

# The Use of Stories as Autistic Objects

By Paul Barrows

## INTRODUCTION

In this paper I shall describe my work with a four year-old boy diagnosed as being on the autistic spectrum. This work alerted me to a particular way in which this child was making use of the ‘common currency’ of children’s stories, films and videos to a particular pathological end. Rather than constituting part of a shared culture these items were used to block his awareness of both internal and external reality, to defend him from overwhelming anxiety. His use of them appeared to me to be the equivalent of what Tustin has described in relation to the use some children make of *autistic objects* (Tustin, 1972) and I would like to suggest that her concept might appropriately be extended to include such cultural artefacts.

Tustin first described *autistic objects* in her earliest work on childhood psychosis, *Autism and Childhood Psychosis* (Tustin, 1972). She continued to make extensive use of this idea in her later writings, though she also became increasingly interested in developing and exploring the related concept of *autistic shapes* (Tustin, 1986). Whilst she did make some minor modifications and revisions to her views, the concept remained substantially unchanged throughout her work. The implications of her late and substantial revision of her own ideas (Tustin, 1991, 1994), involving the final rejection of the notion of a stage of normal primary autism, were never explored in relation to this particular concept.

## AUTISTIC OBJECTS

In her earliest formulations about the nature of autistic objects Tustin described them as '(a) parts of the child's own body (b) parts of the outside world experienced by the child as if they were his body' (Tustin, 1972, p. 64). Her views were embedded in a developmental psychology that regarded infants as going through an initial stage of 'normal primary autism' from which they gradually emerged as they became more able to tolerate the separateness of their primary object. Her views had parallels with Winnicott's idea about the mother needing to 'gradually disillusion' her infant, introducing the world 'in small doses'. When this process is managed well enough, the infant experiences, in Tustin's words, a 'psychological birth' that parallels the physical act of birth. When, for whatever reason, this process goes awry the alternative is a 'psychological catastrophe' (Tustin, 1981b). The autistic object is used to avoid awareness of that catastrophe: 'the *autistic object* is an object which is experienced as being totally 'me' ... The function of the autistic object is to obviate completely any awareness of the 'not-me' because it is felt to be unbearably threatening' (Tustin, 1972, pp 66-7).

The example from the baby observation of (non-autistic) Susan that is given suggests that the little girl used her fingers or other objects autistically to block out awareness of her mother's separateness. This developmental vertex is further developed with the suggestion that over time the autistic object 'merges into becoming the *transitional object*' (as was the case with Susan) and as such allows the infant to increasingly tolerate frustration and the awareness of the object's separate existence. It is only

when ‘ the frustration of waiting becomes intolerable, [that] objects become used autistically’ (p. 69) and only when this use becomes compulsive that pathology ensues. Such a development then establishes a barrier between the infant and the outside world that blocks any further progress since external influences cannot be allowed into the psyche.

Tustin’s 1980 paper develops her thinking but also re-emphasises many of the key points she had made earlier about autistic objects: she stresses their hard, physical nature and particularly the fact that they are ‘sensation dominated objects’ (she later re-named them ‘autistic sensation objects’ Tustin, 1990, p.40). She also reiterates her view about the part that they play in normal development: ‘autistic objects are normal in earliest infancy...Thus, the nipple experienced in terms of the child’s own tongue, is one of the child’s earliest autistic objects’ (p.30).

Whilst such views must necessarily require modification in the light of the revisions she was to make to her developmental theory, her comments about the *function* of autistic objects, as opposed to their genesis, remain extremely pertinent. ‘An outstanding characteristic of autistic objects is that they are not used in terms of the function for which they were intended...From a realistic point of view they were used in a way which was useless and meaningless: from the child’s point of view it became obvious that they were absolutely essential’ (p 27). It is precisely in relation to the *function* of the autistic object that I hope to show, in the clinical material that follows, how this concept may be extended to include a wider range of objects than those originally identified.

