A tribute to Frances Tustin

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Frances Tustin died on 11 November 1994, at the age of 81. Someone said to me during her last illness, 'I never had supervision from her, but she's always been a presence in my life.' Those who came in contact with her found that the way they saw their work, and indeed their life, was lastingly transformed. Thinking of her, I am reminded of lines from Jon Stallworthy's poem 'Credits':

Whose eyes, from looking much  
On the circumference  
Of life beyond this life  
Mirrored two worlds at once.*

She was born Frances Vickers in Darlington on 15 October 1913. Her father taught at primary school and was a lay preacher; her mother was a deaconess. Her early life is documented in Sheila Spensley's book on her work, the second book in the Routledge series on Makers of Modern Psychotherapy (Spensley, 1995); readers of this journal will recall Maria Pozzi's evocative interview (Pozzi, 1991). Frances was an only child whose life was suddenly and completely changed when her mother informed her that they were leaving her father. She and her mother spent the following years moving from one place to another. Before her parents' separation she had been keenly interested in biology, which she hoped to read at university. Both parents transmitted to her the belief that the things that mattered were not necessarily those that the world thought important. I remember her talking about an autistic child who was using a particular talent in order to get a fuss made of him. 'He must think that grown-ups are all mad,' she said, 'to be taking these monkey-tricks seriously instead of realizing what really matters.'

She trained as a teacher, and wrote her first book, A Group of Juniors, on latency children. Her interest in groups took her to a conference
where she met Dugmore Hunter, a psychoanalyst and later consultant psychiatrist in the adolescent department at the Tavistock Clinic. He suggested to her that she should apply for the training in child psychotherapy that had been newly established at the Tavistock by John Bowlby and Esther Bick. She had already become interested in psychoanalysis through attending Susan Isaacs’ lectures at the London University Institute of Education, and she went to the Tavistock in 1950, as part of the second intake of child psychotherapy trainees, along with Mattie Harris and Dina Rosenbluth. She had a long personal analysis with Bion, followed by a short time with Stanley Leigh after Bion went to California. Two of her supervisors were Herbert Rosenfeld and Donald Melzer, of whom she spoke with particular appreciation: ‘I remember going along to analysis and saying to Bion, “I’ve found a supervisor to match my analysis with you.”’ She wrote an account of her analysis with Bion for this journal (Tustin, 1981a), as well as giving an interview on it to Virginia Hunter. She valued most highly a remark by a colleague who said that she had Bion’s work in her bones. ‘I took it in on the couch,’ she said (rather than through reading).

Three years before going to the Tavistock she had married Professor Arnold Tustin, whom she met through a shared interest in Labour politics. He was an electrical engineer who had done pioneering work on the theory of servo-mechanisms during the war. He continued to be based in Birmingham while she spent the week in London, living with Mattie and Roland Harris whose second daughter was her godchild. ‘Arnold,’ she said later, ‘wrote three books while I was doing the training.’ This example proved an inspiration to her. ‘I saw Arnold writing – and then re-writing and re-writing; and I said to myself, “I could do that!”’ In fact she had a way with words. Her writing was simple and poetically evocative, and she worked at it until each word was in the right place. During most of her working life, she had a full caseload of once-weekly patients, so that weekends were divided between private work and writing. Although she had a constant battle with ill-health, her stamina was in fact extraordinary, both in the amount of work she got through and in her capacity to put up with difficult and unresponsive patients.

Arnold and Frances Tustin’s marriage was loving and devoted, and it was a particular cause of sadness that they were unable to have children. David Munrow, who later became a pioneer of the Early Music movement and whose parents the Tustins knew in Birmingham, was 8 years old when she suffered a stillbirth. He constituted himself as her honorary son. She often said that the lack of her own children made the love of her students particularly important to her. She gave to them insight, warmth and constant interest and support in relation to their personal lives.

