Melanie Klein’s Discovery of Reparation
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The first in a series of three papers presented during the seminar ‘Facing the Pain of Crimes and their Reparation’ at the 48th International Psychoanalytical Association congress, Prague, 2013. See also paper 2, Waiting for a Concept by Edna O’Shaughnessy and paper 3, Primitive Reparation and the Repetition Compulsion in the Analysis of a Borderline Patient, by Heinz Weiss.

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In 1921 Klein started to see child patients in Berlin – following Abraham’s invitation to join the newly opened Berlin Policlinic for which colleagues were needed. Klein approached the children with the analytic theory of the early 1920s and a technique developed for adults, i.e. she offered her young patients the couch, asked them for associations etc. and interpreted the different manifestations of their oedipal conflicts. But the intense anxieties and impulses she met with - some of them right from the beginning, often endangering the planned analysis – made an urgent challenge both to try to understand what was going on and also to find a new analytic method, a play technique suitable for children.

In today’s presentation, I would like to show how the concept of reparation, which later became a key part of Klein’s Depressive Position concept, had its origins in the colloquial German terms of reparation and restitution [Wiedergutmachung und Wiederherstellung], used synonymously to describe the intense impulses to repair the damage to their objects that Klein discovered in her small child patients.

Klein dealt with ‘broken’ [kaput] and ‘good again’ [wieder gut] in the analyses of her young polyclinic patients as early as 1921. The nine-year-old Grete, for instance, mentions that Irmi’s ball is broken, but hers does not have much strength either. That is why she does not touch it for 24 hours after it has been refilled with air so it will be ‘all right again’ [wieder gut]. On the basis of work already done and in the context of the subsequent material of the session, Klein’s interpretation, ‘genitals damaged by masturbation’, is accepted by Grete. Evidently Grete wants it to be ‘all right again’ [wieder gut]. It is through Grete’s analysis that Klein learned that the girl is not only driven by penis envy, but also preoccupied with the state of her own genitals. In this example, Grete looks for measures to make it ‘all right again’. Klein does not go into more detail here, so we cannot know whether, at that early stage, she had already seen what we know she saw a little later – namely that ‘touching’ the ball might mean attacking/destroying the mother’s breast by masturbatory phantasies and then fearing the mother’s revenge.

About two years later the analysis of Klein’s youngest patient, the melancholic 2¾-year-old Rita, who suffered from anxiety states and compulsive symptoms, was a particular challenge for Melanie Klein. Let us have a look at
one of her sessions to get an impression of how turbulent things were. Here is a vignette from April 1923.

Rita asks what is inside there, pointing first to doll then to herself (stomach area). Klein interprets: ‘curiosity mother orientation’. Rita throws large bricks on the floor and says she wants to break the floor. She also throws a chair around and sits astride it: “now I am breaking Mummy.” She is ‘very wild’. She fetches a long chain, puts it on, then hits the floor with the chain – and says she is breaking the floor and chain. She hits the doll with the chain and throws the doll away. Klein interprets: ‘activity and sadistic coitus’. The next day Rita is ‘not friendly’ as Klein arrives, does not want to give her hand and does not want to go with Klein.

In this sequence we see how Rita feels driven ‘to break Mummy’, in a way to break the floor, the foundation of her life. Rita wants to know about the content of her and her object’s belly/insides, she gets excited about it and acts out her sadistic phantasies. The next day she fears the contact with her analyst – her object might take revenge for the damage she has inflicted.

In the following weeks the sessions are dominated by Rita’s wish to change her clothes because they are dirty. She is preoccupied with clothes, stockings, hat and shoes, takes them off, puts them on and wants to be put into a ‘complete change of clothes’. For example on 23 June: Initially Rita says that she will not change clothes because her aunt would be angry. But then she does change clothes again and also her doll’s clothes. And eventually she wants to cut up everything: her stockings, Klein’s jacket, the doll’s dress etc. She cannot bear it when she thinks her stockings or Melanie Klein’s dress are ‘crumpled’. She cries and says it is Klein’s fault.

