

Madeleine Francis

PSYCHOMOTOR

On first sight Al Pessso looks as if he might have stowed his reindeer and sledge under the stairs before entering the room. A powerfully built man, with a black beard crinkling round his face. He talks energetically, while his eyes move from one person to another with uninhibited interest, like an animal.

As he warms to explaining Psychomotor, other sides of him emerge and he can be fleetingly reminiscent of Beelzebub, Henry the Eighth, a blanket salesman in a bazaar, and even the laughing policeman.

Although his Psychomotor theory, evolved through years of work as a movement therapist and in mental hospitals, has gained him international recognition, it is hard to associate him with any kind of motor, psycho or otherwise. There seems nothing mechanical about him; his first and foremost delight is obviously in people.

Pessso has been working in England together with his wife Diane, Co-Founder of Psychomotor. Their greatest trump card as a man/woman team is probably the sympathy they bring to the individual's much-buried infantile sexuality. Oedipal wishes are encouraged to surface in their groups, and then handled with all the commonsense kindness disastrously lacking in most people's family experience of this period. Where real parents freak out and start slapping things, 'archetypally good' parents such as the Pessos strive to represent (while making it clear there can be no such thing in real life) and accept the emotion, whether it be rage or desire, while at the same time making it clear to the child that neither parent is going to let itself be raped, murdered or supplanted.

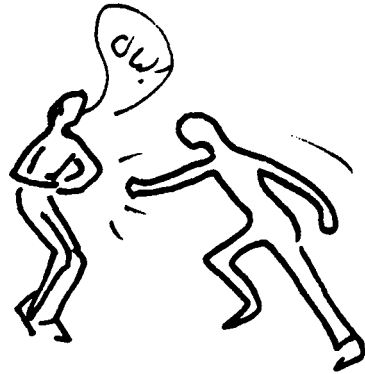
Countless hours spent studying the elusive sign language of the unconscious have given Pessso a flair for symbolism, and he is just as much at home with someone's conviction that a giant mechanical something-or-other is boring into their back, as he is with another person's hand gesture of holding finger and thumb to make a circle which effectively 'closes him off from the world'. Unlike many group leaders, Pessso is prone to make specific interpretations, which often can have a shock effect; it may take a while for a girl who is told she is afraid to use her 'phallic energy' to get used to the idea that she has a right to any, and likewise the man who is preserving what Pessso calls 'a psychotic vagina' inside himself tends to have something of a struggle about symbolically handing it back to a girl in the group, in order that he can enjoy his own true male energy again. Interpretations, in whatever theoretical vein, can always be argued about, but in terms of effect Pessso seem ultimately to produce a happier, stronger, freer state in the individuals with whom he has worked. As he says, he knows how to 'talk to the unconscious'.

Perhaps the chief concept in Psychomotor theory is 'accommodation'. This is based on Pessso's conviction that every primary *feeling*, whether it be anger, fear, love or joy, contains a drive towards expression in the form of *action*, and that every action feels

better if it is an *interaction*. In concrete terms, if you are fed up to the teeth with your mother-in-law, your feeling would probably incline you to swing your fist at her, and what your libido would really like would be to annihilate her with the blow. *Anger* stimulates aggressive action, with the death of the adversary as the desired aim. *Fear* produces the urge to run away, and furthermore to safety with another person who will protect. *Love* brings out the wish to embrace, and the goal is love and acceptance in return. In short, as Pessó states unequivocally, and to the disgust of ascetic masochists who stray into his groups, what everyone is seeking is *satisfaction*. Martyrdom in his view is an acquired and self-destructive way of expressing one's life energy. He admits of course that in real life, feelings are not always accommodated, particularly aggressive ones.



Positive accommodation -
accommodator gives total
warmth, support, etc.



Negative accommodation -
no touching, but accommodator
responds as if hurt.

But all strong needs are traceable to childhood, and by reconstructing a childhood scene in which a particular need or set of needs was operant, Pessó believes it is possible to reverse the process by which each of us was taught or forced to repress the strong feelings whose entombment has crippled the flow of life-energy in us. Instead of acting out the repressed impulses unconsciously on all and sundry in our day to day lives, the original situation can be recreated symbolically, and with the difference that the acting out the can *really* bring satisfaction and relief to the uncompromising unconscious.

Work usually begins by focussing on whatever is happening with your body - a cramped position, stiff neck, fluttery stomach, or whatever. Accentuation of the position or sensation is encouraged, and if you can feel your way clear to base an action on it you are asked to let that happen, choosing someone to accommodate by interacting with you. At this stage associations are normally aroused and the person working can remember some childhood situation where he had a similar feeling.

