Psychoanalytic Studies on Dysphoria
The False Accord in the Divine Symphony

Marion M. Oliner
Psychoanalytic Ideas and Applications Series
Series Editor: Gabriela Legorreta
“Marion Oliner is well positioned to make a significant contribution to the growing literature on trauma and so called post-traumatic stress disorders. Herself the victim of severe trauma during the second world war which analysis helped her overcome, she deepens the understanding of unconscious trans-generational transmission. She is sensitive to the interplay between real events and their unconscious reverberations. The role of aggression both outwards and self-directed is elaborated. She follows the changes in recall which follow trauma and adds new insights on the role of unconscious guilt and omnipotence which modify with time the representation of trauma. Finally, she adds very perceptive insights to the role that sleeping and dreaming play in the assimilation of trauma. Mental health professionals at all level of training will benefit from this book.”

—Francis Baudry, Training and Supervising Analyst, New York Psychoanalytic Institute

“An extraordinary collection of psychoanalytic essays by Marion Oliner, written between 1982 to 2018, is presented in this book. The essays encompass a broad range of clinical and theoretical topics all of which are indelibly influenced by both psychic trauma and the reality of external trauma. Quoting Baudelaire ‘I am the limb and the wheel and the victim and the executioner!’, Oliner describes the complexities of self and object representations and the external object relations of many traumatized persons. This book, enriched by the author’s own traumatic life experience, expands understanding and knowledge, and inspires further reflection and inquiry.”

—Harold P. Blum, President, Psychoanalytic Research and Development Fund; Training and Supervising Analyst, Institute for Psychoanalytic Education, affiliated with NYU School of Medicine; Former Editor, Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association

“In Psychoanalytic Studies on Dysphoria: The False Accord in the Divine Symphony, Marion Oliner uses a dramatic but evocative line from Baudelaire to title a collection of her articles, some of which not been available in English before now. They are all concerned with individuals who react to trauma by attacking and thwarting themselves. She focuses, among other things, on the distinction between the experience and the unconscious meaning of the experience to the individual. Her comments are logical and clarifying, particularly when she discusses the importance of Winnicott’s assertion concerning the megalomania underlying this self-sabotage.”

—Gail S. Reed, Honorary Member, New York Psychoanalytic Society and Institute; Training Analyst, Contemporary Freudian Society; Former Member and Training Analyst and Founder, Berkshire Psychoanalytic Institute
Psychoanalytic Studies on Dysphoria: The False Accord in the Divine Symphony depicts the profound dysphoria afflicting certain individuals, and includes the author’s own personal experience of this as a German Jewish child during the Holocaust. Marion M. Oliner explores the impact of catastrophic events on the lives of individuals and their descendants from a broadly psychoanalytic perspective.

The book focuses on the interplay between the experience and the unconscious meaning attributed to the trauma, and the ways in which patients may feel guilt, and blame themselves for the events and effects of their trauma. Drawing on the work of Freud and Winnicott, and with emphasis on the traumas suffered during the Second World War, Oliner offers new ways of understanding how resistant to treatment such traumas can be, and how the analyst can understand the experiences. The chapters span the evolution undergone in the nearly four decades of practice by the author. The book references a range of works including some taken from the German and French psychoanalytic literature, some never published in English. Taken together they aim at keeping the vitality of psychoanalysis without idealization, while discarding concepts whose essence is static, and therefore unhelpful.

Psychoanalytic Studies on Dysphoria will appeal to psychoanalysts as well as other mental health professionals working with self-defeating behavior as a result of trauma.

Marion M. Oliner is a psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City, USA. She is a member of the International Psychoanalytic Association, the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis and the Metropolitan Institute for Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy.
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*Psychoanalytic Studies on Dysphoria: The False Accord in the Divine Symphony*
  Marion M. Oliner
PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDIES ON DYSPHORIA

The False Accord in the Divine Symphony

Marion M. Oliner
I dedicate this work on self-sacrifice to the memory of my parents, Jakob and Charlotte Michel; my father who wanted to be remembered, and my mother who, in 1942, joined him in almost certain death at the hands of the Nazis so that my life would be spared. She left me with a debt for which she asked no compensation: it influenced me to try to appreciate and enjoy the gift and not to be burdened by the price she paid.
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Since the collection of articles spans forty years of reflections its content relies on a multitude of sources on various aspects of psychoanalysis. The orientation is basically Freudian: for me it is the best way to maintain a cohesive outlook on the innovations imposed by newer discoveries and try to integrate them with more familiar knowledge. Their numerous origins are discussed in the book as well as the thoughts that inspired me. Rereading them was like revisiting old acquaintances in their own words rather than my own mixed with theirs.

I am most grateful to the members of the Publication Committee of the International Psychoanalytic Associations, chaired by Gabriela Legorreta for choosing to publish this work. It is indeed an honor.

On a more personal level I remember one of my last conversations with Martin Bergmann who was touched when he heard that I was including an article stemming from our work in the “Group for the Psychoanalytic Study of the Holocaust on the Second Generation”. He saw this as keeping issues we discussed in the 1970’s alive and current, and reacted as if he were being kept alive. He was right: I am still warmed by his reaction and appreciation.

Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel and Bela Grunberger were very important to me especially for their work on narcissism which provides an emotionally powerful understanding of the pathology that is essentially without
an external object. Their studies are vivid and embedded in other aspects
of the personality such as aggression, drives, external reality, and the
importance for individuals to accept the difference between generations.
I have used the notion of an objectless state fueled by magical thinking to
teach supervisees and classes, who found the wider scope enriching.

At a later time, after I met Jakob Arlow in the middle of a lake in India
by approaching his table and asking “are you Dr. Arlow?”, I learned from
his seminars principles that have guided my practice ever since. While he
was known mostly for his studies on unconscious fantasies, his attention
to the context surrounding a thought or fantasy showed how it adds to its
meaning. This precision made one interpretation more cogent than oth-
ers among the many possibilities that present themselves. In addition I
learned to remember the first words of the patient upon entering the room
as well the last. They sometimes provide the key to the understanding of
an otherwise puzzling session.

My old friend and colleague Regine Herzberg Poloniecka and I shared
a similar history, being orphaned through World War II. We have often
been a comfort to each other over the years. Professionally she enabled
me to have a first-hand experience with the Paris psychosomaticiens, I was
admitted to their case conferences when I visited Paris and even being
given a Tee shirt marked IPSO by Pierre Marty, the leader of the group.
By studying the structure of the deficiency in emotions that are the cause
for psychosomatic symptoms this group composed of many highly
sophisticated adherents, was the first to enlarge psychoanalytic theory
to encompass non-symbolized processes. In France the psychosomaticiens
used their influence to obtain reimbursement by the health authorities for
the psychotherapeutic treatment hospitalized and out-patients with psy-
chosomatic symptoms received.

A debt of gratitude which I could not possibly pay back was incurred
when Eva Brabant, to whom I did a small favor but whom I never met,
contacted her friend Judith Dupont’ both famous for their Ferenczi schol-
arship, to present my previous book, Psychic Reality in Context to the
publisher, Campagne Première, who accepted the book. I heard so lit-
tle about how the translation was going that I wondered whether it was
still happening. But it did. When after the publication I met Jean Delaite,
who had been responsible for the project, he gave me a book on Diderot,
that calls the encyclopedist an enchanted materialist. This attitude was of
course also reflected by Proust and suggested pleasure where most ana-
lysts insert a moral or pathological judgement. When attention to material
determinants is not a sin psychoanalysts are warned against by Bion and
his followers it is simply ignored. The problem has been the contemporary division between external (concrete, beta) and internal (malleable, alpha) as if they were mutually exclusive. Through Marcel Proust’s enchantment with memory and the emphasis by Cesar and Sara Bottella on figurabilty Freud’s interest in the sensory qualities of dreams as a result of dreamwork gave the material world the importance it deserves. Its role in complementing the inner world is thereby elevated instead of being disparaged by many contemporary analysts as only greed, defense, or concreteness. A number of articles in the present collection reflect the need for sensory qualities to inform the work of analysts.

Closer to home, my good friend Laura Kleinerman has given me support and encouragement for many years. Also for many years Gail S. Reed was my promoter for a number of activities and projects. Frank Baudry has generously sponsored my work and has my heartfelt gratitude. Elsa and Harold Blum and Roslyn Goldner are old friends whose company I have enjoyed privately and professionally. I owe a debt of gratitude to Leon Wurmsers for having made me the beneficiary of many of his contributions and the acquaintance with many analysts in his circle both here and in Germany.

Among my current German correspondents Ilse Grubrich-Simitis with her elegance, erudition and style leaves me in awe. I thank her for our friendship spanning many, many years. Sibylle Drews has been my promoter from early on and lately we have spent many leisure hours together. Christian Schneider, a sociologist, and his wife Cordelia, a psychoanalyst, have been partners in many conversations and excursions. I learned from Christian about life in post-war Germany. Christian also selected a number of my articles for the books he published. Last but not least, we always found something to laugh about.

Rainer Krause of Saarbruecken impressed on me that an event may be connected with trauma but it is the traumatic process that determines its subsequent nature and intensity. Joerg Frommer, a good friend who is modest to a fault about his achievements and generosity, has promoted the publication of a number of my articles. Likewise Werner and Marianne Bohleber have been instrumental in bringing me to the attention of German psychoanalysts, encouraging and helpful whenever they could be.

The present book owes its subsequent fate to Rhoda Bowdekar of the IPA and the editors at Routledge. Charles Bath is the shepherd with too many sheep. Nevertheless we got to know each other and I am grateful for his civility and help despite being overworked. I am confident that the finished book will show the care he has given it. It was strange at first
that the next stage, production, was the responsibility of Swales & Willis, not the publisher. The book was allocated to George Warburton, Editorial Manager, who oversaw the process, and I met with the same kind of concern for the book, all aspects of it. I had the good fortune to be assigned to the copy-editor, Hamish Ironside, who was both respectful and showing his sense of style by suggesting, at times, an improvement on the original. I took it each time as being an improvement. I was not used to having a manuscript handled by such a large number of people, but they were clearly involved in making it “our” book.

In this way, the publishers accepted the artwork of my gifted friend Ruth Formanek for the cover. Her work is remarkable in color and form and I am grateful to the Design Department for agreeing with me and accepting her striking design for the cover of the book.

Considering that this book is published very late in my career, I may have passed over others who deserve to be acknowledged. I have been fortunate in having met many analysts whom I admired and whose gifts were freely given. Shall we blame any omission to those frequent memory lapses that we encounter as we age? I hope so.
The subtitle of this work is based on the poem “L’Héautontimorouménos” by Charles Baudelaire, which poignantly describes the self-image of many traumatized individuals. The text of the book consists of a collection of essays not available in English discussing the impact of catastrophic events on the lives of individuals and their descendants. These essays focus on the interplay between the experience and the unconscious meaning attributed to the trauma, thus excluding those severely damaged individuals who would not profit from an approach stressing unconscious factors entering into the assimilation of the experience. It is based on the same premises as a book I published in 2012, *Psychic Reality in Context: Perspectives on Psychoanalysis, Personal History and Trauma*, in that I have found certain concepts applied to the treatment of trauma unhelpful because their emphasis on events as the cause for disturbance of these patients thus creating two categories of patients: the patients who, because of their failed solutions for conflict, are regarded as active agents in their own suffering, and those who are victimized by events they endured passively, implicitly taking away from the second group the focus on conflicting motivations. This in turn has led to the adoption of some of Freud’s concepts that lack a dynamic dimension. First among those is the repetition compulsion which is thought to cause events to be repeated because they happened. Similarly identification, as an explanation for the suffering of the children of
traumatized parents frequently lacks a more dynamic interpretation, as if
the historic events account for their disturbance. These concepts and a few
others, have their place, but, if not properly understood, risk to bypass
the analysis of unconscious guilt as a motivating factor in repetition and
suggest that conflicts concerning aggression and separation play no part
in identification.

This book will remain closer to the original sources that influenced
my thinking than the previous one which is more of a distillation of those
ideas. As will become evident to the reader, over time the explanations for
the same phenomenon will vary. Early on, in order to illustrate why vic-
tims blame themselves for the calamities they suffered, I used the idea of
a psychologist who stated that since memory for specific events fade first,
memory becomes more dispositional with time. This is illustrated as follows:
“I stumbled because there was a stone in the path” becomes “I stumbled
because I was clumsy”. Eventually this formulation dropped out of my
awareness, not because it was incompatible with the later one, but because
it did not concern itself sufficiently with the cause for the shift in memory:
the role of unconscious omnipotence that colors our thinking causing it
to become less specific. Thus emotional factors and self-centeredness
dominate the assimilation of an experience. As the Italian analyst De Masi
has suggested, the connections from the emotional to the cognitive system
are more robust than those in the opposite direction. Therefore the uncon-
scious has a preponderant influence over our behavior as we tackle the
vicissitudes of life.

Still later, I became acquainted with Winnicott’s 1960 pronouncement
about there being no trauma without omnipotence. Its appeal resides in
its succinctness. As I reread the earliest article included here, omnipotence
was already a factor in my thinking. Thus the basic premise remained
constant and explains why it is frequently difficult to treat victims of his-
toric events and why the facts that would exonerate them cannot have the
desired effect because of the unconscious guilt that can continue to domi-
nate their emotional life. Omnipotence is of course the factor that underlies
“survivor guilt” but also the capacity to withstand incredible hardship.

Increasingly, I distanced myself from those other ideas that empha-
size dissociation or denial. Previously, these ideas conformed to the image
I attributed to the calamities in my own development causing me to think
of my functioning as that of a sausage cut in slices. As it will become
evident, this view was confirmed by other survivors and also those
treating patients who had to assimilate the effect of a calamity in their
lives. Gradually it became clearer to me that the emphasis on the divisions underestimates the role of sleep in integrating events in terms of its unconscious meaning, and therefore I too had a continuous core. This recognition convinced me that the narrowing of focus emphasized in the dissociation of the mind describes the ego state dominating the experience of a calamity thus not accounting for the subsequent work of assimilation over time. Assimilation is the by-product of sleep and dreaming, the latter adding a sensory, hallucinatory component to the experience.

I have shown here how I dealt with guilt as a result of the evolution in my thinking. Accepting Winnicott’s assertion that omnipotence is more prevalent than previously assumed, the scope of the dynamics of surviving a historic calamity were also applicable to the understanding of other symptoms including those who, like the subject of Baudelaire’s poem, felt that they were the “false accord in the divine symphony”. The subtle shifts in my thinking become evident in the subject matter of these articles. Chapter 4 even argues that psychoanalysis is the wrong discipline for complex events such as wars. Compared to the previous book, the chapters are more clinical and do not discuss the ambiguous place of external reality in psychoanalytic theory, which is discussed extensively in Psychic Reality in Context.
The Publications Committee of the International Psychoanalytic Association continues, with the present volume, the Psychoanalytic Ideas and Applications series.

The aim of this series is to focus on the scientific production of significant authors, whose works are outstanding contributions to the development of the psychoanalytic field and to set out relevant ideas and themes, generated during the history of psychoanalysis, that deserve to be known and discussed by present day psychoanalysts.

The relationship between psychoanalytic ideas and their applications needs to be put forward from the perspective of theory, clinical practice and research, in order to maintain their validity for contemporary psychoanalysis.

The Publication’s Committee’s objective is to share these ideas with the psychoanalytic community and with professionals in other related disciplines, so as to expand their knowledge and generate a productive interchange between the text and the reader.

The IPA Publications Committee is pleased to publish another book by Marion M. Oliner, *Psychoanalytic Studies on Dysphoria*. This book focuses on issues related to those in *Psychic Reality in Context: Perspectives on Psychoanalysis, Personal History and Trauma*, which was published in same series in 2012. The author’s interest in understanding the complexities of the treatment of individuals who had experienced trauma and their
descendants continues to be central. She also continues her reflection on the impact of external reality on psychic functioning. While in this volume she remains closer to the original sources that influenced her thinking, she also exposes and explains to the reader the evolution of her ideas.

Inspired by Charles Baudelaire’s poem, the author portrays trauma survivors as being “the false accords because of the divine symphony that was never part of their childhood [. . .] they are constantly in conflict concerning their right to a separate existence, different from the place assigned to them by the imaginary orchestra”.

Skilfully organized in seven chapters, the author describes with clarity the evolution of her theoretical and clinical understanding. One example of the modification in her thinking is her assertion of the central role of unconscious omnipotence in trauma survivors which makes self-centredness dominate the assimilation of their traumatic experience. Following this line of thought, the author, inspired by Winnicott, underlines even more the intimate connection between omnipotence and trauma, asserting that deficient parenting magnifies the role of omnipotence in the child. This has a clear connection with the excessive inhibition of aggression out of fear for the destruction of the object. Since the individual believes that the parent is the victim of his/her own destructiveness, they may attribute their own survival to the goodwill of those who actually failed them. Marion M. Oliner reminds us that the reason why the facts that would exonerate patient’s sense of responsibility for the trauma cannot have the desired effect is because of the unconscious guilt that dominates their psychic life. Another important shift in the author’s thinking, which she develops in detail, is a decrease in the importance that is given to the notions of dissociation or denial in the psychic functioning of these individuals. Based on this perspective, Marion M. Oliner proposes important considerations in the treatment of these patients.

There is no doubt that Marion M. Oliner’s soundness, both theoretical and clinical, has resulted in important insights in the understanding of survivors of trauma. This is certainly a great contribution. I am confident that it will be useful and of much interest not only to the psychoanalytic reader worldwide, but to anyone interested in the complex and important subject of the effects of trauma in the psychic life of an individual, and its treatment.

Gabriela Legorreta
Series editor
Chair, IPA Publications Committee
L’HÉAUTONTIMOROUMÉNOS

Je te frapperai sans colère
Et sans haine, comme un boucher,
Comme Moïse le rocher
Et je ferai de ta paupière,
Pour abreuver mon Saharah
Jaillir les eaux de la souffrance.
Mon désir gonflé d’espérance
Sur tes pleurs salés nagera
Comme un vaisseau qui prend le large,
Et dans mon coeur qu’ils soûleront
Tes chers sanglots retentiront
Comme un tambour qui bat la charge!

Ne suis-je pas un faux accord
Dans la divine symphonie,
Grâce à la vorace Ironie
Qui me secoue et qui me mord

Elle est dans ma voix, la criarde!
C’est tout mon sang ce poison noir!
Je suis le sinistre miroir
Où la mégère se regarde.
Je suis la plaie et le couteau!
Je suis le soufflet et la joue!
Je suis les membres et la roue,
Et la victime et le bourreau!

Je suis de mon cœur le vampire,
– Un de ces grands abandonnés
Au rire éternel condamnés
Et qui ne peuvent plus sourire!

*Le Boureau de soi-même

Charles Baudelaire

The executioner of oneself

I shall hit you without anger and without hatred, like a butcher, like Moses
hit the rock. And I shall cause the waters of suffering to gush from your eye
to drench my Sahara, my desire blown up by hope will swim on your salty
tears like a vessel which goes to sea, and in my intoxicated heart your dear
sobs will reverberate like a drum beating the charge!

Am I not a false accord in the divine symphony, due to the voracious
irony which shakes and bites me? It is in my shrill voice! All my blood is
black poison! I am the sinister mirror in which the shrew looks at herself.
I am the wound and the knife! I am the slap and the cheek! I am the limb
and the wheel, and the victim and the executioner!

I am the vampire of my heart – one of these great waifs condemned to
eternal laughter and unable to smile.

Translation by Marion M. Oliner
Introduction

I am including in this book one older article that covers issues that remain unresolved: it is Chapter 1, “Hysterical features among children of survivors”, which attempts to show similarities between the clinical picture of children of survivors who came to the attention of the group in which I was a participant, Group for the Psychoanalytic Study of the Effects of the Holocaust on the Second Generation. My article highlights some similarities between these patients and the dynamics of hysteria. The essay tried to take some distance from the notion of events being the primary cause of a disturbance. Undoubtedly historic calamities play a part, but the unconscious dynamics of the family still determine the nature of the conflicts the identification of the second generation with the fate of their parents aims to resolve. The same events can have different effects and therefore generalizations concerning cause and effect should be avoided. By concentrating on the issue of identification rather than the events in the parents’ lives I was reminded of the studies of hysteria which did not evolve along with other diagnostic terms. Yet hysterical identification is a term that was described as solving a psychic conflict implying that it had psychodynamic roots. From my own experience I knew that my childhood as a German Jew in the Second World War influenced how I viewed my competence as a mother. Nevertheless this fact never attained its exonerating function because of my deficiencies, especially around tolerating separations. To the contrary,
knowing the nature of my experiences served to reinforce the sense of being undesirable. As Winnicott rightly suggests, surviving trauma brings with it a fantasy of omnipotence.

With the focus on the second generation it is crucial to remember that they did not experience the events which shaped their lives. As I stressed in a “brief communication”, included in this book at the end of the second chapter, the children were influenced by their parents’ anxieties. The parents’ concern about survival which manifests itself in peacetime in inappropriate ways is frequently internalized by their children in a way that requires rationalization before it makes sense. According to the French analyst Roussillon (1999):

In the place of the illusion “I am the breast” there is a negative illusion at the origin of primary culpability: “I am (the) evil”. This core of primary culpability is non ambivalent, it precedes the organization of the differentiation between subject and object and rests on a primary confusion between self and non-self.

(Roussillon 1999: 83; my own translation)

It is no coincidence that Roussillon refers to pathological the self-image of being evil and the title of this book is contained in Baudelaire’s collection of poems to which he gave the name Les Fleurs du mal (The Flowers of Evil).

Chapter 2, “The Nazi hunter”, addresses specifically the second generation of trauma survivors whose early childhood distinguished many of them from the Divine Symphony, the idealized world of ordinary people. The title of the chapter describes how the belief in herself as an outcast shaped the life of a self-defeating young lady, who has remained in touch with me and who feels that I helped her despite the difficulties we both encountered in the treatment because of her looking for clues that I was a Nazi and later that I belonged to the upper class unlike her parents who were victims. It taught me to appreciate the struggle of many patients who are children of survivors.

If the reader thinks that this summary describes common knowledge and does not need my emphasis on the unconscious processes involved in the assimilation of historic events, I recently ran across evidence to prove them wrong in a 1985 article by the British analyst Leslie Sohn, written around the time when our study group functioned. The author stresses the fantasy aspects of the identification of the next generation with the fate of their parents. The Study Group on the other hand never questioned the application of this terminology and apparently either did not know about
Sohn’s article or did not agree with it. Despite my taking issue with the ease with which identification was accepted, I was ignorant of this interesting article which proposes a new term – identificate – for the highly valued image that differs from a genuine identification with a parent or another role model, lending itself for a personal myth. Those who function by deriving their identity and their sense of self-worth based on this falsified image stress the victimization by history rather than the triumph that comes with survival. It is therefore not history they are repeating but their own experience with a generation whose fate, victimization and triumph, has left its imprint on their relationship to their children.

I am including as an addendum to Chapter 2 “Playing games versus being fooled”, a brief vignette from the movie Life is Beautiful and my own experience during a life-threatening experience which convinced me that children react to the anxiety of their parents even if the subject is playful.

Chapter 3, “On the difficulty of hating one’s enemy”, adds another formulation for the difficulty in integrating the experience of psychic trauma in a meaningful way, counteracting the omnipotence derived from surviving the threat posed by the event. Omnipotence conflicts with the helplessness inherent in the experience and the ability to externalize the source of the injury in such a way that it no longer influences the self image. This complication is frequently ignored. The enemy – who should by virtue of the menace to the individual – be hated, is by definition a function. The function is to be a threat to the survival of the individual. In other words, our commonly applied psychoanalytic terms concerning subject and object are not helpful for extreme situations. Freud alluded briefly to this issue in The Ego and the Id:

To say that an instinct “hates” an object strikes us as odd. Thus, we become aware that the attitudes of love and hate cannot be made use of for the relations of the instincts to their objects, but are reserved for the relations of the total ego to objects.

(Freud 1915: 137)

The notion of the total ego has not drawn widespread attention. Perhaps it is contained in the concept of narcissism in most psychoanalytic formulations, but that is not accurate in terms of the underlying dynamics it covers. Jean Bergeret (1984), an analyst practising in Lyon whose work will be discussed in greater detail follows Freud’s logic in that his theory is based on there being a fundamental violence underlying
all subsequent development. At the outset the external world is not yet filled with objects. In this world there are only obstacles that must be removed for the individual’s survival. It is an interesting idea which I applied to the understanding of the difficulty in hating one’s enemy. Roussillon (1995) also felt compelled to use the notion of a different personality organization to explain the change caused by the experience of trauma. He explains the reaction to the threat to survival by means of the reality principle which organizes the personality when the action of the pleasure principle must be suspended. He suggests that this organization is determined by sensory perceptions without personal meaning. It makes a vivid case for those “denuded” factual memories that are at first powerless to mitigate the omnipotence that follows the survival of a calamity. The illustrations in this paper highlight this problem through testimonies of survivors. Vitality is derived from the degree to which an individual can externalize their experiences and give up the responsibility for events which they did not cause.

Chapter 4, “The root of war is fear; the rest is history”, is based on the question “Why war?”, initiated by the editors of the *Revue Française de Psychanalyse*, which discusses a group phenomenon thus differentiating it from the other chapters in this book. It goes beyond the limits of psychoanalysis because wartime leads to a focus on survival. It concerns the mind dedicated to the accurate perception of external reality, and it is a state in which the connection with the inner world is at a minimum. The preoccupation with strengthening the boundaries between friend and enemy leads to greater cooperation among friends and greater aggression against enemies. Fears of imaginary dangers remind us of paranoia and require education or treatment. Accepting that a danger is real during wartime thus limits the work of psychoanalysis whose emphasis is on the creations of the mind. Bergeret’s 1984 description of fundamental violence applies to wartime conditions even though he addresses a fight for survival present at the birth of the infant whereas wars concern adults in large groups that fight for their existence.

For the individual participating in some kind of active combat or other forms of aggression in the service of survival, there is the potential for the comfort derived from the identification with a group. Except for this, the similarity between their situation and the one described for victims is compelling. These individuals also have to suspend actions guided by fantasies or dreams and allow themselves to be dominated by expediency in the service of survival. They tend to have a narrow focus and a keen awareness for danger. Their attunement to external circumstances
is crucial. In this situation it appears as if the “total ego” dominates the sense of self so that instances that are discussed in the article in which a leader’s narcissism runs counter to the primary goal, that of survival; instead they are suicidal.

These judgements do not call for psychoanalytic knowledge but decisions based on expediency. I consider it important to keep in mind that as analysts we are almost powerless to influence the course of events. We may be able to distinguish and judge accordingly if a war has a rational basis or it is in the interest of a leader’s aggrandizement such as those whose story is retold in this essay, but we do not have the power to change it. The outcome depends on history.

This paper clarifies the distinction between the reality oriented, objectless psychic organization and narcissism. Wars may be necessary and require firm and well protected boundaries. The strategies should address the goal of survival when threatened without the glory promised by those whose narcissistic needs exaggerated the danger to begin with. The population dominated by the fear for their survival do not necessarily know how to judge the reality of the danger. This makes them more vulnerable to propaganda that frightens them. Once the assessment has been made – rightly or wrongly – that a war is necessary, psychoanalysts need to ensure that the patient acts appropriately in order to fight the danger be it war or be it another kind of threat to survival for which action rather than reflection is called for.