In fact, already in 1981, Tustin had begun to extend the concept herself and the example she gives in that paper particularly highlights how it is the *function* of what is being done that causes her to invoke the concept of the autistic object:

‘Anne Alvarez (1980) alerted me to the way in which these children can use language as Autistic Objects which *block* communication instead of facilitating it. She instances how, with a certain psychotic boy, words which had been full of life and meaning and used for communication with his therapist would gradually deteriorate and become ‘dead’, being then used to block communication’ (Tustin, 1981a, p.130).

Later authors, for example Rhode (Rhode, 1997), have similarly extended the use of the concept. In the latter instance the use of the voice as an autistic object again involves a considerable physical, sensation-dominated component. In the account that follows this aspect is not in evidence, but the way in which John made use of stories and videos did have all the hallmarks of objects being used to *block* communication that exemplify autistic objects.

#### CLINICAL MATERIAL

John was referred at 4 years of age by a paediatrician with a diagnosis of ‘autistic spectrum disorder’. The main difficulty described was that of him being excessively involved in his ‘fantasy play’, spending very long periods acting out characters from

videos that he had seen. He could also, at times, be very compulsive about the need to stick to certain routines, for example following a particular route on the journey to playgroup. He also had problems with soiling which resulted from his retention of faeces.

When I met the parents for an initial assessment I learnt that John had been born abroad and that he had for some time been in the care of nanny about whom they had come to have some considerable, though unspecified, concerns. They had been particularly alarmed when they noticed, on moving house at one point, how extremely distressed John had been when he had seen the TV packed away. There was a suggestion that the nanny might have left him for long periods in front of the TV. He subsequently seemed to show little interest in other children at a playgroup.

They reported that he had been extremely jealous at the birth of his younger brother, to the extent that at times he would act as though he did not exist. Tustin has suggested that the birth of a sibling may often act as a powerful precipitant for the onset of autism, and this may have been an important contributory factor in John's case:

'Thus the onset of autism is sometimes associated with the birth of another baby, if this occurs in the first two years of life. However, instead of feeling in competition with just one baby, such children feel in competition with a swarm of rivalrous sucklings who threaten to crowd them out or crush them to death' (Tustin, 1990, p.49).

They further described how he had never really learnt to sleep on his own. At the time of referral he would invariably be put down in the parents' bed by one of them, and they would then have to remain with him until he went to sleep. If they moved him to his own bed he would soon wake up and come back in with them. Their perception of this was that it was more driven by panic at letting go of them than by a wish to come between them. I was reminded of the Batellier drawing that forms the frontispiece to Tustin's *Autistic Barriers in Neurotic Patients*, depicting a child asleep with a gaping black hole at the foot of his bed (Tustin, 1986).

I arranged to see John for three times weekly therapy. It soon became clear that what the referrers had described as 'role play', or acting out, was of a rather different order than these terms implied. Nearly the whole of his time in sessions (and outside of them) was taken up with him 'being' a character from some story. I say 'being' advisedly, for there was rarely any sense of this having the status of 'make-believe', the 'as-if' quality of pretend play, although at times I thought he had 'learnt' that he ought to describe it thus and would say that it was a game. Thus, if I asked him who he was when was talking like Winnie the Pooh, he would say matter-of-factly "I'm John", but not as if he had left off this role, rather as if he had been 'taught' that this is his name, but actually John and Winnie are quite indistinguishable. It seems likely that his mother, in trying to help him separate out from his characters, had emphasised to him that he is John, and that he had learnt this by rote and taken it on board to the extent of repeating it to me. However, it carried no conviction that he had any sense of *who* John was.

In consequence, interpretations that might address the symbolic content of the stories seemed meaningless and beside the point. It seemed rather that the stories had *become* his world and that very powerful barriers had been erected to maintain this state of affairs. These barriers blocked out any shared reality - the stories themselves being *potentially* part of a shared external reality and culture - and meant that there was also no linkage between the stories and his internal world.

