occurs in a relation with the mother, we can unite Meltzer's view with developmental studies of mother-baby-interaction. One well-known research paradigm is the Still-Face experiment (Tronick et al., 1978), in which the mother, at the request of the researcher, holds her face motionless in front of her infant. Many babies immediately become anxious. We can assume this is because they cannot solve the aesthetic conflict that the mother's incomprehensible gestalt incites in them. Her outward form and the content that the baby assumes inside her no longer fit. The infant considers the object bad, not only because of the harmful intentions that he fantasizes it harbours against him. It is also a bad object because it has suddenly turned into an unsolvable enigma, an incomprehensible gestalt.

I would like to illustrate that Meltzer's account of the aesthetic experience as one of intense work and relaxed joy, also gives justice to that special blend of reverence and awe we sometimes feel in our psychoanalytic work. I will provide clinical material.

### CASE VIGNETTE – KAREN, 8 MONTHS

Karen<sup>1</sup> is 8-months old. She demands nursing continuously and has severe sleeping problems. Her mother can-

<sup>1</sup> Names and some data have been changed in the paper to protect anonymity.

not get her to sleep unless she yields to her demand for the breast. Any mishap makes Karen cry and her mother is exhausted and helpless. The mother is worried about her daughter's development and about her own health. The three of us worked in a two-month psychoanalysis of 4 sessions a week.

In the first session, mother tells me she worries about Karen's health. She knows that from a medical point of view, she has no reason for concern, but is apparently distressed. This contrasts with her light tone of voice. She seems unwilling to let in my suggestion that it must be hard for her, too, and not only for Karen. She substitutes 'we' for anyone of the two to such an extent that I feel she blurs their identities. If I am right that she fears her own affects about Karen's health, she cannot contain her baby's affects. I ponder if Karen's whining for the breast is related to her mother's way of handling this situation.

During the analysis, in which I used the technique as described by Norman (2001, 2004), my interpretations help Karen express her anger and helplessness more unequivocally. Concerning the legitimate question of what a baby might understand of the analyst's communication, and vice versa, see also Salomonsson (2006). Her fretting and craving for the breast prove to be distorted expressions of anger. Anger appears when she cannot constantly be with her mother. Mother tells of instances at home when she cannot leave the girl without her starting crying immediately. Such instances also appear in the consulting room. But, Karen's anger also appears when mother communicates in an unclear or affected way. Karen's affects get distorted when they lose contact with her memories of conflictual interactions with mother. Instead, they tie to craving the breast. One part of her, the whining girl, storms with affects. Another part is a warded-off and affectively silent part where anger is blacked out. After this cleavage, symptom and personality are fixated and an infantile repression (Norman, 2004) is established.

In my office stands a glass case. A tiny lamp lights up some little figures in porcelain and wood. When in the analysis, Karin begins to release herself from clinging at mother, the case attracts her interest. I think it represents the thrilling world outside her confinement with an ambivalently loved mother. It also represents mother's exciting inner world, which she sometimes strives to reach into.

In the third session, she pays attention to the glass case for the first time. Karen is quite happy. She opens the cupboard cautiously. I tell her not to touch the things there. She leaves the case and sort of swims up to her mother, where she examines the space between mother's legs. It looks like a game of delivery, and I tell Karen

she came out there, between Mom's legs. She laughs delightedly and stretches her hand towards heaven. I do not get the impression that the glass case creates much conflict in her.

In the 10th session, however, tension has mounted along with mother's decision to give up nursing. Irresolute, Karen sits entwined with mother in her lap. She wants to investigate a painting on the wall but cannot leave Mom. After a while, she gets interested in the glass case. She looks at it and then starts crying. I describe to her what I assume goes on: she wants to get into the case but fears that I will tell her not to. However, I do not think her fear of my "No", or of her primitive superego, completely accounts for her tears. Up till now, craving for the breast has concealed from her that she must take a stand in the aesthetic conflict. She illustrates this with the two episodes that now follow, each representing different approaches to that conflict. She lets go of the glass case. Fascinated, she turns to the roof window of the consulting room and looks through it. It seems she now accepts being in my consulting room with its restrictions. She can find her way in the conflict between her wish to explore its fascinating objects and her knowledge of my 'No'. She turns her attention to things outside the window where there is so much she desires to know. Then, suddenly, she reverts to an intrusive approach. She crawls up to her mother, tries to unzip her pullover and reach for her breast. She is obviously unhappy, and mother gets embarrassed.