This psychic orientation geared to effective action illustrates a scheme proposed by Freud when he suggested that at first what is outside is hated. It is, of course, the organization that individuals with weak ego boundaries adopt in order to hold on to their identity. It is a state which leads to the suppression of subjectivity because external and psychic realities are considered to be in an antagonistic relationship. When this reaction is inappropriate to the context in which it occurs, it serves defensive needs such as exoneration from guilt and aggression. I fear that the fact that this personality organization can serve defensive needs appropriate to survival, manifested in rigid and concrete thinking, has caused analysts to view external reality exclusively as the antagonist of psychic reality. Loewald (1952: 30) suggested that psychoanalysis “has not recognized, in its dominant current, that psychoanalytic theory has unwittingly taken over much of the obsessive neurotic’s experience and conception of reality and has taken it for granted as ‘the objective reality’”.

And I am inclined to think that the division introduced by Bion between alpha and beta elements also contributes greatly to this misunderstanding
(Oliner 2013). This has led me to include at this point an essay, Chapter 5, focused on the interaction between sensory perception and psychic reality. I believe that the attention paid to external reality is necessary for the treatment of those individuals who consider themselves “the false accord” because their need for omnipotence has led them to sacrifice awareness of their own history in an act of devotion to their fragile parents.

Chapter 5 highlights the tacit assumption about value attributed to the reality of an object, a perception or an occurrence. The value of being real is shown in this chapter for the important role it has influencing thinking and dispelling the notion of external reality being essentially in the service of a defense against psychic reality, as I believe is implied in some of the newer theories such as Bion’s notion of beta elements. Grubrich-Simitis (2004) raised the issue of early trauma as the cause for Freud’s intense reaction to the physical attributes of the statue of Moses by Michelangelo. She suggested that individuals having been traumatized are likely to place greater emphasis on perception. She does not suggest that this character trait necessarily leads to concreteness and operational thinking – a term introduced by the French psychosomaticiens denoting action oriented thinking.

According to Proust, whose view has been confirmed by scientific research (Johnson 2006), strong emotions interfere with the way events are remembered. The individuals whom this concerns need to overlook the faults of the parents who fail in their function and blame their own flaws or sins for the events they cannot afford to remember precisely because of their need for a dependable adult. The process is based on abolishing the difference in generations or more precisely, to aggrandize those parents who fail them and lend them an unyielding authority which they have not earned. Thus fragile parents can cause their offspring to think of themselves as omnipotently having caused the emotional scene. In their analytic treatment they treat a more precise knowledge of their own history as an act of aggression.

The chapter also explores how “being real” is used in various contexts; how this value persists outside the purview of reality testing or other objective criteria; lastly how the need for perceptual qualities influence dream work as well as other illusions of reality, including fetishes, whose sole value resides in their material reality. Proust’s description of the experience of tasting a madeleine (compared with the indistinctness of highly charged emotional memories) and a clinical incident illustrate the important role perceptual identity plays in making the past come to life. Because the impact of perceptual identity stems from an earlier period of
development than the striving for thought identity, it has wrongly attained
the status of a poor relative. To counter this, I try to demonstrate how the
need for perceptual identity causes the past to be repeated.

Because insistence on the reality of an experience is frequently used
defensively, thus distorting the complete picture of an experience, ana-
lysts run the danger of joining patients in treating external and psychic
reality as dichotomous. This attitude underestimates the beneficial poten-
tial of using reality where it can serve to limit unconscious omnipotence
and thereby restore from oblivion the past in its context and allow the
total setting to come to life as personal history.

Chapter 6, “Further explorations of Winnicott’s ‘use of an object’”,
examines how Winnicott dealt with the issue of external reality. He
expresses it by way of the object whose autonomy is perceived and
acknowledged which differs from Freud’s notion based on the assumption
of the uselessness of hallucinations as a response to hunger. The hunger
persists and leads to taking pleasure in sucking the breast that nourishes.
The difference between the hallucinated, mental, or fantasied object and
the real one that satisfies is the foundation of the positive aspects of the
external world. Winnicott’s theory is different from these assumptions
on which the preceding chapters are based. He introduces the contrast
between object relating and object use. The latter addresses the reality
of the object. He described the transition between object relating and object
use as one involving the destruction of the object. If the object survives, it is
placed outside the individual’s omnipotence and becomes useful in that
it is dependable:

The subject can now use the object that has survived. It is important to note
that it is not only that the subject destroys the object because the object is
placed outside the area of omnipotent control. It is equally significant to
state this the other way round and to say that it is the destruction of the
object that places the object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent
control. In these ways the object develops its own autonomy and life, and
(if it survives) contributes in to the subject, according to its own properties.
(Winnicott 1971: 89–90; italics mine)

The problem with this clarity lies in its expression: it appears as short-
hand, the object’s survival renders it useful and real. However Winnicott
did not sufficiently explain his notion of destruction. We are left to specu-
late whether it is based on forgetting or as obliterating memory traces. Just
how does the mind destroy? Does it engage in violent unconscious fanta-
sies? Does it only obliterate the links to the images rather than rendering
them truly non-existent consistent with Bion’s description of evacuation? Or are we to think of negative hallucination, to which Andre Green (1993) devoted considerable attention. These unanswered issues do not put into the question the validity of Winnicott’s clinical observations, especially as it derives from the treatment of those individuals whose parents appear literally too fragile to be useful. Because of the clinical validation of Winnicott’s observations, they require a formulation that is better integrated into the existing psychoanalytic theories. I thought that the most outstanding problem is the terminology that implies that there is only one object, underlying the Kleinian notion of pre-oedipal development. I am convinced that greater precision about the processes Winnicott describes will yield wider application to the treatment of adults, especially as it concerns those who identify themselves as “the false accord in the divine symphony”.

Chapter 7, “The analytic frame: neither subject nor object”, examines the analytic situation in the light of the contemporary rejection of the rigidity formerly associated with the Freudian model and the issue of survival raised in the previous chapter. Granted that the silent analyst who occasionally lets out a sound so that the patient knows he is awake has become a caricature of classical analysis. Yet the implications inherent in greater flexibility have to be appreciated and understood as well as the verbal exchange between analyst and patient. In the contemporary setting enactments are inevitable and can serve to inform the process. However, “anything is grist for the mill” does not hold for the modern situation any more than it did in classical analysis. This realization brought me back to the examination of the nature of this important and essential aspect of the analytic situation: the part that enters the process silently at the outset, but Bleger, whose 1967 study of the frame is most enlightening, recommends that the meaning of the frame eventually should become part of the subject of analysis. Thus remaining both frame and process before the end of the treatment.

It has generally been accepted that aspects of the frame must survive the treatment itself thus maintaining the special relationship between patient and analyst. It is illustrated in the ethics codes as a strong warning against potential intimate relationships between former patients and their analysts: it is regarded as akin to incest. This emphasis on survival of the frame requires careful examination. In the context of Winnicott’s discussion about destruction, the issue of survival should be taken literally. In my experience, those individuals, “the false accords”, torture themselves because of this “divine symphony” that was never part of their childhood. While they may not be actively suicidal, they are constantly in conflict concerning their right to a separate existence, different from the place
assigned to them by the imaginary orchestra. The challenge to their existence makes merger relationships particularly attractive while at the same time threaten the very existence they are trying to save.

As usual, the childhood experience with deficient parenting magnifies the role of omnipotence. This is in direct line with the inhibition of aggression out of fear for the object. Here again, it is easy to be misled when confronted with individuals who appear victimized by a sadistic parent: the fear of the parent is evident but not the fear for the parent, considered the victim of their own destructiveness. In the process they may attribute their own survival to the benevolence of those who failed them. This is poignantly illustrated in the chapter by the fact that Jewish concentration camp survivors praised God for saving them thus ignoring all the suffering and losses which would suggest that God forgot his chosen people. Krystal (1978), himself a survivor, addressed this same phenomenon by highlighting the pseudo-dependency of substance abusers and others unable to care for themselves appropriately. These problems resurface in the patient’s attitude toward the frame. In my experience patients, especially those who fear their own destructiveness, inhibit as much as they can initiating changes in the frame. I have witnessed serious temporary confusion resulting from episodes they regarded as the destruction of the setting. A similar, but less serious, reaction resulted in the patient who thought he had caused me to lose ground in our imaginary battlefield.

The identity these individuals forged for themselves is not closely related to who they are, but there are enough defenses in place to keep this out of their own awareness. The merger relationships they favor tend to give them safety, because differences threaten their existence. This defensive pattern results ultimately in the uncertainty about who is speaking during session. As one of the patients suggested after I tried to clarify for him the factors entering into his inability to finalize the plans for a trip: “now I am going to go home, put on a wig and make the arrangements”. Another patient spent the weekend in bed waiting for his Monday session during which I would tell him what is going on. I took it to mean that he put “his life on hold” and the Monday session was considered the event that would restore him. The meaning of the frame can only be guessed at, but its importance is clear. According to Bleger, whose 1967 work is discussed in the chapter, it is a non-ego.

Bleger’s observations are worth repeating in this introduction because unlike the preceding texts, he introduces the psychotic part of the analytic process. What is most primitive, non-differentiated, repeats itself in the frame:
This denomination of the non-ego makes us think as something non-existent, but which actually exists to the extent that it is the “meta-ego” on which the very possibility of formation and maintenance of the ego depends.

(Bleger 1967: 514)

In such a breach the effort by the patient is to re-establish the analyst’s frame so that the analyst can be ignored or destroyed, because the symbiosis between participants has been re-established. With regard to the frame the alliance is made with the psychotic part of the frame. It is mostly ignored but according to Bleger should become part of the process within the analytic setting. Examples of actual reversible psychotic reactions within an analysis will illustrate these theoretical statements.

References

CHAPTER ONE

Hysterical features among children of survivors

Introduction

It has been stated repeatedly that, in one way or another, the children of survivors tend to be preoccupied with the suffering of their parents. To many people’s surprise and pain, children who were often conceived in order to reaffirm life, have shown signs that the past suffering of their parents plays an important part in their own existence, and that their concern with the horrible events preceding their own birth is expressed by a tendency to repeat the suffering themselves. This wish tends to be repressed, since the parents have placed much stress on survival and the new life; and the tendency to repeat the past is clearly contrary to the view consciously shared with their parents that it should never happen again. However, when some malfunction brings one of these children to the attention of professionals, the analyst is apt to be confronted by symptoms that can only be explained when one understands that year after year the patient has attempted to relive aspects of the persecution of his or her parents and relatives. This has been a painful discovery for all concerned. At the Psychoanalytic Congress in Jerusalem in 1977, Erich Gumbel stated that it was particularly difficult for those living in Israel to recognize that the second generation was still experiencing the past, and that the founding of the Jewish state could not wholly undo the effects
of the persecution (see Gumbel 1978). He suggested that therapists and analysts have suffered a “narcissistic blow”, which they share with everyone whose basic sense of values was affronted by the Holocaust, and which they must recognize within themselves.

It is equally difficult to accept Emmanuel DeWind’s references to a “hate addiction” among survivors which leads ex-prisoners to what he called “the most serious problem which is that they so often direct their aggression onto their children, thus fulfilling the Biblical saying that the sins of the shall be visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generation” (DeWind 1968: 304).

This is not to say that all survivors are sick and have damaged their children, but many children of survivors do need help and understanding. As the cases unfold, the wish to experience the persecution expresses itself in many forms, most of which do not reveal the underlying motive. For instance, it was detected in the artistic creations of one who was unaware that he was expressing his longing to share in the deaths of his relatives so as to have a place in the minds of his parents and be loved as he felt that only “they”, his relatives, were loved. These fantasies were apparently present despite an outwardly close and intricate tie to the family, which had no connection with these creative efforts; and the patient’s intense outpourings of emotion stood in sharp contrast to the drabness of his daily existence. As in so many other cases, concern about the choice of a career had brought him into treatment. Inasmuch as his artistic creations expressed feelings that were not evident in the rest of his personality, they took the place of a symptom; and it had to be assumed that he could not improve his life without integrating into the rest of his personality the fantasies they expressed.

Sylvia Axelrod and her co-workers (Axelrod, Schnipper and Rau 1980), whose experience with thirty hospitalized children of survivors led to similar conclusions, described patients who have staged real persecutions or have repeated, within the hospital setting, being locked up as their parents had been; thus, they were alternately preparing for the Holocaust and testing whether they could be freed. In each case, the nature of the underlying motive was unconscious, but it became a familiar part of the picture to those observers who had become sensitive to such fantasies. It is as if these patients needed to abolish the time difference between them selves and their parents, and, in order not to suffer from the sense of exclusion, had to relive, often on anniversaries, the latter’s fate in order to go on with their own lives. “Their story becomes more real to me than my own life, at times”, said one child of survivors who, for that reason, could not afford
to become too immersed in their story. She also said, in describing events that preceded the time of her birth, “We lived . . .” instead of “My parents lived . . .”. Nevertheless, she was not aware how many of her actions were determined by the wish to take part in the trauma suffered by her parents.

Once it has been established that the need to repeat the fate of the parents dominates one part of the lives of the neurotic and psychotic children of survivors who seek treatment, it is important to assess the mechanisms by which this need is both integrated and kept separated from the rest of the personality. No attempt is made here to attribute one single mode of psychic functioning to a population whose members are almost as varied as is society at large, having in common only the fact that their parents survived the Holocaust, were in constant danger during it, and incurred important losses of objects as well as narcissistic losses. However, the fate of the parents favoured certain adjustment mechanisms that entered into their relationships with their children.

It occurred to me that the study of hysteria is particularly relevant for some of the problems which confront the analyst who is trying to understand them. For example, those who have studied the effects of the Holocaust on the survivors, have often referred to a period of latency. The traumatic impact of the degrading and cruel treatment by the Nazis has often been delayed, so that at first the survivors seemed less damaged by what they had undergone than they actually were. This observation turns out to be compatible with what was observed about traumatic hysteria: “After the physical trauma, the life endangering shock, there exists a period of latency, of incubation (Charcot) or of ‘elaboration’ (Freud), that leads one to think of something different from a purely causal physiological sequence” (Laplanche 1976: 130). Martin Wangh refers to the relationship between the trauma and its long-term effect as “permanent character changes through stress”. He goes on to assert:

At the time of the traumatic impact, through a defensive depersonalization and derealization, clear apperception of external stimuli is greatly reduced and hence the potential for the emergence of internal repressed ideation, consonant with the present sado-masochistic stimuli, increases. At such a time, the percepts of the cruel external reality that have not been entirely warded off by the defense, form an amalgam with the emergent percepts of the past, thus obtaining a lasting energetic cathexis as great as that of a traumatic experience in childhood. Once the traumatic situation is over, an effort usually only partially successful is made to forget, to rerepress.

(Wangh 1968: 320)
As a further elucidation for this process, Wangh suggests that the process of defensive depersonalization and derealization is akin to the “hypnoid state” first postulated by Freud and Breuer (as quoted in ibid.: 320). This analogy suggests that the defence against the trauma is a process known to be productive of hysteria. On this basis it might be helpful to hypothesize that hysterical mechanisms also lend themselves to the mastery of the trauma suffered by the survivors. To postulate that this mode of defence leads to the mastery and subsequent transmission of the trauma requires considerable justification, but it can be demonstrated that there are striking similarities between the traits and conditions favouring hysteria and those under which children of survivors were brought up. This understanding is particularly important in those cases in which the dissociations are so severe that they attain psychotic proportions, since hysterical psychosis is a diagnostic entity that has fallen into relative disuse, and the proper assessment may not be made.

**The uncertain status of both hysteria and of the pathology afflicted children of survivors**

Axelrod et al. (1980) remarked on the fact that many of the survivors’ children who came to their attention presented atypical pictures, and a number had defied categorization. Judith Kestenberg has stressed repeatedly (and has incorporated her conviction in her diagnostic profile; Kestenberg 1982) that even though some of the patients were at times psychotic, many did not suffer from the fragmentation seen in schizophrenia and displayed ego strength not usually associated with psychotic episodes. While they seemed at times confused, their boundaries conformed to their own boundaries and to those of their internalized objects; however, they did not seem to be living their own lives during the psychotic episodes. Many of them did not settle into a state of chronic psychosis, so that often its episoic, encapsulated character suggested a dramatic re-enactment in an “altered state of consciousness” rather than a state of fragmentation compatible with schizophrenia or the chronicity of manic-depressive psychosis. In this, what they suffered seemed to resemble the description of hysterical psychosis: “A type of transient psychotic state [which] can be differentiated from other psychogenic psychoses. It is usually sudden in onset, short-lived . . . and has no long-term sinister prognosis of psychotic deterioration” (Blacker and Tupin 1977: 117). There is a relatively rapid reconstitution of ego functions both
in hysterical psychosis and in the psychotic episodes suffered by some of the children of survivors. In the survivor children, the onset was at times triggered by their having reached an age that was crucial in the history of their parents’ persecution. It may thus be true that the puzzle represented by some of these patients mirrors the uncertain status of the disorder from which they suffer, and that a further exploration of hysteria will be helpful for the assessment and treatment of these particular cases. Unfortunately “the unrewarding areas of psychiatry attract the interest of neither the practitioners nor theoreticians. Hysterical psychosis is one of these, and as such has been neglected by research workers” (Pankow 1974: 408). This situation is to the detriment of those patients whose degree of pathology may be overestimated because of a more damaging diagnostic label.

At the present time, when clinicians tend to consider neurosis and psychosis as two distinct categories, and when we try to find a fixation point by which one can judge whether the main difficulties are Oedipal or pre-Oedipal, it is frustrating to approach hysteria where no differentiation has been made between neurosis and psychosis. Nor is it at all clear how the oral fixations so often mentioned in the cases of hysteria interact with the observation that the hysteric has failed to detach the libido from the Oedipal object. This lack of clarity has undoubtedly contributed to the decline of hysteria as a diagnostic category at the present time. Yet, in a strange way, these patients reflect this uncertainty: “They are not as sick as they look” is one of the frequent observations that has been made about them; and what distinguishes them from other severely traumatized patients is precisely the remarkable ego strength in the presence of extended pathology.

Indeed, we may be forced to accept the elusiveness of this neurosis, which ranges from the most advanced (fixation at the Oedipal level) to outright psychosis. In this context it may be helpful to recall the pathology of Anna O. (Breuer and Freud 1895: 21–47) and compare it with her subsequent career. The severity of the one stands in sharp contrast to the adaptiveness of the other; and the tendency to suggest that those whom Freud treated were not hysteric because of their psychotic or borderline features, may reflect the wish to redefine the term rather than to make a renewed effort to understand its complexity. In the case of those patients who fall into the realm of hysterical psychosis, only a proper diagnosis will lead to appropriate treatment. The problem of proper diagnosis is not nearly as crucial in the case of neurosis.
Despite the uncertainty about hysteria, the literature on the subject is abundant; and within the last three years alone, there have been two books attempting to give an overview on the subject. The Paris Congress in 1973 devoted to the subject yielded many interesting articles integrating what is known about the dynamics with more recent ways of conceptualizing psychosexual development. As we review some of the salient points methodically, the parallels between the experiences of children of survivors and those of hysterics become unmistakable, so that it seems as if in many essential points the descriptions of hysterics in general fit the cases that are known to us.

The reality of the trauma

Ever since Freud abandoned his theory attributing the cause of hysteria to childhood seduction, there has been a tendency among psychoanalysts to consider events in outer reality as being the concern of other disciplines. But this tendency has never detracted from the effort to find in treatment memories of the event that caused the pathological defensive reaction within the ego. Psychoanalysis emphasizes the reaction of the ego in response to what happened to it. In the case of the survivors’ children, the trauma of the Second World War has the same role as that attributed to seduction in hysteria. The complicated interaction between inner and outer reality was never stated the way André Green did:

What comes into play is not a seduction which is put into action, rather it is a matter of the minimal signs, indicative of such a desire, which are recognized by the girl, as the jealous person recognizes the seductive behavior of his lover toward his rival. What comes into play is the function of the misapprehension of the desire of the girl who wishes to be seduced. Perception serves repression in this case. External reality furnishes exoneration to the interdiction which weighs on internal reality. Fantasy is nourished by the kernel of reality, as in delirium, but the role of perception is to [obscure] the fantasy while having induced it.

(Green 1973)

Inasmuch as there is evidence that the often-unspoken reality of the trauma that the parents have suffered and the anxieties it has generated, are communicated to the children in the same way as the seduction described by
Green, this reality can be said to have the same function as the seduction in the fantasy life of the children. This is true even though the reality of the trauma pertains to the life experiences of the parents and not to those of the children.

What is transmitted is at first as mysterious as adult sexuality when it impinges upon the child’s consciousness and is assimilated in that realm where perceptions merge with fantasy. Only later can one sort out one’s reactions as a child and distinguish between the life experiences of the parents and one’s own fantasies. If Dora’s fantasies concerning Mr K. (Freud 1905) were of utmost importance for understanding her difficulties, the memory of Mr K.’s advances was crucial for the pathological outcome, since she was subjected to a seductive climate that stimulated her beyond her capacity for assimilation. Psychoanalysis has always taken into account the events that have triggered the fantasies underlying pathology. It has therefore had to stay on a fine line between inner and outer reality, somewhere between solipsism and sociology. Axelrod and her co-workers report on the hazard of emphasizing one aspect at the expense of the other with reference to survivor children:

> We believe that some discordant diagnoses and concomitant treatments arise by reason of the unusual degree to which intrapsychic or endogenous factors are associated and confused with subcultural familial factors. Focusing on one set of factors to the exclusion of the other leads to poor results.

(Axelrod et al. 1980: 8)

Even though we are faced with the transmission of events that have actually taken place and are not exclusively part of the parents’ fantasy life, many concrete details are simply not known and therefore bear the stamp of a reinterpretation by the parents and the children. The anxieties of the parents in regard to survival and loss generated by those events can reinforce the child’s anxieties in ways that are familiar to us.

> The genesis of the trauma

Eric Brenman’s description of the hysterogenic mother so fits what has been written about women who have survived the Holocaust that he could almost be describing them and the conditions under which they tried to raise their children right after the war:
1. The mother is overwhelmed by anxiety, unconsciously conveying that the infant’s anxieties are really catastrophic. 2. At the same time, she will provide a panacea to lull the baby and try to make it believe all is perfectly well. She provides a model for identification which is unreal, the prototype of the “successful hysteric”. 3. She encourages negation of psychic truth. 4. She provides external love of an idealizing type, with excessive indulgence of the physical needs, devotion, excessive sensuous stimulation, encouraging greedy dependency and hypersexuality. 5. By these means she avoids psychic catastrophe. . . . We have an attack on psychic reality and an external mother forming an unreal relationship. Here we can see a modus vivendi established together with a defense against catastrophic anxieties of survival.

(Brenman 1973)

Brenman adds that the same relationship could exist between an average mother and a difficult baby. It also applies to the average woman who is trying to nurture a child in peacetime while being plagued by memories of war, death, destruction, starvation, and loss. John Bruggeman says:

I think that many concentration camp mothers used their first-born child after the war as a peace-child or as a substitute for the dead member of the family; sometimes as a reparation child for the reunification of the estranged family . . . by treating the child’s fears and griefs as trivial and commanding it to enjoy itself because the war is over.

(Bruggeman 1977)

The anxieties remained unspoken, and the patient in treatment later communicated only very indirectly his own belief and that of his parents that the truth is unbearable.

M. Masud Khan (1974) concurs with the view that the attack on psychic reality is essential to the etiology of hysteria, along with the overstimulation leading to a precocious body ego and sexualization of anxiety: “The body needs were satisfied but the ego needs were neither recognized nor facilitated” (ibid.: 154). The trauma, according to him, is in the mother’s inability to satisfy the psychic needs of the child and in the child’s attempt at self-cure by exploiting body experiences and thus establishing the basic model for reacting to stress, and conflict. Khan suggests that:

hysteria is not so much an illness as the technique to remain blank, as if absent from oneself, with symptoms which are substitutes permitting the camouflage of this absence. In their childhood, hysterics become conscious early in life of the subjective mood of the mother, a mood which
intrudes into her function as a caretaker. Under those circumstances, the child sexualizes a relation to the partial object in order to refuse this intrusion provoked by the emotionality of the mother and a relation which is too close for the capacities of the budding ego to face.

(Khan 1974: 156)

He, too, suggests the exclusion of an important part of the child’s experience from the rest of the child’s psychic organization, but adds that the missing part is replaced by excessive sexualization of the relationship. This part is repressed in later years as well and manifests itself as the return of the repressed in neurosis and psychosis. The two-phase process – the exclusion of mother’s affective relationship to the child as well as the replacement of missing component by a sexualized relationship that is later repressed – makes the fixation point in hysteria difficult to establish and causes it to look like more serious pathology, such as the “false self” or other schizoid phenomena. However, the intervening variable, which is the sexualization of the relationship to the object, allows development to continue and reach the Oedipal phase, even if in what Gisela Pankow (1974) calls a truncated form.

Despite many advances in psychoanalysis, the process of sexualization remains mysterious; but it is also clear that through it, the relationship to the object is maintained and quantities of energy can be absorbed that otherwise would contaminate the ego to a paralysing degree. If the ego is strong enough to sexualize the trauma, it can be segregated by means of a split and contained as a symptom.

This sexualizing of the trauma was brought home through the case in which the survivor syndrome was, as it were, absorbed into a sexual perversion, which was treated and described by Abraham Freedman (1978). The man, who had suffered greatly during the war, came into treatment because of a perversion he was driven to enact when he felt anxious. As a result of psychoanalysis, he was greatly improved and left the treatment satisfied. The question that arose when this case was presented for discussion concerned the effectiveness of linking the symptom to the patient’s early life without giving his wartime experiences equal, if not greater, attention. The content of the analysis dealt mainly with his earlier childhood in which the Poles or his father were imbued with the sadistic imagery incorporated into his perverse scenario. It is as if the experiences that came later had been absorbed into an earlier structure, and reinforced it. We shall never be able to know what would have been the outcome if
interpretations centering on the sadism of the Germans had become more important in his analysis. It is equally conceivable to me that the potential for absorbing a trauma through sexualization was demonstrated through this patient’s great improvement by means of insights geared at understanding the earlier trauma and analysts could accept that there is a great deal we need to learn from our cases.

If this is indeed true of this case in which the patient’s sexuality was used almost exclusively, it would illustrate Joyce McDougall’s description of individuals who use sexuality to repair faults in one’s sense of identity (McDougall 1970). As in all perversion, the patient attempted to create through the perverse scenario something that did not exist – as, for example, a man who at will “becomes” a woman while still retaining his phallic potency, or a fetishist who creates an illusory penis for a woman from an article of clothing. Through the act of creation such a patient can deny his anxieties about loss and castration on the one hand, and on the other avoid outright psychosis in which a large part of reality is relinquished. The patient avoids working through the Holocaust experience, since the anxieties associated with it are absorbed into those prompting the perverse scenario.

The neurotic, on the other hand, has acquired the right to experience his body as a unit, but at the cost of sexuality as an instrument of pleasure (McDougall 1970). Thus, sexualization of the trauma in hysteria allows a further refinement in the process of defence and the possibility that a greater segment of the personality escapes, at least in part, the pathogenic conflict. This factor contributes to the general view that hysteria, which centers on the repression of the conflict of the Oedipal phase, retains to the greatest extent a means of containing the pathology.