While Frances Tustin was still training at the Tavistock, a lecture by Marion Putnam of the Putnam Research and Treatment Center in Boston awakened her interest in the new area of childhood autism. Kanner’s seminal paper had only recently been published: before 1943, autism had been lumped together with childhood schizophrenia. When Arnold Tustin spent a sabbatical year in Boston in 1954, she jumped at the chance of working at the Putnam Center. During her time there she provided therapy for autistic children as well as visiting them and looking after them in their homes to provide respite for their parents. She remained convinced of the importance of this kind of support in the home, of ‘a sensible person who goes in and helps the parents to sort themselves out’. ( Sadly, this kind of support is rarely available as part of a therapy-based programme for autistic children in this country, although in France, where her work has taken root and flourished, it is much more generally seen as essential.) She greatly enjoyed this time in the United States, where she and her husband travelled about and met many people, despite the witch-hunt atmosphere of McCarthyism.

In 1992, when it became clear that she would be unable to attend a conference of five hundred people organized in her honour by her French students, Didier Houzel travelled to Amersham to make a video (Hello Mrs Tustin). He included in it a photograph of the Tustins in America, setting out together on their bicycles to explore the Massachusetts countryside. Frances Tustin is very beautiful in this photograph, expectant and full of enthusiasm. ‘Ah!’ she said when I mentioned it to her, ‘I can still smell the roses in Martha’s Vineyard.’

On returning to England she formed, at Great Ormond Street, an association with Mildred Creak who was then considered the foremost expert on childhood psychosis. Mildred Creak was particularly gifted at differential diagnosis. She used to say, ‘I’m not a therapist, but I can send you the children who will get better’.” When the children did get better, Frances Tustin encountered the scepticism she was to become accustomed to: a child who improved could obviously not have been autistic in the first place. “Then I would say, “But they were diagnosed as autistic by Mildred Creak”.” One of these children seemed different from the rest: his behaviour did not appear to make sense according to any meaningful pattern that she could recognize. Mildred Creak confirmed that, unlike the others, this child had been diagnosed as brain-damaged. This should not be taken to mean that Frances Tustin
felt there was no point in treating children with brain-damage: the child on whom she gave me supervision at the end of her life certainly had neurological problems. Indeed, as readers of her books will know, she never maintained that the autistic children whom she cured suffered from no neurological defects, merely that any such defects were undetectable according to the diagnostic methods available at the time. During this period she belonged to the study group on autism convened by Donald Meltzer, and which included John Bremner, Isca Wittenberg, Doreen Widdell and Shirley Hoxter. The work of this group culminated in the publication, in 1975, of Explorations in Autism (Meltzer et al., 1975).

In 1966, in a paper entitled 'A significant element in the development of autism', Frances Tustin first described John, whose material she was to re-work again and again. This was the child who told her how, in the absence of the 'red button' (the nipple) he experienced in his mouth a 'black hole with a nasty prick'. Initially she was quite taken aback by his language, as she had been careful not to introduce words such as 'breast' and 'nipple' unless he used them himself. She realized that he was telling her about experiences that were difficult to conceptualize in terms of the theory she had been taught. In Didier Houzel's video she describes this initial bewilderment: 'He said to me, "The red button grows on the breast" and I asked him, "Where did you think it was?" - so he went like this [pointing into her mouth with the fingers of both hands] - and I said, "Oh! You thought it was your mouth".' The vivid sequence transmits to the spectator the conviction that she must have felt. She followed where John led her, and out of this grew her formulation that autistic children have undergone a traumatic separation from the mother at a stage when this could not be processed, so that they experience it as the loss of a part of their mouth.

When she presented this material at a conference, a member of the audience told her about a paper, 'The capacity to be alone', in which Winnicott had referred to similar experiences of losing part of the mouth (Winnicott, 1958). Following Margaret Mahler, she developed her notion of a stage of normal primary autism. In her first book on autism, Autism and Childhood Psychosis, published in 1972, she advanced a scheme of classification in which she distinguished encapsulated from confusional (schizophrenic) children, and the state of normal primary autism from abnormal primary autism, encapsulated secondary autism and regressive secondary autism. Encapsulated children protect themselves from the terrors of the 'not-me' outside world by erecting barriers against it, while confusional children protect themselves by perpetuating an entanglement with the mother or therapist, of whose separate existence they are far more aware than are the 'encapsulators'. As she put it in Autistic States in Children (p. 37): 'the psychological manuscir children stare emptily into a void, the autistic children avert their gaze from a 'black hole' whereas the schizophrenic children look through empty windows at a scene of chaos and disorder.'