Some sessions later, Karen approaches the glass case anew. Now, she stands the frustration in a more steadfast and creative way. She lets go of the glass case without my having to tell her, and starts investigating a little stool by turning it upside down. Then she creeps under my chair and looks up. She does not seem to intrude into me. Rather, she is preoccupied with research games; what is above the chair, what is under it? What am I like from the front and from below? Finally, Karen looks at the roof window. This time, she sees my reflection in the window-pane, and is very amused that she can see me both in the pane and directly, in my face.

Karen is an infant trapped with ambivalence towards a mother who is ambivalent to her. She tries to solve her conflictual feelings by a clinging and fretful behaviour. This makes her incapable of sustaining any aesthetic tension. Initially, she makes faint efforts to investigate my room. But by the slightest frustration, she reverts to Mom's breast. My interpretations of her anger and helplessness help mother and child free themselves from each other. By the final scene at the roof window, Karen demonstrates a new attitude towards the aesthetic conflict by her humour and imagination. She realizes that the two images of me represent different perspectives of

one object. She can laugh at the enigmatic and maintain an interest in it.

I have provided two examples; the rabbis before the veil, and Karen before my glass case. In both cases, I have talked of the subject in an aesthetic conflict. It is high time to define the term aesthetic.

## THE CONCEPT OF AESTHETIC

In order to define this concept, I will turn to some philosophers who have focused on aesthetic content, on form, and on a combinatory approach, respectively: Plato, Aristotle, and Kant [For introductions to philosophical aesthetics, see Ferry (1998), Hanfling (1992) and Lyas (1997)]. I will also comment on the philosophical discussion from a psychoanalytic angle.

To Plato, beauty resides inside the object, as an expression of a superior idea. Beauty is the outward form of an exalted content. "If someone tells me that a thing is beautiful because it has a bright colour or shape or any such thing, I ignore these other reasons ... nothing else makes it beautiful other than the presence of, or the sharing in [the Beautiful]..." (Plato, *Phaedo*, 100d, p.86). "The lovers of sights and sounds like beautiful sounds, colours, shapes, and everything fashioned out of them, but their thought is unable to see and embrace the nature of the beautiful itself" (Plato, *Republic*, 476b. p.1102).

Aristotle, instead, focused on forms. Beauty resides in man's world of thought, not in the object. "The beautiful, either a living organism or anything else that consists of several parts, ought to have these parts, not only in a satisfactory order, but also ought to have a size which is not arbitrary. For beauty resides in size and order" (Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch.7, p. 34, my translation from Swedish).

Does beauty reside inside the object or in the eyes of the beholder? Is content or is form the most important? The question is impossible to answer. We have to content ourselves with the fact that "opposed estimations of the relative values of form and content have been the source of one of the perennial controversies in aesthetics" (Hanly, 1992, p. 86).

Kant (1790) investigated the relation between the subject's aesthetic experience and the object's formal qualities. He described the aesthetic experience as one in which we make "judgements of taste", which have certain characteristics, or "moments". [For a review of Kant's theory of aesthetics, see Kemal (1997)]. He concentrated on how our mind works in the aesthetic experience. The determining ground of taste "cannot be other than subjective" (1790, p. 42), while the judgement of taste is a complex mental act which can be studied.

"... aesthetic pleasure is a result of the operation of the mind and is not a direct response to the object" (Kemal, 1997, p. 41). Kant thus opened the door for a psychological study of the aesthetic experience.

The philosophical controversy of the value of content and form reflects an innate dichotomy in the aesthetic experience; one between a focus on the outside and on the inside. The two perspectives cannot compete, because they never meet. Rather, they stand in a state of tension. The aesthetic experience ceases the moment this tension dissolves. To experience aesthetically is equal to sustain and to reflect upon this tension, with whatever affects may accompany it.