In her attempt to link psychopathology to interactions within the family, Gisela Pankow states:

I wish to propose the following hypothesis concerning the correlation between family structure and the body image in hysterical psychosis: for a girl to develop her own world of sexual desire, i.e. unconscious genital desire, it is not only necessary that the father take his normal place in the family – which the father of the schizophrenic does not do – but he must also accept his sexual and genital role and the prohibition thus implied with regard to his children.

(Pankow 1974: 412)

Again, Pankow’s comparison between the father of the schizophrenic and the father of the hysterical makes clear that the difference is crucial and that the pathological sexualization of the relationship allows an important step
in development to take place. Accepting of course, that the relationship involves incest and is therefore forbidden because it does not respect the difference in generations.

Khan’s observation that the mother’s inability to contain her anxieties—with her tendency to replace some of the flaws in her ability to care for her child by an emphasis on physical contact—contributes to hysteria is also relevant to the histories that emerge in the treatment of children of survivors (Khan 1974). The parents wanted to reaffirm life through the birth of these children. It is remarkable in this context how many of those who have come to the attention of mental health workers were born in 1946, very often in displaced persons camps, or have siblings who were born before the parents found a permanent home. This fact suggests that the parents of our patients attempted through the birth of a baby, to renew life after their release from the concentration camp. But their fears about survival were often greater than their ability to master them; and when they often engaged their children in a struggle with death, it was on a level that escaped conscious control and formed the core of anxiety that was recognized as inappropriate and therefore denied. In addition to their fears concerning physical care, their decision to have children before they had renewed their own lives caused them to inflict on their children unstable marriages, separations, and hostilities, which repeated some of the elements of their own lives. The attempt to compensate for some of these deprivations through denial and excessive physical care or abuse led the sexualization of the parent-child relationship which caused fixation at that level.

Axelrod and her co-workers write:

Parents have difficulty in responding with adequate affect or setting limits, they are overanxious and overprotective and have difficulties with separation. They tend to overvalue their children, expecting them to accomplish enough in life to justify the parents’ survival.

(Axelrod et al. 1980: 2)

Parents’ anxiety and overprotectiveness can also take the form of encouraging the child to remain a dependent so that fulfilling his or needs can justify their existence in their own eyes in contrast to their own parents who did not live to fulfill that role for them. This causes some aspects of the relationship between parent and child to become unreal and makes it difficult for the survivors to respond appropriately to their children’s suffering due to physical displacement from country to country, economic uncertainty, marital discord, and – most important – the overwhelming
anxieties and depressions that formed their early environment. Since the parents of the children who later came for treatment tended to emphasize the positive aspects of their children’s lives, the children, too, shared the former’s fantasy that they, the children, had been lucky to be born under such favourable circumstances. The alternative between abuse and spoiling reinforced the fantasy that the parents were not to blame and that nothing of a traumatic nature was occurring in the lives of the children. Experiences were therefore repressed and replaced by a wishful fantasy. In most cases, the total abolishment of inner life – as occurs in schizophrenia – was avoided; instead, the child tended to adjust with the demand that he live out an existence fundamentally alien to his genuine feelings – as happens with the hysteric (Krohn 1978: 136) – but not out of touch with external reality.

Through his well-being, the child can prove to the parent that he is innocent of the suffering of his objects, either because they were never lost or because he had no hand in their fate. In this two-phased attempt to help the parents cope with the pain and guilt concerning the loss of their objects, the children can participate in the denial of that loss through an identification that constitutes a miraculous restitution of the lost object. The child participating in restitution of the lost objects alleviates the guilt concerning the death as well as the implied Oedipal victory over the object, and follows the logic that since the object is resurrected in the child, no crime has been committed and guilt is unnecessary. Of course, the object must remain intact and happy and is called upon to play the parental role, or it must remain the needy child gratifying the parents’ wish to retain a nurturing role. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis says:

They clung to their old objects and reprojected them onto their offspring. Lost parents became children. [Since] the fact that [the child] survived them seems to bring forth a statement of guilt, it signified somehow collaboration with the executioner; whereas only death through persecution is the clear distancing from the persecutor. In unconscious mental processes there is apparently a tendency toward a judgment which is quite without foundation and which idealizes the death of the victim and is suspicious of those who survived”.

(Grubrich-Simitis 1979: 1016)

In many cases, then, this dilemma was resolved by the failure of a parent to take the rightful place in the Oedipal triangle and by parental encouraging of the identification of the child with the lost object.
This process was particularly well illustrated in the case of Peter Y., whose parents had turned away from religion with the firm belief that it had lost its meaning for them. However, they gave their children a thorough religious education, so that Mr Y. eventually insisted forcefully that his parents adhere to the ritual; this they did as if they were children who were being trained rather than adults who had gained certain experiences. It was Peter Y. who assumed the role of the lost rabbi in the family and punished the parents for their transgression. These patients try to change themselves in order to defend against the trauma of their experiences with their parents. They cannot confront those experiences, since the defences of their parents aim at abolishing the reality of their own suffering. Thus, these patients maintain repression while entertaining the hope that, through some psychic manipulation, events will be converted into non-happenings. This is different from the obsessive compulsive attempt to undo an event by action on an external object; here the wish is to change the inside magically so as to abolish the external event.

Unlike other cases who have been more or less damaged, hysterogenic parents are likely to have been able to adapt to the postwar world; but for them the past presented so many problems that their adaptation could only be superficial, and in the service of procreation and survival. Hence, the ability to adapt is often so well-developed in their children, as Kestenberg (1982) has pointed out. These patients are different from others whose fantasies about the Holocaust, sadism, and persecution constitute a greater disruption with present-day reality. The hysterical patient shares with his parents the ability to create for himself a surface normality and conformity to the culture in which they live. When the events of the past intrude into the relationship, they are rationalized to signify something else in order to maintain the repression.

One who has survived death and destruction to take one’s place in a society that attempts to affirm life has had to undergo profound transformations involving change of culture (very few survivors settled in the country of origin), change of language, and sometimes change of names. Some survivors forgot their original birth dates and took on another date or stopped celebrating. During the war, their survival was often predicated on their taking on false names, secret residences, conversion to Christianity, and a different moral code. E. DeWind (1968) says that the ability to switch quickly from one level of functioning to another has great survival value. This flexibility also proves to be one of the conditions for facilitating readaptation to normal life. But this asset could also become a liability, as described by Saul Friedlander:
I was destined, therefore, to wander among several worlds, knowing them, understanding them... but nonetheless incapable of feeling an identification without any reticence, incapable of seeing, understanding, and belonging in a single, immediate total movement.

(Friedländer 1979: 155)

This experience shows how, in a world such as that in which the survivors lived, identity becomes something like a garment that one can change at will: the more garments one has, the more likely one is to survive.

In the same vein, survivor-parents hoped that they could raise children who were adapted to the postwar world while gratifying their, the parents’, wish that

they [the children] should return as saviors into the psychotic world of the concentration camp and to see to it that the parents do not emerge as damaged, humiliated victims, this time... to be as if petrified in their own lives, to bear witness as a memorial to the crimes.

(Grubrich-Simitis 1979: 1008)

From the point of view in which one identity does not preclude another, these wishes do not seem incompatible. The children were led to create strange fantasies, such as the one in which a young man was entering the pre-history of another person and tried to steal that person’s identity. This fantasy corresponds again to something that A. Metcalf wrote about aspects of hysteria as being:

in response to parental expectations that the child be a protagonist in scenes from the parents’ unconscious fantasies – fantasies that are almost always a sadistic distortion of narcissistic struggles for survival with objects from the parents’ past.

(Metcalf 1977: 259)

Paul-Claude Racamier also commented on the dynamics of hysteria:

The hysteric and the child substitute miracles for mastery. That is to say something which cannot be communicated... He is pushed to live more than he is capable... to affirm himself through a life of substitutions, that of others.

(Racamier 1952: 142, 146)

Themes of resurrection, of reincarnation, or of being the savior abound in the material obtained through the treatment of children of survivors. These children have a sense that all good people have died; and that to
be loved, one has to be dead or bring back to life the prewar world. The generations are often reversed, and the children take on the identities of the lost objects as well as their own. This is the life of substitutions, as described by Racamier; the absence from oneself, as it was called by Khan; the life of hysterical materialization, as we have come to know it from classical psychoanalytic literature.

**Hysterical identification**

In the children’s search to help replace the lost objects of their parents and identify with the parents’ suffering, there seems to be both an attempt at restitution for losses and a defence against the Oedipal competition with a parent whom the child considers too vulnerable. These are two separate processes aimed at gaining love and freeing the child from the parents without the implied aggression of an Oedipal victory. These are two forms of identification for which clinical vignettes have already been given, but which have always had some puzzling aspect: for while in one case they are identifications with lost objects, they should not be confused with those identifications that lead to the giving up of the object in the outside world. Those are neither the dynamics of hysteria nor do they apply to those patients who are being studied here. In these cases, the tie to the object is maintained, and those objects whom they attempt to resurrect are not their own lost objects but those of their parents. The second type of identification – that with the suffering of the Oedipal object – is the partial identification observed in a patient who caught a disease that was at the time infecting a group of survivors, but it is similar to the first in that it, too, does not lead to object loss. Traditionally, the second type has been called “partial identification”, and the first type – that with the lost object of the parents – must be assumed to be a special case of the second type.

As was mentioned earlier, the first type aims at some form of restitution stemming from the parents’ belief that the losses can be undone. The dilemma was poignantly stated by this remark: “I can’t discard it since it is already irretrievably lost”. The belief that losses can be undone leads to a reversal of generations, as exemplified by Peter Y. who successfully imposed on his parents the religious practices that they had consciously abandoned; when he later started to waver in his beliefs, he felt guilty as if he were the first to abandon a tradition. If the classical cases of hysteria are re-examined to test whether they, too, yield some evidence of this reversal of generations, we are reminded that Anna O. nursed (mothered?) her father during his last illness, and that Dora was her father’s companion.
It is not easy to assert with conviction that in those cases there was an identification with the lost objects of the parents, since the analyses never went in that direction; but it is conceivable that this was indeed true. In children of survivors, the evidence is overwhelming that there is such identification; hence, there is additional reason for the children not to show an evidence of being victimized. Otherwise, instead of being the restitution for the loss, they might become its confirmation.

This can go to ludicrous extremes, as in the case of the parents who referred to their aggressive child as “little Hitler” but punished the less aggressive one for not fighting back. Nothing is permissible that might evoke the fantasy that the survivors abandoned their objects to their death; and the children are often indoctrinated to be aggressive toward a world that is depicted as hostile and menacing. Through their intactness, the children can alleviate some of the guilt of the parents, as was demonstrated clearly in the transference of a patient who was angry at and wanted to punish the analyst: “I would kill myself if it would not give pleasure to all those who say that analysis is no good.”

In the hope that the survivors had for their children, there is an implicit interdiction; as victims, they did not want to serve as models; if, however, they lived out their survival as a heroic achievement, they also made identification impossible, since the image they built was of superhuman proportions and required circumstances that would have to be re-created in order to be mastered. We know how many children attempted precisely that: to create circumstances in which the parents’ heroic deed could be duplicated. Other children gave evidence of reluctance to identify with the survivor-parent by other means: for example, a patient who studied all languages but the ones that his father spoke fluently. This rebellious attitude is as much because of the aggression (anal castration, according to Bela Grunberger) against the parent as because of the father’s own conflicts about assuming his rightful place, for which the son would have to compete in order to attain maturity. “During adolescence, detachment from the parents is tantamount to persecuting or destroying them” (Bruggeman 1977). Axelrod and her co-workers confirmed this observation: “Hospitalized survivor children have usually been unable to form any significant identification. . . . For this subgroup, parents have effectively banned links with their heritage, seriously interfering with their children’s sense of identity” (Axelrod et al. 1980: 10). It is apparent that clarity is needed when the word identification is used, since hysteria is considered the realm of identification par excellence. But as was seen before, hysterical identifications resemble what one patient called
“wearing constantly changing costumes”, and serve to obscure the lack of identification that would come from having competed and finally compromised in such a way that the individual feels one with his sexual and procreative functions. Green (1972) says about hysteria that the fundamental conflict resides in the impossibility of making compatible, through sexual experience, the union to a new object having phallic significance with the conservation of the parental object. According to him, sexuality is the privileged domain for the expression of this conflict, since the attainment of sexual gratification, which would mean a realization of the subject’s own persona aspirations, signifies the overcoming of the fixations on the parental objects without the feeling of cutting, separation, and mourning. New ties threaten the disappearance of the old ones in hysteria. Also, the good objects is always the one who takes part in the enjoyment of another; therefore I have an identification with another object which permits satisfaction only through a third. This notion of attaining satisfaction through the intermediary of an identification with the parents on the level of sharing their suffering is unconsciously encouraged by many of the parents, who in their lifetime have experienced the mutability of identity, and who perhaps themselves are parents, without ever identifying themselves with that function and what it implies. They experience separation as permanent loss and cannot tolerate that particular aggression that leads to a permanent separateness. It is evident that the children the survivor parents bear will never enrich the dead ancestors who because of their fate did not become grandparents. It is a breech in the generations and therefore for many survivors represents only an example of castration, humiliation, or punishment.

Contrary to people’s expectations, the problems presented by the survivors’ children are ordinary. At the workshop of the International Psychoanalytical Association Congress in Jerusalem in 1977, the comment was made that the problems presented by these patients were banal. This may be the most pervasive hysterical identification that they make – that with their own culture. The shallow conventionality has also been mentioned as being characteristic of the hysterics. If individuality is thwarted, why not copy the most pervasive pattern around? These survivors’ children made “new lives” often in such a way that when they finally made contact with each other and could discuss some of the issues which made them feel so isolated because they were not like everyone else, they felt great relief. This has been documented in much of the literature by the children themselves. Only when making contact fails – when either some somatic problem, a failure in a career, or problems in a love relationship
bring them into treatment – does it become apparent that the adaptation was a token of love offered to their parents in order to spare them yet another trauma – the suffering of their children. “Having these complaints is felt as a reproach against the parents, about which there are intense guilt feelings since they say that the war was not their parents’ fault” (Bruggeman 1977). The conventional adjustment of the child serves to bolster the feelings of innocence on the part of both parent and child. It has been my tentative conclusion that the second generation is angrier at the perpetrators than the first because survivors have a greater need to rebuild and not perish through their own anger.

The part that does indeed receive the mother’s communication of catastrophic anxiety, and is later replaced by sexualized fantasies about the parents’ lives before and during the war, does eventually make its claim. It is found in some of the incomprehensible actions that can only be understood as identification with the parents’ suffering. It expresses both the wish and the punishment for the wish, and it points up again that these children experience the difference between the generations more keenly and feel more shut out of their parents’ lives than do most other children. The wish to take part in that past is therefore overdetermined. Not only does it serve as a typical hysterical symptom, but it also allows a greater sense of having shared something important from which they were excluded.

**The problem of aggression**

It was pointed out at the beginning that survivors often inflicted considerable damage on their children through extensive pent-up aggression. Judging from the cases that have come to our attention, it is apparent that there were many instances of a parent calling a child “little Hitler” or “worse than what happened to me during the war”. Axelrod et al. (1980) report 30 per cent child abuse in the histories of the hospitalized group. Often the children, too, are aggressive and abusive. This attitude does not seem particularly pathogenic to their relationship, since it reaffirms the bond between parents and children and keeps alive the victim and executioner scenario. Where both parties seem much more vulnerable is in the area of loosening ties through growth. Emotional growth of the children through treatment may be experienced as a loss by parents, just as does a college education or a marriage. Events that most parents usually greet with pleasure, survivor-parents often react to negatively, as they lack the
trust to regard separations as matters of degree. As the danger is loss but not necessarily aggression, parents and children can be tied to each other by the repetition of a pattern of persecution and innocence which reaffirms ties through guilt. One patient, who was subjected to cruelty and abuse in childhood, said that she does not like to think of the Germans as human, since then she would have to think of all that cruelty as human, too. She clearly used the image of the Nazi as a screen for some of the cruelty inflicted on her by her own parents.

Some literature suggests that aggression is not a factor in hysteria, and it places the emphasis on dependency and submissiveness. But anyone recalling the case of Dora, who placed her aggression in the service of defeating Freud and who did not get along with her mother and whose death was called by Felix Deutsch (1957) a relief to those who had to cope with her, knows that the picture is far from simple, and that those early cases did not yield much material on aggression because the emphasis was on the repressed sexuality. Again, the picture is no simpler with the children of survivors; and basically only that aggression is avoided that would inflict upon the parents damage or loss. In this light, competition seems to be one of the forms of aggression most threatening to the object. A patient who had gone to a job interview asked the interviewer whether she feared that she, the patient, might compete with her. She was not accepted for the position and linked the whole episode to the fact that her mother had been in a concentration camp.

The oral receptivity, dependency, and passivity usually attributed to the hysteric, and also evident in some of these cases, is basically more the expression of the wish to get pleasure vicariously through the intermediary of an object with whom one can identify than a genuine malleability. In general, children of survivors have not been a reliable patient population, which fact is further proof that the “dependency” consists of maintaining the tie to the parents rather than its more infantile prototype which would appear in the transference. In this again, these children are similar to those hysterics who have shown great resistance to analytic treatment and who find it difficult to accept certain impulses as being their own. The hysterical children prefer to seduce the analyst into their way of thinking in order to assert their innocence.

As a group, children of survivors described here may only incidentally mention sexual difficulties or actually deny their import if they surface in treatment. Rather, along with the rest of the population, these patients can achieve a superficial eroticism common in the culture today, but this seems to serve as a mask for the anxieties attached to a
better-integrated sexuality. Since concern about this malfunction would signal abnormality both in the sense of admitting to sexual strivings and in the failure of the defence against them, this aspect does not seem to be prominent in many cases. It seems rather that the proof of normal sexuality is yet another way in which to establish innocence in the same way as frigidity did at the time of Freud.

Because of the dissociation between their sexual fantasies and the ego functions, hysterics remain passive, in expectation, waiting for someone who will help them act this strange amalgam of pregenital and genital sexuality which is theirs. . . . The hysterical needs, so to say, a sexual facilitation from the other in order to act out the latent and repressed sexual fantasies. That is why he always feels innocent in everything that is actualized in his life as sexual.

(Khan 1974: 153)

Unfortunately defences against the understanding of this mechanism are very resistant to interpretation and may well be recognized without leading to personality changes. This is where analysis and its emphasis on the transference interpretation may be the only effective method of treatment.

Specific treatment issues

Many of the issues are implicit in what we have said before. It has been a repeated observation among those treating children of survivors that they tend to play down the impact of their parents’ past even if it is mentioned during the initial interview or is actually known to have been an important factor in their lives. As one patient said, “I don’t mind talking about it, but when you bring it up in another context, I don’t want to hear about it.” Therefore we know of cases that were treated without highlighting the survivor issue. As Bruggeman points out, a child tends to experience the integration of his parents’ lives into his own difficulties as an accusation against them. In order to avoid this, survivor children use the analyst and the analytic treatment at times to prove their innocence and that of the parents; and in the process, the analyst becomes the fascist or the Nazi, or he may be called upon to watch scenes passively and thereby confer upon what he is witnessing the stamp of innocence. It becomes apparent that the transference difficulties encountered with hysterics certainly pertains to those problems encountered with children of survivors: that is, their
wish to bring into the relationship to the analyst the dimension of victim and victimizer.

DeWind says:

An interpretation can only be “mutative” if it includes three frames of reference: the transference, the patient’s actual situation in life, and the infantile relationships. We may add that in the case of traumatized patients the interpretation may have curative meaning only if the way in which the patient unconsciously experienced the trauma of persecution has been included.

(DeWind 1968: 175)

The fact that the trauma of persecution belongs to the life of their parents alters only slightly the problem of interpretation but does not change the necessity of bringing into the formulation some reference to events during the war. It is in this context that a thorough familiarity with the problems relating to the treatment of hysteria can be helpful in confronting the issues concerning these patients.

Psychoanalysis admonishes the patient to remember the past, just as the parents of the patients wanted them to remember; but in many cases these two processes run counter to each other. While there is a wish to immortalize the dead Jews, there is the injunction against remembering a childhood full of painful fantasies and anger against the parents. Thus, the memories called forth by the process of analysis have a forbidden quality which spells out disloyalty to the parents. What is to be remembered has been handed down by the parents and becomes part of the child’s fantasies, which he then integrates in specific ways that have been repressed. Despite their holding on to a past, these patients may feel that trying to remember is crazy.

While much has been said about not entering into a “pact of silence” with the patient, a word is needed about the other extreme, which is often induced by hysterical patients. Racamier warns: “Who has not felt, when confronted with a hysterical, this secret inclination which tempts him to play doctor? All of a sudden we are imbued with a function” (Racamier 1952: 7). The analyst can not afford to perform as the Holocaust expert, much as one might be tempted. An interpretation cannot take the place of proper suspension of judgment, and one may have to be alert to the countertransference tendency induced both by the need to be of help and the patient’s to have the analyst perform.
References


In this chapter I shall delineate the difference between the conflicts of parents who were victims of a historic trauma and their offspring who have been burdened by the trauma of their parents. I consider this to be an important distinction which is not always sufficiently maintained in the psychoanalytic literature. The mere expression of the process of “transmission of trauma” suggests to me that a historic event can be deposited in or passed on to future generations like a bank account or a bad debt: the language used for this identification draws excessively on the traumatic events, rather than on its being the resolution of a conflict in that the identification defensively diminishes the difference between generations. According to Elizabeth Loftus, “We seem to reinvent our memories, and in doing so, we become the person of our own imagination (Loftus 2003: 872).

I want to avoid the risk of placing the emphasis on the identification with past events because they occurred and were passed down, and stress instead the motivations underlying the adoption of the fate of the previous generation as one’s own. Instead, I am using “identification” loosely throughout this chapter. It would require a review of Loewald’s 1980 paper on internalization to be more accurate and to distinguish between identifications that are structure building and those that attempt to assume the identity of another person. Rather than defining or refining this difficult
concept, this chapter will focus on the important defences against conflict underlying “the transmission of trauma” and on maintaining wherever possible an analytic attitude even in the face of massive trauma in the history of the family.

I shall present a case in order to illustrate the point I am making: that subsequent generations suffer as a result of the traumatization of the parents; that observers are frequently not prepared to see that those who were conceived in order to reaffirm life, show signs of the importance of the past suffering of their parents in their own existence; and that their concerns around those events which preceded their own birth are expressed by a tendency to repeat the suffering themselves. But their suffering should not be confused with the trauma of the parents. Instead, the trauma of the previous generation organizes the experiences of their children at a relatively late point in their life. The historic trauma makes the experience of the next generation understandable, but it is not the reason for the wish to recreate these events. The parents’ story is based on events they were helpless to avoid whereas the children repeat the history for complex motives of their own. I believe that this distinction is important in the treatment of survivors of trauma and the generations that follow them, and I shall discuss the difference in the dynamics for each generation. I shall suggest causes for analysts’ overlooking this contrast, illustrated by a case of a young woman who took on the struggle of her parents. The title of this chapter, “The Nazi hunter”, illustrates her attempt to equate her trauma with theirs in order to defend against having to experience the actual traumatic events in her own life. As she herself said: “their life is more real than my own”.

The first generation

As in the previous chapter, I shall define trauma as an event in external reality that has a disorganizing effect on the personality of the victim. This definition maintains the essential elements of trauma: the event in the external world and the reaction of the individual to it. The traumatization of the parents often leads to conscious segregation of the memories of trauma (Brenner 2001), i.e. historic reality, and results in the knowing and not knowing described by Laub and Auerhahn (Laub and Auerhahn 1993).

This disorganization is the result of the post-traumatic re-integration of the personality and the assimilation of the trauma, yielding a rift (Freud 1940) between the memory of the conscious response to an overwhelming
historic reality on the one hand, numbing or armoring of the ego (Grubrich-Simitis 1981: 423), and on the other unconscious guilt which is determined by unconscious omnipotence stressed by Winnicott when he said, “In psychoanalysis as we know it there is no trauma that is outside the individual’s omnipotence” (Winnicott 1960: 586).

In addition, the symbolic meaning attached to trauma (Freud 1930), unrelated to any facts (Oliner 2000), plays a part in the disorganization. With the passage of time and the inevitable blurring of memories of facts, the unconscious structures the thinking of victims so that their knowledge of their own history becomes only marginally relevant. Instead they can cling to the unconscious omnipotent belief that what was done can also be undone, causing the victim to think that loss and the passage of time can be reversed. This belief is based on the unconscious conviction that the victims must undo the damage they have done. In parenting, the disorganization of the traumatized parents manifests itself through the blurring of the distinction between generations (Kestenberg 1982) and between inside and outside (Oliner 1982), engaging without consciously wanting to the children to be part of the undoing.

As I see it, the guilt caused by a regression to infantile omnipotence, more than any other sequelae of trauma, is responsible for the difficulties survivors of massive trauma have in parenting. Their appreciation of their own suffering thus tends to be based on a projection of guilt rather than a genuine appreciation of history with all the limitations this implies, foremost among which is the acceptance of losses that cannot be undone. Thus the trauma is frequently not fully acknowledged as history by those who suffered it because history implies the inevitability of a process that cannot be undone. Instead of it being an experience in the past (which would be the realistic assessment), the trauma develops into a screen or myth whose function it is to externalize blame. The myth can lend itself to be used as a screen, pushing a true event in history into the foreground in order to deflect the unconscious irrational guilt victims of calamities tend to experience.

The attempt at projecting blame, the blame that is internalized because of the infantile omnipotence, must fail because it is built on the irrational premises mentioned earlier: that the individual having suffered caused his or her fate; that the past can be recaptured, that history can be undone, that losses and the sequence of generations are reversible and therefore do not have to be accepted. Unconscious omnipotence sets itself against the reality of history which would dictate the acceptance of the past as such and of the future that could repair the damage by building on that past.
When this is not the case; when the past is unconsciously seen as a crime committed by the individual who was its victim, the need to undo it, to bring the culprit to justice and thus to undo the trauma becomes an irrational externalization of unconscious guilt and not a realistic assessment of facts. Unfortunately, this has involved victims and their descendants in settling old scores rather than creating a different and better future. As will be discussed in chapter four, this phenomenon, erroneously named Nachträglichkeit, provides the foundation for wars promoted by those who justify them to undo past humiliations or losses.

As much as parents might want to spare their children – and many victims of trauma attempt to shield their children from the knowledge of their victimization and shame – they have powerful unconscious reasons to abolish the gulf between the generations: from their vantage point, there is a wish to refind the dead among the living, thus needing the offspring to fill a void in their own past and blurring the distinction between generations. The parent’s wish, according to Auerhahn and Laub is “to be parented through his child, by his child, in his child” (Auerhahn and Laub 1987: 54). But this attempt to undo the past, doomed to fail, has two contradictory consequences. The trauma to be secretly undone increases the separation between the generation that was traumatized and the one that may have suffered from the effects of parental dysfunction and widens the gap that normally exists between generations. And it invites the descendants to identify unconsciously with the world of the parents in order to undo the painful sense of exclusion from the adult world that children normally experience and make restitution for the losses produced by fate. In fantasy, the child can join the parents, participate in the secret and undo the separation caused by the wish of the parents to spare their children the knowledge they are too young to assimilate. The parents, all too eager to modify their own past losses, accept this unconscious restitution and the blurring of generations.

