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Book review: *Clinical Lectures on Klein and Bion*, edited by Robin Anderson

Hardback, Separate volumes are available in hardback and in paperback.
London/New York: Tavistock/Routledge, 1992. 139 pp.

Reviewed by Marie Bridge, 2002

This book is based on a lectures given in a series of Public Lecture days at The Institute of Psychoanalysis in the late 1980s – two ‘Klein days’ and one ‘Bion day’. The lectures have been revised by the authors, and edited by Robin Anderson. Despite revision, the book retains some of the atmosphere of those conferences: a live sense of work in progress and the desire to convey complex theory to a mixed audience. In her Introduction, Hanna Segal writes of the authors’ ‘daunting task’ of ‘making [disturbing] ideas understandable without denuding them of any of their meaning’. Inevitably, since the complexity was retained, the detailed thinking could not be absorbed in a single hearing. Thus, having attended two of the lecture days myself, I recall feeling grateful when this collection was published, in 1992. The book also has, in the best sense, a ‘period feel’ of a specially fertile time for the Klein group: Ron Britton and Michael Feldman, for instance, are referred to as ‘new authors’ and there is a sense of watching the early development of ideas that are now seen as seminal, for example John Steiner’s work on mourning and Ron Britton’s on the Oedipus situation. The collection also includes papers by Patricia Daniel, Ruth Riesenbergl Malcolm, Edna O’Shaughnessy, Irma Brenman Pick, and Elizabeth Bott Spillius. Anderson’s introduction is brief and peculiarly helpful in its style because he manages to place himself alongside the uninitiated reader. He stresses that this book is not comprehensive but aims more at giving a taste of how the concepts are used in current clinical practice and how they have been developed and modified. His synopses of each paper function as a vade mecum, guiding the reader to the central point of each paper. He links each paper with the aspect of Klein’s or Bion’s theory that the author aims to refine: thus Feldman and Spillius look in detail at different kinds of projective identification conceived as a far more central than this concept was for Klein herself; Steiner distinguishes between the fear of loss and the capacity to experience loss as different shades of the depressive position; Britton’s now almost axiomatic linking of the depressive position with the Oedipus situation is shown to be entailed by Klein’s concepts.

In the Bion chapters Anderson shows some sympathy with the reader who might find Bion’s notation not only ‘difficult and often unnerving’ but possibly even questionably useful. This un-idolatrous approach permits Anderson to gloss some of Bion’s ‘empty concepts’ and thus provide a vocabulary to help the reader approach the complex Bion chapters with more confidence. He underlines again that the origins of Bion’s concept of the ‘psychotic part of the personality’ lay in his early work with frankly psychotic patients. Quoting O’Shaughnessy, Anderson emphasizes that it is the mind’s attack on itself, and on the very concept of mind, ‘the fragmentation and the expulsion of the means of knowing reality’ that underlies psychotic functioning and reminds us just what we mean when we, perhaps too casually, refer to ‘the psychotic part of the personality’. The structure of the Bion part of the book reflects this: the chapters by O’Shaughnessy and Britton, dealing with extremely ill patients, serve to highlight the hatred and dread of knowledge that underlies the ‘phenomenon of not learning’ in Malcolm’s less obviously ill ‘as-if’ patients.



Although some of these papers have become free-standing classics, the book itself is more than a collection. In 'Keeping things in mind', Britton writes of the reciprocal relationship between container and contained. "The 'contained' gives meaning to the context which contains it. The 'container'gives shape and secure boundaries to that which it enshrines." He speaks of a 'mild mutual persecution' between container and contained as necessary for life. Unusually, this formulation gives an equally structuring function to the contained, which redefines its own context. To my mind Britton here beautifully describes this book and the relation of psychoanalytic tradition, Freud – Klein – Bion, (the container) to clinical work and new thinking (the contained.) Most authors here explicitly ground their thinking in a developing tradition, implying that it is the secure framework of key concepts that gives them room to think. Thus Steiner writes of the 'impressive clarity' and clinical usefulness of distinguishing between paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions – probably Klein's most significant contribution – which he and others then go on to elaborate and refine. Feldman, Spillius and others write about different kinds of projective identification in a way that reconfigures this concept itself as a container.

The Klein group is sometimes caricatured as monolithic. Although there is a coherence among the papers, this reviewer is more struck by the differences in style. The containing tradition allows Brenman Pick to present a paper which is entirely clinical so that the sessions are so vivid they could have happened yesterday. This is what carries conviction. Many papers contain a detailed review of the counter-transference, both during the session and in hindsight. Indeed, it is here most of all, in wrestling with the analyst's own very uncomfortable feelings, misgivings and defences, that theory comes to be questioned and rethought. Spillius's paper is exemplary, not only in the sweep of her review and rigorous attempts to clarify different uses of a concept, but also in the benignly ironic quality of self-scrutiny that leads to re-vision. It will be a tremendous loss to the wider psychoanalytic community, and to the public, if considerations of confidentiality make it impossible in future to present such open-handed papers to an unrestricted audience.

There are flaws in this book. Steiner's paper contains six lines (p.53) that are repeated verbatim two pages later, suggesting hasty editing or revision. Malcolm's paper, now a classic, is still in my view so rich with detail that it could do with judicious pruning. These are, however, minor quibbles about a book that exemplifies what is most admired about the contemporary Kleinians: Britton's 'mild mutual persecution' - between theory and practice, between tradition and dissenting creativity, a friction that keeps psychoanalysis alive.

In conversation Robin Anderson told me something of the genesis of this book. The series had been his idea but he thought that the Public Lectures Committee itself, with its broad base in the Society as a whole, had also been a container. Mostly the lectures were written for the occasion, though some of the concepts that were in the air at the time have now become central - notably 'psychic retreats' and the repositioning in the foreground of the Oedipus complex. Anderson, along with Iain Dresser, had chaired the series and Anderson had been invited to edit the book when the series proved such a success. At the time he was relatively junior and felt privileged to edit the lectures of so many established figures. He was not an 'analytic scholar' and in particular was not at that time steeped in Bion as many of his authors clearly were. In writing his introduction he himself had been working hard to



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understand Bion's 'sometimes not only enigmatic but even provocative' comments. Writing the introduction had not been easy. I think it is this openness to his own experience of learning that gives Anderson's introduction such a lucid and accessible quality.

Asked to speculate about what new theoretical developments might now be in the air, Robin Anderson said his own particular interest was in the balance between the psychotic and non-psychotic parts of the personality, the fact that 'each individual has to grapple with their own madness'. He had come to this through his work with adolescents, where it was particularly clear in the intense focus on the body and often extremely concrete thinking: eating disorders, disturbances in sexuality, self-harm and suicide. However, he had a sense that other analysts were again turning their attention to the mind/body boundary.

I was interested in Anderson's view that I was mistaken to regard the time of these lectures as 'particularly fertile'. At the time he and members of the Public Lectures Committee had themselves felt in awe of earlier analytic thinkers (e.g. of the 1950s) and had indeed wondered whether in the 1980s they were witnessing the decline of psychoanalysis. The series of lectures, which ran parallel to similar events on other major figures in British psychoanalysis such as Winnicott and Anna Freud, had partly been devised to face this challenge. Thus he was struck that someone of my generation now saw this collection as a classic and that I felt we now stood in the same relation to the 1980s figures as he had to earlier figures. He was adamant that, although times were harder for analysts, the quality of recent analytic generations was as high as ever and he was confident that new conceptual thinking would go on emerging for that very reason.