It often felt as though he was desperately hanging on to 'being' the character whose role he had taken on and I increasingly came to feel that the 'stories' had more the quality of autistic objects that he clung to. This frequently seemed to involve a lot of running around in the room and when, on occasion, largely driven by my own frustration, I tried to slow him down, it was immediately apparent what a state of panic this threw him into.

From early on in his treatment John would invariably remove his socks and shoes in the waiting room, before coming along to the playroom. It was as if he was literally stepping out of his own shoes and into somebody else's. At times I would think of this as a very concrete and massive form of projective identification (see Klein, 1955), although even this seems to imply more of a phantasy than was present. At first, tellingly, he said to me that his mother was 'borrowing' his shoes, as though any distinction between the two of them, any acknowledgement of the difference of the generations (and of the sexes) had been abolished. Later he began to say that she was

‘looking after them’, but again this seemed to be something that he had ‘learnt’ that he ought to say.

When John was locked into being one of his characters I felt him to be quite inaccessible, and at times it was very hard to keep on paying attention. It was rarely any use asking him what the story was, as he would simply not reply and continue on. Sometimes it would become apparent which story it was, but he might also move very quickly from one story into another with no transition. The moments when he would tell me of a real event, for example about a cut on his hand, or once when he was looking out of the window and told me about ‘his’ car (later corrected to ‘his mother’s car’) that he could see in the Clinic car park, seemed like moments to be treasured.

There have, however, been a few occasions when this massive defence has broken down and it has been possible to get a glimpse of the fears that have led to its creation. I will quote from my notes of one such session at a fairly early stage of his treatment, which followed a session that he had had to miss:

John had his shoes on at the beginning of this session. He told me about being Scrooge and about the ‘walking stick’ that he had brought - a cardboard tube. He seemed unusually clear in talking to me at this point that he was ‘pretending’ to be Scrooge. I could feel that I was actually able to talk to him and he then told me that they have lost the video [of Scrooge]. When I tried to make a connection to the fact that he had ‘lost’ a session when he had been away the day before he would not reply. He took his shoes off, and it now



seemed apparent that he was 'being' Scrooge and he again seemed inaccessible. When I tried to slow down his running around the room he became quite panicky.

He then asked if it was time and insisted on getting his socks and shoes on even though there was a lot of time left. He said he was going to wait by the door. I helped him to do up his shoes and tied the laces. By chance, it turned out that one bow was only half done, with the result that one length of shoe lace was much longer than the other. As soon as he noticed this John became very distressed. He referred to the big one, the longer one, as 'the grown up' and said he didn't like the little one. He wanted to go out to his mother to get her to deal with this. I did not let him do this, but his distress was such that I did in fact adjust the lace on one of his shoes though not on the other, although he pressed me to do so and seemed ready to burst into tears. I talked to him about how he hates being little and how being 'Scrooge' - getting into his shoes - is one way he has of trying to run away from feeling little.

He told me several times to leave him alone and I talked to him about how he really hates me talking to him about this, and then wants me to go away and leave him alone. Nonetheless, this was a rare and unusually moving moment of real contact. It lasted for several minutes, until he picked himself up and started walking around with his stick. It was clear that he was now firmly back into the role of 'being' Scrooge.

I think that this material demonstrates how John retreats into the world of the Scrooge story to avoid having to face the 'external' reality of his dependent position as a little child. For a while he was able to 'pretend' that he was Scrooge, but it then seemed that my 'error' in reminding him of the reality of the missed session was felt to be too much and precipitated his move into 'being' Scrooge, and getting out of his own shoes. The loss of the session was something quite beyond his own control and it seemed that he was unable to tolerate this evidence of his own limited capacities, this blow to his omnipotence.

This is then confirmed by the material relating to the shoelace. It is the perception of his 'littleness' that he cannot abide and the 'fact of life' (Money-Kyrle, 1968) of the difference of the generations that he is thus presented with. In trying to equalise the lengths of the laces he seeks to obliterate the fact of this difference (see also Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1985).