How does Klein conceptualise this material? I believe she did so for the first time in an unpublished manuscript of 1927, the third lecture of a course given in London. In this lecture she dealt with the sexual development of girls, which she set out in detail before discussing Rita’s analysis. ‘In Rita’s analysis, when her dread of her mother […] had been aroused, there ensued a marked compulsion to keep on changing her clothes. She first did this to her doll, which she washed and whose clothes she changed in a manner characteristic of obsessional neurosis. Next, she proceeded to furnish her own person. […] Next came the compulsion to change her own clothes. She changed everything, even her shoes, beginning with her under-clothes. She then looked at herself more or less satisfied, only to declare very soon that she must change her clothes again. When this phase was at its height, the whole hour was taken up in this way’. Behind this compulsion was the dread of having been injured physically and the desire to be renewed and restored.”

When later we hear from Heinz Weiß, whose patient has a great need to be restored, we may be reminded of Rita whose preoccupation with changing her underwear and clothes constituted an attempt at reparation, in particular a reparation of the self felt to be damaged in the course of attacks on the object, a primitive attempt that is bound to fail. As Heinz Weiß will show with his patient this kind of concrete repair continues to cause damage (and Rita
knows something about this, when she says her aunt will be angry) and thus feeds the repetition compulsion.

It was in Erna’s analysis, which Klein started a few months after the end of Rita’s treatment in January 1924, that she was able to examine in more detail the struggle between sadistic phantasies, anxiety, guilt and reparation. Six-year-old Erna suffered from an obsessive-compulsive disorder – her behaviour at home was ‘unbearable’, she displayed ‘marked asocial tendencies in all her relations’, ‘suffered from great sleeplessness, excessive obsessional onanism, complete inhibition in learning, moods of deep depression, obsessive brooding, and a number of other serious symptoms’. Klein notes how aggressively and contempuously Erna often behaved in the first few sessions.

We have an impressive series of drawings which show Erna’s response to intolerable pain following her ‘asocial behaviour’ – she retreats from her knowledge as is vividly demonstrated in this drawing (Fig 1). ‘She sits in her room to avoid knowing anything about the murder’ was Erna’s comment on the figure she drew in the right hand corner of the sheet of paper dominated by the charming girl and her weedy bridegroom. The old hag, who had already been marginalised in the previous picture (Fig 2) is now completely removed. Erna cannot face the pain of her crime: she constructs a hiding place, a retreat – ‘to avoid knowing anything about the murder’.

Initially what catches our eye (Fig 1) is Erna’s picture of her oedipal phantasies as the ‘charming lady’ with the ‘groom/father’ who make a couple. The knowledge and the misdeed are also in the drawing: in the form of ‘not wanting to know’ – the little girl has to protect herself from its accusing
persecutory presence. Is it too fanciful to think of a dungeon into which she banned herself because of her bad deed by placing a retreat/hiding in the ‘lowest corner’? On another sheet (Fig 3) the bridegroom is blamed for the murder. You can read at the bottom ‘the bridegroom of the charming girl kills the old hag’. At the top it says ‘makes such big eyes to frighten her’. According to Erna, the horizontal line below the middle is a sabre. The representation of our charming girl in Fig 1 shows her as having it under her control as a huge appendage of herself. This reveals she is the one who both swings the sabre and looks ‘daggers’ at her mother.

Drawings from earlier sessions give us a glimpse of how Erna operates in this regard (Fig 4). She tries to present herself as good girl ‘with working apron’, though the crown already indicates other ambitions. And indeed, in the background she appears as a girl with a fat belly, having usurped the pregnant mother’s place and put mother on the sledge to go ‘Schlitten fahren’, meaning to belittle her. On the following sheet (Fig 2), she appropriated mother’s ‘willy’/penis and left mother with a small ‘children’s willy’. So it is not ‘just’ murder but everything that Klein has described as pre-oedipal impulses and phantasies, e.g. to possess the maternal body and its content, to rob and destroy her, out of envy and hatred.

Fig 3

Fig 4
The series of drawings (of which I have omitted a few) ends with ‘the bride in the grave’ (Fig 5). Erna’s initial refuge no longer protects her; only a grave is able to fulfill the promise of not feeling and so being at ease. Klein noted in her process records that Erna repeatedly ‘says she really wants to die’, and that ‘she actually is dead when she lies on the couch’. As Klein also notes, Erna tried to counteract all this by ‘excessive friendliness’ – Erna brought her flowers.

