



Primitive Reparation and the Repetition Compulsion in the Analysis of a Borderline Patient **By Heinz Weiss**

The third 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 1, Melanie Klein's Discovery of Reparation by Claudia Frank and paper 2, Waiting for a Concept by Edna O'Shaughnessy.

Introduction

As Claudia has convincingly shown by the drawings of Klein's little patient Erna and as Edna O'Shaughnessy (2008), Henry Rey (1986), Hanna Segal (1964; 1981; 1991) and other authors have emphasized, primitive reparative attempts are detectable even in severely disturbed and psychotic individuals. What discerns these primitive reparative manoeuvres from mature forms of reparation, however, is in my view (1) their concreteness, (2) the desperate attempt to control anxiety by omnipotent means, (3) the inability to acknowledge separateness and guilt, and finally (4), a pseudo-acceptance of reality which obstructs psychic development (Steiner 1990; 1993; Weiss 2009).

In the following I will argue that primitive reparation, because of its concreteness, leads to further damage of the patient's internal objects, thus creating a situation where any attempt to restore the object leads to new damage, hurt and guilt. This may be one of the mechanisms fuelling the repetition compulsion *which in its own right can be seen as a desperate and failing reparative attempt*. In a way, these patients resemble the tragic heroes of Greek mythology (Sisyphos, Prometheus, Tantalos), whose rebellion against the Gods, the primitive super-ego, leads to endless torment and punishment.

As Edna O'Shaughnessy has pointed out, it is this cruel super-ego that makes reparation so difficult. But on the other hand reparation is also required to transform the archaic super-ego into a containing structure that enables the ego to deal with feelings of mourning and guilt (Klein 1958; O'Shaughnessy 1999).¹

¹ In her 1958 paper "On the Development of Mental Functioning" M. Klein introduced the idea that the archaic super-ego initially functions as a kind of 'bad bank' which later on develops into a 'container' and eventually into an *agency which allows the ego to make reparation*. It is in her view the co-evolution of ego- and super-ego structures in exchange with the early environment which enables psychic growth and development (O'Shaughnessy 1999). Perhaps, in a simple way one could say that so as to make reparation, four basic requirements are necessary: (1) the integration of hate and love towards the same object, (2) the development of a super-ego that is able to contain the ensuing feelings of mourning and guilt, (3) an acceptance of time and transience, and (4) the endorsement by a third object which helps to repair symbolically what has become damaged and lost in phantasy and reality.

Clinically this paradoxical situation can lead to impasse, especially when feelings of *grievance* and *wrath* come to dominate healthier parts of the patient's self. In that case reparation cannot proceed and the damaged internal objects are re-enacted in the transference and counter-transference. In the analysis I am going to describe, this evoked feelings of irritation and resignation in me, so that *my* capacity for reparation was also undermined and I found it difficult to maintain an attitude of unprejudiced understanding.

Clinical material

Mr. B. is a 30 year old employee, grown up in a family who had moved to Germany from a culturally completely different background. Because of his foreign origins he was often picked on and teased as a child. Together with his parents' pressure to conform and their traditional style of child education, this led to the repeated experience of humiliation and shame. He tried to overcome this by doing well at school and subsequently acquiring detailed knowledge of the financial markets. Through clever transactions this accrued him a fortune of several million dollars already by the age of 21. After feeling wrongly criticised by a superior he resigned from his job in an insurance company and decided to study economics with the aim of becoming a fund manager in an international stock exchange. In order to devote all his time to his studies, he entrusted the administration of his fortune to his father. However, when his father did not act fast enough during a crisis in the financial markets, most of the fortune was lost in a short time.

Mr. B.'s ensuing depression and feelings of quarrel made it difficult to study. He failed his exams narrowly several times, changed the university and eventually gave up after the death of an idealized professor. Since then he had withdrawn from the world full of resentfulness and contempt. He blamed his father's 'stupidity' for his failure and refused to try a new start in life. Instead he expected to be reimbursed for his unjust losses.