'Littleness' seems to be felt to be so intolerable when it is associated with 'helplessness' or impotence, and it is this that can lead to a sense of panic. Tustin emphasised this aspect of the underlying problem for the child when she described how unreachable these children can seem to be:

'For much of the time in the early days of treatment the child... may not seem to be communicating with the therapist at all. It is important to remember that ostrich-like the child has hidden his head in the sand to retreat from unspeakable dreads... Gradually the therapist gets in touch with some of these

unspeakable terrors which have been kept at bay by the delusion of being in complete control by bringing everything to a dead stop. The terrors interpenetrate each other but are shot through with the supreme *dread of helplessness*' (Tustin, 1972, p.162, italics added).

It is in order to evade such terrors that John clutches at the story of the video which then becomes an object in its own right and not a vehicle for meaning. By clinging on to the story he avoids having to confront an external reality that is felt to be unbearable. This is the 'fact' of his littleness and the 'fact' of the missed session the day before with all that that might imply about his helplessness. External reality is not quite totally abolished: he knows his name, my name, that his mother is waiting for him outside and so on. So it is not such a total retreat as in a more profoundly autistic child. Nonetheless, when he has 'become' Scrooge and seems quite inaccessible, it is as though that external reality has ceased to be endowed with any real emotional significance for him. It is, then, as though he is now inhabiting his own inner world and he seems to achieve this by reinforcing the autistic barrier between that world and the one inhabited by his objects.

Of course, that inner world is a pretty odd world, constituted as it seems to be for the most part of an amalgam of video and other stories. His identity then seems to consist of a cobbling together of a variety of different characters. This is characteristic of autistic children about whom Tustin has said that they 'feel that they can make themselves grow by sticking extra bits on to their bodies' (Tustin, 1986, p. 279). Barrows (1999) has described this same process in an adult patient who particularly

admired a griffin figure because of its unique qualities, being made up of an amalgam of other creatures.

At this stage in his treatment I learnt of some positive changes that had been taking place: John was now sleeping through the night and going off to sleep without his parents having to be with him. He was taking more notice of his brother and interacting with him more, but he still often treated other children at school as if they simply did not exist. Whilst the school commented on some very noticeable improvements and more appropriate interactions with his peers, he still needed a lot of support to prevent him from disappearing into his 'stories'.

In his sessions, he was increasingly in touch with the real world, and there would be periods at the beginning and end of sessions when he would tell me about some real-life events.

### **Further Clinical Material**

I want now to describe some material from much later in John's treatment. I believe that this further illustrates the extent to which John's use of his stories and videos was a defence against a central anxiety related to the issue of 'bigness', an anxiety to which Tustin made frequent reference. It also shows John developing an increasing interest in the idea of 'imagination'. This material comes from some three years further into his treatment, at a point when his sessions had been, for some time,

reduced to once a week (in part a consequence of his improved performance at school).

He sat down on the floor and began to take off his socks and shoes. As he did this he told me about having a trident with a spooky face on at home, and then that in the next day or so he was going to go with his dad to buy some more things, like lanterns, which are for Halloween. (This was an instance of him telling me about an ordinary real-life event.) He then stood up and told me, in a typically didactic way, that he 'has an imagination', pointing to his head as he said this, and then also told me that he has spooky dreams and good dreams. He went on to say that he also has a brain, and seemed to mean that he can use his brain for thinking in contrast to 'imagining'. I said that it seemed that there were these 'real' things he could tell me about, like going shopping with his dad, and also things that he imagines, which seem more like what happens in his dreams, which can be either spooky or 'good'.