In the example quoted, the Talmudic rabbis maintained this tension. They took the Biblical text literally, let its contradictions remain and associated to the stave paradox. In the same vein, Rilke's introductory poem expresses that "die Verwandelte", that which has been transformed into an aesthetic expression, is sensed only by "die Verlierern"; those who literally lose, or let go of, the content. It is a poet's rendering of Freud's advice that the analyst...

"... surrender himself to his own unconscious mental activity, in a state of *evenly suspended attention*, to avoid so far a possible reflection and the construction of conscious expectations, not to try to fix anything that he heard particularly in his memory, and by these means to catch the drift of the patient's unconscious with his own unconscious" (Freud, 1923, p. 239).

Kant seems to express the same attitude to the object of knowledge when he stated that a judgement of taste is "simply *contemplative* ... indifferent as to the existence of an object" (1790, p. 48). Bion speaks of "the harm to analytic intuition that is inseparable from *any* memories and *any* desires" (1970, p. 31). His position is very close to that of Freud. This is easier to see if we note that "... hovering", better than "... evenly suspended", captures the volatile nature of Freud's word "Gleichschwebender". Like Freud, Bion warns of an analytic attitude that strangles the meaning of what the patient is trying to transmit. Kant expresses the same notion when he says the delight in the "agreeable" or "good" (as opposed to the "beautiful") is coupled with *interest*, i.e., "the delight we connect with the representation of the *real existence* of an object" (1790, p. 42, italics added). In Meltzer's terms; when the infant strives to carve out content from its form, desiring the good or agreeable content inside mother's body, he will deprive himself of the aesthetic experience.

The poet, the philosopher and the analyst seem to agree; what determines an aesthetic, and an analytic,

approach is a passive and yet alert waiting for signs from the unknown. It is an attitude of hovering, of losing oneself, of contemplation – and of attention. This must imply that in aesthetic experiences we feel not only beauty. Not least, art of our own times often excites other feelings such as awe, fear, and disgust. Kant's concepts of the sublime also makes room for negative feelings in an aesthetic experience:

Since the mind is not simply attracted by the object, but is also alternately repelled thereby, the **delight in the sublime does not so much involve positive pleasure as admiration or respect, i.e., merits the name of a negative pleasure** (1790, p. 91).

Whichever feelings go along with the aesthetic experience, one might wonder if they are of a special kind. Croce, the Italian philosopher of aesthetics, emphasized that there are no such special feelings. **“What makes a feeling an aesthetic feeling is not any quality of the feeling, but the context in which it occurs”** (1902, translator's note, p. 85). Psychoanalytic experience can supplement the aestheticians' search for this affective context. The anger, love, tenderness, disinterest, fascination, etc., we feel with our patients, certainly are ordinary feelings. However, they are contained within a framed situation. I sometimes experience this as “Here I am sitting with my patient while all this commotion goes on inside me”. I sense the ‘staves’ of my feelings, but they do not penetrate ‘the veil’, i.e., I do not act them out. This stance makes the contradictions of being an analyst possible.

Before approaching a psychoanalytic discussion of aesthetic form and content, I will try out a simpler way of describing the aesthetic experience. Couldn't one look at a landscape and simply say it is beautiful? Couldn't such an experience be called aesthetic, without our hypothesizing that the subject sustains any tension? However, psychoanalytic reflection contradicts such a simplification. Conscious perception interacts with unconscious fantasies. The perception of landscape-form interacts with one's unconscious fantasies of content. In the psychoanalytic situation, the analysand might speak of a beautiful landscape. We would take it for granted that she has fantasies and feelings about it – and we would analyse how they relate to her aesthetic experience. This would grant her story true aesthetic value.

An injunction against a naïve vision of the aesthetic experience is also illustrated by the perverse experience. I briefly touch upon it here in order to delimit my aesthetic concept. The perverse aesthetic experience focuses on the object's superficial formal aspects, which become

eroticized. The subject's interest in aesthetic content is confused with his experiencing content as a narcissistic prolongation of himself. The subject purports to search for the object's appearances, but unconsciously he looks for different versions of himself. He is afraid to get to know the object, since this would lessen his control of the object – and bring him in closer emotional contact with it. He fears both alternatives.

## PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORIES ON AESTHETIC FORM AND CONTENT

Before describing his experience of Michelangelo's Moses statue in S. Pietro in Vincoli in Rome, Freud writes (1914):

I have often observed that the subject-matter of works of art has a stronger attraction for me than their formal and technical qualities, though to the artist their value lies first and foremost in these latter (p. 211).

In “Creative writers and day-dreaming” (1908), Freud speaks of aesthetic form as the author's way of disguising his egoistic daydreams before he presents them to his readers. The author bribes his readers by “the purely formal – that is, aesthetic – yield of pleasure which he offers us in the presentation of his fantasies” (p. 153). There is a risk that **by describing form as a disguise and a bribe, Freud curtails the aesthetic dimension**. In his formulation, form is not on a par with content. The two are not seen as inextricably woven together.

Classical psychoanalytic theory of aesthetics has long been criticised, by analysts and non-analysts, for its focus on psychic content, and its neglect of form and how it interacts with content, see, e.g., Langer (1942), Deri (1984) and Rose (1980). These authors look for a psychoanalytically informed theory of aesthetics that grants equal value to form and content and studies how they interact. Hanly (1992) writes:

It is an **error to think of form as though it were imposed on an unorganised, raw thematic, and affective material** – to assume that content is only Dionysian and form only Apollonian .... The creation of form is not itself free from the struggle to master the powerful affects generated by instinct life and relations with objects. For this reason, artistic form can in a more explicit way, as the “shape of the content”, be illuminated by psychoanalysis (pp. 96-97).

Form does something beyond disguising content. Content is more than an unconscious Something hiding

inside an aesthetic form. We must therefore formulate the aesthetic dimension of the analytic process within a theory that honours the organic unity of form and content. This is a point strongly argued by Croce:

We must ... reject the thesis which makes the Aesthetic consist only in content ... as [well as] the alternative which makes it a matter of tacking form onto content... In aesthetic activity, the activity of expression is not merely added to impressions, but the latter are, rather, worked on and given form by it ....

It follows from this not that content is something superfluous (rather it is the necessary point of departure for anything expressive), but that there is no way of inferring the qualities of the form from the qualities of the content .... **Content is, indeed, transformable in form, but insofar as it has not been transformed, it does not have determinable qualities; we know nothing about it. It is *aesthetic content* not to begin with, but only when it is actually transformed (Croce, 1902, pp. 16-17, italics in the original).**

Croce's description of the unity of form and content differs from Freud's separation of them. We can exemplify it from the rabbi's discussion and from little Karen. United, the Ark's carrier staves and the curtain make up an aesthetic object. It is insufficient to define it as one of staves-content hiding behind a curtain-form. To put it another way: a bust is one thing, two breasts behind a bra is something quite different. By describing form and content separately, we dissolve our experience into a matter-of-fact statement. Karen finally approached the roof window and looked at it in fascination. She stayed by an aesthetic combination. *We* can describe it as one of entralling inside and glassy outside – but *she* experienced it as an ensemble.

## THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION AND TRUTH

If form and content interchange continuously, if there is no such thing as *the* content, no unambiguous affects, thoughts or conflicts expressed by *the* form, does this not mean the end to psychoanalysis as a knowledge-seeking enterprise? If form is linked to an equivocal content and if forms are but temporary, do we not end up in relativism where any patient expression could express any unconscious content in any manner?

In a psychoanalytic process, new expressions or, to use Bion's concept, transformations (1965), emerge. Our task is to assess their truth. Bion asks how truth determines the value of a transformation, i.e.; "to what has it to be true and how shall we decide whether it is or

not?" (p. 38). He continues, more as a conviction than a reply to his question, that mental growth depends on truth "as the living organism depends on food". He does not support his stance by "evidence regarded as scientific", but rather by a "formulation [that] belongs to the domain of the Aesthetic" (*ibid*). The reason he cannot answer from a scientific vertex is that K, the function of knowledge, is inappropriate to grasping O, ultimate psychic reality. K can be a tool, which risks penetrating the aesthetic object and dissolve it. Handled with care, though, it can be used to the benefit of analytic work, as when Bion grasped a patient's disturbed thought processes "by virtue of an aesthetic rather than a scientific experience" (p. 52). Meltzer pays a similar tribute to the aesthetic dimension when he suggests it as the ultimate level of growth in abstraction and sophistication" (1978, p. 69).