Thus he lived at home and tyrannised his parents, whom he accused of living in derelict squalor because they had not followed his 'instructions'. Only once he had been able to voice his feelings towards a young woman and could never cope with her rejection. In the same year he witnessed the terror attack of the World Trade Centre in New York. In my view the collapse of the Twin Towers seemed to represent the collapse of his omnipotent self as well as the murderous rage against his parents. So he spent most of his time in financial analyses in front of the computer, occasionally self harmed and let his parents feel his resentment. After several suicide threats he had started psychoanalytic treatment, which he experienced as a renewed humiliating confirmation of his condition, as well as a futile effort to give him back his pride, success and financial independence.

Already during one of our first sessions Mr. B. mentioned that he could not imagine that a human being had ever been so unjustly humiliated as he had and that he was not sure whether he might put a knife to his heart. I was alarmed but also angered by his attack and interpreted that he was putting a knife to my chest and giving me the responsibility if things did not go the way he wanted.

In the subsequent long period of his analysis Mr. B. was almost exclusively preoccupied with his past, whereas my attempts to look at his current state were

rejected. For instance, he described in minute detail the ups and downs of the share prices in 2001, the failures of his father, the unjustified criticism by a former course leader, the refusal to acknowledge a previous exam... When he filled the sessions with such monotonous accusations he seemed difficult to reach. I often felt tired, hopeless or annoyed, while my futile efforts to establish emotional contact were ignored with charitable negligence. For Mr. B. it was clear that this treatment came 'too late' and that his misery was *not* my fault.

Many months passed in this tug of war. While I was trying to bring him into the "here and now", he kept ignoring my interpretations and drew me back into the "there and then" (O'Shaughnessy 2013). I could sense a powerful grievance and rage. The only 'solution', the only form of 'reparation' he could imagine, he said, was a return to the state prior to the loss of his fortune and the failure of his studies. As he well knew that I would not be able to bring about this state, my interpretations were experienced as irrelevant or as taunts, which left me with feelings of rejection and anger. In particular, when he presented his father as simple, lazy and useless, I was more than once provoked into getting carried away pointing out that he was unbearably arrogant. Such 'rebuke', as he called it, hurt him, but he did not let on.

Nevertheless his condition stabilised after about two years and he tried to rebuild his fortune by skilful financial investments. He continued to refuse to seek regular employment and saw it as a 'punishment of fate to have such incompetent parents as his'. On the surface of it I was excluded from this accusation, but experienced myself as unable and unsuccessful in relation to the patient. Repeatedly, Mr. B. let me know that he experienced 'relationships with people' as disappointing and it seemed clear to me that the relationship with me could only be another disappointment.

At a time, when the conflicts with his parents were coming to a head, he contemptuously said that he wanted 'no more to do with this world'.

Then he created the picture of a desolate island, onto which he had retreated and from which he kept people off with a large sign 'No trespassers'. From this island, he was going to follow the worldwide stock exchanges in the hope of reconstructing his former wealth through clever investments and thus be able to live a life of independence and abundance. While no one was allowed to come close to the island, I was permitted to land from time to time in a small boat to bring him provisions. But even I was not permitted access to the 'darker areas' inside the island.

To me this picture seemed as much imaginative as provocative. While I was trying to interpret his self-righteous rage and wrath, he made me feel that I did indeed not have access to these 'darker areas' in his internal world. A kind of helplessness spread in me, which went as far as catching myself one day carefully checking the share prices in the mad hope that if they rose, my patient would get better...

It seemed I had lost the confidence in my work and instead had become identified with his belief system. I thought the 'provisions' I was allowed to deliver to the island were upholding the status quo without finding real access to his internal world.

There were times, however, when a better emotional contact developed. When he once again began by saying 'In the year 2000...', and I expected him to continue with

his usual complaints about his father's failure, he continued by saying: 'In 2000 I would not have understood your interpretations'. To my surprise he added, if he understood me correctly, his greatest problem was his attitude of all or nothing and thus he was his worst enemy. And after a short break he let me know that he was invited to visit friends in Switzerland who organised white water rafting tours with expert guides from New Zealand.

I had the impression that this expressed an appetite for life and said that he was considering trusting my guidance in moving of his desolate island into rough waters.