He went over to the light switch and turned it off and on and said something about needing to be bigger (this seemed related to the light switch, although in fact he can reach it perfectly well.) He told me that he dreams about being bigger and then he came over to the table and asked me to move my elbow so that he could move the table over by the door and the light switch. He also moved the couch to be in front of the table. He climbed up on the table, turned the light off/on, and then talked about being bigger and being a giant. I said that he was showing me how much he wished he were bigger, a giant, and that

often he does not like being 'John' in 'John shoes' and that he is showing me how he can use his 'imagination' to make himself *feel* bigger by climbing up on the table and then being bigger than me. He insisted that he still *is* John without his socks and shoes on. He then came over to me, telling me that he is 7 years old. When I said that he wanted to be a giant because he seemed to hate feeling small he corrected my use of the word 'small' and said 'short' instead.

He then started to tell me about 'George of the jungle', which was something that he had seen on TV. He told me that George got married to someone and they had a child. He then said that he could see 'in his eye' George and his bride on Pride rock. He explained that Pride rock was in the film *The Lion King*. I said that it seems he feels that George and his bride (mummy and daddy/ Mr Barrows and his bride) are up on their rock, looking down on him, as if they are full of pride and want to make him feel small/short and how unfair this feels to him. So that then he, in his imagination, makes himself into a giant so that he is as big or bigger than the grown ups.

He insisted that it was a film, something that he had seen on TV. I agreed with him, underlining that it was indeed a film and contrasting this with, for example, what he had told me about shopping with his dad – a real thing that he does. It seemed important at this stage to help him clarify the distinctions between real events, films, imagination and dreaming and I thought that my 'symbolic' interpretation of the content had been, perhaps, more than he could

manage at this time. He told me several times that the Lion King was coming to London and that this would be a play. He spelt out to me that this means that the characters on stage are actors playing these parts.

He then went to his box and took out the farmer figure. He talked about the giants sniffing out human beings (the farmer) and he, as the giant, intending to eat the farmer. He pretended to swallow the farmer figure and I suggested he felt that this is the way that he can 'become' like this grown up figure. Then the farmer tasted 'yuck' and he spat it out. He repeated this sequence, but this time the farmer escaped by climbing back up and out of his throat. I took up John's wish to have the farmer inside him, in his tummy, and therefore under his control, linking this to the fact that he had missed his session the week before (when his mother could not bring him) and his feeling that I had 'escaped', that he was not able to be in charge of me. He then removed the farmer's stick, pointing out to me that this was what he is doing. I talked to him about the stick being something that the farmer has got, an extra thing, (a symbol of his adult status) that John wished to take from him.

This material relating to the farmer's stick also illustrates Tustin's insights into the child's 'predatory envy of "sticking out bits" .... on other bodies' (Tustin,1981, p.73) which she linked to the child's experience of the loss of the 'bodily bit' of the mother. She continues:

‘Amongst other functions, these ‘sticking out bits’ are seen as plugging the ‘holes’ resulting from separation experiences, which lead to sensations of helplessness, hopelessness and extreme vulnerability. At this level, having the ‘sticking out bits’ means being all-powerful and in control, and this is felt to ensure survival.’

In the same chapter she also describes how this is frequently manifested in a child’s play by the use he makes of the light switch in the playroom, as in John’s case:

‘Putting the electric light switch on and off, which, in the early days of treatment, is a much repeated activity of most psychotic children, almost invariably has the connotation of having the bit that bequeaths control’ (ibid.)

In a later session the theme of ‘bigness’ recurred and it was significant that it was brought in the context of him telling me about his dreams. References to his dreams and to dreaming were a relatively new development, linked to his growing interest in his imagination:

He put his head out from under the couch where he had been hiding and said he was going to tell me about a **bad dream** that he had. In the dream he was with a girl from his school who he was in love with. He then noticed that his hands were getting bigger and then his feet were getting bigger and his head was getting bigger. He went on to number several other parts of his body that also got bigger. When he looked in the mirror his face had become his father’s



face and he had become his father. This was clearly a bad dream and quite scary. He also made some reference to becoming a giant.