In her much later paper 'The perpetuation of an error' (Tustin, 1994a), she was to describe how she realized that the theory she had learned did not adequately cover the phenomena she was observing. Feeling that she was describing the same things as Margaret Mahler, she turned at this point to Mahler's theoretical scheme. In this scheme, as in Winnicott's, the infant gradually emerges from a state of non-differentiation from the mother. Frances Tustin thus conceptualized autism as resulting either from an abnormal persistence of a normal primary state or as a regression to it. When she revised her views on normal primary autism, she felt that the classification proposed in Autism and Childhood Psychosis needed to be reconsidered. However, this first book on autism contains much clinical material that she did not subsequently re-work in her later books, and which is highly relevant to some of the children presenting with mixed features today. Although the famous cases of John (psychotic depression) and David (encapsulation) were discussed in her three later books, there is much that was first delineated in Autism and Childhood Psychosis that has still not been comprehensively developed. (For instance, David's strategy of taking bits from his objects in order to construct a pseudo-identity by means of a kind of collage has far-reaching implications for disorders of introjection.) Frances Tustin wrote this book with passion, and because of this she herself preferred it to her comprehensive second book, Autistic States in Children, which was composed more coolly and with a lesser sense of urgency. 'I used to feel I had a baby sitting on my knee,' she said of the time when she was working on the first book, 'and that if I stopped writing, it would die.' Autism and Childhood Psychosis is to be re-issued by Karmac Books, with an introduction by Victoria Hamilton.

However she may herself have felt about the second book, successive generations of students have found in it characteristically evocative descriptions of autistic experience. Autistic children behave in seemingly bizarre and meaningless ways which can make them seem like members of a different species. Their characteristic anxieties, of ceasing to exist, of spilling out, of falling for ever, of losing bits of their bodies, are difficult for us to sustain for more than minutes, and their body-centred states can appear to have little in common with more symbolic modes. Frances
Tustin had a particular gift for bridging the gap between the bodily and the symbolic. There are many instances of this in her books, as when she writes about 'breasting' a hazard, or about a child who stands on his therapist's feet in search of the wrong kind of 'understanding'. This was part of her natural mode of thought, not just of her approach to work. (Speaking once of a friend who had been crippled, she said, 'She always used to take things in stride, and it's a dreadful thing now to see her with no stride left.) She was equipped to see the link between the actions of an autistic child who flaps his arms or uses his eyes to 'fly' above his earth-bound anxieties, and descriptions of out-of-body experiences or the more familiar state of elation.

The case of Peter provides a beautiful illustration of a child moving from sensation to 'thinkings' (Autistic States in Children, Chapter 16). Peter came to twice-weekly treatment at the age of 6: Anni Bergman, Margaret Mahler's chief psychotherapist, had seen him when he was 2½, completely mute, walking on his toes and with stereotypic mannerisms. She described him as one of the worst cases she had come across. By the time he was 6, he had had cognitive therapy and had developed some rudimentary speech. The session given in detail took place when he was 8: in it, he moves 'shapes' up from his bottom through the 'stomach' of his therapist's mind until they become thoughts in his head. The process is documented in parallel columns, one showing Peter's actions, the other, Frances Tustin's countertransference experience. Even leaving aside the content, it is the most detailed and beautiful account I know of the interplay between countertransference and observation.

Peter went to university and got in touch with Frances as an adult. This gave her enormous pleasure, as did her later contact with a patient whom she had seen as a child and as an adult, and who spoke most movingly at the memorial meeting held at the Tavistock Clinic on 11 February 1995, in association with the Association of Child Psychotherapists and the Squiggle Foundation.

