

Terror, War and the Death Instinct

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A Critical Response to the Lecture delivered by Hanna Segal at the Workshop on War and Terror Sponsored by the Institute of Group Analysis and the Journal Psychodynamic Practice 8th March 2003

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At eighty-five years old, Hanna Segal was alert, intellectually sharp, creative and responsive. Her lecture was for me a particularly poignant event linking back to her work with Melanie Klein, Wilfred Bion and the basic understanding of psychotic processes in human behaviour. Then there were her links to Rotblat, Oppenheimer and the first Manhattan Project followed by references to Robert McNamara. Behind it all were the monumental figures of Sigmund Freud and Albert Einstein, linked by their frustratingly fatalistic correspondence on the question “Why War?”.

Speaking of the symbolic element of the attack on the Pentagon and the twin towers of September 11th (the year is rarely mentioned, the event has become part of the annual cycle of traumatic anniversaries) Hanna drew attention to the puncturing of the containers of fantasies of omnipotence. The reversal of the dynamics of power and powerlessness broke through the defences against acute feelings of impotence, impending annihilation, poverty, resourcelessness, terror, vulnerability and guilt. We were “pushed into a world of terror versus terror, disintegration and confusion. It awakened our most primitive fears for ourselves and the world group we belong to. It is the deepest fear in a disturbed infant and a schizophrenic.”

Reaffirming her comment from a previous paper, she contended that the threat of nuclear annihilation profoundly changed the nature of our collective anxieties, turning the normal fear of death and understandable aggression into the terror of actual total annihilation. She suggested that “a deep psychotic process underlay our group thinking and reaction”. Exploring the roots of such a process she quoted Freud’s assertion that “the constructive processes (of groups) are interfered with by disruptive attacks arising from the death instinct, and that groups are formed to combat man’s destructiveness to man”.

She then moved on to consider Bion’s more comprehensive theory of group function. He considered that one of the main tasks of the group “was to contain and deal with difficulties that we cannot contain in ourselves....We project into the group psychotic anxieties that we cannot cope with ourselves. One of the most important functions of the group is to contain and deal with those anxieties”. There was a lovely throw-away line: “If individuals behaved like groups they would be classified as mad”, which led into the statement: “When a psychotic basic assumption dominates a group (and maybe the combination of the military and the religious is the most deadly) then the whole group acts on that assumption, produces

leaders who present that madness and through escalating projective processes, drives those leaders madder and madder and further and further away from reality”.

Now clearly, “understanding these group processes is vital”, but understanding is not the same as clinical observation and description. It is one thing to be aware of the phenomena of psychotic processes in group and social behaviour but it is quite another thing to understand them, to analyse their precipitating origins and to discern and explore the domain of interventions that can transform them. Sadly, in spite of the critically important progress in this field that has been made over the last quarter century, Hanna was unable to take as further in the task of understanding.

The post-Hiroshima world was described as “acting on a psychotic premise, with the USSR and the US-led West producing a paranoid schizoid world, each viewing the other as an evil empire and threatening total annihilation”. During the cold war we acted out “typical schizoid mechanisms of splitting, projection, depersonalisation, dehumanisation and fragmentation”. The paranoid-schizoid system kept the world free of war but at the cost of deepening psychosis. Indeed, the anxiety stimulated by nuclear weapons mobilised the most basic psychotic defences to deal with the fact that our worst nightmares had become a potential reality.

The psychotic process of the military-industrial regime was matched by the rise in fundamentalist religion, first among the “born-again” Christians longing for Armageddon in the form of nuclear war to destroy the work of the Devil. Armageddon was God’s war to cleanse the earth of all wickedness, paving the way for a bright, prosperous new order. The dynamic is mirrored by both Jewish and Islamic fundamentalism, albeit with totally opposed views of the constituents of the “Axis of Evil”.

As one pole of the global split collapsed in the wake of *perestroika*, there was a brief window of insight into the fact that “our belief in an evil, powerful enemy was in fact delusional”, before the underlying psychotic process re-emerged with the successful search for a new enemy. That transient moment of hope is familiar from clinical work when “a paranoid patient begins to give up his delusions... The improvement is genuine, but as they get better, they have to face psychic reality... With the withdrawal of projections they have to face their own destructiveness, their inner conflicts and guilt, their inner realities. Moreover, they often have to face very real losses in external reality, brought about by their illness. Formidable manic defences can be mobilised against this depressive pain, with a revival of megalomania and in its wake a return of paranoia”.