To my mind, we assess the truth-value of the patient's communication, viewed as an aesthetic object, in a complex and rapid process in which we weigh together its emotionality, extraction, expressivity, formal complexity, vitality and reproductive capacity. Emotionality: how does it affect us? Extraction: how is it related to earlier communications? Expressivity and formal complexity; do we experience beauty or any other aesthetic affect before it? Is its form blunt or elaborate? Vitality: are our reactions to what the patient expresses ephemeral or lasting? Reproductive capacity; does it engender new aesthetic creations or does it seem infertile? I will illustrate this process with case material of a girl who became an important guide in my quest for the aesthetic dimension of psychoanalysis.

## CASE VIGNETTE – LINDA, 10 YEARS

Linda is 10-years old. Her parents worry because she has seemed depressed since early childhood, at least since her sister was born when she was 3. She has few friends and has problems of asserting herself. She easily feels excluded and cannot use her affects, especially anger, to change the situation. By the time of the vignette, Linda has been in analysis for 6 months, four times a week. Gradually, her painful inner situation has emerged. She stands outside the dyad of mother and sister, feeling her father cannot pilot her into it. A harsh super-ego condemns and ridicules her longing.

Linda also has narcissistic traits, expressed in her being cautiously supercilious. My countertransference oscillates between compassion, vexation for being subtly rebuffed, and joy in talking with a bright and sensitive young girl. She gets quite afraid when I name her angry or sad feelings. She becomes muffled and we lose contact.



### *From a session*

It is the first day after an Easter break. Listlessly, she draws something with her left hand without showing me. It looks awkward and I think: Does it reflect how lost and awkward she felt during Easter holiday?

Linda: It is mountains and a forest.

Then silent, looking lonely, or sad. Suddenly and indignantly:

L: Why do they never tell the names of animals participating in movies?! Some children participated in a theatre play and they got paid for it. But an adult actor who just dragged a box along the stage got paid much more!

Analyst: You speak of injustice. Animals are worse off than humans, children are worse off than adults.

She is silent. I try out an interpretation:

A: When you speak about these things, could they tell us something of how you felt during Easter holiday? I am the adult and settle my holidays, you are the child and must follow what I decide.

In retrospect, my interpretation was a sign that I now had set off on the road she had prescribed for me. Her left-hand drawing seemed a display of her talent of drawing with the “wrong” hand, rather than an invitation for me to look. When she spoke of the children, she appeared more like an ombudsman of Children’s Rights than someone addressing her own suffering. Linda took me to the veil and showed me her contradictions; suffering and contentment, clumsiness and skill. I introduced yet another contradiction; I settle holidays while she has to follow my decisions. My interpretation, which I think was reasonably correct, also represented an enactment of my intolerance. I was invited to her veil, then rejected, and after a while, I responded by pushing at it. It was my response to the patient’s attempts “to get the analyst to act in a manner appropriate to his [her] unconscious projection” (Bott Spillius & Feldman, 1989, p.48).

Linda proves she is not ready to make use of the interpretation. She keeps silent and continues drawing. I feel I do not reach her. My thoughts drift away in daydreams of professional aspirations. I feel rejected by her, and guilty of my self-centredness. Do my feelings reflect similar feelings in her? Do I return her rejection by escaping to daydreaming? How can I interpret what I feel to be at hand? In similar situations, when I have directly addressed her sad or angry feelings, she has turned anxious. In the counter-transference, I feel like an outsider. In the next interpretation, I make use of this feeling by introducing the theme of outside – inside:

A: You speak of an animal against humans, a child against grown-ups. Someone has power, the other not. Someone is outside; he is not mentioned in the movie, not paid, not seeing what the other one draws. The other

person is inside, and for him or her it is the reverse. That person gets paid – and sees and knows everything.