On the theoretical side, Autistic States contains an amplified statement on autistic objects, one of Frances Tustin's main contributions. She showed how the hard objects that autistic children characteristically carry about with them are not used as symbolic playthings, but as generators of sensation that make the child feel he exists. (Autistic shapes, which she described in 1984 in a paper to be included in her third book, Autistic Barriers in Neurotic Patients, are soft bodily sensations derived from breath, spit, flatus and so on, and which the child uses to soothe and tranquilize himself in an addictive mode.) Additionally, she distinguished different types of encapsulated children: 'crustaceans' who are encapsulated as a whole and who are usually mute, as distinct from 'segmented' children. She thought that these were children (often with rudimentary language) whose primary encapsulation had been disturbed and who sought to reconstitute their protective shelter by breaking up threatening "not-self" objects into segments until they [could] be brought together in familiar 'me' terms (Autistic States p. 30). These uses of autistic objects and autistic shapes tie in with the process of dismantling described by Donald Meltzer and his co-workers, and amplify details of the means by which attention is focused on a single feature of 'common sense'.

Frances Tustin also provided many illustrations of the way in which autistic children misuse their senses in order to deny separation and the existence of space, which for them holds such overwhelming terrors. Thus vision, which is characteristically a sense to do with distance, can be used instead in a tactile way that obliterates space as a fact of life.

Autistic States contains a section on the autistic kernel in various disorders - anorexia, school phobia, encopresis and others. Frances Tustin enlarged on this in her next book, Autistic Barriers in Neurotic Patients (1986), in which she discussed the importance to her thinking of a paper on 'Autistic phenomena in neurotic patients' published in 1980 by Sydney Klein with whom she had worked in London at the West Middlesex Hospital. Both of these books have recently been re-issued in revised versions - the revisions undertaken by her in order to bring them into line with her current thinking after she abandoned the idea of 'normal primary autism'. Her fourth book, The Protective Shell in Children and Adults (1990), was written after she had revised her views. She considered it to be her best book, and many readers would agree. In it, her emphasis moves towards seeing autism as a manoeuvre which can protect the child from the ultimately terrifying experience of the black hole. This black hole experience is not thought of as an exclusively autistic phenomenon, and she views autism as one of a variety of possible defences against it. Autism is defined as a defence against psychosis rather than as constituting the psychosis itself and she makes reference to cases in which schizophrenic conditions may become manifest once the autism has improved with treatment. She suggests also that the autistic condition may be seen as a kind of time capsule in which a traumatic, unmetabolizable event is 'frozen' and preserved until such time as it can be worked over. She links this to a similar suggestion in relation to Holocaust survivors made by David Rosenfeld (Rosenfeld, 1986), whose descriptions of the most primitive body image as consisting of pipes paralleled her
own findings in *Autistic States.*

A detailed theoretical discussion of the implications of Frances Tustin's work is beyond the scope of these recollections. Sheila Spensley addressed this task very lucidly in her paper "The frontiers of consciousness" given at the Frances Tustin Memorial Meeting. In it she outlined Tustin's influence on the work of Grotstein and Ogden, and pointed to implications for the treatment of borderline patients and of children with learning difficulties and developmental delay. Spensley's recent book on Tustin has already been referred to. Another overview of the development of Tustin's thought may be found in 'Rencontres avec Frances Tustin' by Geneviève Haag (Haag, 1992). This personal and scientific appreciation is written by one of her most distinguished and original former supervisees and includes a recent dialogue with Frances Tustin on points that Geneviève Haag considered to be of special importance. (Frances Tustin was delighted by the degree to which French workers responded to her thinking, and was especially in tune with their focus on bodily experience.) Many psychoanalysts working with adults, beginning with S. Klein and including Noemi and Gomberoff, Mirani and Morra as well as Grotstein and Ogden, have made links with the phenomena she described in children. In a brief contribution on the relevance of Henri Rey's work with borderline patients to the treatment of autistic children, I have pointed out the great degree of overlap between Rey's formulations concerning borderline adults and Frances Tustin's concerning autistic children (Rhode, 1995).

"Generosity" is the feature emphasized by everyone who contributed their memories of Frances Tustin, whether at the memorial meeting in her honour or in the *Bulletin* of the ACP. This was true of her supervisions, of her abundant letter-writing, of the way in which she included and acknowledged students' contributions in her books and papers.

