

## **THE PETRIFIED SELF: ESTHER BICK AND HER MEMBERSHIP PAPER**

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There can be few people in psychoanalysis that have had so profound an influence and yet who have published so little as Esther Bick. Her influence could indeed be said to be in inverse proportion to the volume of her writings. The present paper offers a brief sketch of Bick's life and achievements and situates a recently rediscovered early work within the corpus of her ideas.

Born in Przemyśl, in Poland, Esther Bick (1902-1983), despite a difficult early life both emotionally and materially, always strove resolutely to achieve her ambitions, a capacity that contributed to her gaining early in her career a PhD in Child Psychology under Charlotte Bühler in Vienna. Later in her career this same trait led to her being regarded as uncompromising by some colleagues, most notably by John Bowlby over the Tavistock Clinic's child psychotherapy training. Following the *Anschluss* she fled with her then husband from the Nazis to Switzerland and travelled from there to England. Arriving in 1938 she began her psychoanalytic training, being analysed by Michael Balint and supervised by James Strachey and Melanie Klein, before going on to have a second analysis post-qualification with Klein.

Bick is best known in Britain for her pioneering development of child psychotherapy at the Tavistock Clinic (Bick, 1962), infant observation within psychoanalytic education (Bick, 1964) and for her ideas on the 'psychic' or, perhaps more accurately, proto-mental functions of the skin. The latter began with the idea that the experience of the skin forms one of the most primitive experiences of being passively held together, without which there would be a deadly falling to pieces. Here the experienced skin is an amalgam of the infant's own skin and that of mother obtained through handling. The internalisation of this function, according to Bick, provides the infant with a primitive notion of a body boundary, dimensionality, compartmentalisation and concomitantly a container, necessary precursors of the splitting, projective and introjective mechanisms that contribute to Klein's paranoid schizoid and depressive positions.

Fear exists as a central leitmotiv in Bick's writings and thinking. The impingement of fear as a basic affect, particularly on the infant's psyche, unmodulated by containment, was a phenomenon that Bick regarded as having profound effects on later development. Early failures in first skin containment, Bick suggested, can lead the infant to an active use of his body, principally through the musculature, via either continuous movement or tensing of the body, to confer a self-generated sense of being held together in the face of severe anxieties, a primitive defence she termed a 'faulty second skin formation' (Bick, 1968, 1986). Subsequently Bick described a related defence, 'adhesive identity', her preferred name for what her supervisee and subsequent colleague, Donald Meltzer, later described as 'adhesive identification' (Meltzer, 1974, personal communication, 14 September 2000). In this state the infant attaches himself to the surface of the object, adhering to it to attain a rudimentary degree of safety, to combat massive anxieties about catastrophic ruptures in the coherence of the body-self that it is feared could result in a spilling out of the self into boundless space. Conceptually, this bears a certain similarity to Balint's (1959) description of the clinging to objects that characterises ocnophilic states.

Due to difficulties in setting her ideas down on paper and her relative dissatisfaction with the results (Harris, 1983; Joseph, 1984) Bick published very few papers. Her influence within the psychoanalytic community had derived primarily from

her extensive teaching and supervisory work. Since her death in 1983 this influence has ebbed somewhat within the Kleinian mainstream, a situation in part contributed to by the aforementioned slim published output. Nevertheless, for many clinicians her ideas remain vibrant and are currently attracting something of a renewed interest. Within the psychoanalytic literature, Sayers (2000) has produced the best currently available account of her life and work, in addition to which a collection of papers in two volumes is due for publication in France (Haag, forthcoming) whilst here in Britain work is occurring on a festschrift (Briggs, in preparation).

Given both her seminal importance and the relative dearth of her available writings, it was particularly pleasing to recently discover, in the course of an unrelated study, a hitherto unpublished early paper of Bick's entitled 'Anxieties underlying phobia of sexual intercourse in a woman'. This paper, here reproduced for the first time (*BJP* 18(1): 7-21), represents an important addition to the body of her published work. Written during the first half of 1953 and completed by the beginning of June, Bick read it to a Scientific Meeting of the British Psychoanalytical Society on the 10<sup>th</sup> of that month as her membership paper. This was apparently the second paper Bick gave to the Society, at least one earlier paper having been given in 1948 following her election as an Associate Member during March of that year. The Institute's archives record a paper, 'Notes on a case of a boy treated on a once a week basis', being read in April 1948, whilst other records there suggest Bick delivered a paper to the Society on 19 May, titled 'Psychoanalytic work in child guidance'. It seems probable that both titles relate to only one actual paper. Unfortunately no copies (under either title) are so far known to exist.

In her membership paper Bick describes a five-year ongoing analysis, conducted initially on a four and then five times a week basis, of a married woman in her mid-thirties who came into treatment with pervasive disabling phobic states (claustrophobia and vaginismus being prominent) and thoughts of suicide. The patient, existing in what now might be termed a psychic retreat, was torn between a desperate clinging onto her objects for her own survival and a concern for their well-being, especially given her calamitous omnipotent control of them. Envy can be seen as a significant, albeit unnamed, feature of the patient's presentation, it being a concept Melanie Klein was still at this time working towards. With Bick's analytic support and insight into this dilemma, the patient's persecutory anxiety gradually mitigated, which in turn allowed increased reparative concern and love for her objects to emerge. While significant analytic work had been achieved over the course of the reported treatment, it remained work in progress; its final outcome is tantalisingly unknown. Its contemporary reception was sufficiently favourable for Bick to be elected a Full Member, though Winnicott (who at the time was assuming a more Independent stance) raised a number of criticisms about the paper's Kleinian leanings. In particular he criticised the application of splitting as a concept to non-psychotic patients and suggested instead that dissociation was the more apposite concept, before commenting *inter alia* on Bick's description of paranoid defences against depressive states, and on the patient's use of breathing as an early, partially inhibited form of oral sadism (see Rodman, 1987, pp. 50-52).

From a contemporary perspective the paper can be regarded as remarkable in a number of ways, including its portrayal of nascent forms of some of Bick's subsequently developed ideas, particularly her central interest in primitive fear and its containment. Thus, for example, Bick describes her patient as employing 'a defence of immobility, of suspension' against anxieties about disintegration, reminiscent of what she later termed 'second skin' phenomena. Similarly the patient's profound difficulties with separation, as depicted in the 'leash, leech, vampire mouth' dream as well as the anxiety evoked around the breaks, Bick might later have discussed in terms of 'adhesive identity'. In part related to this is a fine description of primitive nipple-mouth containment or holding, an idea

now widely associated with Bion and Tustin. Two other features are worth noting here particularly. First is Bick's employment of the term 'claustrum', probably derived from a paper Bertram Lewin had published the previous year (Lewin, 1952). Her use of this particular idea can be seen as a link with her ongoing interests in primitive containment and arguably was influential on the thinking of Donald Meltzer, who went on to extensively explore this idea (Meltzer, 1992; Willoughby, 2001). Related to this feature is Bick's depiction of "lavatory" containers, prefiguring Meltzer's (1967) concept of the "toilet-breast".

The paper is reproduced here in this Journal in toto for the first time. Some very minor amendments have been made (to grammar, spelling and punctuation) to facilitate its readability. Textual interpolations are given in square brackets, while brief additional comments are confined to the endnotes.

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