The case

As happens frequently, mechanisms such as transmission of trauma are most evident in those cases in which they misfire. Therefore I chose as my example a young woman who was 26 years old when she entered analysis after having been rejected as a training case because of the severity of her disturbance. This rejection was based on the judgment that it would take too long for her to establish a transference. She was indeed difficult, but whether her need to make me into a Nazi was proof
of the absence of transference is clearly a matter of definition. It was a transference of sorts that was hard to analyse because she had an intense need to put the enemy outside. She rejected the idea that I too might be a survivor for whom she would feel very sorry and therefore could not use as an analyst. My being seen as a Nazi was therefore the precondition for her working with me. When she found an ornamental South African coin embedded in the matrix of an ashtray in the waiting room, she had all the proof she needed. The degree to which she was confused about past and present is revealed by the fact of her having chosen a racial issue of her generation, the struggle of the black population in South Africa against white oppression, instead of reacting to my having Freud’s Gesammelte Werke in German on the bookshelf she faced when leaving my office. My speaking German would have made for a better rationalization for the accusation. When I asked her one day how she imagines my being a Nazi: did she think that I was cheering as her ancestors were being gassed? Her response was: “you think of the Nazis as history, I think of them as now”. This did not prevent her from marrying a German-American, justifying it by the fact that his parents were victims also. She never officially abandoned these ideas but eventually thought of me as being born into a higher class than her parents and therefore could not understand her background.

Her mother never spoke about her experiences in Treblinka and the loss of her entire family because she wanted to spare her youngest child. This led her to state: “how could I lose what was already so irretrievably lost?” She imagined walking on the street and meeting her mother’s brother who perished in Auschwitz. He would recognize her because she looked like her mother, and she would bring him home to her. She thought about ghosts, about people being characters out of a novel, about there being a fire next door to my apartment and her replacing my neighbor who died in a fire.

Because of these fantasies of replacing the dead, she found it most important not to compete in reality. During a job interview she asked a potential supervisor whether she was not afraid of her as a possible competitor. She acted as if she had already won a competition that killed her rivals therefore she had to prevent this from happening again, opting for the life of an angry victim. She had been unable to stay at Bryn Mawr College, because she made herself think of where her mother was at that age and became seriously depressed.

Her father constantly talked about his life on the run in Russia; he had two sisters and a brother who survived but with whom he was not
on speaking terms, and especially in his later years, he would cry at occasions when the family wanted to enjoy a festive meal. He could be violent at home which resulted in her mother calling the police, at least on one occasion, and her father spending the night on a park bench. When she was in early adolescence, he got into a fight with the supervisor on the job and was beaten. Then he lost his court case against the man who attacked him.

She dealt with her rage at those events by exonerating the “victims” thus unconsciously regarding her own victimization as justified, which made her also very angry but helpless, because of the guilt attached to the aggression toward her parents. The only ones to blame were the Nazis. Acknowledging her parents’ strengths would have meant that they too were responsible for her suffering and the potential legitimate target of her rage. As can be seen from her need for constant self punishment, the image of the parents as victims and the Nazis as perpetrators dominated her actions.

Working was a major problem for the patient because she could not distinguish between working and being a slave. Her mother actually had cautioned her early in life, not to accept chores in school in order to guard herself against exploitation by the teacher. These lessons carried over into her adulthood and caused her to work for years for a dying organization of survivors by whom she felt mistreated because she was not one of them. In other words, she did end up angrily allowing herself to be exploited by those whom she considered to be victims, just as she could not permit herself to understand fully the impact of the domestic violence with which she grew up.

Her refusal to accept the Nazi period as pertaining to the history of her parents shows that she did not acknowledge sufficiently the difference in generations. Because of this confusion, she did not understand why her father could not openly admit that he was sexually attracted to her. But where would she have learned to discriminate between parents and children when her mother, prompted by the jealousy of the patient’s older sister, took herself out of the picture in order to allow the older daughter, who spoke a better English, to be in charge of her upbringing? In the face of the sister’s competitive strivings, the mother abdicated the handling of the little girl who seemed to have been her favourite child. The sister took over many parental functions, including handling her father’s court case, and no one challenged her position because she spoke English fluently.
The dynamics of a traumatized family

What I am describing is familiar territory to analysts: the descendants of a traumatized population taking in the victimization of their parents or ancestors. The parents were traumatized and the children lived in a dysfunctional family. It is impossible to assess whether the parents of my patient, who married after the war, would have married each other had there been other family members to whom the mother, who came from a more educated milieu, could have turned. As it was, the parents came from the same village and the mother had lost her entire family. In this way, the story is one that interweaves the effects of the Holocaust with the couple’s postwar decisions showing the complexity involved in the reaction to trauma.

The parents’ disorganization, especially the parents’ difficulty in maintaining the difference between the generations (Chasseguet-Smirgel 1984), by relegating the role of parent and spokesman to the oldest daughter, had serious consequences for their children. The daughters lived through some of their own traumatic experiences such as the police coming to the house or the many trips to the hospital caused by the parents’ overreaction to a minor injury to my patient, but these events pertained to the children’s life and not to the historic events relating to the Nazi period around which my patient tried to structure her thinking. She rejected the importance of the impact of those events when I pointed it out to her. Thus her conscious use of the life of her parents is an extreme example of the attempt to undo history in order to have a legitimate target for conflicted aggression.

The patient’s identification with the parents as angry victims of the Nazis was defensive and mitigated the rage the patient felt against them. She made herself into the other target for her fury at the violence, the screaming and the abuse, and this was true to such a degree that she prevented herself from being successful in the pursuits of most of her goals including her analysis. She finished college during her treatment, suffered the death of both parents, and recovered from a number of life-threatening illnesses. After her move to another city, she had one child to whom she is devoted, but she has frequent bouts of depression and feelings of defeat, full of anger and fantasies of revenge aimed at the Holocaust and the fate of the Jews in it, but also at class distinctions. Her use of history was conscious as became evident when she saw a broken store window in the Jewish section of town, which she attributed intuitively to vandalism, then revised her thinking in order to relate it to anti-Semitism and the destruction of Jewish property during the Holocaust. In her case, the problem was not
so much her inability to distinguish fact from fantasy, as a prohibition against taking comfort from her own reality and whatever security her postwar life afforded her including being her mother’s favourite. She seemed compelled to use the experiences of the previous generation to overshadow her own experiences, just as her profound attachment to me which lasts to this day, was overshadowed by the image of the analyst as a Nazi which evolved into the image of a person “to the manor born”, thus distant from her working class background. The defensive effort was not successful enough to enable her to enjoy the validity of her own existence, instead she denied herself satisfaction in the most important areas of her life: career and family. She sees herself as a bad wife and mother and has never had a career.

The case used to illustrate my thesis, shows considerable pretraumatic pathology in the parents to which was added the disorganizing effect of the persecution of the Jews during the Second World War. The personality deficiencies of the parents were greater than those of most victims, and this made the patient’s rage against them impossible to handle except by constant futile attempts at externalization using actual historic events that enabled her to be the avenging victim rather than the aggressor. Despite the particular circumstances that contributed to the pathology in this family, I believe that some of the issues around transmission of trauma, evident in this case, transcend the specific situation I have described. Although she no longer lives in New York she has stayed in touch with me. She is grateful to me and appears to have a mutually supportive marriage and being parents.

Historic trauma: a reality, a memory, and a myth

The children suffer from the effects of their parents’ traumatization, but their experience of the anxieties or the depression of the parents takes place before the children know or understand the cause. Frequently, parental dysfunction generates aggression in the children that is first directed against the parent but also against themselves, the child holding itself responsible for the parent’s depression or detachment. Only later does the history of the parents, about which the child learns eventually, help to explain the family’s way of being and serve to externalize the aggression. Only relatively late in the child’s development does the personal history of the parents become the vehicle for the child’s anxieties and aggression. At that point the history of the parents can be used
for externalization. The parents’ trauma eventually can act as a screen that externalizes the blame. The screen undoes the identification with the aggressor by re-externalizing the responsibility which is first attributed to the parents. My patient’s problems illustrate the failure of this function: she could never overcome sufficiently her anger at her family including herself, to use the history of her parents for constructive purposes. Unlike a successful screen or myth, whose useful function I shall discuss, the patient’s attempt to use the Holocaust failed because it was not sufficiently integrated to serve as a defence. The defence, had it been successful, would have provided her with objects outside the family at whom she could direct her anger without punishing herself.

The use of screen memories, to which I have just alluded, enables individuals to remember events in their own history in a way that externalizes them. Freud described screen memories early in his career because he was struck by their clear and factual quality (Freud 1899, 1901). Since then the potential of screen memories for relieving pressures within the superego has been established, especially by Greenacre, who departed from Freud’s original idea that these memories are emotionally neutral and suggested that it is to be expected that where there is no severe degree of sado-masochistic character structure, simple, pleasant, or tepid events may be used as the screen, whereas in severely morbid personalities really traumatic events may be seized upon as representations of the earliest anxious fantasies or experiences of the child and may be used variously as justification, verification or gratification.

(Greenacre 1949: 76)

Discussing a case, Ferro mitigated his criticism of the case by stressing that “there was an emotional exchange that took place—true, deep, without the obligatory screen of the Holocaust that blinded and impeded examination of the actual subjectivities of analyst and patient” (Ferro 2003: 782). By removing subjectivity and personal responsibility, screen memories can be used as exoneration and thereby assuage guilt. As in all screen memories, the content concerns real events used in an externalizing fashion because of the pressure to re-externalize the omnipotent guilt engendered by ill fate (Freud 1930) and trauma (Winnicott 1960). Remembering events external to the subject serves to maintain innocence.

As my patient and many other descendants of traumatized populations have shown, this “obligatory screen” can be extended to future generations causing the historical reality of one generation to be used as a set of organizing fantasies, a screen identity (Greenson 1958), a personal
myth (Kris 1956) or a family myth, for those who did not experience it. These myths serve an important defensive function by covering up unacceptable aspects of ambivalent relationships. When these myths entail appropriating the fate of ancestors, they aim to reverse the separation between generations, sharing or undoing the trauma of the parents, and thereby sometimes sacrificing the subjects’ own lives. The inability of my patient to integrate her own identity, to abort it, suggests that she considered her existence with a separate identity from that of her parents and sister to be an unsustainable loss for them.

Faimberg (1988) refers to this process as telescoping between generations and ascribes it to the need for narcissistic regulation on the part of the victim. She suggests that the victim who uses projective identification intrudes into the child who appropriates the unwanted aspects of the parent. I see a difficulty in this psychoanalytic vocabulary in that it comes too close to reifying history. The vocabulary, based on projective identification suggests to me that psychic elements or experiences can be deposited like a package for another person to hold and treats the repetition of the past with undue emphasis on identity instead of the variability depending on the context in which it occurs. Without wishing to eliminate the narcissistic elements involved in the transmission, I place greater emphasis on conflict resolution, especially as it concerns the defence against the aggression toward parents who have suffered trauma.

It is therefore my contention that the experience of traumatizing historic events followed by the identification of the children with the fate of the parents is not sufficient explanation for the transmission of trauma to the next generation. As Ferro suggested, the reality of certain events, no matter how traumatic, diverts from the analysis of the internal world of the patient. We find it difficult to examine motives based on conflicts when the one who remembers feels accused and the analyst takes himself to be an accuser. I discussed this problem at length in an earlier paper (Oliner 1996). There I tried to suggest that guilt toward the victim leads to the relinquishing of the analytic attitude in favour of a more event-based, non analytic approach in cases in which trauma or transmission of trauma from the previous generation plays a part. Recently, Reisner similarly indicated that “An implicit theme of the trauma narrative is that the traumatized is absolved of responsibility” because suffering is imposed on the innocent from without. With the accent on the innocence of the victim “trauma has become the venue in our culture, and in our treatment, where narcissism is permitted to prevail” (Reisner 2003: 408). Trauma derives its appeal from the innocence and lack of responsibility it bestows on the
victim creating a source of conflict in those who need to treat the victim as an active agent. In these cases, judgment based on innocence shifts imperceptibly from science to morality.

I do not want to be misunderstood: I believe the descendants of traumatized individuals suffer, but the impact of the fate of their parents produces a different set of dynamics than the sequela of actual trauma. The dynamics of transmission resulting in the identification with the fate of parents are fueled by the need to resolve conflict, predominantly centered on aggression. For each individual this “transmission” is specific: as all defensive efforts, it takes place between one set of parents and one set of children, and it follows patterns with which analysts are familiar. From this perspective, I want to emphasize the role of conflict resolution rather than historic events in psychopathology. Traumatization makes individuals suffer and inflict suffering on their children without wanting to. But the events that inflicted the trauma cannot be the subject of analysis and cannot be transmitted as such. Instead, future generations bear the burden of the guilt, the anxieties, the aggression, and above all the omnipotent disregard for the difference in the generations, and this, I believe is the cause of many wars in which one generation feels compelled to undo the wrong inflicted on a previous one in order to transform humiliation into aggression. This issue is the topic of chapter four of this book.

It has been shown recently, that the repetition of the past itself is an illusion, that nothing happens twice, thus opening Freud’s notion of the repetition compulsion (Freud 1920) to further modification. But the attempt to repeat is not in question here, nor the continued suffering of future generations of a traumatized population, what I am challenging is an event-based approach in psychotherapy or psychoanalysis that dispenses with the examination of the conflicts the identification with the trauma of the previous generation resolves. Understanding based on events is only appropriate in those cases described by Fink in which “an experience [is] burned into the mind like the numbers on the forearms” (Fink 2003: 993), and these do not ask to gain insight, only the relief which analysis is unable to give them.

Playing games versus being fooled

The Italian film Life is Beautiful described how a father engaged his son in a game of make-believe in order to spare him the awareness of his plight as a prisoner of the Nazis, and to enlist him in the struggle to save his life
by leaving his father. In the film, the child allows himself to be “fooled”, and he plays his father’s games. This was the fictional story of a five-year-old boy. But even in the film, the degree to which he believed his father’s games is left vague while the importance of playing along was conveyed through his father’s anxiety. Whether this was clear to the boy was left to the viewer to decide. My anxiety watching this film convinced me that they were not playing.

There was another child, nine years old, this one not fictional, who gives us a different view of a child’s reaction to adult “denial”. In 1939, she and her mother were fleeing across the border between Germany and Belgium in the middle of the night when she fell into a ditch below the railroad tracks they used to guide them. There was water in the ditch, the child came up drenched, and started to cry. She did not want to go on. Anxiously, the mother said, “If you continue walking, I’ll buy you the biggest ice cream in Brussels.” Sobbing, the child replied: “How can you promise me ice cream? Won’t we be refugees then?”

The important element in both stories is the children’s cooperation in response to the parent’s anxiety. The sceptical child, as well as the child who seemingly was fooled, went along with the requirements of the situation, making it likely that both were aware of the danger that prompted the anxieties of the parents. Many who have seen the film think that it trivialized the danger by introducing the world of games, playing, and fantasy. I think that the fantasies that were presented to them to enlist the children’s cooperation were set in a context of a life and death struggle for survival, and their response did not depend on whether or not they bought into their parent’s attempt at engaging them in fantasy. Neither child was playing: each reacted to the parent’s anxiety and the danger it conveyed. To me, the game in the movie was the only way a small child can be enlisted to leave his father and protector in order to save his own life, and it acts here in the service of realistic goals. In this respect it does not deny danger. It asserts danger to the extent of enabling the child to leave his father rather than clinging to him for protection. Of course, I am examining the motives of a fictional child, who is younger, in the light of the reaction of an older child, and the comparison may not be warranted. There are those who think that the child is portrayed as unaware, and that this makes light of the horror. I continue to believe that the child in the movie knew about the father’s anxiety and responded accordingly, just as I continued to walk even though I did not believe that my mother could buy ice cream once we were refugees.
References


CHAPTER THREE

On the difficulty of hating one’s enemy

Introduction

In this study, I would like to examine the reasons why it is so difficult for the victims of a trauma to hate those who were responsible for their suffering. The victims themselves are not aware of the great extent to which their memories serve as an indictment against themselves rather than against those who perpetrated the trauma. Even individuals who remember the events they had to endure precisely cannot prevent the process of internalization manifested by unconscious fantasies relating to the power of victim and perpetrator. Unconsciously, the memories of the events provide the raw material for grandiose fantasies, although consciously those same memories remain separate, factual, and without emotional connection to the person who remembers. However, since the internalization is unconscious whereas the factual memories are conscious, knowledge of the historical facts is useless for genuine exoneration. Instead it results in unconscious omnipotence and self-blame, so that the use of these memories in the struggle against self-incrimination is put in the service of defensive externalization, not genuine historization. Even though the memories are based on fact, the internalized guilt is “projected” onto the actual perpetrator and the guilt of the victim remains unconscious.
Why is it that those who are most in need of an integrated knowledge of their own history are least able to achieve it? One answer, that is only partially satisfactory, is based on the symbolic meaning attributed to misfortune and ill-fate (Freud 1930: 126): the person who suffered it is responsible for it, and as such it is a fantasy that can be analysed. The analysis is based on the logic of the pleasure principle according to which the helplessness, the shame, and the passivity inherent in trauma are denied and replaced by fantasies of omnipotence. The denial of any kind of vulnerability can account for the difficulty in hating those who have inflicted the trauma. In technical terms this means that the post-traumatic reorganization of the personality occurs under the dominance of unconscious fantasy guided by the pleasure principle and that denial of the events becomes part of that organization. This interpretation, although valid, does not throw light on the specific consequences of trauma; it contains nothing that differentiates trauma from other kinds of distortions caused by wishful thinking; nothing that illuminates the consequences of trauma, which consists of the impingement of external reality upon personality organization in such a way that the interplay between fantasy and reality is seriously disrupted.

In previous studies of this problem I concluded that this disruption expresses itself in the role assigned to sensory perception, presentation, in the mental life of trauma victims. Since sensory perception is a relatively neglected topic in the psychoanalytic literature, I found the work of the French analyst René Roussillon (1995, 1999) particularly useful. He assigns to perception the important role I believe it plays. In addition, he demonstrates how Freud’s work has always contained the theoretical tools for understanding the impact of trauma. By taking seriously Freud’s last revision of the regulatory principles, Roussillon shows how wishful thinking and the pleasure principle are secondary and that they can serve to cover up, to organize and to give meaning to a split in the post-traumatic personality structure. Roussillon applies Freud’s later thinking according to which fantasy was no longer primary in that there is a layer below fantasy “beyond the pleasure principle” that exists without meaning: something exists because it happened.

Applying this view enhances our ability to explain the impact of trauma: the organization of thoughts based on facts without personal meaning to the person involved, accounts for the difficulty victims of trauma have to place these events. This is responsible for the problems victims have in truly appreciating that these events took place outside their sphere of control, that is in the external world, and at a specific time in their own history. The lack of personal connection to the facts that are remembered, explains
the inability to withstand the guilt aroused in patients and analysts alike when faced with genuine victimization.

In earlier publications (Oliner 1996, 2012), I attempted to assess the role played by external reality and the way the existence of the world outside and its perception influence the constitution of the mind. I contrasted the usefulness for the integration of the personality of memories that are placed in their historic context, allowing the person the sense of continuity between the past and the present, with the uselessness of certain important memories of traumatized individuals. Comparing the latter with the laws that generally govern memory – the fading with time yet involving the sense a sense of personal participation in one’s history – the memories of trauma are like screen memories. Screen memories are known to be vivid, present, and being emotionally disowned by the very person who remembers, they are presentations in contrast to the rest of mental life which is based on representation. These memories are not “available for the evolution of a new idea”; instead, they constitute “events in which the attention to the experience was split . . . that the unconscious processes were forestalled from operation” (Meltzer 1991: 60). Compounding the difficulty of establishing a reliable external world is the tendency discovered by experimental psychologists of memory to become more dispositional, evidence of the unconscious omnipotence due to the experience of trauma, which means that one forgets a circumstance in the outside world that caused an event and instead one tends to attribute the occurrence to a personal disposition.

Using this knowledge, I attempted to clarify in a subsequent paper on trauma (Oliner 2000), the split in the personality caused by the recurrence of memories, which, because of the self- and object-less ego state they recall, cannot be integrated into the personality without considerable work. I attributed the duality to the psychic effort aimed at containing the impact of the traumatic event; keeping these memories separate, without the individual being aware of the strength of the defensive effort and the concomitant omnipotence. I speculated that narcissistic personalities might be most vulnerable to the reworking of traumatic experiences in conformity with their unconscious need for power. Upon further consideration, I concluded that this reasoning explains the duality of the personality caused by trauma and the uselessness of certain factual memories but not the victims’ incapacity for accurate and non-defensive externalization.

The trauma becomes part of the inner world because the perpetrator or the event could not attain the status of meaningful objects in the psyche of
the victim. Instead, victims are forced to use memory, when it is evoked, in the vain attempt to relieve the guilt generated by the events; thus recall fails to contribute to a sense of personal history for which the one who suffered or was humiliated bears no responsibility. And rather than attribute the incapacity for historical truth to the victims’ need for unconscious omnipotence, it appears more likely that both factors – the omnipotence and the incapacity to use the memories of events for their value as personal history – originate from the same source: the reintegration of the personality as a reaction to trauma. Now, I intend to explore in greater depth those factors involved in the inability to use memory to resist the internalization of traumatic events and to hate one’s enemies after they have left the scene of their crime.

The capacity to use external reality

This function has not aroused much interest recently. Even the current concern with the role of the object in human development has not shed much additional light on the function of being and remaining outside, as part of external reality. Instead, current studies give the object an ambiguous status in that there is frequently no distinction between the object that is inside and that which is outside. And the partiality in the psychoanalytic literature shown to the internalization of the object over the advantages derived from its being in the external world further adds to the neglect of external reality. Here Winnicott (1971) is a notable exception, because he stressed the usefulness for the subject’s healthy development of an object that remains outside and survives the destruction inherent in internalization. The object who survives in the external world opens the way for trust in an orderly, dependable, impersonal world, where one neither has total control nor bears sole responsibility.

Memories of history which contain an awareness of the major events in one’s past life, serve the same function as the survival of the object: they allow the external world to escape the destruction inherent in forgetting, the best and most beautiful example of this being Proust’s In Search of Lost Time. Integrated memories permit a sense of continuity, both of the internal and to a great extent the external world, and one’s place in it. Trauma interferes with this personal historization because of the unintegrated state of the traumatic context on the conscious level, and the unmitigated omnipotence, on the level of the unconscious. For a description from a slightly different angle, see Chapter 5.
The experience of trauma

In my opinion, the special character of traumatic memories derives from the ego state during the actual experience. These are states during which the ego is dominated by the need for total attunement to external reality and by the certainty of there being “something of myself which has no place here” (Roussillon 1999: 84). The events that could potentially become personal history cannot fulfill this function because the subject is absent, the self is missing.

A brief example of the account of survival under extreme conditions illustrates the need of the victim to avoid emotional reactions to his own traumatic history: The narrator recounts in 1945 how a friend succumbed, despite his own efforts to drag him along during the death march of the last inmates of the Nazi concentration camps. When he heard the shot that killed his friend, he broke down and cried inconsolably:

All my neighbors admonished me, not to let myself go, questioning whether I am totally crazy, whether I had not seen enough dead bodies, they impressed on me that if I wanted to come out alive, I could not become sentimental now and start bawling like a child.

(Hesdörffer 1998: 213)

The second example stems from Klemperer, who kept a diary during the war years. He stresses the lack of a sense of time, another dimension of history, when he and another man find last year’s newspaper:

14 September 1944. The impotence of memory to fix in time all that we had so painfully experienced. When – insofar as we remembered it at all – had this or that happened, when had it been? Only a few facts stick in the mind, dates not at all. One is overwhelmed by the present, time is not divided up, everything is infinitely long ago, everything is infinitely long in coming; there is no yesterday, no tomorrow, only an eternity. And that is yet another reason one knows nothing of the history one has experienced: The sense of time has been abolished, one is at once too blunted and to overexcited, one is crammed full of the present.

15 September 1944. The lethargy or bluntedness of the imagination! I am so accustomed to news of cities destroyed by bombing, that it makes no impression at all on me.

(Klemperer 1999: 357–358)

Delbo, a survivor of Auschwitz, uses the metaphor of the skin that a snake sheds in order to portray how the memory of the holocaust is encased;
remembrance has a skin that has hardened, that allows nothing to filter out of what it retains, and she has no control over it. She does not feel it.

In Auschwitz reality was so overwhelming, the suffering, the fatigue, the cold so extreme, that we had no energy left for pretending. When I would recite a poem, when I would tell the comrades beside me what a novel or a play was about while we went on digging in the muck of the swamp, it was to keep myself alive, to preserve my memory, to remain me, to make sure of it. Never did I succeed in nullifying the moment I was living through, not for an instant. To think, to remember was a great victory over the horror, but it never lessened it. Reality was right there, killing. There was no possible getting away from it . . . So you are living with Auschwitz? -No, I live next to it. Auschwitz is there, unalterable, precise, but enveloped in the skin of memory, an impermeable skin that isolates it from my present self.

( Delbo 1990: 2)

She says that she does not recognize herself in the person that was in Auschwitz. It is no longer real.

In his 1991 book, Holocaust Testimonies, Langer reports the account of a daughter whose mother watched as a soldier pulls the trigger to kill her daughter. He was out of ammunition and walked away. “So nobody says anything . . . it wasn’t worth taking my life, so he just walked out. So now you can understand why people were quiet. If my mother said a word, I wouldn’t be here today” (Langer 1991: 72). Langer suggests that to imply that a mother’s caring and loyalty expressed through the silence conveyed to the SS man an indifference that ultimately saved the daughter’s life is to draw definitions from the lexicon of Alice in Wonderland; that their lives in the camps emerge as a kind of arrested process, bereft of meaning and insulated from the future. Langer concludes that those who search for value in the Holocaust experience look in vein. Historical inquiry is life-promoting, but here we have an excess of history. Humiliated memory negates the impulse to historical inquiry.

Extreme conditions do not permit the individual to shape perceptions according to wishfulfillment and according to the pleasure principle, but only according to the demands of external reality submitting to the rules of expediency rather than pleasure or morality. Persons recounting their reactions to danger, are surprised at their capacity for thought and action to help them survive a threat. These seemingly superhuman resources people have at their disposal, depend on a narrowing of focus and a suspension of the sense of self as the previous examples illustrate.
These states reflect a time in development governed by the instinct of self-preservation. This has recently drawn the attention of the French analyst Bergeret (1994, 1996a, 1996b), who suggests that this phase in the evolution of the individual is without an object, and that the status of the enemy lies in his being a threat to narcissism or survival. Hate has no object and therefore depends on the perception of a peril.

Integration of these events

After the traumatic events, the memories that were suffused with cognitive, factual, ahistoric and lifeless elements for whose existence all external validation vanished, had to be integrated into personal history. However, as was shown in the preceding section, traumatic events have a character that is antithetical to the sense of time and history. These characteristics make them unsuitable for the creation of personal continuity. With the post-traumatic resumption of a sense of self, the attempt to integrate the experiences is rendered more problematic because of the symbolic meaning of ill-fate. This thinking assumes that unconscious fantasy ruled by the pleasure principle takes over psychic reorganization, and that, as the Italian analyst De Masi also suggests, the connections from the emotional to the cognitive system are more robust than those in the opposite direction. Therefore the unconscious has a preponderant influence over our behavior as we tackle the vicissitudes of life (De Masi 2000: 6). In this way, the symbolic meaning of misfortune with its implicit omnipotence, dominates the assimilation of the trauma and the posttraumatic personality reintegration.