He then very quickly went on to tell me about another dream he had had. This was a **good dream**. In this dream he was wearing yellow trousers and he became somebody called Caroline who is clearly a cool rock star and singer. This was presented as a very positive dream. He then stood up on the couch and began to impersonate the rock star.

There was something very telling about the way in which he stopped to tell me these dreams and in the way he delivered them, and I believe that what he was describing here was a central difficulty about his relationship to reality. In the bad dream he feels that in order to secure his object, the girl he loves, he has to become big. In fact, he has to literally 'become' his father. This is the kind of massive - and therefore pathological - form of projective identification so vividly described by Klein in her 1955 paper. However, the fact that this is experienced as frightening in the dream, and indeed the fact that this situation is presented in the form of a dream, already represents considerable progress over the straightforward enactment of such a phantasy. The dream is no longer an autistic object. The 'good dream' represents further progress since in this, and his subsequent impersonation of the rock star on the couch, there is a degree of pretence and of wish fulfilment in which John seems to be more able to 'play' at being a rock star.

There are now times when he can tolerate the sadness involved for him in the recognition of his 7 year old status:

He began the session (soon after a Christmas holiday break) by wanting to show off to me how strong he is: picking up his chair and then wanting to lift me up in my chair. I talked to him gently about wanting to be very strong, wanting to be as strong as the grown-ups, as strong as a daddy. At the same time I made it clear that I did not go along with this estimate of his strength and later on he became upset, complained that I wouldn't believe him, and said that he wasn't ever going to come again, that he would leave me for ever. He was sad and tearful and hid under the couch for a lot of the time.

However, during this session, he did not take off his shoes at any point and it was only at the very end of the session, in about the last five minutes, that he became rather manic, saying it was show-time and starting to sing a song, dancing and leaping about. At one point he went behind the curtains, looking very sad and said that I didn't understand him.

I said I thought there was a John who wanted to be very strong. At the same time there was a John who didn't feel at all strong, like the baby that he had referred to at the beginning of the session [he had heard a baby crying elsewhere in the Clinic, and said he didn't like it]. I talked about how he did not want to hear this 'weak' baby and connected this with what he had said about leaving me to be all on my own. I said that perhaps he had felt that he had been left like this in the holiday and that then he thought the way to deal

with that was to be very strong. I pointed out that he had been very upset in the session today, but that he *had* kept his shoes on all the time and that in that way he had carried on being seven-year old John, and that that was also why he had been so upset, because he didn't really like it. He really wanted to be as big and strong as a daddy and he thought it was very unfair of me to talk about this earlier on and not to agree that he was the strongest boy that I had ever met, as he wanted me to.

## DISCUSSION

Taken together, I want to suggest that this material shows how John initially used his stories and videos as autistic objects, until he slowly began to give them up and develop more of an 'imagination'. They seem to me to conform to Tustin's description of the autistic object in a number of ways. Firstly they were clung to desperately by John in a similar way to that in which David clung to his Dinky car (Tustin, 1981), even if they do not have the same hard, physical qualities. More particularly they served the same *function* as autistic objects namely that they were used to block out reality. They were an autistic barrier.

They were also 'promiscuous' or 'interchangeable' which was a feature to which Tustin also drew attention:

‘Another typical feature of autistic objects is the seeming ‘promiscuity’ of their use...If one were lost, there was always another to replace it...Some psychotic children have one autistic object which is used for a time in a stereotyped and ritualized way. It is then discarded, to be replaced by another which is used similarly. Thus, over a period of time, there may be a succession of objects which have been used in turn, with an intensity which shuts out awareness of anything else...If an autistic object is gone, the child is distressed as if he had lost a part of his body, but the object is soon replaced by another one which is experienced as being the same.’ (Tustin, 1980)

Thus there were occasions when, with great sadness, John might recognise, for example, that Robin Hood would not be coming to tea at his house. However, although the Robin Hood story was then abandoned it was immediately replaced with an equally obsessive interest in *The Wind in the Willows*.