Manic defences emerged in US statements indicating conviction that American soldiers would not be at risk in future wars, since total air superiority guaranteed that any opposition could be destroyed from the sky. “That myth was punctured on September 11, and revealed the tremendous anxiety, fear and maybe guilt underpinning the need for grandiosity that created the twin towers and the pentagon building... We have been precipitated into a world of fragmentation, and at points total disintegration and psychotic terror – and also into total confusion... The spreading fragments of a collapsing empire were felt all over the world and imbued with evil like the plague. This is the most primitive terror in our personal development – not ordinary death, but some vision of personal disintegration imbued with hostility”. Hanna continued to note that: “the situation is made much worse when God comes into the equation. The fundamentalist Christian longing for Armageddon is now matched by

Islamic fundamentalism. Our sanity is threatened by a delusional inner world of omnipotence and absolute evil and sainthood”.

In conclusion Hanna saw the real battle as “between insanity based on mutual projections and sanity based on truth”. The task is to withdraw projections and deconstruct the psychotic defences, while strengthening the reality-related work group. It is quite impossible to “annihilate all evil and terror without destroying ourselves, because it is a part of us”. The impending war with Iraq is seen as a secular Armageddon destined to usher in the benign rule of righteousness, democracy and American values. Perhaps the most telling moment of the whole lecture was the Freudian slip by which Hanna spoke of the objective of American “domination of Europe after the end of the world”.

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As a classical psychoanalyst, Hanna Segal formulates her perceptions within the foundational paradigm of Sigmund Freud, adding the developments of the paranoid schizoid defences delineated by Melanie Klein and the application to group process achieved by Wilfred Bion. Within this framework the description of behaviour as “psychotic” and the source of anxiety as derived from the “death instinct” renders further analytic research taboo. It is as if there is a floor to psychoanalytic understanding, an axiomatic platform about the nature of humanity, from which the psychoanalytic paradigm is derived, but which is itself not open to exploration. Perhaps we would do well to follow the scientific intention of Freud to explore the reaches of the as yet unconscious, rather than to enshrine his construct as some kind of new fundamentalist text to be expounded and applied, but not to be questioned in any significant way.

Existential coherence is implicit in Hanna Segal’s presentation. No group, organisation, institution or social system is immune from the enactment of the ubiquitous paranoid-schizoid defences. All act as containers for the uncontainable psychotic anxieties of their members. All select leaders to match the group phantasies and act as foci for the projections of the led. To make the inference explicit we need to recognise that it also applies (and with particularly distilled intensity) to groups and organisations of psychoanalysts, even group-analysts! The dynamics of the large-group event which followed the lecture provided an exemplary context for us to experience and observe the phenomena for ourselves within a temporary microcosm of our wider society. The raw clinical data of psychoanalytic research are universally present and available, both subjectively and objectively, at the phase interface between conscious and unconscious process. Written text offers another vehicle for the presentation and therefore also the exploration of the as-yet unconscious of the author in the context of an anticipated audience or readership. My selection, ordering, linking commentary and consequent critique of Hanna’s lecture inevitably offers something of an unconscious autobiography available for exploration to those readers with eyes to see.

The remainder of this paper is devoted to an exploration of the edges of understanding of the paranoid-schizoid syndrome which informed the theoretical basis for Hanna Segal’s lecture.

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If the September 11 terrorist attacks “pushed” us into a “world of terror versus terror”, then that world pre-existed the attacks. The propulsion overcame the normal resistance that keeps us out of touch with such acute, psychotic levels of anxiety. In other words the traumatic event broke down the anxiety defences and re-stimulated the world of terror against which they were in place. It is not that the terrorist attacks “scared the hell out of us”, but that they “opened up the hell in us”. We are left with the question about the origin of the pre-existing world of terror.

On both the occasions that Hanna referred to the September 11 events, she used the word “punctured”, firstly with regard to “your high-flying balloons” leading to annihilation, and secondly with regard to the “myth of invincibility”. It is a membranous image, marking the boundary between inside and outside of a container. The rupture of that membrane is catastrophic. The instrument used is the “little knife” of the terrorist. What flows out of the container? What happens next, the remembering of which is so devastating? When did we experience being inside a membranous container whose puncture (possibly by a knife) precipitates an experience of annihilation? It leads on to being “pushed” into transmarginal terror, disintegration and confusion. The puncturing of the later defensive containers “revealed the tremendous anxiety, fear and maybe guilt” stored within them from the originating scene. It is defence against this psychotic core that drives the “need for grandiosity that created the twin towers and the pentagon” in the first place. Revelation has an air of repetition about it. Revelation is a re-introjection of reified projected material, connection with whose originating ground has been repressed and denied.