It left me to speculate whether this difficulty is avoidable and to wonder under what conditions the unconscious omnipotence is lessened through the process of reintegration; and I reached the conclusion that the personality structure I have been observing corresponds to the descriptions of infantile trauma by Roussillon. From this vantage point, I am applying his understanding of the impact of trauma on the personality structure in infancy to the impact of trauma in later life.

In the process of using Roussillon’s model, I have had to wrestle with one form of resistance within myself: I have had to accept the closeness between the return to a prior developmental stage and the reorganization of the personality mandated by the interest of expediency, defense, or survival. Because of its adaptive value, I hesitate to call the pattern a regression; even the term “regression under the control of the ego” so dear to the ego psychologists appears unsuitable. Nevertheless, the response
to trauma has to be viewed as a return to a prior personality organization in which there is a breach in the “continuity of being” (Winnicott) with a suspension of the sense of self (but not the total ego, which is a distinction made by Freud 1915: 137) into which memories must be integrated in order to become useful as personal history. The self is structured by unconscious fantasy and the traumatic events are governed by the reality principle, that is not the heir to the pleasure principle, their integration is fraught with problems not unlike a computer document that is brought up by a program other than the one in which it was encoded. It is the essence of trauma that this integration frequently cannot take place. The person who is telling the story is not sufficiently present in the past, or else is overwhelmed by it, for it to be a useful personal history.

Memories registered as facts, memories that are thoughts without a thinker (Green 1998), denuded representation (McDougall 1972), have been observed by a great number of analysts, and they are to be explained by their running counter to the pleasure principle. The terms that are used by various analysts bring us back to the work of Bion: undoubtedly, the unlinked, factual memories I have been presenting resemble Bion’s beta elements about which Caper (1999: 40) said: “one of the things that make beta elements unsuitable for thinking is that they are persecutingly, monotonously moralistic”. In this he states in a rather mysterious way a connection between meaninglessness and moralism that requires a more detailed explanation. This mystery was solved to a large extent when I applied Roussillon’s schema to the elusive problem of “survivor guilt” unrelated to the developmental theory that he has formulated.

Taking Freud at his word, Roussillon postulates that mental life begins with sensory perceptions subject to the repetition compulsion. They themselves are “beyond the pleasure principle”, and it seemed fruitful to think that traumatic memories, recapture, or are recaptured, by the repetition compulsion, escaping as they do the dominance of the pleasure principle. But this is not the only fate of the need to repeat, as Roussillon asserts:

The categorical imperative to which the human subject is subjected is to become subject (which does not mean agent) of that to which he was subjected, this is the modern formulation of the repetition compulsion.

(Roussillon 1999: 106)

The repetition compulsion, which is automatic and meaningless, also allows for a reworking of memories so that they are re-experienced as having meaning for the subject. In this, it is put into the service of life: the
need to signify experiences and to establish links within the total personality. In human development, according to Roussillon, the organization according to the pleasure principle reworks perceptions in such a way that automatic repetition is modified. He does not think that repetition is ever eliminated only it eventually is put in the service of pleasure and gratification. I believe that the fact that familiarity in and of itself becomes a source of pleasure is the best example of such a modification from the repetition compulsion to the pleasure principle.

Making the integration between the two more difficult is the defensive structure caused by trauma:

It is not a defense using process or at the core of process, it is a defense through structure . . . it is a defense that erases historization and causality itself . . . the event is not symbolized at the moment nor après coup, because the subject was not there to feel it, to register it.

(Roussillon 1999: 74–76)

Roussillon interprets this return to the dominance of sensory perception effected by trauma as a revival of the earliest stage of development with the concommitant dominance of the repetition compulsion. At this stage, events are repeated not because they have been a source of pleasure but simply because they happened and could not be integrated into the individual’s continuous history. (This does not apparently include the knowledge that is acquired through the earlier search for perceptual identity, another mode of identifying without making sense of perceptions.)

In normal development perceptions are the raw material which becomes metabolized in interaction with good enough caregivers into affectively meaningful psychic elements. Without the interaction with an object, they remain meaningless and without any relationship to a subject or an object.

If the first phase is without an object, which means that there is no outside which is subjectively constituted, primary narcissism is also primary masochism. It falls to the object’s lot after the discovery of its externality to help deflect “to the outside” the experiences of non-satisfaction and the destructiveness which accompanies them.

(Roussillon 1995: 1411)

I believe that the examples I have given show that survival under traumatic conditions is also predicated on a very limited, if not absent, outside, which is subjectively constituted. This is not immediately evident because
of the victim’s heightened attunement to external reality and the ability to focus on effective action. However, this behavior is devoid of meaningful relations to self and object which means that the enemy is not an object. What we see as heightened narcissism in self-preservation may ultimately concern the total ego, as Freud called it, rather than the subject in relation to the world outside experienced as objects. It is an organization which depends on sensory perception, hence the difficulty in deflecting to the outside the disruptive effects of trauma when they cease being experienced as ongoing events. The subject has learned to be dependent on, and hypersensitive to, sensory stimulation. The attempt at a meaningful post-traumatic reintegration of the personality is frequently thwarted by there not being anyone available to support this process.

Instead of the hatred of those who inflicted suffering, another development takes place that Roussillon (1999: 83) describes as the response to the need to “submit to the requirements of the environment that imposes itself and that usurps the psychic space of the subjectivity of the subject”. Which means that in human development, the split between the subject constituted by presentations and the object world that does not assist in their symbolization causes a discomfort with which the subject identifies:

In the place of the illusion “I am the breast” there is a negative illusion at the origin of a primary culpability: “I am (the) evil”. This core of primary culpability is non ambivalent, it precedes the organization of the differentiation between subject and object and rests on a primary confusion between self and non-self.

(Roussillon 1999: 83)

This, according to Roussillon, is the link between primary culpability and trauma, which eventually becomes rationalized through actions that confirm this basic irrational certainty. The “actors” in this drama of guilt and expiation can be displaced, even onto the real perpetrators, without it becoming evident that there is a split between the knowledge of the crimes of others against oneself and the primary culpability the subject suffers because of having been subjected to those crimes. As Roussillon says criminality can be a defensive reaction, it “tries to refind the experience with the merciless object but through a process which has already known the trauma of the destruction of the subjective position” (ibid.: 84)

The paradox in the post-traumatic reintegration of the personality lies in the fact that those events that are kept outside the sense of self do not
lend themselves to the creation of a meaningful external world. The traumatic world was organized around sensory input and narcissism, and the hatred generated by it does not have an object. With disappearance of the threat and the return to a self that is related to the world of objects, there is the constant need to repeat: repetition is automatic but it also helps to validate the past danger in the emotional world of the traumatized individual. Without this validation, these events cannot become part of the world as Winnicott describes it: a world that survives internal destruction, can be refound and limits the omnipotence of the victim. In the process of reintegration it becomes apparent that the defense against the impact of trauma runs counter to the need to remember in a meaningful way the harm that has befallen oneself and to hate those who have inflicted it.

References


CHAPTER FOUR

The root of war is fear; the rest is history

Introduction: My experience of the Second World War

A devastating war, the Second World War, was part of my formative experience. Jews like me always refer to it as the war. The first question either asked or suppressed is “Where were you during the War?”. There is no need to be more specific: for us no other war counts.

War had been expected; its inevitability dominated conversations. And yet, the day this horrible war was declared, shortly before my tenth birthday, I was totally unprepared. It was my mother’s reaction of absolute horror at the news that led me to understand that something dangerous had been unleashed. Her many stories about her childhood, including the First World War in Germany, did not reflect any of the terror; I only knew that an American captain wanted to marry her.

The declaration of war was followed by the Drole de Guerre, during which time our life as German Jewish refugees in Belgium remained unchanged. In Belgium we were Germans forbidden to work, and treated as enemies. My own memories are of Kristallnacht, 9/10 November 1938, the destruction of Jewish property, escaping Germany in 1939, being a stranger in Belgium, fearing and liking the Germans when they came – resulting in an ambivalence based on our common language, described in “Excuse me for being born: The fate of a German Jew during the Second
World War” (Oliner 2012: xxxi–xlix) – and especially hiding anything that could set me apart and make me identifiable. In Belgium I had been known as a German until the Germans came. Then I was a Jew.

These highly personal experiences gave the “war” a different colour from the pictures we saw of battlefields. Throughout the war people disappeared. In my field of vision there were no wounded soldiers or dead bodies, only voids, and with them came my lifelong attitude of “out of sight out of mind”.

When the Germans invaded Belgium on 10 May 1940 the Belgians regained their command of the German language to trade with the occupying force; and we were in danger. This is when the war started for me. The full impact of that realization was brought back to me on 11 September 2001. The weather that day reminded me of the invasion of Belgium in 1940. As I saw the cloudless sky in New York on TV, and the horror that was unfolding on the tip of Manhattan, I said to myself: “Not twice in one lifetime.” I worked hard to establish the difference: “Now I am a citizen of a strong country that will defend me; then I was a refugee.” Does this reflection in 2001 mean that in 1940 I knew how defenceless we actually were? Did I react then to the anxiety my parents felt or did I invent the contrast as an adult in order to fight against the terror caused by the similarity? 11 September 2001 was not traumatizing, whereas 10 May 1940 was. I based the difference in feeling on the capacity of the United States to defend itself and therefore protect me.

This ability to differentiate between the horrifying past and the stable present, and to be reassured by the power of the United States to defend “our country”, failed me when, shortly after 11 September 2001, we had dinner with a couple who also had survived the war in Europe. Every table in the restaurant was decorated with little American flags; the waiters wore neckties made of the Stars and Stripes. I was stunned by the atmosphere that greeted me. It reminded me of how Nazi Germany displayed its power. Upset, I requested that the flag on our table be removed. The other woman reacting to my request with self-righteous indignation declared: “I love this country.” She had set herself up as a patriot and in so doing implied I was not. My objection to the display of flags was for her a short step to my not loving the United States. This leap is typical of the emotionally charged, self glorifying partiality that according to Freud (1915a) characterizes thinking during war.

Both the woman and I had experienced the vulnerability of Jewish children during the war: she in Poland, and I in Germany and the occupied countries. Based on our childhoods, we had reason to be afraid but
she distanced herself by disparaging me. In her mind the proper love for the United States included what I regarded as a worrisome sign leading to possible excesses. Instead of the two of us identifying with each other around the experience we shared she accused me of being disloyal to the country that would protect us.

My horror at the sight of the flags may have been exaggerated, but the similarity between then and now was not an illusion. It was based on factors that the past and the present had in common. I had reason to fear the response of the United States to the attacks of 11 September 2001 because it was evident before the attack that upon his election in 2000 President Bush took positions contrary to those of his father, President George H. W. Bush. The latter had insisted on keeping the Gulf War limited to the goal set by a coalition: driving the Iraqi forces out of Kuwait. The people now in power had argued for an extended war in Iraq leading to the fall of Saddam Hussein. The attack on the World Trade Center towers gave this group the pretext it needed to start the war they had clearly wanted. At issue was revenge and a show of strength. This led to my memories of the past becoming fused with my fears of a future war aimed at undoing the supposed “weakness” the country had shown by ending the Gulf War when it did.

The patriotism fueled by fear caused the rift between us. From the outset, the excessive patriotic fervor triggered by the attack on the World Trade Center towers used by the Bush administration to go to war did not make sense to me. I distrusted the government that arbitrarily selected an enemy to be eliminated and was convinced that a war against Iraq was without justification. Nevertheless, the decision to invade Iraq met with congressional approval. As former President Bill Clinton, noted in 2002: “When people feel uncertain, they’d rather have someone who’s strong and wrong than somebody who’s weak and right.” Thus the war took place, and the consequences of destabilizing the Middle East and the American economy cannot be measured.

By emphasizing the motivation of Bush fils, I am conflating the individual and the group. He did not act alone and he certainly would have disputed the highly personal reasons for his attack on Iraq. The advisors with whom he chose to surround himself instilled fear of weakness and chose the nature of the threat: Saddam Hussein. It turned out to be a war that achieved little more than a show of power at tremendous cost; it destabilized the region, it strengthened the power of Iran, and it nearly ruined the American economy. It did not even achieve its one major goal: bringing Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind of the attack, to justice. The region
remains in chaos and groups of fanatics find cogent reasons to glorify power and to justify destruction and killing.

Narcissistic factors in the glorification of war

The Second World War was my formative experience of how fanaticism leads to total destruction. From the Allies’ point of view, the Axis powers that threatened the survival of the free world, had to be destroyed. But by attacking their neighbors and moving to conquer the world, the Axis powers started a dumb war. They destroyed themselves and the country for whose glory they unleashed unprecedented horror. Wars with rational and achievable goals will always be with us. They deserve the support of the people who are threatened. I discuss these wars in the last part of the paper. Here I shall explore the nature of the dumb war I survived. I do so because of the (self-)destruction it unleashed, and because it was preventable; but perhaps most of all – from my perspective – because it was the war I survived.

My earliest memories concern the Nazi marching songs, and eighty years later I remember words and the tunes of most of them except for the one about Jewish blood being spraying from their knives. The other songs were less threatening, and I can hear them now:

SA marches in measured steadfast steps, and Adolf Hitler, Göring, Göbbels and comrades march in spirit within our ranks.

These words bound the individual to the exalted leaders. Another song takes on a different tone:

In the battlefield a man gains his worth, no one will take over for you, you are alone.

The second song eliminates the identification with the great leaders and aims at aggrandizing the solitary heroism in the battlefield. My remembering the robot-like parades, the upbeat marching music and the uniforms, all of which spoke to me of power, order and correctness are testimonial of their appeal. I was a German child taken in by the flag waving, the energy and the rigidity signifying order.

I do not know when this changed. It was this same appeal that probably frightened me most at the sight of the American flags that I described earlier. In reflecting on the horror I experienced in the restaurant, it seems
to me that it was the appeal of the excess that so frightened me. I knew it first hand. My childhood impressions of the propaganda justifying power, glory and the destruction of the Jews took a long time to dispel. The realization that the marchers were targeting me and the adults who could not protect me was forced on me gradually. Somewhere in my being there remains a profound identification with the values of these men who marched. It manifests itself as a vague regret that as a girl and as a Jew I was excluded. The last remnant of my identification with the aggressor to yield was the assumption that the Nazi ideology – although wrong and hostile to us – was guided by a strict code of conduct the very antithesis of “Jüdische Wirtschaft”. I did not understand that the Nazi regime was a lawless, exploitative, disorganized and corrupt system, one that cleansed Germany of its Jews who were compared to a contagious disease at the same time that it enjoyed the wealth plundered from us, the victims. I did not understand the apt definition of ideology given by Žižek, who wrote that an ideology may be viewed as “a symbolic field which contains . . . a filler holding the place of some structural impossibility, while simultaneously disavowing this impossibility” (Žižek 1997: 98). The horror that I described at seeing the flags showed that I learned to fear and disparage what I had witnessed because I understood the destructiveness it presaged.

By the time we left Germany in 1939 an indelible imprint of fear, inferiority and worthlessness was etched into my consciousness as well as on those who were children, too young to resist the internalization of the hostility directed at us. In On the Move, Oliver Sacks refers to his major psychological difficulties resulting from the wartime separation from his family as “the three B’s: Bonding, Belonging, and Believing” (Sacks 2015: 235). Michael Buchholz, a German analyst who had his own trauma, expressed his situation succinctly: “We are forever grateful” (in conversation with author). We are grateful for that which others take for granted.

An intimate understanding of the role played by the ideas of glory, value, sacrifice, devotion and similar emotionally loaded terms can be gained by reading the correspondence that two active and enthusiastic participants in the war had with their families. Ute Althaus, a German psychoanalyst, wrote a book about her father, Ernst Meyer, “NS-Offizier war ich nicht” Die Tochter forscht nach (Althaus 2006). His letters reveal that his loyalty to the regime was unquestioned, until it had to be denied even to himself and his family. The central story is that of a brutal murder he committed in defence of the Fatherland. Meyer hanged a man carrying a sign calling for an end of the war just a few hours before the arrival of the American troops. He was captured by the American occupation forces
and eventually handed over to the German authorities because his action was not considered a war crime. The German civilian court convicted him for the murder, sentencing him to ten years in prison. His is a story in which identification with a defeated power misfired. It also reveals reflection by the American authorities who, by their action, deprived Meyer of the defence that he was obeying orders and that his action was compatible with the defence of the nation. He and his family were outraged by the verdict and tried to keep his incarceration secret. His daughter, by publishing this correspondence, dared to step outside the family tradition. Even as a child, she spoke about her father’s incarceration with her classmates. Her mother’s reporting this to her father wrote that Ute could not be trusted and needed to be watched.

The second correspondent was Heinrich Himmler. His correspondence is depicted in the documentary film *The Decent One* alongside pictures of his wartime activities. Himmler – who, as head of the Storm Troopers was responsible for carrying out the project to exterminate the Jews – considered it his duty to protect the purity of the character of the German people and its post-war reputation. He believed that because of the decency inherent in the German character the elimination of those who threatened the health of the nation – referring to the inmates of Concentration Camps – should not be easy for those who had to carry out their extermination. But the burden of genocide must be borne to reestablish the integrity of the German people. Himmler asserted that if the work done by the Nazis in Auschwitz appeared to future generations to have been without inner struggle, the reputation of the German people would be damaged for centuries to come.

His letters express self satisfaction with his actions as the head of the most murderous killing machine in the civilized world. He wanted his family to know of the long hours he worked to be of service to his people and assured them that he was sleeping well. His letters are suffused with declarations of love at the same time he had a mistress who bore him two children.

In the documentary, a casual remark by his wife, Marga, about her inability to have more children suggests that she might have suspected that there was another woman and perhaps even condoned Himmler’s infidelity. She may have felt that she had failed to serve the Reich by having only one child. Ute Althaus’s reflection on her mother’s comments suggests that the wives of Nazis were not necessarily submissive but rather actively shared in the glory of the Nazi ideal by supporting the men who were sacrificing themselves for it.
Before Heinrich Himmler succeeded in making the SS a powerful and independent organization, he expressed concern about not getting the public recognition he deserved for his devotion. The aggrieved tone of the early letters resembles those of Ernst Meyer, whose self-pity is manifest before, during, and long after his incarceration. In the letters to their families these two men legitimized their violent actions by seeing themselves as the heroes of their own myth and martyrs in the service of its ideal.

The lives of these two perpetrators show how their struggles within and against a phallocentric family was elevated to mythic proportions and how they used the power of the Nazi party to triumph over fathers whom they had reason to fear. Once they attained the power as “fathers” they saw it as their duty to destroy those whose lives they declared as worthless. Underlying this twisted logic is the coexistence of their self image of selflessness, achieved through the act of taking the lives of those who do not deserve to live. That those others are deemed to be a threat to the health and the survival of the nation elevates the murder to self-defence.

The issue of “values” or ideals like racial purity made it apparent that not everyone can become a mass murderer: it takes a special quality that the majority of humanity lacks. Those who qualified to execute the ideology as spelled out by Himmler were helped by those undistinguished soldiers who saw the work in the concentration camps as a way to avoid the Russian Front. This complicity, motivated by self-preservation, creates a psychological distance between them and the inflated language used by the leaders to justify mass murder. However, the distance was totally irrelevant for their victims.

Invariably, religious fervour or self-aggrandizement detracts from the realism needed to win a war. The conflict between the necessary sense of purpose required to achieve the aim of winning a war and the personal pride of an officer was powerfully dramatized in the movie The Bridge on the River Kwai. The story is based on a book by Pierre Bouelle and involves the relationship between prisoners and their Japanese captors. The commander of this camp in Burma insisted that the officers perform manual labour, thus violating the international conventions on the treatment of prisoners. A British Colonel, the highest ranking officer, leads his fellow officers in resisting this command and is near death when the Japanese commander relents because the morale of the workers is low, the work done without proper supervision is not progressing properly, and the bridge must be built. Instead of suffering the constant punishment, the proud Colonel takes charge and convinces the Japanese that the bridge was planned in the wrong location. A new location is found, the morale
of the men greatly enhanced by their working under British officers. The Colonel is proud to show up the shortcomings of the Japanese and the superiority of British ingenuity, finishing the bridge in time for the first train scheduled to cross it. The Colonel is unaware that a mission to destroy the bridge and train was planned by an Allied commando working in the jungle. When the Colonel discovers exposed wires, he alerts the Japanese commander which led to the commandos having to shoot the Colonel when they realize that he was going to protect his proud achievement. Ironically, his lifeless body falls on the detonator, setting it off thus destroying the bridge and the train. Only the British doctor survives, declaring at the film’s end: “madness”.

This mirrors the fate of the Nazi leaders after they failed to achieve the aim of conquering the world. Not one of them was available for the rebuilding of the country that their grandiosity had destroyed. They killed themselves.

_Fear as the vehicle for aggression_

_Psychoanalytic formulations_

Losing track of the realistic aim of an attack causes many wars, including the Second World War, to be suicidal. To wage a war with a defined aim: win it and end it requires, as Freud indicated, _reorientation to new rules_. Compared to the recent “dumb” wars I discussed previously, those that Freud examined in 1915 and 1933 (Freud 1933) seemed to have more tangible aims and were still conducted in accordance with some international norms. The disorientation Freud described in 1915 was necessary because those in power dictated that former friends were now enemies who posed a threat significant enough to justify armed aggression. Those who stood in the way of the aim set up by the rulers had to be killed. In 1915 Freud saw the transition from friend to foe as created by a supposed threat to the survival of the state or group and the consequent fear such a threat induces. While people might concur that a mobilization is necessary, their judgment of reality of the danger confronting them quickly becomes irrelevant. Once a war has been declared the threat becomes real: it is _kill or be killed._

In 1915 Freud labeled his reaction to the war “disorientation”. Neurologists paint a picture that is more radical than that and should serve as a powerful warning against making light of the transition between war and peace. According to Yoram Yovell:
The amygdala... is believed to mediate the emotional experience of fear... [It] is virtually incapable of forgetting... emotion can be aroused without conscious memory. Once the neural connections that mediate a traumatic association are made in the brain, they remain intact for the lifetime of the organism.

(Yovell 2000: 175)

This suggests an unmediated connection between fear arousal and the senses, by-passing those structures that assess meaning. From this perspective my reaction to the flags was a conditioned response to a stimulus instead of a conscious recollection of the Nazi period. The fear is aroused through the senses and lasts a lifetime. Conditioned responses, also known as Pavlovian responses, explain the connection between a fear arousing event and another element present at the same time: in my case the connection between the fear of the Nazis and the flags. Whether the connections to the historical situation becomes conscious depends on many factors. Antonio Damasio observed the innate aspects characterizing these reactions:

All living organisms from the humble amoeba to the human are born with devices designed to solve automatically, no proper reasoning required, the basic problems of life.

(Damasio 2003: 30)

Damasio refers to the trigger of an emotional response as an emotionally competent stimulus. He distinguishes between emotions which connect to the body and feelings which connect to the mind. Accordingly emotions permit effective but not creative responses to relevant sensory perceptions. The threat to the survival of the individual or a whole group demands readjustments within the personality. It requires the acceptance of the reality principle rather than the pleasure principle which is immaterial and can be counterproductive. What is needed is a readiness for effective action accompanied by a greater submission to authority in preference to solitary reflection as well as an attitude toward the enemy that is compatible with disobjectalization that Green attributes to the death instinct (Green 1993: 25).

Disobjectalization is implicit in Freud’s suggestion that hate originates from the total ego which does not have objects. Harold Blum supports that notion when he wrote about Freud’s attitude toward hate:
Freud did not initially regard hate simply as an expression of aggression or as the reverse of love. Hate was originally considered neither a derivative of love nor its opposite, but was regarded as a different ego attitude.

(Blum 1997: 360)

Blum’s reflections are a faithful assessment of Freud’s original statement:

To say that an instinct “hates” an object strikes us as odd. Thus, we become aware that the attitudes of love and hate cannot be made use of for the relations of the instincts to their objects, but are reserved for the relations of the total ego to objects.

(Freud 1915b: 137)

Disobjectalization cannot be as effective for victims as for combatants because frequently the enemy is less identifiable and there may be a lack of perceptible corroboration.

The notion of a total ego and the implied disobjectalization has been removed from most contemporary theories and replaced by concepts based on representations of subjectivity. These formulations are based on psychic reality and lack that unmediated relationship to external reality suggested by the total ego. Jean Bergeret, a French analyst from Lyons, has studied precisely those states in which the threatened total ego reacts with fundamental violence (Bergeret 1994, 1996a, 1996b). Thus the attitude of “kill or be killed” is not directed at an object, but at the cause of the threat. Its trigger is fear.

Bergeret argues that the recognition of the violence inherent in self-preservation would have challenged Freud’s defences against recognizing the basic and inevitable struggle between mothers and their children. In concentrating on the life and death encounter between Oedipus and Laius, a struggle between father and son, and interpreting it as a contest between two men for the same woman, Freud did not recognize it also to be a fight for the right of way, i.e. survival (Oliner 2001: 678). Bergeret based his thinking on the earliest experience at birth where at times decisions around the life of the infant are weighed against the life of the mother.

Narcissism as conceived by Bergeret, includes violence: the rule of “either him or me.” It is not concerned with the impact on “him” or “her” other than eliminating danger or threat. The fate of the target is a matter of indifference and, in contrast to other forms of aggression, there is no pleasure in destruction because the target is not an object Implicitly, it also expresses Bergeret’s
conviction that violence acts on behalf of life and not as a manifestation of a death instinct, to which he is opposed (Oliner 2001: 678–679).

This conflict brings into play the instinct of self preservation, or ego instincts that are prevalent during war and produce the necessary armouring of the ego (Grubrich-Simitis 1981: 423). For us victims as well as for the soldiers in the battlefield wishful fantasies have no place and the interplay between fantasy is seriously disrupted (Oliner 2001). Even the longing for home can potentially interfere with effective functioning in the battlefield. For the warrior the relationship to comrades in arms is that of reciprocally need-fulfilling objects and, as such, they are extensions of the soldiers’ total ego. This ego state is organized as narcissism in the service of survival, and therefore even mourning the loss of a comrade has to be kept to a minimum. Moreover submission to superiors serves the purpose of survival and has little in common with masochism (Oliner 2012).

Despite the difficulties of the formulations based on inherited traits, I believe that psychoanalysts should not relinquish the study of the mind that, dominated by realistic fears, is compelled to segregate the unconscious in favour of submitting to the issues of survival. This organization describes an ego state of the individual in threatening situations in which fear must lead to action. In an article devoted to the misuse of psychoanalysis, Gilbert Rose recounts:

The late Dr Kurt Rose used to tell how, in Europe in the mid-1930s, when he discovered that a respected professor was applying for his immigration visa to the United States, he looked carefully at the current situation and did likewise. “That”, he said, “was my finest piece of analysis”.

(Rose 1974: 515)

This capacity to perceive, assess, and respond to a threat depends on the ability to keep the focus on external reality and the sensations of self to a minimum. This concentration on the external world is brought into play as a part of the experience of trauma, during which victims can and frequently do dissociate from the internal world. The internal world is silenced by the dominance of sensory experiences; the individual feels numb. This ego state can be compared to a hypnotic state in which behaviour and understanding is dictated by an outside force as against factors that come from the anxiety and unconscious wishes caused by drives.