L (earnestly): I think of my sister, she has her birthday soon. A couple of kids gave me something to give her as a present .... I remember a drawing, we only talked about it once.

She shows me a drawing of her family. Its members stand next to each other. A special place is reserved for her little sister on top of a pedestal.

L: That time we said my sister is the smallest one ... but she occupies ... so much space ... (hesitates anxiously).

The pedestal drawing is a moving picture of how Linda sometimes feels about her family. Now, she has transformed my interpretations of her being outside my Easter break, into touching upon how she feels about her sister who shall be put on the pedestal on her birthday.

Linda picks up another drawing and starts improving the contours of an armchair. She shows me: under the armchair she has written PAKLARASA and PETUNUS.

L: The words have no meaning, they’re secret!

A: Inside – outside .... You only know secret words when you are inside.

L: My sister and I have a secret alphabet. We draw a picture depicting something that begins with the same letter as the one we want to write. A rainbow for R! .... You know, my school mates have a secret alphabet.

A: Then one could feel outside if one doesn’t know it.

L: (a bit dashing) Well, I don’t know if one *has* to feel outside...

Linda watches PETUNUS.

L: I made some special letters! “U” in Petunus is an “Utbrott” = eruption (it is a volcano).

A: Eruptions; you could say that about people too...

L: Yes, feelings .... But I would never have an eruption because of my friends’ secret alphabet!

Uneasy, she draws a picture of a well-mannered girl. She is anxious, but continues:

L: Daddy told me there once was a volcano. People had no time to escape the eruption, they were found stiffened in the lava. It happened long ago, it was in Greece I think...

### AESTHETIC DIMENSIONS OF THE SESSION

Let us have a re-look at the passage where I interpreted that her talking of underpaid children reflected her sense of powerlessness in front of my Easter break. In order

to better understand why I escaped to a daydream, we have to look at how Linda addressed her issues. She did not say *she* felt like an underpaid child actor or an anonymous animal. Reversing the cast, she deplored the injustice on *their* behalf. Their real problem, that adults did not care about them, she formulated as a lack of payment, or movie captions. The aesthetic gestalt she showed me, “by the veil”, was built on her projections into me, and her displacements onto other children, of her own sore feelings. My interpretation of content was correct, I think. However, it did not address the entire presented aesthetic form, but rather tried to cut through to reach the content. Put in classical psychoanalytic framework, I was too hot in interpreting the impulse, and skipping its defence.

Form and content did not match in Linda’s aesthetic gestalt. The same could be said of my interpretation, which explains why she did not recognise what I was talking about. By my interpretation and my ensuing day-dream, I tried out the two standard solutions to an unbearable aesthetic conflict; *intrusion and escape*. First, an interpretation that was intrusive in the sense that I made it without evidence from her that she had felt abandoned during Easter. Then, after her continued silence, I abandoned her for a fantasy, in which I was put on the pedestal.

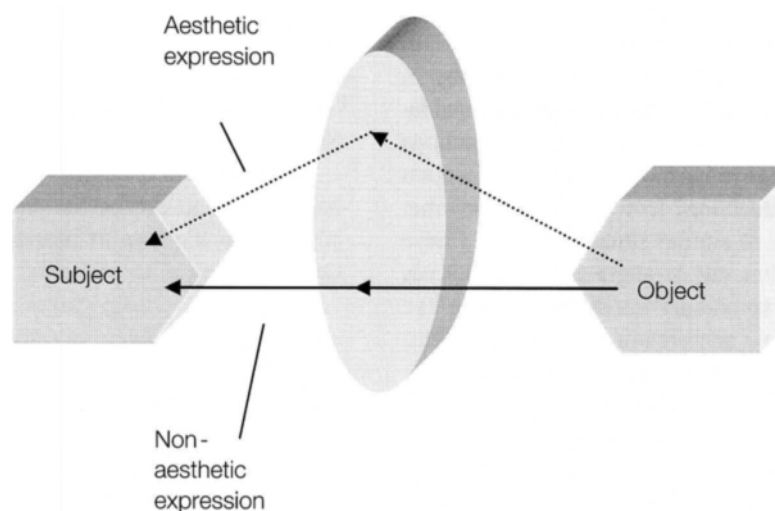
What about PAKLARASA and PETUNUS? One way of looking at them is that they represented Linda’s response to my interpretation. “The words have no meaning, they’re secret!” perhaps meant that the interpretation had no meaning to her. And, maybe the armchair was her communication of an analyst parked in a seat of omniscience. However, these reasonable suggestions did not resound in me. The reason is that Linda

now started showing her affects openly; she was eager when speaking of the words without meaning, thrilled when mentioning the secret letters, and anxious when addressing her friends’ secret alphabet.