I remember an instance of her generosity in a different area: at a psychotherapists' party when I was a student, a little boy came up to offer her a chocolate. Frances was diabetic and not supposed to eat chocolates, and she said, "Oh dear, I haven't eaten one of these in years. Will you be very hurt if I don't have one?" She looked carefully at the child, who was holding out the box with great seriousness, and said, "You will, won't you?" - and she took the chocolate and ate it.

Another feature recalled by many people was her voice - a high voice which remained youthful - and her characteristic way of answering the telephone - "Frances Tustin here!" During the last years of her life she carried out many supervisions on the telephone, as well as seeing visitors who made the journey to Amersham. I had the privilege of a telephone supervision from her on a mute autistic 12-year-old who probably had some degree of brain damage. Before we started, I was concerned about how a supervision on this kind of child could work over the telephone. I need not have worried. Jack's feelings were far from easy for me to get a grip on when I was present in the room with him, but in some way they transmitted themselves to Frances down the telephone wire. She would listen intently, saying "Yes . . . yes . . . yes" very so often, and then she would begin to weave things together so that I felt she was describing the very essence of a child who had seemed to have no essence. Before a holiday, she summed up, "There's no-one he loves as much as you. There's no-one he hates as much as you . . . " She went on for some minutes, and I was overwhelmed by her evocation of the power of the transference. Readers of *Autism and Childhood Psychosis* will recognize the style of her commentary on David's material (pp. 46ff.).

Always, she emphasized how important it was to try to feel my way into Jack's bodily experience, and I am sure that her therapeutic power was connected with this willingness to feel things as the child felt them, instead of rushing to explain. She worked naturally on primitive levels. One day when Jack began his habitual violent snapping in the corridor, she said, "He's pleased to see you - he can't wait to get started." But the primitive was always linked to everyday experience. When he paced the room for fifty minutes, she said, "He must be worried; when I pace up and down, it's because I'm worried." Or when he was upset because of meeting someone in the waiting-room, "It's when things aren't how he expects them to be. I know what I feel like when Meals on Wheels doesn't arrive on time.'

Although Frances saw things from Jack's point of view, she was unsentimental. A propos of his grimaces, she told me that she used to get herself into the right frame of mind for work by looking at reproductions of Hieronymus Bosch. "I used to say to myself, "Que suis-je allée faire dans cette galère?"" I was interested to hear about some of her modifications in technique, which she had not written about in detail: she emphasized how important it was not to let oneself be ground down, to be resilient, bouncy. "I used to say to him, "You're a proper little terror!" " Her emphasis on following one's feelings and immediate reactions was immensely liberating. 'Don't think about what you mustn't do, or what you mustn't say; these children's heads are far too full of that already.' Jack became very preoccupied with his shadow, and she was interested in the Jungian perspective on this, besides seeing it as a step forward that meant he was experiencing himself as a solid object in space. She was above all prepared to go wherever the material led her,
without any regard for what might be the generally accepted view, even if it was based on her own previous work. This was the same attitude that led her to change her mind about normal primary autism, not because Margaret Mahler had said one thing, or Melanie Klein had said another, but because she was convinced by the evidence from child development research shown to her by Anne Alvarez. Her love of the work was obvious. 'I feel I am so lucky,' she said, ‘to have work that means so much to me.’

Frances Tustin characteristically quoted at length from poets in the attempt to make her meaning clear. She felt that the ability to enter imaginatively into poetic experience was essential to anyone working with psychotic children. Another quality she thought essential was the ability to retain one’s common sense, to keep one’s feet on the ground. I have a memory of her seminar on young child observation which I attended during my first year of training, in which the observer described a 3-year-old child whose musician mother was temporarily entranced while playing the piano. The little boy felt unable to follow her, and focused his attention instead on a large, rounded teapot. As Frances spoke, the teapot grew and grew in all our minds until it became transformed into a richly glowing emblematic thing. ‘It’s his ideal,’ she said, ‘his dream. He mustn’t turn his back on his dreams – they’re what will take him further, inspire him, help him to reach beyond himself. But he has to learn to bear the frustration when reality doesn’t live up to his ideal. “Tread softly”,’ she quoted “because you tread on my dreams”.