I take seriously the discovery by neuroscientists of the existence of unmediated emotional reactions between certain perceptions and fear. It is compatible with Freud’s notion that we are dominated by bodily reactions
that lack conscious representation. Whether these reactions, which are sometimes only visceral, are considered traumatic memories is a matter of choice. This type of conditioning might be considered to be the lowest level of integration because it consists of responses to a perception triggered by external reality without conscious awareness of the subject who responds. The perceptual identity that causes the response does not guarantee that the emotional (bodily) response can be transformed into a feeling that enters the mind. The transformation is facilitated through dream work that relies on perceptual identity for enhanced integration. During sleep, the forgotten stimulus may reappear and through the dream work, link it to the previous day’s residue. This leads to higher levels of integration, including aspects of the self, that make the perceptions more meaningful to the mind.

Having outlined this scheme does not mean that conditioned responses based on perceptual identity are the only pathways to fear. While I reacted to the perception of the flags viscerally, I also had a well reasoned fear of President Bush starting a war with Iraq based on his choice of foreign policy advisers. Was the fear aroused by the flags reinforced by the fear of our government’s wish to depose Saddam Hussein? Consciously, I only recall the similarity between this restaurant and Germany under the Nazis. It is possible that only through the process of writing this paper did I become fully conscious of the confluence between the two.

The unmediated, mindless, connection between fear and the perception that causes it, recalls the instinct of self preservation or ego instincts that played a part in Freud’s earliest formulations, have been replaced by a vocabulary derived from drive theory and its vicissitudes. In this way, Laplanche reformulated self preservation to be an outgrowth of self love “I live for my own love, for the love of the ego” (Laplanche 1976: 83) recasts it as a function of narcissism. Unfortunately, this attempt does violence to the radical difference between those ego states in which unconscious processes are brought into play and those in which reality factors dominate the psyche. As shown earlier, narcissistic strivings in the form of self aggrandizement can and often do run counter to a well functioning sense of reality. They can be a cause of the madness of war that leads to the destruction not only of the enemy, but of one’s own interests. Drive theory, object relations, and unconscious fantasies are therefore inadequate to the formulation of the personality organization during war. Bergeret solves this problem by enlarging the view of narcissism to include the response to war. The shortcoming of this formulation is that fundamental violence, like the instinct of self preservation, cannot escape reliance on innate factors that do not evolve with maturation on which psychoanalytic theories are based.
The issues concerning individuals and groups in times of danger

Sigmund Freud (1915a) gave a vivid picture of the power of states to promote the interest of the community to fight for its interests noting that such strivings would be condemned as being egoistic when they govern the behaviour of an individual. In war, this leads to a strange paradox: socialization requires the citizen to do the bidding of the state justified by the threat the enemy poses to its interests.

Combatants selflessly fight for the self-interest of the common good as an extension of their own survival. This creates an interdependence on others not usually experienced to that degree in peacetime. The closeness that is fostered through training and shared experiences is a benefit that is lost at the end of wars, and while the former receives attention and nurturing, the latter, the trauma of separation at the end of wars, is mostly ignored. Relegating these realistic issues brought on by war exclusively to other disciplines suggests that external reality does not concern our field and that the readjustment to life without these dangers can take place without concern for the losses entailed by having had to abandon the battle-oriented state of mind.

Previous chapters in this collection have described this ego state to illustrate the experience of trauma, and while self-preservation equally applies to the response to war for victims and combatants, there are distinct differences between them. An essential attribute of trauma is the isolation accompanying the individual’s experience. Active combat produces almost the opposite effect. Interdependence and cohesion is greater than in peacetime and is enforced through martial law. Desertion and treason are crimes specific to wartime. Despite the closeness of wartime relationships formed in the interest of survival they cannot be confused with the more libidinal ties, although they can survive during peacetime. For those fighting wars, there is a forced separation from family, and the new community of armed forces has a shared goal.

For soldiers returning to their old life means leaving the close and interdependent community and “being on their own”, whereas in wartime we “were in this together”. I believe that it has recently become more difficult because there have been small-scale wars which deprived those who returned of the triumph of military victory and closure. Still, the best portrayal of the problem of returning home stems from the Second World War, which ended in victory. It was sensitively and cogently shown in the 1946 movie The Best Years of Our Lives that chronicles the return of three members of the Armed Services who had not known each other before the
flight home. Each is depicted with his own specific problems, the business man who returns to his old job, and his wife and children. The sailor who lost both hands and who cannot tolerate his family’s distress at seeing him with his prosthetics. The decorated Air Force officer in his snappy uniform suffering the contempt of his flighty wife, and his former employer acting as if he were doing him a favour by offering him a menial job because he is not entitled to claim his old one. As each one leaves the taxi that drove them to their homes, they show their reluctance by suggesting that the others should go first. That night all three met without premeditation in the bar owned by the uncle of the former sailor and got drunk.

The reintegration of soldiers into a less threatening existence requires a new reorientation: the state of mind supported and sustained by the realities of war lacks its counterpart in the new reality. Peacetime constitutes the loss of corroboration for a mental state that persists but has lost its validity in the perceptual world. Veterans who still carry within them the wartime experiences feel separated from their surroundings and ashamed of the feelings they shared with their comrades. With the loss of perceptible danger they are forced to rely on memories of their recent experiences. In addition they regret that their state of mind which creates distance is a disappointment to those eagerly awaited their return. Eventually those memories that lack perceptible corroboration can become personal history and over time attain personal meaning.

I believe that the examples I have given show that survival under traumatic conditions is also predicated on narcissism in the interest of survival, based on a very limited, if not absent, outside, which is subjectively constituted. This is not immediately evident because of the victim’s heightened attunement to external reality and the ability to focus on effective action. This behaviour is devoid of meaningful relations to self and object which means that the enemy is not an object and subjects cannot be attuned to their internal world. The world of the victim frequently is a solitary one compared to the mutual support combatants can give each other.

What we see as heightened narcissism in self-preservation may ultimately concern the total ego, as Freud called it, rather than the subject in relation to the world outside experienced as objects. It is an organization which depends on sensory perception, hence the difficulty in deflecting to the outside the disruptive effects of trauma when the threats are no longer corroborated as ongoing events. The subject has learned to be dependent on, and hypersensitive to, sensory stimulation. The attempt at a meaningful post-traumatic reintegration of the personality is frequently thwarted by the discontinuity between the organization of the mind during danger
and the world of supposed safety, and frequently there is no guide to help to support greater permeability of these two states. The victims of violence live in psychic isolation.

The unconscious element in the integration of wartime memories

The most likely personal meaning attributed to the reality-oriented state of mind that led to their survival is the belief in omnipotence. Actions that were undertaken because of they were effective in reaching a shared goal of fighting a war or escape persecution lend themselves to be transformed into magical thinking and the reality of a job well-done is experienced through the lens of infantile grandiosity. According to Winnicott, “In psychoanalysis as we know it there is no trauma that is outside the individual’s omnipotence” (Winnicott 1960: 586).

This likelihood leaves open the question, to be determined by each clinician, whether the survival is met with euphoria and liberation using the realistic factors to exonerate veteran and survivors from the guilt caused by the aggression involved in fighting a war or simply having survived where others died. Or whether the unconscious omnipotence of survivors will turn the violence against themselves as if they were responsible for having witnessed death and danger and are struggling to readjust to peacetime. Sebastian Junger, the journalist and film-maker, summarized the post-war disturbances of veterans: “Awkward as it is to say, the trauma of war seems to be giving it up” (Junger 2015: 142), and “PTSD is a crisis of connection and disruption, not an illness that you carry around” (ibid.: 144). It is therefore essential to appreciate the personality organization necessitated by war in order to analyse the meaning of peace for each returning warrior and not rely on the assumption of the “safety” of the consulting room or the warmth of the family to which each is returning.

The day the Second World War ended was not an day of jubilation for many survivors of persecution. They felt ambivalent about a possible reunion with their families. When no one survived they were spared the many tragedies of concentration camp survivors who found their children but who could not overcome their feeling of mutual estrangement that led to insurmountable tragedies. Still becoming part of a new family or being alone, each required multiple adjustments accompanied by disappointments for people of goodwill.
Analysts can and should be able to address disturbances attributed to events unrelated to personal issues, acknowledge their reality as history, and probe into the difficulty of those who cannot accept as history a war from which they have to detach themselves. The reintegration of the personality is made more difficult for those who attach a negative judgment about the war they just fought or survived and themselves for the difficulty they are experiencing returning to “normal” life. Reassurance is counterproductive. The problem needs to be subjected to analysis especially if there is evidence that the unconscious has begun to dominate the meaning attached to experience regardless of their conscious memories of the events. Those who distort the meaning to their own detriment (survivor guilt; shame for being weak, for feeling estranged from those who did not share their experience) need the inquiring minds of psychodynamically trained professionals. They may also need to know that some of their fears of being alone with dangers they experienced will remain with them for life and to recognize them as such.

The worst part of war is the knowledge that it can happen and did happen. This is what remains. The supposed security of the consulting room does not exist for those who have lived through war. Survivors question what others take for granted and the job of therapists is to help them to distinguish between the lived experience of the external world as threatening and the unconscious meaning attributed over time other than the reality of war and suffering that comes from it.

Neither culture nor science has found a remedy against war. The skepticism that Freud showed regarding to usefulness of his exchange with Einstein has been supported by the wars that followed. To the contrary, greater dissemination of news and scientific discoveries such as harm done to the environment, appear to uncover dangers that were unknown to previous generations. Our daily reality is one of ever-present fears and history has shown time and again that these are used by those in power to fan the belligerence of their people to take action against a chosen enemy. A democratic state can only rely on an informed public to insist that wars have defined aim and that they will cease when the goal has been reached. It is sad to look back on the way in which the American public reacted to the humiliation of the attacks on the World Trade Center. It accepted fighting Iraq, an enemy predetermined before the events of 2001. I was made to feel that I was unpatriotic in the restaurant when I rejected the excess of flag waving. The ensuing events showed me that there will always be war because even “dumb” ones and persecution of minorities can be sold to a public convinced that they are patriotic, that they are in danger, and that they are acting in the interest of self-defence.
References


CHAPTER FIVE

Life is not a dream
The importance of being real

Introduction

The previous chapter was based on a specific aspect of external reality: war. It is an aspect of experience in which accuracy of perception is necessary in order to survive. War is in a way the ultimate reality because it can maim or kill, consequently it mobilizes defences that arm the individual against external reality. Additionally, if the threat comes from the outside world that awareness can exonerate those individuals who are caught up in wars. However it is also a common defence used by children early in life to claim that the aggression for which they are reprimanded comes from someone else, on the familiar model of “he started it”. Because of these distortions introduced by the issue of war and its reality, leading to guilt or exoneration based on the emphasis on an agency external to the individual these dynamics reverberate in psychoanalytic thinking in which material reality is treated with suspicion because it is considered antithetical to introspection and self knowledge. It is important therefore to shed this restricted view and adopt a wider perspective on reality, by which is meant external reality.

This chapter will explore the value of being real. Like all things individuals consider precious, “being real” is often imitated, sometimes counterfeited or mistaken for what it is not, only attesting to the esteem in
which we hold the actual thing. The most commonly applied criterion to determine whether or not an object is real is its accessibility to the senses, as in “seeing is believing” while other sources for mental activity are devalued by comparison. “Being real” – in the sense of being perceptible – is a merit constantly added to experiences despite the recognition of the crucial importance of psychic reality. Perceptibility is a factor in dreams and hallucinations, creating the illusion of external reality, and it plays a part in fetishism, in which the perceptible object is used as a substitute for the one that is experienced as missing or destroyed. The ubiquity of the need for reality, even where it is based on illusion or delusion, gives proof of its value. It is also the reason for its elusiveness; the cause for its neglect in the psychoanalytic literature. I believe this elusiveness to be the source of the well-founded distrust of analysts with regard to the use of external reality as a defence against psychic reality in the analytic process. When it serves that function, inside and outside are treated as mutually exclusive, with analysts emphasizing the role of the inner world. It is there that the wish for perceptibility originates. It is there that the interaction between inside and outside takes place, but it requires further exploration. It has been hampered because, according to Loewald, psychoanalysis “has not recognized, in its dominant current, that psychoanalytic theory has unwittingly taken over much of the obsessive neurotic’s experience and conception of reality and has taken it for granted as ‘the objective reality’” (Loewald 1980a: 30). Winnicott cautioned that “psychoanalysis always likes to be able to eliminate all factors that are environmental, except in so far as the environment can be thought of in terms of projective mechanisms” (Winnicott 1971: 88).

I can think of no better illustration for the importance of being real than the key passage in the epic novel In Search of Lost Time in which Marcel Proust recounts how the taste of a madeleine soaked in tea brings back to life a world that was dead to the narrator. He introduces a Celtic belief to describe this life-giving process and its dependence on the qualities inherent in the material object. According to that belief, the souls of those we lost are captive inside an inferior being. We liberate the souls from the spell if by chance we come close to one of these. Being liberated by us, they have triumphed over death and come to live with us (Proust 1992: 64). This lovely, poetic invocation depicts the power of the material world over our innermost being; its capacity to bring the past to life. In the novel, the taste of the madeleine is the key to the resurrection of a lost world:
And so it is with our own past. It is a labour in vain to attempt to recapture it: all efforts of our intellect must prove futile. The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of the intellect, in some material object (in the sensations which this material object would give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves die.

... But when from a long-distant past nothing subsists, after the people are dead, after the things are (destroyed MMO) broken and scattered, taste and smell alone, more fragile but more enduring, more immaterial, more persistent, more faithful, remain poised a long time, like souls, remembering, waiting, hoping, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unflinchingly, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection.

(Proust 1992: 59–60, 63–64)

Remembrance here is entirely dependent on perceptible qualities experienced as inherent in the object encountered by chance.

Proust contrasts the capacity of sensory aspects of the event to bring the past back to life with his recurrent childhood memories. Those were embedded in “indistinct darkness” (Proust 1992: 63). They were memories of the painful trip upstairs at bedtime separating him from his beloved mother; they lacked a connection to their surroundings; they were static in a word, seen always at the same evening hour; isolated from all possible surroundings, detached and solitary against the dark background, the bare minimum of scenery necessary (like the décor one sees prescribed on the title-page of an old play, for its performance in the provinces) to the drama of my undressing; as though all Combray had consisted but of two floors joined by a slender staircase, and as though there had been no time there but seven o’clock at night. I must own that I could have assured any questioner that Combray did include other scenes and did exist at other hours than these. But since the facts which I should then have recalled would have been prompted only by voluntary memory, the memory of the intellect, and since the pictures of that kind of memory shows us nothing of the past itself, I should never have had any wish to ponder over this residue of Combray. To me it was in reality dead.

(Proust 1992: 64)

Dominated as these were by the emotional drama of childhood, in them the external world served but as a faint stage setting compared to those linked to the perception of the past in the chance encounter with a sensation from
the past: they were self-centred. The emphasis on the night-time drama was on loss, on the inner world devoid of the imagery that brings the past to life, contrary to the effect produced by the taste of the madeleine.

His description of these emotionally charged memories is compatible with the findings by neuroscientists discussed in a later section of this essay. In the present context it is important to note that there is no difference between the child who experiences the pain and the man who remembers it because, as has been described by a research psychologist (Johnson 2006), intense emotions interfere with remembering the specific source that triggered them.

Proust’s depiction of two different kinds of memories shows us the contrast between those emotionally charged ones and those that are permeated by sensory perceptions. This contrast, between the specificity inherent in the rediscovered taste of the madeleine and the indistinct, unchanging and static quality of the remembered self-centred scene, requires exploration into the role of sensory perception in the experience of being real, or according to Proust, in bringing the past back to life. It is remarkable that the sensory, real, taste of an actual madeleine evokes the memory of the same experience in the past and bestows on this memory an important quality of time, lacking in the memory of the emotional scene. Interestingly, the sameness of the sensation introduces the experience of the difference in time whereas in the emotional scene at bedtime “is always seen at the same hour”. The term “static”, suggests timelessness. These observations provide an avenue through which to compare the timelessness of emotions with the distinct contributions made by the senses in causing memories to feel real. The adult who enjoys the taste of the madeleine remembers the child he once was, biting into the same confection but aware of the difference between the present and the past, one enriching the other. Proust’s suggestion that these memories cannot be produced at will, but depend on a chance encounter is compatible with the daily experience of clinicians. The fortuity involved may be one of the reasons for it not receiving the needed attention. Since the encounter between a sensation and a significant memory cannot be produced by the skill of the analyst, it is humbling and runs counter to the clinician’s need to be active in furthering the psychoanalytic process.

The real in the analytic process

By establishing the real contact between patient and analyst, the psychoanalytic situation aims to promote the fortuitous occurrence that provides
a window on the past. In recognition of the chance factor, Freud recommended free association as the method most likely to achieve this goal. He discouraged consciously directed attention by both analyst and patient, and he was proven correct in most instances until he saw the usefulness of constructions in analysis (Freud 1937).

An experience from my own practice provides an example of an unpremeditated experience: it happened the day I was dressed in black. My patient was stunned and begged me to let her leave because I was working despite the death of someone close to me. She pleaded with me but complied with my insistence that she stay. I was able to call her attention to the intensity of her reaction to seeing me dressed in black, suggesting that this brought back a painful memory. Specifically, I could convince her that this incident recalled a time when she witnessed her mother’s grief for the baby who was born after her. The infant boy died before he could be brought home, and the grief-stricken adults paid no attention to her presence. Before the incident in my office, she maintained that her mother was always in a cheerful mood despite the fact that she could no longer stay at home and went to work after this tragedy. The construction of her mother’s grief was effective because of her seeing me dressed in black. This is how her mother’s grief became real to her, and the likely experience of her feeling excluded, unwanted, and like an intruder.

This example which illustrates the daily work of psychoanalysis is remarkable only in the question it raises: the fortuity of the black dress that set the process in motion. It is possible that my wearing black that day was due to my unconscious attunement to her readiness to confront this experience, but had this indeed been the case, it would eliminate only the chance factor, without bringing the incident under my conscious control. It is impossible not to ask oneself about the role of chance and be tempted to return to the notion of psychic determinism which claims that a person will find something in the external world to respond to when a memory is ready to emerge. Again, it diminishes the role of chance, but it does not diminish the role of perception in making it real, and it would not alter the intensity of her response to seeing me in black. Her reaction illustrates the strength of the magnetism of perceptibility.

Early in the history of psychoanalysis, Freud considered the need for perceptible reality in dreams to be an important aspect of dream-work. One has to wonder therefore why the distinctive name given to the criterion of perceptibility, Darstellbarkeit, was not carried into the Standard Edition. There, it is called representability, a term also used for the translation of Vorstellbarkeit, thus devoid of that aspect that causes the dream to
be perceptible and therefore feel *real*. Dreams create the illusion of a tangible *reality*, thus running counter to the most common assumption of sleep as primarily a withdrawal from external *reality*. In dreams, we transport ourselves into a different world that we experience as *reality*. Upon waking we realize that it was only a dream, bringing either disappointment or relief, but always the sense of its only being inside.

According to Freud, the dream-work attempts to figure the external world psychically, not abolish it. And part of the wish fulfilment of dreams consists in refunding the world left behind and to reshape it. In “On Dreams” Freud adds the function of repetition performed by dreams: “The situation in a dream is often nothing other than a modified repetition, complicated by interpolations, of an impressive experience” (Freud 1901: 659–660).

The accent on the experience and its repetition in the dream suggests the *universal nature of the need for reality and its repetition*. From this point of view, repetition can be considered a manifestation of the *universal* pressure for discernible experiences and for their actualization (Freud 1914: 151) consequently accepting that it is part of human endowment to repeat emotionally charged experiences by making them *real* in dreams or in action. The need for *realization* in that case would be considered a matter of degree depending on the person’s capacity to integrate experiences.

Tacitly the need for the *real* in the psychoanalytic process has always been accepted. The current view of enactments as an inevitable part of the psychoanalytic process for both analyst and patient recognizes implicitly the greater need for *reality* than previously acknowledged. Much can be gained by adopting Loewald’s reworking of the synthetic function of the mind:

Loewald’s thinking is based on a broader, more modern biological framework than Freud’s which led him to attribute the binding, the system making, in other words, the synthetic function, to Eros, and not to the ego. In this way he postulated that the instinctual drives organise environment and are organised by it in the same way as is true of the ego and its reality (Loewald 1980b: 235). He attributes the difficulty inherent in the earlier theory in that *instinct* was a concept restricted to the *inner* stimulus. “Instincts remain a relational phenomena, rather than being considered energies within a closed system to be discharged” (Loewald 1980c: 152).

Loewald’s formulation accounts for the intrusion of the external world into dreams as being instinctively driven and many other phenomena are easier to explain if the need for integration includes the environment. From this perspective enactment involves *real action that only subsequently can be used for reflection*. *Repetition* in the psychoanalytic process is evidence
for the impulse toward actualization: enacting or repeating both involve some form of realization that tend to be contrasted to memories as such, but are actually their dramatization in the service of synthesis.

Despite misgivings, which I shall discuss later, the importance of actions, the need to make something real happen, is common knowledge. The negative judgment toward repetition reasserted itself later in psychoanalytic history, when it was linked to the death instinct and considered to be innate and unmotivated. A more extensive discussion of this issue is contained in a 1996 article (Oliner 1996) and in the book Psychic Reality in Context (Oliner 2012). I am suggesting that repetition, especially in dreams, and enactments are manifestations of the need for the real, and that there much to be gained by exploring this line of thinking.

The search for the “real” in repetition

The need to repeat has been viewed mainly by Freud and those who have followed him from a negative angle. This view is compatible with the multiple ways in which external reality is regarded in psychoanalytic theory. These are described and discussed in a number of my earlier papers (Oliner 1996, 2008). It is regrettable that these later theories have created a significant departure from Freud’s earlier thinking when he stressed the creative aspects of repetition. Repetition, as it occurs in dreams, was understood as aiming to rework the previous day’s residues of events into wishes that have been fulfilled, thus showing how repetition of experiences serves the pleasure principle. In the later theories, events that were repeated were too easily attributed to the repetition compulsion caused by the death instinct. Inderbitzin and Levy assessed “the repetition compulsion” critically by suggesting that it is a useless term which can lead to bad technique in that it overlooks the aggression generated by trauma:

When the ego functions that guarantee autonomy from the environment and autonomy from instinctual drives are inadequately developed or become compromised by neurosis, posttraumatic states, and psychoses, behavior becomes less flexible and stereotyped repetitiveness increases.

(Inderbitzin and Levy 1998: 49)

In addition, the explanation for the sequelae of trauma through the death instinct leads to two different approaches to psychopathology: that which is caused by unconscious conflicts and that which is caused by historic events. Those who suffer from the former needed to investigate their own
motivation whereas those afflicted by the latter had to remember what they endured. This division actually removes victims of trauma from the spectrum of psychoanalysis being that the cause resides not in the patient but in the external world. In addition, it emphasizes victimization and plays down the feelings attached to surviving the calamities that befell them. Given the universality of the need for the *real* and its repetition it is possible to place trauma at the extreme of a continuum with regard to that need, without considering it to be the manifestation of a separate drive. From this perspective, each case could be examined in terms of how the individual has integrated inner strivings with outer *reality*.

Perhaps no one has expressed the important function of the *real* more clearly than Winnicott. Although he used a different terminology, his contrasting object relating to object use addresses the *reality* of the object. He described the transition between object *relating* relating and object *use* use as one involving the destruction of the object. If the object survives,

> The subject can now use the object that has survived. It is important to note that it is not only that the subject destroys the object because the object is placed outside the area of omnipotent control. It is equally significant to state this the other way round and to say that it is the destruction of the object that places the object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control. In these ways the object develops its own autonomy and life, and (if it survives) contributes in to the subject, according to its own properties. (Winnicott 1971: 89–90; italics mine)

The problem with this clarity lies in its expression: it appears as shorthand, the object’s survival renders it useful and *real*. Winnicott did not sufficiently explain his notion of destruction. We are left to speculate whether it is based on forgetting or as obliterating memory traces. Just how does the mind destroy? Does it engage in violent unconscious fantasies? Does it only obliterate the links to the images rather than rendering them truly non-existent consistent with Bion’s description of evacuation? Or are we to think of negative hallucination, to which André Green (1993) devoted considerable attention. These unanswered issues do not put into the question the validity of Winnicott’s clinical observations, they only require a formulation that is better integrated into the existing psychoanalytic theories (see Chapter 6 of this volume for “Further explorations of Winnicott’s ‘Use of the object’”).

C. and S. Botella base their understanding of these early processes on the *loss of the object of hallucinatory wish fulfilment* (Botella and Botella 2001). Accordingly, this is the first trauma from which subsequent development
originates. It builds on Freud’s notion that the first satisfaction is recreated through hallucination, and it postulates a loss when its non-existence, its unreality has to be accepted. I am reluctant to refer to an experience of loss at the dawn of human experience because a recognition of loss, being based on a sense of reality, is beyond the capacity of an infant. This formulation would be compatible with Freud’s brief allusion to the existence of a reality ego that predates the pleasure ego (Freud 1915: 136). However, without being literal concerning the notion of loss, it is evident that waking and giving up the confusion between the hallucinated breast and the real one starts with birth and the transition between the infant’s sucking during sleep and sucking at the breast confronts it with an important difference. Automatic gratification pertains to dreams and fantasies, and the traumatic aspect of this loss is replayed in later life whenever a pleasant event turns out to have been a dream, and “Träume sind Schäume” (“dreams are foam”). Returning to the infant, the hallucinated breast gives milk without sucking, whereas the real breast does not, it requires the infant and the caregiver to respond in very specific ways.

In contrast to Winnicott’s formulation, in which the object is destroyed but it survives and becomes real because of its being outside the infant’s omnipotence, the sequence as it is drawn up by C. and S. Botella is marked by a radical loss. This theory stresses that the hallucinated breast can only remain real inside and the real breast that is found outside will never lose its substitute character. This is an important distinction between the two ways of understanding the real in that it differentiates clearly between inside and outside while at the same time stressing their co-existence. Both are real, but they are not identical. Both are experienced as real because they depend on the same memory traces built on sensory input. But the difference between them is essential, a distinction which C. and S. Botella expressed by the formula: “only inside but also outside”. This emphasizes the substitute quality of external reality and the illusory quality of refinding the lost object. The search for it, based on the memory traces of past experiences of satisfaction and the wish to repeat it, is never given up, leaving a lifelong coexistence between awareness of loss and its denial. The reality of the object found in the external world sustains the illusion of refinding, the source of many pleasures including the feeling of elation. A moving illustration of the elation induced by a substitute object can be found in Eugene O’Neill’s play The Iceman Cometh, which deals with this topic extensively by showing how Hickey, who attacks the illusions fuelled by the alcohol consumption of the other characters, is accused of “having taken the kick out of the booze”.

Despite their primitive nature, these processes persist through life. Sensory traces of experiences appear in dreams and determine their content, and those same traces become the blueprint for the wish to repeat the satisfaction or avoid the danger in external reality. According to Freud, the process constitutes a return to some of the earliest means of realization the search for perceptual identity (Freud 1900: 506–507; see also ibid.: 566). According to the findings of neuroscientists which will be discussed briefly in a later section of this paper, these sensory memory traces persist despite defences against their gaining consciousness, and therefore remain a unconscious source of motivation.