In another reference to September 11, Hanna described the event as “symbolic”. It “precipitated (us) into a world of fragmentation and psychotic terror – and also into total confusion”. Precipitation is more violent than pushing. What does the symbol stand for? What is its ground? The spreading fragments (products of the shattering experience of fragmentation) are those of “a collapsing empire” and are “imbued with evil like the plague”. Collective defence against this psychotic content drives the formation of empire itself as a containing membrane between the safety of the inside and the perceived threat of the outside.

The exposed content, which floods the social consciousness once the defences are broken, is “the most primitive terror in our personal development – not ordinary death, but some vision of personal disintegration imbued with hostility”. The occasion “awakened our most primitive fears for ourselves and for the world group we belong to”. So these fears, like the Kraken, lie submerged in sleep, always available to be re-evoked as our worst nightmares are triggered by some resonant external reality. They are “the deepest fear in a disturbed infant and a schizophrenic”. Presumably they lie dormant in an undisturbed infant and remain exposed in the schizophrenic condition.

In the concluding discussion Hanna referred to the work of Lipton, noting that our deepest anxieties were not about fear of death and disintegration, but stemmed from “death by the death instinct”, a condition of “endless agony”. So in tautologous revolution, Hanna turns full circle. The construct is closed. The psychotic levels of anxiety and the defences generated to contain them receive full explication. There is nothing more to be said.

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The paranoid-schizoid syndrome reaches its apogee in the psychosis of religious fundamentalism with its externally reified symbolism of projected inner phantasy. It drives inexorably towards the dénouement of Armageddon, no longer a distant metaphor, but today a potential nuclear reality as a collective re-staging of our innermost fears and the titanic struggle between good and evil. So “our sanity is threatened by a delusional inner world of omnipotence (and omni-impotence) and absolute evil and sainthood”. The defusing of Armageddon demands the deconstruction of the collective defences and projection mechanisms, together with a realistic grounding of the originating experience. That can only be achieved if we dare to challenge the Freudian fundamentalism of the “Death Instinct” itself.

The hypothesis of the causal role of the death instinct derives from Freud’s later work, being then taken up and applied by Melanie Klein as providing an explanation for the paranoid-schizoid pre-depressive defences observed in clinical work with very young children. Wilfred Bion took up the concept without apparent further critique in his construction of a theory of psychotic group process. It was not, however, the only explanatory strand in Freud’s thinking and its exclusive selection is itself an interesting phenomenon. Fear of castration was on occasion seen as the source of all derivative anxieties. Its gender-specific limitation rendered it inadequate as a generalised explanation of clinically observed presentation. Today it is more often linked to the intense but ethnically defined trauma of circumcision which formed an unconscious collusional bond between the Jewish male members of the original group of psychoanalysts. Association of the “little knives” with the castrating attack on the phallic symbols of the World Trade Towers is quite clear. Saddam Hussein is on record as saying that “no child remembers anything before the age of seven”, the age of Islamic circumcision in Iraq. His invasion of Kuwait was designed to “recover the part of Iraq that the British cut off”. Links have been made between the compulsive search for the lost foreskin and the religious wearing of skull caps, smaller for Jews, larger for Moslems, as well as to the intense passivity and collective victim mentality of the Jewish culture. It is part of a common post-traumatic-stress-syndrome which reverses into intense aggressive behaviour when sufficient external impingement breaks through the social defences.

Freud’s earlier attribution of the source of anxiety and terror to the “caesura of birth” has received increasing attention over the last three decades, particularly in Germany. As far back as 1909 Freud added a footnote to the second edition of “The Interpretation of Dreams” asserting that “the act of birth is the first experience of anxiety, and thus the source and prototype of the affect of anxiety”. At the end of “The Ego and the Id” he had described birth as “the first great anxiety state”. This year marks the eightieth anniversary of the publication of “The Trauma of Birth” by Otto Rank, the brilliant and youngest member of Freud’s Vienna Circle. Initially Freud hailed it as “the most important progress since the discovery of psychoanalysis”. Presentation of the manuscript to Freud as a birthday gift in May 1923 came just after the first cancer operation and formal publication coincided with the second involving massive surgery to remove the right side of Freud’s upper jaw and half his palate. After the third operation, recognising that Rank’s thesis took precedence over the Oedipus Complex as the critical factor determining an individual’s mental development, he was to write: “And now everything falls into place around this point that you (Rank) are the dreaded David who with his Trauma of Birth succeeds in depreciating my work”.