A year and a half later, Erna had got more in touch with her inner reality. The notes on her drawings now allow us to follow how the activity of drawing was used in the service of reparation. We see the to and fro – how reparation can be reversed and a moment later become an attack once again, which makes her feel ugly and dead. We can follow this in the drawings of 5 November 1925.

Here is the first picture (Fig 6). Klein commented that Erna drew a queen who had short hair. This was quickly followed by none at all, and eventually it was just a wig. Erna then drew flowers with special care but then covered them in red saying it was prettier. She drew lines over the face, damaging the drawing. The careful composition of the flower/genital could be seen as an attempt at reparation, which is interfered with and destroyed.
Let us now turn to the further three drawings of that session. In the second picture (Fig 7) a red face is suggested, surrounded by yellow hair which reaches down to the floor and the outline of a red bow. The whole thing is more of a scribble than a worked-out drawing. Klein notes that Erna begins to draw more beautiful princesses. However, she does not succeed and gives up. She begins again. In the third drawing (Fig 8), as in the second, we see the glorious yellow hair reaching down to the floor, a wide crinoline filling the centre of the picture, with thin, red stick legs and black stiletto heeled shoes below. Erna comments this is meant to be a beautiful princess but finds this did not work.
And finally the last picture of the session (Fig 9) – a huge head with an oversized mouth, hair standing on end, a wide neck and a comparatively small, misshapen body. Black lines cover the throat and the body. Below that, the two black lines can be interpreted as legs and the stronger small rectangle as ‘pipes’, known to us from the drawings of the first year. In the previous drawing of the queen they had been drawn in red. From Klein's notes we gather that Erna's association to this drawing was to a thunderbolt which made the princess became bad and ugly, like poo. Subsequently Erna's was reluctant to play, depressed and remorseful.

![Fig 9](image)

I think we can see Erna's wish to triumph as a princess over the queen with her excessively glorious hair, yet she was not satisfied with the result. Is this because it bore no relation to reality? (No body, no legs) She abandoned that attempt, but had another go. This time she focused on the whole figure and wanted to triumph by using the big crinoline, but then realised that it all stood on very skinny legs. And in the next picture, after the thunderbolt, a crying baby was left, who was ugly with all the poo left inside. In the first picture the eyes were drawn in black; perhaps representing faeces. I think she may have felt as ugly and vulnerable as she had wanted the queen to feel through her attacks.
Let us cast a quick glance at the three drawings from 17 November 1925. Erna draws a beautiful princess (Fig 10) and we clearly see her excessive glorious yellow hair. This princess is furnished with all the maternal attributes – the crinoline representing the pregnant belly, the neck the penis, the bow the female genitals and the hair pubic hair and stools. Considering the care with which Erna let the flowers sprout out of her analyst’s belly on 5 November, it is remarkable that now she is over-triumphant; everything is bigger but also coarser. In the next picture (Fig 11) we virtually see her walk with her head high. We learn that she is on her way to her lover, but she realises he has become ugly. She cannot find his palace. In front of a cave she meets an ugly old man who is small, like Rumpelstiltskin. She is supposed to redeem him. But as she draws the princess in the third picture (Fig 12), Erna notices that she looks dead and the drawing does not succeed. And indeed we can see she is the shadow of her former self: instead of the glorious hair surrounding the head there are only two or three yellow lines to the right and left of the head. Klein made the following notes: depression, spits, pushes at carpet with feet, wants to pull scab off her lip. Klein commented that the theme of the session had been rivalry from the start and the severe guilt feelings led her to feel ugly and dead.
In the beginning we had the girl sitting in her room ‘to avoid knowing anything about the murder’, a girl who is finally in a grave. After 18 months of analysis we see how Erna is able to engage in an intense struggle with her destructive and reparative impulses.

**Final remarks**

I hope I have given you some impression of the clinical situations Klein encountered in her first child analyses in the early 1920s. We can read in her notes about aggressive impulses and phantasies, followed by anxiety and guilt, which lead to a whole range of reparative attempts. In this way Klein began to develop the new concept of reparation, which in 1935 became a part of the depressive position: ‘The ego feels impelled ([…]) by its identification with the good object) to make restitution for all the sadistic attacks that is has launched on that object’.

Edna O’Shaughnessy will now explain how psychoanalysis was waiting for such a concept.

**References**


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