The application of this scheme to trauma

The process described above – which is based on memory traces that elicit an emotional response – can be compared to classical Pavlovian conditioning. In a personal communication, Ani Buk, a specialist in art therapy, pointed to the similarity of these memory traces to implicit memory. Like in classical conditioning, the process does not depend on an individual’s being conscious of the stimulus that caused the response, and the rules that govern it are equally applicable to memories of gratification associated with pleasure and memories of danger evoking fear. Therefore it applies to trauma in which the focus has to shift somewhat from memory traces of gratification and wish fulfilment to those pertaining to experiences of danger. The need to make sense of the response through making the source intelligible and real persists – as I shall show – it is even greater in the case of trauma – but it meets with greater obstacles and therefore requires a separate discussion.

The work of neuroscientists has shown that specific sensory stimulation is sufficient for there to be an emotional response that may or may not have meaning for the individual. Emotions can distinguish between fear arousing and neutral stimuli without being conscious of doing this (Yovell 2000). According to Kandel, “After a single exposure to a threat, the amygdala can retain the memory of that threat throughout an organism’s entire life” (Kandel 2006: 243).

It is notable that both authors stress the fact that the emotional response is elicited by the qualities intrinsic to a sensory stimulus, thereby accentuating the power of perception to by-pass consciousness, to persist throughout life, and to elicit the same emotional reaction every time the individual is confronted by the same or a similar situation. The relatively recently
discovered function of mirror neurons suggest that they too respond to changes in the outside world by imitating the feelings of others (Buk 2009). These facts show a more durable and more extensive connection between perceptions of external reality and emotional reactions than most clinicians suspected, and they suggest that the process is unconscious and antedates repression and other complex defensive reactions.

Since these primitive reactions to the external world persist through life and form the basis of dreaming, understanding the laws that govern them is relevant to psychoanalytic thinking: they reveal how external reality enters the mind to create the experience of the real. An article by a group of psychologists summarizing the results of research in the area, “Memory: When less is more” (Riccio, Rabinowitz and Axelrod 1994), shows that forgetting the attributes of stimuli leads to increases in responding to novel stimuli, a state akin to heightened motivation and generalization. Responses increase because the particular conditions that originally elicited them, i.e. their source, have been forgotten. Thus, the less we remember, the more we respond. Furthermore Johnson, a research psychologist, suggested that emotional factors decrease the source monitoring factor (Johnson 2006). This is particularly relevant to trauma, considering that the experiences resulting in trauma are accompanied by intense emotions or the defences against them. This interference with the memory of the source of later responses appears to increase their strength and frequency.

Not knowing the source of responses that persist through life prevents those reactions from being modified. As Proust put it, it is always the same time as when he, the child, had to leave his mother to the world of adults. The reactions cannot undergo desensitization because their source, being unknown, cannot be examined in the light of the passage of time and brought into the context of the individual’s present circumstances. As the work of analysis has amply demonstrated, the responsiveness persists, but if the stimulus that elicits it is discovered, the emotionally charged memory can be evoked without a need to enact it in order to bring it back to life. It can remain a painful memory. The response can become more specific, expressed in feelings rather than actions, with an appreciation for the differences in the context between past and present.

It is unlikely that certain responses can ever be extinguished, but they can be modified through inhibition or desensitization. This process depends on contextualizing the source of the responses, thus making it conscious, specific and real. Modifications in responsiveness, whether in waking and in dreaming, depend on the accessibility of the memory traces.
As was mentioned earlier, transforming these primitive conditioned responses is a lifelong undertaking, which is particularly hampered by the fact that highly emotional states work against source monitoring. The unelaborated reactions to aspects of external reality persist and remain unchanged because of nature of the experience that gave rise to them. In addition, the higher level defences against trauma such as splitting or dissociating also prevent the source of the emotion to be assessed and contextualized in time. The defective or missing memories interfere with refining and assessing the source of the danger or pleasure, and widen the responsiveness, aiming to realize them in the external world. Instead of being able to elaborate the memory traces into higher forms of expression, where they could undergo transformations, survivors of trauma remain with the responses without any ability to understand their origin. Thus memory cannot fulfill its basic function of leading to a sense of time. The process malfunctions because the specific source of the emotional responses is not known.

These memory traces guide the search for surrogate for the lost object of hallucinatory wish fulfillment. The emphasis here is two-fold: the sensory traces of the lost object, like a roadmap and the gap between the wished for object and the acceptance of the real in the external world. The real satisfaction has to retain a level of unreality because of its status of being linked to the lost object that is only available in dreams. Nevertheless, I am convinced that each real satisfaction is not only tied to a lost object but also also consists in a gratification of unconscious omnipotence since the experience of trauma leads to the need for narcissistic enhancement.

Even a brief survey of the vast literature on trauma demonstrates the many ways in which the memory of calamities continues to be an unintegrated cause for an individual’s reactions. Different theorists have emphasized different aspects of the barrier that exists between the original experience and the lifelong response, but they agree that the integration of the experience of trauma is seriously hampered or prevented.

I have selected authors according to their relevance to psychodynamic understanding, and I believe that all of them are compatible with Freud’s notion that traumatization and misfortune lead to the loss of the sense of being protected by a benevolent parental agency (Freud 1930: 121). This basic loss necessitates defences resulting in its suppression. Ira Brenner has concentrated on the response to trauma resulting in dissociation. He defined dissociation psychodynamically as
a defensive, altered state of consciousness due to auto-hypnosis augmenting repression or splitting. It develops as a primitive, adaptive response of the ego to the overstimulation and pain of external trauma, which, depending upon its degree of integration, may result in a broad range of disturbances of alertness, awareness, memory and identity.

(Brenner 2009: 79)

He adds to this the loss of connectedness to the participating self in the cases of trauma (Brenner 2001).

Ilse Grubrich-Simitis refers to the armoring of the ego as a result of trauma (Grubrich-Simitis 1981: 423). Van der Kolk (2000) refers to the increased narrowing of consciousness with increased arousal, Quindeau (1995: 25) suggests anaesthesia, and Krystal (1985: 151) refers to modifications of consciousness that permit conscious registration of perception without provoking a dangerous response. He also observed that unavoidable danger does not evoke fear but a reaction that could be called catatanoid. Likewise, Wangh (1998: 320) compares the defensive depersonalization and derealization to a hypnoid state, and Shengold (1989) ascribes the lack of self awareness to auto-hypnosis, and André Green (1993) emphasized the impact of negative hallucination possibly consciously willed and therefore closely related to auto-hypnosis. All point to these defensive reorganizations of the personality as a result of trauma as interfering with the use of memory for integration leading to a sense of history. Repetition, however, points to the persistence of the memory traces in some part of the personality which leads to the constant striving to make them real. In the case of my patient’s response to seeing me wear the black dress brought back convincingly the experience of being in the presence of grief in which she had no part and which made her feel isolated. Added to the isolation at the time the baby was not brought home was her previously reported memory of being taken to the cemetery to visit the grave of a sister who died before her birth, roaming among the graves not knowing what to do with herself but being reprimanded for being bad.

Because of the poor integration of the total personality, wishful thinking and dreaming are as dangerous for traumatized individuals, possibly even more threatening, than danger itself. In the absence of a sound assessment of reality, fantasies can feel too real and therefore are too close to the gratification of infantile omnipotence (see Oliner 2008).

These important findings account for the duality encountered in the treatment of victims of trauma: despite the serious interference
in the assimilation of experience, they respond constantly to stimuli that may not be consciously perceived. Thus the reaction takes place with minimal degrees of conscious perceptibility, yet their dangerous nature is clear enough to evoke an emotional response. According to Rousillon, “Before being psychic, perception is first a somatic process; it could not be immediately conscious” (Rousillon 2001: 1381).

The evolution of these emotional responses occurs through subsequent cognitive development to inhibit their expression. This evolution depends on consciousness and its availability for reassessing danger. When this process is undisturbed, cognitive development will know if it is real by means of the perceptual apparatus. But since this is interfered with in the process of assimilating traumatic experiences, its victims respond with emotions without knowing the source that triggered them. Depending on the nature of the defence against the memory of trauma, it may cause some victims to constantly seek danger instead of avoiding it, leading one to the suggestion that the wish to make it real in action overrides the need for its avoidance.

External reality and psychic reality are false dichotomies

The need for the real is greater for victims of trauma than for those who have not suffered calamities. This was illustrated by my patient’s intense reaction to the black dress. It brought back the memory of mourning, but she insisted that I was in mourning and caused her to be an intruder into my grief. By maintaining the reality of my mourning she attempted to deny the real source of her emotional reaction, the memory of her mother’s mourning provoked by the sight of the black dress and the meaning it had for her: her own pain at not finding a place for herself. She was unable to prevent her emotional reaction to the past event which she denied, but made sense of it by experiencing it as actually taking place in the present. Instead of being able to leave open the possibility that her reaction was predicated on the co-existence of two factors: one external and the other internal, she insisted on their being mutually exclusive. A more complete history can be found in “Anal aspects of overeating” (Oliner 1988).

We are now in a better position than we previously were to appreciate the importance of the persistence of the emotional reactions linked to sensory experiences of unknown origins. A conviction of reality attaches to them, but they have to be continuously reworked to ascertain their origin and place them in their historic context. For my patient, the black dress was not
experienced as a memory, the record of an actual event in her childhood; she insisted that it was happening in the present. It was at first inconceivable to her that she was reacting to something inside of her. My mourning was real; the proof for its being real was my clothing thus vehemently excluding her internal world. The pain she suffered at seeing her mother’s mourning but feeling excluded persisted but remained unelaborated. It was not yet tied to its actual source in the past and therefore was experienced as real in the present. I cannot agree with the view of those influenced by Bion, who regard the emphasis on an object like the black dress as evidence of evacuation. The patient did have problems making the connection between the object she saw and reacted to and her own internal world, but I believe that the process is more complicated. It is a process in which the historic reality of the perception plays an important part. Whereas many analysts seem to assume that the work of analysis concerns only the inside, the phrase coined by C. and S. Botella only inside but also outside completes the picture. To view the black dress only as a concrete object that serves to evacuate the intense emotions attached to the memory is a disservice to the function of the black dress in evoking the emotional reaction. That reaction was specific and based on a perception that reactivated memory traces based on a similar experience in childhood.

Viewing the problem of repetition from this perspective, from the view of a necessary process failing to take place because of trauma, rather than an existing memory being dissociated, differs from the more prevalent theories. It is compatible with Loewald’s notion of one of the most important actions of psychoanalysis: the process of integrating experiences at more evolved levels (Loewald 1980b). A similar view was expressed by Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, who described the problem of the need for reality in terms of the defences used by families of survivors of the Holocaust. She concluded:

Because the traces left by the experience of extreme trauma in the memory of the persecuted are constantly derealized by this dissociative work of defence, they are incapable of assuming the character of memories and hence the quality of belonging to the past. They may thus remain catastrophically imperishable. In other words, the normally beneficial division of the temporal continuum into past, present, and future is abolished in relation to the area of the trauma.

(Grubrich-Simitis 2010: 46)

This describes the difficulty in terms of defences against remembering and restoring the reality of the history. It thus accounts for the unavailability of
crucial memories. It does not, however, explain sufficiently the persistence of memory traces that leads to the repetition of aspects of the traumatic experience. The persistence of memory manifests itself in dreams and in actions; it expresses itself in emotional responses to sensory experiences that need to be contextualized in order to be understood. In psychopathology, it is that which has failed to take its normal path in development. In the case of severely traumatized individuals, it points to the interaction between the defensive aims and the failure in certain normal maturational processes. It is the combination of these two factors that accounts better for the repercussions of trauma, – the obliteration of memory and the persistence of emotional responses – than either one taken separately.

My patient’s insistence upon my being actually in mourning because of the black dress I was wearing, her belief in the reality of the situation making her feel like an intruder as would have been appropriate to the situation, was in response to an event she experienced external to her. This insistence of the reality of her perception creates a false dichotomy between the inside and the outside world. Yet because of the persistence of the link between the perception and the emotional memory traces, this use of the real aims at giving those traces a meaning that is ego-syntonic. The memory traces manifest themselves in emotions that seek to recreate the sensory qualities of the experience that gave rise to them. This aspect of the analytic work has been weakened by the various post-Freudian theories that concentrate exclusively on psychic reality and regard the external world as a means of evacuating a part of that world when it becomes unbearable. This shortchanges seriously the role of the intrinsic qualities of the object world – that world becomes only a product of our projections (Winnicott) and therefore unusable. Many of these discussions rely on the transmission of trauma suffered by the parents, discussed in Chapter 2 of this volume. They are based on the assumption that those being the victim of historic events experience those events as if they were taking in all the facts and that the tunnel vision required for surviving calamities played no part in the experience (Oliner 2009). This negates the role of the earliest processes in which emotional reactions become linked to sensory stimuli. Ultimately, this view creates a dichotomy in which an either-or decision is applied to analytic material, as if a reaction could not be in two places at the same time. It runs counter to the “balance” in which inside and outside co-exist (Inderbitzin and Levy 1994).

Although the emphasis in the psychoanalytic literature depicts how external reality is used defensively and thereby strengthens unconscious
omnipotence in patient and analyst alike, the process to identify the source of emotional reactions as they are elicited by external reality is equally important. Unfortunately the process is made more difficult by the fact that emotions interfere with knowing what gave rise to them. Nevertheless, mental life consists in a constant search for the source of an individual’s reactions. Clearly, the refinding, as was true of Proust’s taste of the madeleine, strengthens the contact with the external world, creates a sense of history, and is not necessarily only a means of numbing the emotions.

The importance of the real in making sense of confirming the source of an emotional reaction also leads to the overestimation of the real. The search for perceptual identity in waking life is an attempt to deny the loss of omnipotence and the magic of dreams. Fetishism is one of the dynamics in which this denial is best illustrated. The reality of the fetish makes sexual activities possible that would otherwise would be fraught with anxiety and fail. But it is the reality of the fetish that has this power, not its actual relationship to that which is missing or lost. In less severe manifestations of the power of the real, the object supports the illusion of refinding a lost object. This too can misfire when the process threatens to abolish the substitute quality of the real and perceptual identity supports the notion of hallucinatory wish fulfilment in waking life. Its being real is so vehemently defended against the awareness of the potential surrogate quality of the external world; it takes over and obliterates the difference between that which is alive at night and that which can be perceived while being awake. It is a well-known fact that the survival of trauma results in an impoverished fantasy life, considering that fantasy is the playground between dreaming and the external world. Trauma results in an excessive need for the real at the expense of an inner life.

Conclusion

Proust’s description of two different memories, the taste of the madeleine which involved the identity of perception mentioned by Freud, and the static emotional scene at nighttime almost completely devoid of sensory qualities, leaving only a mood, is remarkable in that the perceptual identity leads to the element of time and history, two limiting factors, whereas in the other scene, dominated by emotions lacking sensory qualities does not allow for the distinction between past and present. They remain one and the same, concentrated on the self-centred awareness of a troubled child. By contrast, the taste of the madeleine opens the way in which the author,
as an adult, can look upon his childhood and the events surrounding with a sense of refining yet also with a sense of history. The evening scene leaves him perpetually the abandoned child experiencing the same emotion without considering it his own history which he has outgrown. The contrast between the two experiences, the one endowed with vivid sensations and the second one totally devoid of sensory specificity, illustrate the importance of sensations, perceptions and the real better than any theory could do. The taste of the madeleine connected to history of the narrator, and the question of whether this was real was eclipsed in the wonderful mingling of internal and external.

Because Freud introduced the issue of perceptual identity in the context of regressive phenomena such as dreams and hallucinations, there has been a relative neglect in the analytic literature of the role of the real, not only as it fulfills wishes, but as it impinges on the individual unbidden, as in trauma. The real that emerges from perception can lead to memories of the past; under optimum conditions it establishes a sense of history, and thereby limit unconscious omnipotence. It is through Proust’s genius that this “search for lost time” has illustrated this point better than psychoanalytic theorizing, and that we are able to appreciate the real, not as a hindrance to the inner world but as its complement.

References


CHAPTER SIX

Further explorations of Winnicott’s “use of an object”

Introduction

This chapter aims at re-examining one of Winnicott’s key concepts, the use of an object, a subject I explored in my article “Winnicotts Konzept der Objectverwendung” for the German journal Psyche (Oliner 2015). The article addresses Winnicott’s assertion that the usefulness of an object depends on its ability to survive destruction. This resilience – or its absence – and its consequences are of particular interest to me because I survived the destruction of the world into which I was born.

The importance of what, at first, appears to be a deceptively simple statement, namely that a destroyed object is useless, is rarely discussed in psychoanalytic circles. Nor is its complexity sufficiently acknowledged. Yet the problem of the object’s survival, as defined by Winnicott as its capacity to withstand aggression, requires further examination. Clinical practice indicates that patients who perceive their parents as fragile are often afraid to separate themselves from them and become independent. They fear that to do so would destroy them. This impasse has serious consequences for their maturation and can be the cause for their experiencing themselves as the “false accord in the divine symphony”.

My study will be extending Winnicott’s thinking on the usefulness of the object, framed solely in terms of the infant, to adult patients. (Indeed,
it is my contention that this was his implicit intention and that although he spoke only of early development, his theory does not need to be restricted to infants.) My point of view was supported by Jacques André who suggests that it was probable that

this model was based not on the observation of infants but on a construction stemming from deep transference-induced regressions in borderline patients. Winnicott’s theory constructs a nature for the lack of one.

(André 2013: 191)

This focus avoids the serious misunderstanding described by Francis Baudry (2009) on the occasion of Winnicott’s presentation of this paper here to the New York Psychoanalytic Society, when discussants steeped in ego psychology attempted to compare Winnicott’s theory of development with their own.

In applying Winnicott’s thinking to adults, I will also be looking at the ways in which the survival of the object is relevant to the psychoanalytic process itself, introducing two vignettes in which the fragility of the object and its psychic consequences for patients were central. Finally, I shall suggest that in working with patients for whom parental fragility remains of consequence, the analyst needs to maintain a narrow range between rigidity and permissiveness.

Explorations of Winnicott’s “use of an object”

To review, in “The use of an object” Winnicott (1971a) states that the usefulness of an object is predicated on the object’s ability to survive the destructiveness of the infant: thus the object’s dependability is a quality inherent in the object rather than a projection of the baby’s internal world. Winnicott’s emphasis on usefulness being predicated on the reality of an object in the external world opens a critical topic for psychoanalysts. It introduces a counterweight to the exploration of psychic reality, generally considered the main focus of psychoanalytic concern. Winnicott’s emphasis on external reality stresses the value of the gains inherent in the ability to accept the personal limits leading to dependence on a reliable world, sacrificing – at least in part – fantasies of omnipotence. For many individuals the advantages of the object world existing in external reality with its perceptible and tangible qualities are outweighed by the individual’s vulnerability to its loss or destruction. According to Winnicott, the reason patients emphasize psychic reality in analysis is
fueled by unconscious omnipotence: they opt defensively for being in control, and he attributes a similar preference to analysts. In his words: “psychoanalysis always likes to be able to eliminate all factors that are environmental, except in so far as the environment can be thought of in terms of projective mechanisms” (Winnicott 1971a: 88).

Psychoanalysts need to emphasize psychic reality, because the attention to unconscious processes is the distinguishing feature of our specialty. Consequently psychoanalytic theory does not consider sufficiently the external world and real qualities of parents or, when they do they appear, to focus on events rather than the interaction between events and those on whom they impact. The external quality that is central to Winnicott’s thinking is resilience.

The topic seemed particularly relevant to me because of the actual destruction of the world of my childhood and my subsequent isolating the memory of these events in order to be receptive to what in the external world survived. I lived through the experience of fragile, victimized parents who did not survive. They therefore were literally not available and could not be used for creating a new existence. Since then I have been sensitized to the topic introduced relatively casually by Winnicott when it concerns patients whose lives were more ordinary than mine but who nevertheless experienced their parents too fragile to be used for their own growth and individuation. This is an issue discussed in Chapter 1 in the specific context of parents who survived the Holocaust.

In “The use of an object”, Winnicott contrasts object relating with object use. It is to be noted that Winnicott introduces a new term, “object use”, to describe a new experience dependent on the object’s ability to maintain an attitude based on independent judgment. The contrary can be seen in the example of the mother of the patient, who cried when told that her son misbehaved. She was unable to maintain the attitude of a loving parent who can accept that her son deserved to be reprimanded without feeling reprimanded herself. This inability is the equivalent of her failure to survive as a parent. This survival is crucial to ushering into the world of the infant reliable limits to its omnipotence. It opens the way to a trustworthy and dependable outside world. This theoretical construction – based on a specific quality of the external world – is a pivotal contribution to the way to think of loss and mourning in the event that the object fails at this task.

Indeed, Winnicott’s insinuation that these issues address a developmental phase in maturation is unfortunate because they limit their application to infancy. Many adult patients are unable to benefit from
therapy because their life is determined by unconscious omnipotence. They treat limitations as narcissistic injuries and therefore avoid them.

The potential failure of parents to survive their children’s independence also manifests itself in the children’s inability to properly acknowledge their own capacity for self care. Instead they constantly attribute their own well being as well as their own creativity to instances external to themselves. Krystal (1978a) found this to be true of patients addicted to such external sources as alcohol or drugs. As Krystal points out, it is even true of placebos whose effect is caused by the belief in the power of imaginary medication as if it were necessary for their welfare. These outside supplies serve a parental function because of the addicts’ anxiety about the ability of their parents to survive their independence. These are individuals who deny the validity of their own creativity, which Krystal attributes to their failure to introject a function that is their own: “This behavior on the part of the patient represents the dealing with their fantasy of a deficiency, or defect, to be repaired by the incorporation of the object” (Krystal 1978a: 226). It appears as if a greater autonomy of the child would destroy the parents. From this point of view, introjection – in the sense of ownership – of one’s own functions is comparable to the destruction of the object described by Winnicott.

Sára Botella has expressed this idea more radically, saying: “The trace of its own existence is lost in the satisfying object” (“La trace de sa propre existence perdue dans l’object satisfaction”; Botella 2007: 32). Thus the example of a patient’s unconscious fantasy is revealed in a dream that depicts his belief that he must unite his parents by showing his father’s picture to his mother so that he can be born. The patient had a drinking problem and his life has been marred by his pursuit of idealized unobtainable goals.

**Usefulness, external reality, and aggression**

The most difficult aspect of this theory is the manner in which Winnicott introduces aggression as part of the process that attributes an external position to the object and in so doing contributes to its usefulness. This seems puzzling and, indeed, it requires further reflection because from his perspective assessing reality is not, at its origin, a simple process based on the sense organs: suggesting that seeing, touching and hearing the object when it is present and noticing its disappearance are the key factors in apprehending the external world. Instead, he describes the evolution this way:
It is no good saying that a baby of a few days old envies the breast. It is legitimate, however, to say that at whatever age a baby begins to allow the breast an external position (outside the area of projection), then this means that destruction of the breast has become a feature.

(Winnicott 1971a: 92)

The problem as I see it is that Winnicott describes the process of destruction solely in terms of infancy. To the contrary, I am convinced that it describes a process that pertains to dynamics active throughout life. In my view, the destruction of the breast describes the need to abolish the hallucinatory image of the breast in order to respond appropriately to the external one. This model, as I understand it, can be applied to all hallucinatory phenomena, such as dreaming, unconscious fantasies and belief systems that are based on subjective factors which Winnicott terms object relating as against object usage.

In later development, the schema of the “destruction of the breast” could be applied to situations in which a gratification stemming from an external object destroys the longing for an idealized version in psychic reality. The following clinical example appears to illustrate Winnicott’s theory. A patient started our session by asking me what we were going to talk about saying that things had not been going well. His vagueness seemed to imply that I would know what “we needed to talk about”. When I questioned this request, it eventually emerged that since very early that morning he had been preoccupied by the problem of the 170 cartons of books he had kept in storage for 12 years in another state. These were scholarly books that had belonged to his grandfather, his father, and his own earlier years, and were “all that I have”.

When I questioned this last statement he said that I did not understand him. Without the books he would die. A series of exchanges ensued that placed me in the position of being the person who failed to understand both the situation and him. Implicitly, therefore, I – like him – was neglecting and devaluing the books. All my attempts to come closer to understanding in what sense the books were all that he had were rejected emphatically. Apparently my asking questions was tantamount to destroying their meaning. (This was as far as we got when I wrote the article. Since then I found out that in there were among these books some whose sole ownership could be questioned. The article continued without this knowledge.)

For my patient the books appear to function as the breast described by Winnicott whose destruction is prevented by the infant’s refusal to view
it as an external object. In the following session he informed me that he had decided to stop analysis (adding that he would pay me for the following month). This pronouncement led me to understand that in taking this action my patient hoped to retain an idealized masculinity that was at risk through externalization.

Winnicott describes the *act of destruction* repeatedly in an attempt to clarify its import:

> it is the destruction of the object that places the object outside the area of the subject’s omnipotent control. In these ways the object develops its own autonomy and life, and (if it survives) contributes-in to the subject, according to its own properties.

(Winnicott 1971a: 90)

The patient who needs to keep to himself the issue of the books that are “all that he has” suggests that speaking about them is to “unpack” them and in so doing to unconsciously destroy them. I understand his inaction to be an expression of the imperative to keep the object inside, safe from decay, from aging, and from the analyst who made them visible for a short time. While the object appears to be idealized, considering its vital necessity, it must also be seen as phallic, given that the books belonged to his grandfather, his father and his own professional education. But the danger here is not mainly castration but total destruction.

Winnicott goes on to enlarge the notion of *destruction* to include changes in the object: “The word ‘destruction’ is needed not because of the baby’s impulse to destroy, but because of the object’s liability not to survive, which also means to suffer change in quality, in attitude” (Winnicott 1971a: 93). The change referred to here is even evident in the difficulty some patients have in accepting a change in their appointment time even if they themselves have requested it. For the patient described above, the change meant indebtedness in the sense of “mortgaged”. What is at issue seems to be any change at all. If, as Winnicott says, the object suffers change in quality or attitude, the subject can feel both affirmed and threatened, depending on the frequency of change and whether the changes are experienced as a threat to the object. It is possible that these patients fear they have damaged the object, which is now rendered useless by the power they hold over the analyst’s behavior (i.e. by threatening to leave if she mentions the books again). In the case described above, the uselessness also entailed damage to his own integrity, as I later found out that his right to them was a serious question in his mind.
The danger inherent in change being experienced as destruction is relevant for the psychoanalytic process. Patients who are able to influence the setting run the risk of feeling responsible for the setting “suffering change in quality, in attitude”. As a consequence they may experience the setting as undependable, dangerous and accusatory, reinforcing unconscious omnipotence. Psychoanalysts have to be made aware of the limits of the usefulness of the analyst’s very personal reactions to the patient especially since psychoanalysis has come a long way from advocating total impassivity. The question is how much analysts may show their response to the patient’s state of mind before their resilience comes into question? This can become a serious issue for patients who experienced their parents as brittle either because they withdrew from their children or because they complied with demands rather than confronting what they considered to be an attack. For these patients any change in the analyst is experienced as destructive. The regression of these individuals to omnipotence causes them to inhibit whatever real impact they themselves could have in the analytic setting. These patients may prefer to be in situations in which they feel powerless and innocent. This in turn could cause them to choose “objects” whose impenetrability can border on cruelty.