The essential function of these interchangeable objects was to block out awareness of John’s basic, primitive anxieties. These were essentially the same as those that Tustin delineated in her work, namely the fear of helplessness and impotence. However, I think one can go further in this description in that I think that in John’s case we can see that this defence serves to block out awareness of both internal *and* external reality. The internal, psychic reality of his dread of helplessness and the external reality of his size and child status. In so far as this state represents a retreat from both forms of reality it is very akin to Steiner’s description of psychic retreats (Steiner, 1993).

Steiner describes these psychic retreats as a kind of third area which protects the patient from the anxieties of *both* the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions. 'A psychic retreat provides the patient with an area of relative peace and protection from strain when meaningful contact with the analyst [representing reality] is experienced as threatening.' However, as he goes on to spell out, and as I believe John's material illustrates, this is only achieved at a considerable cost to the patient:

'The relief provided by the retreat is achieved at the cost of isolation, stagnation, and withdrawal, and some patients find such a state distressing and complain about it. Others, however, accept the situation with resignation, relief, and at times defiance or triumph, so that it is the analyst who has to carry the despair associated with the failure to make contact.'

Steiner draws attention to the fact that it is the threatening contact with reality that is being avoided in this retreat. Fonagy and Target, in a fascinating paper on the development of psychic reality (Fonagy & Target, 1996) illuminate how contact with reality comes to be faced in the process of normal development. They argue that: 'The subjective sense of oneness between internal and external ... is a universal phase in the development of children' (p. 219). This echoes Tustin's notion of the importance of the infant's primary sense of at-oneness with the mother. However, they go on to suggest that anxiety drives the child to establish a distinction between the two:

‘Movement forward from this phase inevitably gives rise to conflict, and may therefore be fiercely resisted. However, within this phase the *assumed reality* of internal experience may cause even greater anxiety; the child feels that fantasies and information from the outside world have a powerful, direct and unstoppable impact on each other. Thus there is normally a powerful developmental push [in the very young child] towards integrating the modes of experiencing inner and outer reality, which allows the child to distinguish much more confidently between his internal and external experience’.

They underline the importance for children of this age of establishing ‘a clear division between ‘playing’ and ‘reality’’ (p.220) and argue that this process crucially depends on ‘interaction with other people who are sufficiently benign and reflective’. It was precisely this distinction between playing and reality that John seemed to lack. His stories *were* his reality and did not have the as-if quality that would allow him to easily step out of them.

In describing how autistic objects might shade into transitional objects Tustin had recognised the importance of a transitional area of experience in the developmental sequence that would lead to a full acknowledgement of reality and separateness. De Astis (1997), amongst others, has drawn attention to the need, in therapy, to begin to provide the child with just this kind of experience by trying to create a ‘potential space’ in which more symbolic play can begin to develop. For symbolic play depends precisely upon the acquisition of the capacity to endow external objects with emotional significance generated from the subject’s *internal* world.

Alvarez (1996) has, I believe, further added to our appreciation of what is needed for this developmental step to be achieved successfully, by emphasising the need for the infant to have the opportunity to introject a sufficiently '*playful*' as well as thoughtful object. One function of the kind of 'pretend' games played with toddlers that depend precisely upon 'playing around' with this precarious balance between internal and external reality may be to give them just that experience of making the discrimination between the two. They are those games which - if they are taken just a little too far - lose their 'as if' quality and become frighteningly real, such that the father actually *becomes* the fierce monster he is playing. It is as though, in that situation, the 'reality' that this is the child's parent playing a game is overwhelmed by a terrifying internal reality/phantasy. Having sufficient opportunity to 'play' with this distinction, with an object who can manage the boundary sensitively enough, may be crucial to the process of learning to distinguish between inner and outer reality.