So Rank is designated as the new king waiting to take over from Sigmund Saul. The other, perhaps less conscious, reference is to Rank's work as the stone hurled unerringly from David's sling and smashing fatally into the head of Sigmund Goliath. Is this the start of the phantasy identification of Rank's authorship of the Trauma of Birth with the fatal source of cancer?

Although Rank was mainly concerned with the affect of separation anxiety in birth, his focus inevitably also raised the impact of pain and physical trauma on the process of psychodynamic formation. One of the implications of his work, therefore, was to raise the denied pole of the psyche-soma split endemic in Freud's analysis, and to do so precisely when Sigmund had been reconnected to somatic pain (with its resonance to both birth and circumcision) by the excruciating medical procedures.

In addition to the surgery, Freud had recently suffered three deeply felt bereavements as well as facing his own mortality which led to his "death wish" for assisted suicide if cancer were diagnosed. Rank had concentrated on the effects of the separation anxiety experienced in birth, so bringing overwhelming grief and its associated repressive defences into focus. Today, while perinatal loss is recognised as one of three elements associated with the trauma of birth, it is notable that grief is an affect which is totally absent from Hanna Segal's exposition of the paranoid schizoid syndrome and its application to the aftermath of September 11. Overwhelming grief is probably the most profound and powerful collective emotion evoked by the death of the 3000+ victims, burned and crushed in the catastrophic still-birth of Ground Zero. Denial and manic displacement of the unresolved grief into feelings of anxiety, rage, revenge and aggression drove the dynamics of the War on Terror and the subsequent engagement with Iraq.

Returning to the context of the "Death Instinct" hypothesis, (see forthcoming paper on "The Psychodynamics of the Freud/Rank Bifurcation") we see Rank as Freud's confidante, acting as his amanuensis ("for fifteen years he was an irreproachable assistant and faithful son to me"), directing the Vienna psychoanalytic publishing house and co-editing (with Ernest Jones) the International Journal of Psycho-analysis. There was already intense splitting between Jones and Rank, with an anti-Rank alliance being forged between Jones in London and Abraham in Berlin. Jealousy and envy of Rank's status as favourite son was compounded by his failure to share the content of his work in advance with any members of the Committee. Ferenczi and Rank jointly published *The Development of Psychoanalysis*, cementing the Austro-Hungarian axis in opposition to the Anglo-German alliance. Abraham saw Rank as a potential danger, opening up "an ominous development concerning vital issues of psychoanalysis". Freud concentrated on the patient's relationship with the father, Rank had raised the primary relationship (of attachment and loss!) with the mother. Jones accused Rank of being neurotic and then of suffering from a psychotic illness. The Committee was dissolved. During the potentially conflicted 1924 summer congress in Salzburg Rank symbolically left for America. An extraordinary psychodrama ensued with Rank eventually being seen as "poison" to be drawn out of the group. His excretion from the Vienna circle can be interpreted as the abandonment of the unwanted neonate, the circumcision of psychoanalysis or even the surgical removal of the cancerous mouthpiece of the body-corporate.

Exploration of the psychodynamic impact of perinatal trauma lays bare the possibility of moving on to analysis of the effect of postnatal circumcision and its links to castration anxiety. Any such endeavour would have been intolerable to the personal repressive defences of the male Jewish analysts involved, and prohibitively disruptive to the collective religious identity of the Jewish population at a time of ominous increase in anti-Semitism.

The multi-modal collusion effectively vetoed further exploration of the trauma of birth as the matrix of anxiety, terror, rage, guilt, idealisation, splitting, regression and grief and the source of primary defences against anxiety whether for the individual or for the collective social process. Re-repression was reinforced by the construction of the theory of the “Death Instinct” as an axiomatic event-horizon signalling the setting of a professional taboo. If we recognise the death instinct as a symbolic encoding of the residual defences associated with the trauma of birth, then we can make much more sense of the associational nuances in Hanna Segal’s paper. The placental failure, roots of ambivalence in the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, puncturing of the membrane, breaking of the waters, being pushed or precipitated into horror, pain, terror beyond bearing, the threat of annihilation and personal disintegration, the timelessness of fixation in a state of unending agony, the existential reversal of birth as death and consequent elision of any post-natal separation and grief.