Another aspect of the experience of loss and destruction is that of parents who themselves are impenetrable and defensively unable to convey to their children that their actions mattered. In one case, a mother removed from the living room wall a picture to which the patient had always objected, but only after he had left for college. In a similar case, a patient who had already left home was told by her mother that she had built a new bathroom for her. Both patients believed that their parents failed to acknowledge that they had left home and that their parents could not tolerate their separateness. An analyst who appears too detached may play into a patient’s childhood experience which therefore cannot be analysed. The denial of separateness may silently be repeated with the analyst.

With the emphasis on the meaning of the object’s survival of destruction, Winnicott introduces a crucial addition to our understanding of the external aspects of the “object”. According to the ego psychologists who coined object representation for the nature of the object that Winnicott considers a product of the subject’s projections, Winnicott describes the creation of the real object that deserves a distinctive name. Surviving destruction – and I am not going to differentiate here between the baby’s act of destruction as posited by Winnicott and ordinary destruction through death or abandonment – limits the subject’s omnipotence. It gives a central place to the object’s quality of being external and introduces the benefits
derived from the *limits to infantile omnipotence*. This developmental step is jeopardized by the experience with an object who, according to the subject, failed to survive. This failure does not have to be caused by death or actual loss but can be due to the object’s withdrawal, weakness in the face of aggression, and similar responses that fail to distinguish between an attack and its results. For the subject the object that is experienced as unable to survive attack leads to a return to omnipotence since the object has proved to be undependable.

In his 1960 article on “The theory of the parent–infant relationship” Winnicott is emphatic in linking omnipotence with trauma:

> In his 1960 article on “The theory of the parent–infant relationship” Winnicott is emphatic in linking omnipotence with trauma:

> In psychoanalysis as we know it there is no trauma that is outside the individual’s omnipotence. The patient is not helped if the analyst says: “Your mother was not good enough... your father really seduced you... your aunt dropped you.” Changes come in an analysis when the traumatic factors enter the psycho-analytic material in the patient’s own way and within the patient’s omnipotence.

> (Winnicott 1960: 586)

Thus, in the context of trauma, Winnicott extends the issue of the object’s failure to survive destruction and change discussed in “The use of an object”. He stresses the return to omnipotence in the face of the object’s failure to survive thus strongly implying, without being explicit, that omnipotence interferes both with the capacity to tolerate frustration and with the search for objects to use.

Indeed, in “Creativity and its origins” Winnicott examined omnipotence and its consequence: “Frustration belongs to satisfaction-seeking. To the experience of being belongs something else, not frustration but *maiming*” (Winnicott 1971b: 81). This cryptic formula addresses the reaction of victims of aggression or humiliation feeling diminished (i.e. maimed by what they had to endure). Similarly: “Environmental influence, bad and even good, comes into our work as a traumatic idea, intolerable because not operating within the area of the patient’s omnipotence” (ibid.: 77).

My emphasis here on expanding the issue of omnipotence beyond infancy is justified in the same way that survivor guilt has been accepted as a reaction to loss, regardless of the cause of death or loss. Hence guilt is caused by unconscious omnipotence, not as a developmental phase, but as a dynamic part of unconscious fantasy throughout life. In my book *Psychic Reality in Context* (Oliner 2012: 19), I examined the issue of omnipotence in the face of loss as it applies to the treatment of individuals who have
suffered trauma. Patients often present us with difficulties not because of what they have suffered but because unconsciously they have given themselves solutions that act as defences against further trauma. Henry Krystal calls it “trauma prevention” (Krystal 1978b). Ironically such defences result in so called “victims” being misunderstood because of their unconscious omnipotence.

It remains to emphasize that Winnicott established a contrast between the use of an object and object relating. Whereas the use of an object depends on the ability to find gratification and pleasure from an object experienced as being external to the subject and possessing its own qualities, object relating addresses object representations, to borrow a term from ego psychology. Object representations are imbued with the subject’s projections and, in my opinion, should not be confused with objects that have their own autonomy and life, and can contribute to the subject, according to their own properties. This distinction if made consistently would eliminate transitional concepts like self-objects, introjects, and other ways of designating objects that are far from being objective.

According to Winnicott, the transition from object relating to object use requires destruction. Applying the notion of destruction to the analytic process suggests that it must survive the analysands’ attempt to destroy it. Because of the centrality of transference, the analyst does not conform to the object that is known by its own qualities. It is the effort by analysts to remain true to the process that eventually becomes the crucial quality that makes them useful. Thus it is possible to say that the survival of the process of analysis is most assured when the frame is maintained.

With the adoption of greater flexibility in the analytic process, patients may experience the analyst as too fragile to withstand their individuality (experienced as an act of aggression). Psychoanalysts must constantly weigh the disadvantages of rigidity against the shortcomings of the kind of flexibility that risks giving the patient more power than is good for a sense of trust in the survival and usefulness of the setting.

Frequently, if not always, the frame also has to be the subject of analysis because it lends itself to silent enactments. This was true of the patient who hid his books. His fervor to be beyond reproach by maintaining the time and the payment revealed his attempt to erase all differences between us so that we would be like two soldiers fighting for a worthy cause.

The frame is most vulnerable because it concerns actions more than words. It is my hope that those psychoanalysts who are critical of the Freudian tradition keep the roadblocks caused by silent enactments in
mind when they regard the tradition solely as a manifestation of rigidity and authoritarianism. I am convinced that the destruction of the psychoanalytic process by patients is difficult to avoid. But more importantly, as long as analysts respect themselves as the guardian of the frame and help the patient to acknowledge and to examine closely the nature of the destruction it can be the most useful part of the treatment. This is the theme of the last chapter of this book.

References


In my study of Winnicott’s paper on “The use of an object” (Chapter 6), I stressed the advantages he introduced by differentiating between object relating and object use. By contrasting object relating with object use Winnicott introduces a new term for a new experience based on the specific quality of the object’s ability to maintain an independent attitude. This perspective describes the crucial part played by the object’s surviving destruction and thereby ushering into the world of the infant reliable limits to its omnipotence and opening the way for a trustworthy and dependable outside world. I believe this construction, based on a specific quality of the external world, is a pivotal contribution to the way to think of loss and mourning in case the object cannot fulfil the function of dependability. In the previous study, I tried to clarify Winnicott’s emphasis on the need for the object to survive the destruction by the subject, and while this part of the theory took us into some of the ambiguities of his thinking, the present study will address the nature of the external object that is experienced outside the individual’s omnipotence. As I indicated, it is an issue in need of further elaboration.

Winnicott’s article, whose major contribution consists of its emphasis on the need for the parent/analyst to remain “indestructible”, expands the notion of “destruction” as follows: “The word ‘destruction’ is needed... because of the object’s liability not to survive, which also
means to suffer change in quality, in attitude” (Winnicott 1971: 93). When this point of view is applied to the psychoanalytic process, it addresses the risk inherent in analysts’ changing as a result of the patients’ own wishes, demands, or needs which can be experienced by certain patients, predominantly narcissistic individuals, as gratifying their unconscious need for omnipotent control.

Thus a patient who needed a telephone session told me later as a result of my inquiring about his need to diminish himself, that the phone session meant that I was “losing ground”, clearly arousing his anxiety counteracted by his making himself smaller. An analyst who can resist the urge to change are better able to provide for the patient a more reliable and dependable object in external reality, who mirrors a lawful world provided that the resistance to change takes place in an atmosphere of warm acceptance as against the coldness attributed to analysts who maintain their independence. In Winnicott’s words, the patient can use the analyst because the analyst can withstand the impulses aroused by the analytic process. The survival of the analysis makes the process possible: “This interpreting by the analyst, if it is to have effect, must be related to the patient’s ability to place the analyst outside the area of subjective phenomena” (Winnicott 1971: 87).

However, Winnicott’s emphasis on the survival of the patient’s aggression which places “the analyst outside the area of subjective phenomena” is not without risk: it can overestimate survival. Autobiographical conflicts undoubtedly led to Winnicott’s emphasis on survival and therefore account for his interest in the subject. My own history of surviving genocide presented as “Excuse me for being born: The fate of a German Jew during World War II” (Oliner 2012: xxxi–xlix), and the emphasis placed on the maintenance of the frame during my training inclined me to be less critical than I should have been toward the notion of placing the analyst outside the area of subjective phenomena for the sake of the process. It implies that the transference, certainly a subjective phenomenon, was made irrelevant, or worse than this, an obstacle instead of leading to the experience of the analyst as an external object who interprets the meanings attributed to the work. Thus this constant interplay in the psychoanalytic process between the subjective world and the external object precludes a neat formulation.

The multiplicity of views is illustrated by Bertram Lewin’s comments. He describes the analyst’s role as “The analyst continuously operates either to wake the patient somewhat or to put him to sleep a little” (Lewin 1955: 193). Furthermore, in the sense of transference figure, the analyst is to be paired with what seemed in dream interpretation a very minor piece
of material: he is the opposite number of indifferent precipitates or day residues to which unconscious ideas lend their cathexis. As interpreter, he stands for another minor element – a current external stimulus, which may threaten to arouse the dreamer (Lewin 1955: 197).

Winnicott likewise portrayed a more complicated situation when he stated that the treatment of traumatized patients has to begin within their own omnipotence, suggesting strongly that a process ushering in change can occur even in circumstances entirely dominated by the patient’s subjectivity and the patient’s need for control. As I noted in Chapter 6, Winnicott remarked that “Changes come in an analysis when the traumatic factors enter the psycho-analytic material in the patient’s own way and within the patient’s omnipotence” (Winnicott 1960: 586). The process described here takes place within the area of subjective phenomena until “the traumatic factors enter into the psycho-analytic material”, and, despite the restrictions on the analyst’s power, there is according to Winnicott a process within the patient’s omnipotence. It suggests to me that in these cases the only use the patient can make of analysis resides in the unchallenged maintenance of the frame. I believe that this clarifies what otherwise is a tacit assumption that it is the analyst who needs to be outside the area of subjective phenomena. Instead it seems preferable to think that it is the maintenance of the frame that supports the process and leaves open the usefulness even if the analyst is experienced within the area of subjective phenomena.

But since Winnicott suggests that the experience of trauma creates conditions in analysis that require special consideration, the specific aspects of the experience come into play. Trauma is defined as an event or a condition in the world whose impact is that of abandonment or lack of protection by a parental agency, God or fate. Trauma precludes a dependable environment. This is precisely the condition in which individuals inhibit self assertion seen as destructive to the individual’s relationship to the outside world (see Oliner 2012 for more details).

Traumatized patients therefore need omnipotent control of the process aimed at hiding the belief in their own destructiveness. This was expressed cogently by a man who wrote that he felt like a fraud because he spent the earliest years of his life in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp. He asks himself: what does it mean to consider yourself to be a witness to “an event which by your very own survival, you negate . . . It is to experience the utter de-legitimization of one’s childhood” and calls himself a self-invalidating witness who does not own his past, experiencing himself “as an utter fraud” (Polak 2015). My own reaction to having survived this genocide was expressed in the title of a presentation mentioned above:
“Excuse me for being born” (Oliner 2007). The picture is that of individuals who are not actors in the fate that befell them. It is therefore tempting to treat them as victims unless it is clear that analysis itself presents them with an analysable conflict: they want to live better but unconsciously they are convinced that this desire is destructive to the parental agency that abandoned them.

Polak, the man who survived Bergen Belsen and who subsequently became a Rabbi wrote about this paradox of the Jews who survived genocide and praised God:

These Jews sang – If You had taken care of us in the wilderness, Almighty God, and not provided us with manna – Dayenu that would have been enough!

They sang Dayenu that year – these Jews who had their children snatched from their hands in Westerbork and tossed onto the train to Sobibor, these self-same Jews . . . sang “If you had given us manna, Almighty God, and not given us the Holy Sabbath, Dayenu, that would have been enough.”

(Polak 2015: 111)

The Jews are grateful because all is not lost and the parental agency, God, who abandoned them cruelly, is being credited for what they have left. This emphasis on refinding in external reality a lost parental protection is an important dynamic, easily overlooked, but taken up by Krystal (1978), who attributes to the overestimation of the external world and its supplies the modus vivendi of children of fragile parents.

These parents, just like the God of the believers, who because of their own fragility or the extent of the anger aimed their neglect or abuse, require confirmation of their role as good parents. The combination of these factors leads to a paradox described by Krystal in “Self representation and the capacity for self care” (Krystal 1978). He observed that the distrust in their own powers leads them to the overestimation of the external world for the solution to their problems. Thus those who were thrown on their own resources prematurely, hence the omnipotence, end up superficially dependent. Krystal’s study addresses the lack of self care coupled with addictions and drug dependence which he compares to placebos that deflect from their essentially self-denying attitude. Unconsciously they are convinced that using their own independent resources for their own maturation would endanger their parents. The fragility of the parents made true dependency impossible and was therefore replaced by the dependency on supplies from external reality.
In Krystal’s words:

the failure to own up to one’s death wishes towards the love object: the fear of loss of love, and the fear of destroying the object. “Walling off” the object representation as being “external” and “real” provided a protection for it. Attributing all the “goodness” to this “external object” was a bargain in which dependency and helplessness were accepted as preferable to destruction. (Krystal 1978: 235)

Krystal expresses his difference from theorists like MacDougall, who think that the chemical substance takes the place of a missing internal dimension. Krystal illustrates with many examples that these internal functions exist, and therefore are in accord with Loewald’s view of the development through which the attempt to be the object, the impetus to fuse with others, remains present through life, and is the basis for internalization which in turn enlarges the ego (Loewald 1980).

As Krystal sees it, it enables the individual to exercise functions that are otherwise blocked off by a fantasy and places the object as the agent of the function. He describes individuals who suffer from substance abuse as being unable to anticipate pleasure. Instead they anticipate disappointment and “long to regain the lost function through introjection of a real substance”. They cannot allow themselves to be the agent of their own actions: Krystal calls this a failure in introjection, a relatively rare usage for the ownership of one’s thoughts and actions.

Returning now to the previous discussion which assumed that the frame in analysis is that area that conforms to Winnicott’s notion of the safe limit of the patient’s subjectivity, it is instructive to examine how this non-ego (Bleger) realm affects those patients suffering from the inability to own their inner faculties.

In the context of the discussion concerning the use of the frame in treatment, I shall concentrate on how the fear of their own destructiveness and the need for a parental agency manifests itself in their attitude toward the frame. This is indeed complex, and hopefully it will be clarified by the clinical material I shall offer.

The role of the frame in psychoanalytic treatment

As a result of my formal training, as well as seminars with Jacob Arlow, respect for the frame came naturally to me. It has been equally clear that
discussions relating to the frame are generally avoided until they demand our attention. Subsequently the specific issues become part of the process. The distinction between process and frame broadly lies in the transferential aspects of the relationship that are repeated, mostly verbally, in the process, whereas the frame involves actions by patient and analyst.

Those patients whose omnipotence must evolve in the course of treatment are sometimes unable to sustain the process. Either this difficulty causes them to stop treatment, which is the most serious break in the frame as exemplified by patient Mr A, or it impacts episodically on the containing quality of the frame, as was the case with Mr B.

Mr A broke off the contact with me precipitously as a result of the fulfilment of his wish: he was a very handsome young man who lived far from his country of origin. He had also changed his identity and socialized in circles that were compatible with his stated aim: to marry an heiress. The woman with whom he had a serious involvement fitted this description. In the session during which he spoke about his current financial problems because of his low salary, I pointed out to him that this would change with his marriage. His reaction was unexpected: he said that this would be terrible, and he broke off the relationship, and also the treatment. He needed to break the frame which involved me, in order to re-establish the boundaries between reality and fantasy which had been endangered by the fulfilment of a wish he considered too destructive (most likely the destruction of his parents). The patient’s inability to use the frame for containment is compatible with José Bleger’s assumption that it involves the psychotic part of the personality.

During an ongoing treatment discussions concerning the frame are dealt with as reality issues until they demand more attention and become part of the process. These assumptions are examined in a 1967 article on the frame by the Argentinian analyst José Bleger. He explains:

The problem I want to look into concerns these analyses in which the frame is not a problem – precisely to show that it is a problem – a problem, however, which has not been defined or hitherto recognized.

(Bleger 1967: 511)

It is a non-ego. It is present without being perceived:

It is separated from the ego that shapes the neurotic transference. What is most primitive, non-differentiated repeats itself in the frame. This denomination of the non-ego makes us think as something non-existent, but which actually exists to the extent that it is the “meta-ego” on which the very possibility of formation and maintenance of the ego depends.

(Bleger 1967: 514)
Any interpretation of the frame stirs the psychotic part of the patient, and there should come a time when the frame can be transformed into a process:

_The frame can only be analyzed within the frame_ or, in other words, the patient’s most primitive dependence and psychological organization can only be analyzed within the analyst’s frame, which should be neither ambiguous, nor changeable, nor altered.

(Bleger 1967: 518)

I believe that Bleger’s thinking provides a good answer to the ambiguity in Winnicott’s formulations: the frame provides the “non-ego” element of the treatment. It is not transferential in the usual sense of the term, it is neither subject nor object, but in a primitive way it is both. The more challenged the personality organization, the more its meaning is evident and enunciated, but its maintenance absolutely essential, involving issues of survival. In the clinical discussion, it seemed clear that I needed to call the patients’ attention to their fear of destroying me. This fear along with their need to attribute to the frame a non-ego parental function also meant that they tend to feel less threatened by alterations the analyst may introduce into the frame than if they were initiating changes. My changing the frame testifies to my being intact.

In my experience alterations in the frame have to be brought into the process but their relationship to the issue of survival tends not to be analysable until late in the treatment.

Mr B (the patient who had the problem with the books discussed in Chapter 6) made me aware that even verbal communications must at all times be understood with regard to their potential status as action. Being a good patient may be the only action the patient could allow because of the terror aroused by genuine change. This attitude toward our relationship persisted to the very end. The survival of the frame was all the man was looking for because he was unable to examine the price he was willing to pay to achieve this goal. He geared his speech to serve that end so that the content had a rhythm like a religious observance that did not endanger the frame. He, who considered change destructive, had very little conflict about insulting me because expressing anger is part of analysis thus not endangering his status of a dutiful patient, and after some consternation about what he had just said, easily disowned its meaning. “I can’t believe I said this” meant that he did not believe it. He went through great lengths to be “on the same page as I” as it applied to payments, regularity of appointments even long distance, and other transactions which occur in a long analysis. His cancellations were met the “appropriate” concern
but the excessive anxiety they generated was of no interest to him. He became overwhelmed by panic, as if one or both of us were going to die when he decided to move to another part of the country and the treatment was going to stop. What was said in the years of treatment was actually relatively meaningless to him, and his suspicion of me irrelevant, because the intact frame was evidence of his submission and fusion with me. In that case survival is assured because of the disqualification of the words, as is the lack of progress through change.

He had maintained the conviction that his mother was dependent on him for her survival even though he forged a brilliant career for himself far away from his family. This grandiose fantasy which he truly questioned only during the termination phase of the treatment had a psychotic quality which was manifest in the treatment only fleetingly and ignored as soon as he regained his equilibrium. Elsewhere (Oliner 2012: 54–57), I have described in detail Mr B’s reaction to his own act of defiance, his refusal to hang up his coat after I questioned the meaning of his making himself uncomfortable by bunching up his coat at the end of the couch. His defiance of “my telling him what to do with his coat” led to a dream of my destruction which was so real to him that he needed to wait until the next session to assure himself that the building was still intact. Another manifestation of serious confusion occurred when he acted on his dismissive belief expressed as “what does Dr Oliner know, I know better”, which required my intervention that broke the frame. This took place when he went along with a relative who wanted to “die at home” and therefore refused a recommended hospitalization. After I confronted him about his actions he initiated the hospitalization and the necessary treatment prevented death. Following these events he thought I prevented him from becoming a murderer. However, it also caused him to be afraid of me, to the point that he had to run out of the consulting room after getting off the couch. He equated my intervention with a seduction, and for a while he could not trust the boundaries between us.

During the years of the treatment of this patient I had to question myself and others about the validity of our contact. Slowly I understood that the repetitiveness and the lack of genuine curiosity about himself served a vital function that was essential in a way that I eventually grew to understand as the control he needed over the maintenance of the frame of this analysis. His actions illustrate the point “made by Edith Jacobson (1967) concerning the importance of another person in the life of psychotic patients. According to her there can be introjective and projective mechanism acting as a defence that do not abolish the boundaries between subject and object. The loss of that tie, despite its fusional aspects seriously challenges their functioning.
It represents that which Bleger called the non-ego rather than an external object in the way we tend to think. In his case the termination caused by the move was voluntary and did represent a need to sever his tie without having to acknowledge the intent. The consequence was the preoccupation with death which became part of the process and was analysable in terms of his dread of his destructiveness.

Another patient came into treatment with the conviction that he needed alcohol, drugs, or models to follow because he was convinced that everything coming from him “needed fixing”. The fact that he thought Donald Trump had a chance to win the presidential election when no one else appeared to believe it made a case for the destructiveness of his negative thoughts, as if they brought about an outcome we all feared but did not believe was possible. He was convinced that he was deficient and needed either medication for what he lacked or punishment for his negative attitude. This made me very cautious in what I said especially since he also stressed that if he did well I would get the benefit. I once threw caution to the wind and offered him an additional session when he was very dejected. He accepted and had a very productive day after he left my office; however he argued that the improvement could have had many causes. Nevertheless, he agreed to increase the number of sessions per week. Gradually, his point of view changed enough to allow his professional life to flourish, although he devalues it. A dream revealed that he wanted to be better than his father but could not allow it. His deep-seated problems (related to the mother) came to the surface in connection with his action impacting the frame: He decided to cancel a session before the weekend two weeks in a row because he had fallen behind in his work. He reacted to his cancellations by spending the weekend in bed, waiting for Monday when I would explain his behaviour. He literally put his life on hold to make up for the imagined damage to the frame. Somehow my relating his actions to the first memory of his mother he brought into the treatment served the purpose of bringing him back to functioning. This memory was of the times his mother took naps in the middle of the day. He was afraid to disturb her and harm her but also felt worried and abandoned while she slept. The mother compensated for her repeated abandonment or neglect by constantly offering unsolicited advice, medications, invitations and gifts. His rejecting them was taken by both mother and son as being ungrateful, which was repeated when he rejected the fact that the additional session was beneficial. His father’s fragility was known and the family myth was that marrying his mother rescued him. His fear that he could cause harm to both parents has led to his conviction that his inner resources could not be trusted because he needed his parents.
He had a very revealing dream concerning these conflicts as they applied to the frame: He dreamed that he was about to leave his session with me when he remembered that he had a dream he forgot to tell me. I said that he should tell me the dream and he sat down and suddenly he grew a very large tooth which began to bleed profusely. It was very frightening. I suggested to him that in the dream I broke the frame by extending the session and this put his life in danger. The dream demonstrated his fear of closeness because he was not entitled to his own life. He seemed to believe that he could seduce his mother which would endanger his father’s position in the family.

Another patient objected from the beginning to the schedule of three sessions a week. But he made remarkable progress through our work and rarely voiced the objection to the schedule. At the beginning he needed my help to think through many minor decisions and to weigh the implications of each choice. After one of these sessions during which we discussed an upcoming trip, he left saying “now I shall go home, put on a wig and make my decision” hinting at the strong fusional aspect of his relationship to me. When he had progressed further in his life, he requested one phone session that would give him a longer weekend in the country and I consented to try it. This led to his feeling that he gained territory on me. The war like vocabulary he used was the same as his description of his leaving the country in which his family lives: he cleared the field, thus signaling my defeat in the war for three sessions a week and a breach in the frame.

The fragility of his parents, for which we had many examples, came poignantly to the fore in his reaction to Trump’s election. He was riding his bicycle and thought that if he fell and broke his leg the results of the election would be undone. This strange thought reminded me that he broke his leg and was hospitalized at age three when the family was otherwise traumatized: a move from his native country and the accidental death of a close relative. He talked about being in the hospital alone, but the sense of his thought came to him only on the way out of the consulting room: His parents, especially his father who failed to support the family financially, reacted strongly when they saw him in an inferior hospital and moved him at night to a better one. This was the only memory of his father’s rescuing him. Then he had resourceful parents, especially his father who was proud of rescuing his son.

The destruction of the “object”

The belief of these patients that their actions caused severe damage to the frame and threatened to damage, diminish or destroy me illustrates
concerns that extend beyond the survival of the object. Survival is indeed the issue but it is not the survival of the “subjective object” of transference that is feared. Rather, as Winnicott suggested, it is an entity that is placed into an other realm. Bleger’s notion of the non-ego appears to be endangered. The fact that changes initiated by the analyst evoke fewer reactions than their own actions convinces me that it is their need for parental power that prevented those changes to be less of a threat to survival than those initiated by their own actions. However, those changes that were experienced as my boundary violations had serious consequences for Mr B. and was the subject of a dream in which Mr B’s life was threatened. The intense anxiety caused by their own actions threatening the survival of one of us was manifested by all. Mr B’s plan to leave the analysis meant dying. In his mind, he was the one who would not survive, but the intensity of the anxiety suggests strongly that he was relating to a more primitive conviction of both us dying. This conviction is supported by his strong belief in my total dependence on his payment. The third patient’s cancelations before the weekend because of work which needed to be finished meant that he had to put his life on hold until his Monday session repeating his childhood experience of waiting for his mother to wake up from her daily nap when his life could begin, and the fourth patient was able to reveal the meaning attributed to the phone session: that of conquered territory during a war. It is clear that the belief in their omnipotent destructiveness which must be inhibited dominated their lives and prevented them to find fulfilment from their activities.

The complexity of the dynamics described above resides in the belief of these patients in their own omnipotence combined with an equally powerful conviction that their separateness from the parents will destroy them. Thus introducing another vulnerability of the parents: their need to be affirmed by their children’s dependency. The combination of these two strivings leads to an overvaluation of the external world and a profound reluctance to trust their own impulses. Those individuals who conform to the scheme described above are marked by a history of self-defeat or self-denial. In those cases in which the parents suffered from a historic trauma, the patients’ symptoms tend to be understood as the transmission of trauma through identification with the victimization of the parents. I believe that this formulation involves external events as a cause for their difficulties, thus exonerating the patient as well as the parents and is therefore not attentive enough to the patients’ inner conflict around aggression and self assertion. Unfortunately this type of exoneration through diagnosis has great appeal to all concerned.

I believe that the conclusion we can draw from this discussion is not absolute inflexibility nor its opposite, but rather that changes, especially if
they are in response to a patient’s request or a need, can make them anxious, fearing weakness in the analyst because their own wishes or needs prevailed meaning that the *frame* was not solid enough to contain them. In such a breach the effort by the patient is to re-establish the analyst’s *frame* so that the analyst can be ignored or destroyed. According to Bleger the alliance is made with the psychotic part of the frame. These complexities do not negate the importance of the stability of the frame, apart from the transference relationship to the analyst, instead they underline the importance of examining the meaning attributed to alterations when they occur. The *frame* as it appears here belongs neither to the subject nor the object and therefore is outside the dyad until it becomes part of the process at the end of the treatment.

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