After Arnold Tustin died in January 1994, it was as though the world had stopped for her. After a few months she began to take an interest in work again, always responding with interest to whatever people brought to her. She was, however, in and out of hospital, and in August of 1994 she was diagnosed as having cancer of the appendix. She responded with great appreciation to the care she was given in hospital and, later, at Rayner’s, the retirement home in Amersham where she celebrated her last birthday and where she died. She had always loved clothes, dressing in dark reds, purples and greens, and she talked enthusiastically about the dresses worn by the registrar who told her that she had cancer. Although she was at times very distressed by what was happening to her body and by the contrast between the liveliness of her mind and her physical limitations, she was not afraid of death. ‘If there’s not a lot of pain, I don’t mind dying: it might be the right thing to do.’

A fortnight before she died, Frank Orford persuaded her to write a contribution which he read out at the British Psycho-Analytic Society during the discussion of a paper by Mauro Morra on the connection between obsessionality and autism. She dictated her response to Wendel Caplan, as she was no longer able to write herself. Two days before her death, she was talking about a paper she would have liked to write for Nature, in order to make the implications of work on autism accessible to a wider audience. ‘Sensation,’ she said, ‘is the basis for psychological life, and it makes psychoanalysis credible to people who otherwise would not see it as a basic subject.’

The letters read at the Frances Tustin Memorial Meeting included one from Liliana Berta and Graciela Ball, of the Argentinian group for the study of autism. They had been introduced to Frances Tustin’s work by Kamala DiTella, who had trained at the Tavistock and studied with Frances before returning to Buenos Aires where she founded a training. She died suddenly a fortnight before Frances’s own death. I would like to end by quoting the letter in full:

Dear Colleagues – Friends:

Ten years ago this Argentine work group was introduced by a Hindu woman, Kamala DiTella, in the wonderful and unknown world of the English Frances Tustin who opened us the way to the understanding of child autism. Years later, her work aroused such curiosity in us that made us get in touch with her. In her home in Amersham, we received from her not only scientific knowledge but also great generosity in transmitting it. There, we witnessed the discussion of two women, Tustin and Kamala, trying to unravel the mysterious [sic] world of autistic children. This showed us that cultural barriers are overcome through the ideas that enrich the clinical practice.

From this little place, Amersham, Frances Tustin and her courage made it possible that all over the world disciples sowed and spread her ideas.

Today our pain is great as we have lost both of our teachers but we will keep their ideas and passions, which is our compromise with them.

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NOTE

* These lines from ‘Credits’ are taken from a collection of Jon Stallworthy’s poems, The Astronomy of Love (1961, Oxford University Press). They are reproduced here by kind permission of Oxford University Press.
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Books
Motiveless malignity: problems in the psychotherapy of psychopathic patients

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SUMMARY This paper attempts to draw attention to the difference between the states of mind and inner worlds of neurotic, borderline and psychopathic patients, with reference to different types of destructiveness: anger in the neurotic patient; desperate vengeful hatred in the borderline paranoid; and a cold addiction to violence in the psychopath. Discussion focuses on technical issues and the need to meet the psychopathic patient where he really is, in the inner bleak emotional cemetery he may be inhabiting. Although most patients refuse to stay put in the neat schematic categories outlined, they do seem to appreciate and to need the therapist's recognition of the specific quality of these vastly different states of mind.

KEYWORDS Psychopathy; violence; technique; psychotherapy.

The film Assault on Precinct 13 begins with a sequence of shots of a gang of young men riding around the Watts District of Los Angeles in a car, aiming rifles first at an old black woman, then at a white man, then at a black man. Their fun is at least racially undiscriminating. The aiming seems random, idle, almost whimsical. We get to see the quarry lined up in the sights of the rifle each time, but no-one pulls the trigger. The members of the gang seem to be having a good time. (Bruce Chatwin (1987) observed that in the language of many nomadic peoples, the word for townspeople is 'meat'.) The scene then switches to a little girl buying an ice cream from an ice cream vendor while her father makes a phone call from a call box. She returns to her father, but suddenly looks at her ice cream with dismay and turns back to the ice cream van. She does not realize that by then the gang has killed the ice cream vendor, and the man...