When the volcano appeared, she obviously knew that the eruption referred not only to ancient volcanoes, but also to her present feelings. By now, her knowledge no longer gave rise to fear, but rather to that special joy our analysts and we sometimes touch upon. This is when we realize, not just the meaning of or the secret “behind” a word, a dream, or a drawing, but even more the complexity of an aesthetic gestalt’s content and form. “U” thrilled us because of its intricate way of combining her anger and her creativity. This revelation was reassuring to Linda, who not only had to tackle difficult feelings of anger towards her sister and friends, but also could rejoice in her ingenious “U”. That letter was the reward for our continuous efforts in maintaining the Linda-object as an aesthetic gestalt.

## FINAL COMMENTS

I have illustrated the discussion with a Talmud interpretation and with material from two patients. The Talmud example portrays the human condition of having to conjecture the contradictory aesthetic object. Karen illustrates an infant’s struggle with her desire to cling to and penetrate into her mother, and her dawning capacity to playfully remain outside and turn her attention to objects to which she can relate in an aesthetic way. Linda demonstrates the aesthetic conflict in the analyst, as I struggle to make meaning out of a tricky and camouflaged material. I end my paper with a summary



of how I visualize the aesthetic experience, whether in the psychoanalytical process or elsewhere. I will do it in the form of a figure.

The subject is exterior to the object; it can never arrive at its unequivocal and full meaning. Even if we found several synonyms for PAKLARASA in a dictionary, they would not account for its aesthetic meanings. The middle screen illustrates that some aspect of the object is inaccessible to the subject. It offers itself as a projection screen where aesthetic expression can assume its form. From a developmental viewpoint, it represents the mother's exterior aspect. To this screen, the infant and later the adult have to relate in whatever way he/she can.

The dotted line refers to aesthetic, and the unbroken line to non-aesthetic, signification. The two can be illustrated by Linda's "U". Viewed as a non-aesthetic sign, a U is a U. But as we have seen, her U could also be experienced aesthetically. Linda filled it with personal and profound meanings. The more roundabout the road is in aesthetic signification, the more surprised we become before the aesthetic experience. To be sure, I would never have guessed beforehand the eruptive potential of a U.

We could also imagine some line running above the screen without ever touching it. That would be a situation, in which it was impossible to experience the object aesthetically. As analysts, or as observers in a continuously changing art scene, we note that this line moves as time goes by. What seems a bizarre comment in the consulting room, unsustainable noise in the concert hall, or gruesome scribbling in the art gallery, might, in the analytic situation some time later, or in the art field half a century later, seem comprehensible. Finally, when the screen itself becomes erotised, mirror-like and non-responsive, we have a perverse aesthetic experience.

My brief survey of philosophical aesthetics can be applied to the figure. We might imagine that Plato would point to the right-hand object and state that therein lies Beauty. Aristotle would point to the screen and look for in what ways the beautiful object assumes form there. Kant would focus on the subject and study the mental processes by which he/she perceives the object as beautiful. Finally, Croce would reject the figure and state that we cannot dissect the aesthetic experience into separate components.

Relating to an object in an aesthetic way means to open up to the interplay of form and content. The inaccessibility of the object, as well as its roundabout signification, implies that the aesthetic perspective honours that part of the experience that remains uncomprehended. Nowhere have I seen this expressed more succinctly and beautifully than by Borges. The aesthetic is, he once told an interviewing journalist, "the immi-

nence of a revelation that does not take place". To be constantly waiting for this revelation is the disquieting and annoying, and tranquil and pleasant, satisfaction of doing psychoanalysis.

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