Hence, one or two 'parents' are selected from the group and the structure continues as a 'family' recreated, but with important differences.

Accommodation structure necessary for complete emotional satisfaction		
feeling → action → interaction		
FEAR →	FLIGHT →	refuge with protector
ANGER →	FIGHT →	enemy destroyed
LOVE →	REACHING OUT →	loving reciprocation
JOY →	OPENING →	'oneness' with cosmos

Psychomotor accommodation structures allow the individual to give full vent to both negative and positive feelings, but while this is traditionally achieved in the growth movement by the virtual destruction or affectionate squeezing to death of cushions, with this technique one has the gratification of symbolically destroying or possessing the *person* who was the original object of those feelings. If you are working, you can choose one or two people to represent those aspects of your parent/parents you hated and feared, and the negative parent's function is simply to accommodate your anger. As you act out the murderous impulse on a cushion, your negative accommodator will obligingly respond to what you are actually doing - if you punch him in the stomach he will act and scream as if he has been hit there, and this will go on until you have effectively seen lying before your eyes the slaughtered adversary. According to Pesso, this is meat and drink to the unconscious destructive impulses, with the added advantage that no-one has really been hurt. When the enemy aspect of the parent has been destroyed however, the sense of loss and guilt sets in. So a positive accommodator is necessary too. The negative side of a parent is hated because it obstructs positive satisfactions. The positive accommodator represents the 'ideal' mother or father, and not simply positive aspects of the real parent. Thus when the person working asks for love, support and protection from him or her, he receives it in exactly the way, and to the full degree that he needs it. Exhausted mothers and impatient fathers fade into the distance, and are replaced by parents who have more

open love to give than the child could ever exhaust. As the Pessos exhort during positive accommodation scenes where the parent is being held onto, 'Take as much as you need', there's no charge for this'. In their terms, this satisfaction, unspoiled by the terror of rejection, restores the assertive life flow in an individual, and the parental reassurance 'We love you exactly as you are' gives security and self respect back to starved and guilty psyches. Pride in sexuality is also reinforced, as the 'child' realises he does not have to compensate in himself for deficiencies in the parent of the opposite sex - i.e. a man no longer has to be his own 'mother', or a girl her own 'father'. There is a new freedom to be male or female, and admit the need for/reach out to the other sex in a true way.

Another function of parents is to build the child's ego, which channels the libidinous energy into socially acceptable and fruitful paths - ideally. But for this to happen, the primal urgent feelings have to be *accepted* (though not necessarily the actions which result if the feeling was expressed unchecked) in the first place. Libidinous surges of infantile feeling know no limits, and the child who senses that his parents are terrified of his anger or sexual impulses will grow up being proportionately terrified of these feelings in himself, imagining himself to be omnipotent beneath the repression. He is loath to let out any strong emotion, because his unconscious conviction is that he would destroy everything he loves as well as everything he hates, if he let rip.

Psychomotor uses the concept of 'limits' to represent symbolically the ego building process. This is structured in a group as one person testing out his feeling of omnipotence by lying on the floor and struggling to throw off seven other people who represent his parents are intent on holding him down. At first the person is usually reluctant to 'let go' even then, because his assumption is that he could easily throw off the entire queens guards, let alone a mere seven people, should he release his real energies. After reassurance and humorous encouragement he will try, and the relief and pleasure on finding that it is not so is marked and astonishing. The procedure from then on is the same as with accommodating; having exhausted the negative aggression, the person turns to someone who will symbolically provide him with all the love and succour he can handle - without strings. Pessos says 'One loses in order not to kill', and this covers most forms of self-repression, masochistic self-damage, and of course the remarkable range of psychosomatic illnesses (often with a socially aggressive function) which continue to exasperate and puzzle doctors.

Psychomotor theory is worth reading and learning about and experiencing; in the hands of its inventors it takes on a totally charismatic magic, and there is no reason why it should not be very useful when operated by other therapists/group leaders, etc. But like any structured theory, it provides only a technical framework - the energy must come from the person using it. Al and Diane Pessos work with a kind of freewheeling intuition and warmth which could make any theory palatable. In the end it is them, and not their theory one remembers. Above all, the ability to communicate and to *go with* another person on his journey of self-discovery, without being a back-seat driver, is what makes the Pessos style so good. In physical terms it's like mummy and daddy letting junior take them up the MI in the family car; only instead of pointing out how he hasn't yet mastered double-declutching all the time, the message is 'Go on, we trust you'. It is that trust in and acceptance of each individual's life energy and intrinsic goodness which marks the Pessos' out. They will be returning to England in September.