In John's case a barrier has been erected against the perception of his anxiety-laden internal reality: his sense of dread of his impotence and powerlessness. It is because of this that his play has such a peculiarly sterile and repetitive quality. It does not carry the symbolic resonance that would infuse another child's play. Klein describes this feature in her paper on *Personification in the Play of Children* (Klein, 1929) stressing the negation of reality (both external and internal) that it implies:

My experience so far is that schizophrenic children are not capable of play in the proper sense. They perform certain monotonous actions, and it is a

laborious piece of work to penetrate from these to the Ucs. When we do succeed, we find that the wish-fulfilment associated with these actions is pre-eminently *the negation of reality and the inhibition of phantasy*. In these extreme cases personification does not succeed (p.199 - italics added).

Tustin similarly notes that:

‘There is a ‘let’s pretend’ quality in fantasy play and a realisation of bodily separateness from the object, which is lacking in the psychotic child’s use of his autistic objects. They have a bizarre and ritualistic quality and the child has a rigidly intense preoccupation with them, which is not a feature of fantasy play.’ (Tustin, 1980, p.27)

However John has also isolated himself from external reality as well. Although he remains in touch to the extent that, for example, he is well aware of my identity this is deprived of any real emotional significance. Additionally, there is much about his external reality that he seeks to ‘disavow’ (see Basch, 1983) in particular the ‘fact’ of his ‘littleness’ and the ‘fact’ of his impotence when he has to miss a session.

External reality is not totally abolished, so it is not such a total retreat as in a more profoundly autistic child. Nonetheless when, as in the above material, he has ‘become’ Scrooge and seems quite inaccessible, it *is* as though that external reality has ceased to be endowed with any real emotional significance for him. It is, then, as though he is inhabiting his own inner world and he seems to achieve this by



reinforcing the barrier between that world and the one inhabited by his objects. At such times he seems indeed to come much closer to a more psychotic denial of his perceptions, as described in the way he refused to acknowledge the presence of his baby brother (and indeed his own infantile self, for he would not look at pictures of himself as a baby). In the transference it was also often as if I were not present for him.

It seemed, therefore, as though a barrier against external reality had been erected as well as against internal reality. Thus he did not exactly retreat to his internal reality, but rather to a kind of third area that is divorced from *both* external and internal reality. A kind of no-man's land. It is this no-man's land that his stories represent, divorced as they are from both internal significance (for they do not connect with his internal world) and from external significance (for they are not used as a shared cultural object replete with meanings common to both subject and object). In fulfilling this function they assume the status of autistic objects.

John's increasing interest in the workings of his 'imagination' does, however, give grounds for hope that he may be beginning to move forward from this position, though with considerable pain and sadness as he comes to accept a more reality-based view of himself and gives up his retreat.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper I suggest that Tustin's concept of the *autistic object* may fruitfully be extended in two ways. Firstly, to include such phenomena as the way in which a child may use stories or other cultural artefacts to block out an awareness of not-me experiences, in addition to the hard, physical objects that Tustin originally described. This extension of the concept stresses the *function* of the object rather than its concrete/sensation properties which Tustin had originally emphasised. Such an extension parallels recent developments in Kleinian thinking. For example, Spillius notes that analysts now tend to eschew the use of concrete, part-object terms (e.g. breast, penis) and 'talk to the patient...more in terms of psychological *functions* (e.g. seeing, hearing, thinking, evacuating)' (Spillius, 1994, italics added).

Secondly, when Tustin referred to autistic objects being used to block out reality, she did not specify *which* reality she was referring to. I would suggest that they are in fact used to block out *both* internal and external reality, and thereby create a separate area of functioning that is equivalent to Steiner's conception of *psychic retreats*.

Finally, in the light of her revised views on the aetiology of psychogenic autism and her abandonment of the concept of a stage of normal primary autism, the autistic object can no longer be viewed as 'normal in earliest infancy'. From the outset it represents a pathological turning away from a creative engagement with the world of 'live company' (Alvarez, 1992).

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