Tragically the collusional construct has become embedded in the doctrinal paradigm of contemporary psychoanalysis where its role as a social defence against anxiety has blocked further understanding of the roots of the psychotic processes in groups and aborted our professional ability to provide a creative response to Einstein’s challenging question “Why War?” The collusional construct is a dysfunctional anachronism. It is time to move on.

Postscript (?)

In English we are constrained to use classical languages to describe after-words, whether it be the Greek of **Epilogue** or the Latin of **Postscript**. Here I wish to introduce an **Afterdream**, or **Nachtraum**. Early on the morning after Hanna Segal’s presentation I awoke from an extremely vivid lucid dream whose main content was so at variance with my own process that I concluded that it was an example of social dreaming, the surfacing of group or social transference in dream-symbolic form.

Driving in the darkness down narrow unlit roads in Polish hill country near the German border, with a male guide in the passenger seat and my wife in the back, we came down towards a cross-roads controlled by traffic-lights. Beyond, a tiny village took up the left-hand quadrant with its illuminated row of high-street shops facing onto the main road. As we drove past, something in one of the shop-windows caught my wife’s attention and she asked that we park the car and go back to see it. I turned sharp left into a narrow back-alley running down beside the high blank wall of what seemed to be a warehouse, then immediately left again round the back of the warehouse towards a car-park behind the little row of shops. There were no empty spaces so we turned left again to exit between two of the shops back onto the High-street. Turning right this time we faced the traffic-lights through which we had just passed. The head-lights picked out the narrow road reaching back up the hill into the

darkness. The traffic lights were at red and as we paused we picked out the white weather-boarding of an isolated dwelling set back behind a tall hedge on the banked slope to our left beyond the lights. Leaning forward in his seat our guide began to tell the story of the house.

“It all happened at night, many years ago, before the days of telephones and electricity. In the main bedroom, whose windows looked down the hill towards the village, a woman was in the last stages of labour. There were complications. The baby was stuck. The woman was screaming in excruciating agony. The village midwife had not yet arrived but the husband dared not leave the woman to fetch her. In desperation he picked up a great baulk of timber and beat on the weather-boarded wall of the house, making so much noise that he woke all but the most sound sleepers in the village. Hearing the commotion, the midwife immediately guessed what was happening. Grabbing a cloak she rushed up the hill. Arriving somewhat out of breath, she was quickly taken up the stairs by the much relieved husband who, by now, was fearing for his wife’s very life. Entering the dimly lit bedroom, she took in the situation at a glance. The woman lay exhausted in terrible pain, all progress in the birthing had ceased several hours before. Picking up the first implement she could find, the midwife used the blunt-ended handle of a kitchen fork to rupture the distended tissue to the left of the vagina. Working as fast as she could she extended the opening until the blood-covered baby could be delivered. Then she did everything possible to stop the bleeding, close the wound and make the terribly traumatised woman as comfortable as could be till daybreak. The baby died.

At first light they carried the woman down and put her in the back of a cart for the terrible jolting journey to the nearest hospital in a little German town just over the border. Against all the odds she survived. The midwife’s crude butchery had saved her life. Grief-stricken and still in shock all the woman wanted was to return home. The doctor, knowing that her life was still at risk, forbade her with the words: ‘Poland! Sie bleiben hier!’”

I awoke with the doctor’s words ringing in my ears.

The terror of death in the trauma of birth lies at the very heart of the human condition of alienation. Here is the point of fixation, the mirror boundary that reflects the journey into regressive reversal, the process of idealisation denying any possibility of survival and emergence through the hell of the impingement and offering the only way forward as the journey into the past of idealised uterine bliss. The imprint of birth becomes an event horizon at the boundary of a womb with no exit. The only way out is the retreat to the point at the centre. The boundary is invested with the symbolism of death. It is an engagement with unending agony (“death by the death instinct”), shattering fragmentation, ultimate rage, unbearable terror, unquenchable grief and unforgivable guilt. To cross it is to be placed beyond the pale, to experience the fall, the expulsion from Eden, the judgement of damnation. Salvation requires a vicarious death and a regressive re-birth into the idealised domain of the phantasised heavenly womb.

While birth is seen as death there is no possibility for egressive integration. While the death instinct remains as the symbolic coding of the birth imprint, the analyst is caught in collusion and counter-transference with the common defences against peri-natal anxiety. While the flawed hypothesis of the death instinct is treated as the causal root of terrorism, violence and

war, there can be no deconstruction of the compulsion-repetition psychodrama that lies at the heart of man's inhumanity to man.

For those of us who survive, birth is not death. It is not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. It marks in reality the end of our beginning.

David Wasdell
17th March 2003