

Albert Mason: some personal reflections by John Steiner

I first came across Albert Mason when I read a paper by Hanna Segal on Melanie Klein's technique. Segal described a patient who had become extremely jealous when he saw a certain Dr M. give her a ride in his Rolls Royce. I made enquiries about the identity of Dr M. and, when I discovered that he was an analytic sibling, I fully identified with the jealous patient and protested loudly about Dr M. in my sessions. I would later become friends with Dr Albert Mason and learn that his chutzpah had no trace of superiority: it was simply part of his charm. He enjoyed sharing many more Rolls Royce stories, all of which demonstrated his great capacity for humour and irony, including another involving Hanna Segal. In a session he reported to her that, in the latest of several accidents on his way to a session, he had cut a gash in the bodywork of his car. Dr Segal replied that she had better tell him that she was pregnant before he went and performed a caesarean section!

I kept hearing about this adventurous analytic sibling and found that we had many things in common. I came to admire and respect his enthusiastic engagement with whatever project he might be working on. He was generous, as both a host and a teacher, especially toward young analysts, and he always demonstrated passion for his subject and clarity in his ideas.

He began his professional career as an anaesthetist, went on to become a hypnotist, then a psychiatrist, and finally trained as a psychoanalyst. He grew famous when he managed to clear the disfigured skin of a patient with a congenital ichthyosis, using hypnosis. In fact, he had initially made a wrong diagnosis – congenital ichthyosis was not supposed to respond to hypnotic treatment. However, his discovery turned old theories upside down, causing a stir in the medical community and beyond. This remarkable success led to a research post and a gradual shift toward psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Later, once he had trained as an analyst, he elaborated his doubts about hypnosis, whilst also growing interested in the mental mechanism behind its striking, if unpredictable, efficacy. He described how the hypnotist and his subject engage in a mutual idealisation and attribution of characteristics to one other, resulting in a *folie à deux* of complementary phantasies. He explained that: “[t]he patient wishes for an omnipotent healer both to heal him and to identify with, and the hypnotist wishes, and unconsciously believes, that he has omnipotent powers, and reinforces his own and the patient's phantasies by his own projections into a willing and compliant patient”.

Albert saw that this type of *folie à deux* was a phenomenon that occurred in everyday life, for example in the relationship between mothers and babies; a theme upon which Deborah Steiner elaborated in her 1997 paper on the mutual admiration between mother and child. We can now recognise that a similar *folie* between an analyst and his or her patient is not uncommon, and is responsible for some types of dangerous acting out.

After Albert gave up hypnosis, he began his psychoanalytic training with supervision from Wilfred Bion and Herbert Rosenfeld, and later from Hans Thorner and Donald Meltzer. In the late 1960s, a small group of analysts in Los Angeles invited a number of British analysts to come to California, promising an enthusiastic reception (and good weather!). To everyone's surprise, “the least likely Londoner of all – Wilfred Bion – accepted the challenge”, and his relocation there in 1967 became a puzzle to many of his contemporaries. Albert followed, and remained there for the rest of his life, making a major contribution to the development of Kleinian analysis in the USA and becoming a crucial player in the founding of the Psychoanalytic Centre of California. He had been born in America and, although he was still a baby when his family returned to London, he seemed to feel at home there.

Albert's influence has been rather greater than his published papers suggest. He wrote about depression, transference, the super-ego, and Bion's ideas of binocular vision, and also recorded numerous interviews. One of his writings that stands out is a highly original unpublished paper about the *folie à deux* that developed between Freud and Fliess, in the years between 1897 and

1905. In this paper, he convincingly describes how an impetuous, excited Freud turned to a delusional Fliess, forging a close bond with him that lasted nearly seven years. Albert's paper refers to two characters from Freud's famous 'Irma' dream. In the dream Freud describes his friend Otto as "too hasty", while his friend Leopold is "slow but sure". Albert believes these friends to represent two sides of Freud: the hasty one who became over-excited by cocaine and later by Fliess, and the sober, realistic one who was eventually able to extricate himself from his omnipotent identifications and face his depression. The dream is testament to Freud's dangerous idealisation of Fliess, who was invited to operate on Freud's patient Emma Eckstein, and who then returned to Berlin leaving some gauze in her nasal cavity, which became infected. For a long time, Freud denied his own guilt about this botched job, continuing to exonerate Fliess and blame his patient, despite clear evidence of Fliess' malpractice. This hasty 'Otto' was eventually replaced by a more sober Freud, who was able to admit his errors, begin to face his guilt, and recognise that he had resorted to omnipotence at a time when he really needed Fliess to cure his depression and fear of dying.

Albert appeared to flourish in California, and built a happy marriage there with Jennifer Langham. He helped Jenny to develop her identity as a psychoanalyst, while she helped him to recognise some of his own flights of fancy.