He responded that someone who has never had the experience of failure like me would probably never understand him and immediately I had the impression that I was receiving another lesson in failure and misunderstanding.

For Mr. B., of course, it was difficult to feel understood by me. From his point of view I was in an ideal position, equipped with all the attributes he longed for; money, prestige, academic achievement and a family. This made him envious, and although he acknowledged my 'analyses' as 'correct', he insisted that I could never empathise with him.

Insofar, Mr. B. 'understood' my interpretations, but could not really take them in. His problem was his lacking capacity for *reparation*. Instead of acknowledging the damage he inflicted on others, he was preoccupied with the injustice done to him. Thus he projected his wish for reparation and demanded reparation for what seemed unjustly kept from him, in particular, money, success and respect for his person. For this reason, reparation meant *concrete restitution* rather than making amends.

Thus Mr. B. experienced life and his analysis as constant humiliation. He despised dependency and sought to recreate an illusory state in which everything belonged to him. He *tolerated* treatment from his solitary island as long as this provided food for his illusions and his campaign of revenge. However, he seemed to reject analysis, whenever it was likely to get him in touch with the reality of mourning and loss.

In this hopeless situation time passed by without any prospect of change. It became increasingly clear how much Mr. B. was dominated by a cruel super-ego, which either forced him into a stance of moral superiority or absolute obedience. He claimed the higher moral values for himself and thus justified his withdrawal from other people.

Feelings of humiliation could quickly flip into states of rage and wrath, where he looked down on people. He complained endlessly about the 'stupidity' of his parents and their numerous shortfalls. He could spend whole sessions in disdain about his mother, who had used a fork in a Teflon frying pan despite his 'warnings' and his father, who had 'no table manners', drove like an idiot, did not use his hearing aid and generally did not follow his advice and 'instructions'. Talking like this his voice got louder. He escalated himself into an excited rage, described his parents as 'hopeless cases' and asked himself how much longer he would be 'patient with them'.

In turn, I increasingly experienced *him* as a hopeless case and sometimes lost patience with him. He indulgently ignored my interpretations. If he experienced them

as criticism he either submitted or stopped talking to me and at times this led to loud confrontations in which I found myself carried away into reproaching him.

In the case of the scratched teflon pan, he had accused his mother of 'poisoning' the food, while I accused him of not wanting to see that he was poisoning other people's food with his angry accusations.

There followed a long silence until he got back into his reproachful and hurt manner of talking about his mother's misdemeanours. I interpreted that he had experienced my comment as a sharp fork, which had scratched his thin internal protective layer and thus poisoned his food.

Although he seemed to experience this interpretation as far fetched, he listened carefully. In a more lively and engaged way he protested against my view of his moral superiority by saying that he had a right to think like this. But then his protest flipped to indignation and he declared: 'Because of my failures and unjust humiliations I have developed a strict moral code. And if you think that I have an attitude of moral superiority or you think that an attitude of 'laissez faire' towards my parents would be a better solution, I am definitely of a different opinion.'

This indignation could rapidly flip into wrath and then his contempt and hatred assumed self destructive proportions. In wrath, reparation can only be thought of as *mercy* and this is exactly why it makes the idea of reconciliation nearly impossible.

In the transference I seemed either identified with the contemptible parents or with a vengeful super-ego, with him imagining that I felt in possession of higher moral standards in my omnipotent believe that I could change him. Evidently I had to admit to my own failure to understand him, before I could take in some of his desperate isolation. After his self-righteous moral declaration, he felt alone and let me know after a long weekend that he felt worse without the sessions. On this occasion a more desperate sadness and clinginess became visible that was absent previously.

Nevertheless the conflict with the parents escalated when they accepted an invitation to a wedding abroad. He had declined to accompany them and despised them for having accepted that the relatives paid for their travel costs. With 'absolute obedience' he drove the parents to the airport, but did not speak a word or even look at them. At home he unplugged the phone to leave them in doubt about his welfare, while suicidal fantasies and projections of guilt dominated his ideation.

This situation was mirrored in the treatment by his 'advise to anyone' *not* to contact him. He said, he was on 'the path to self destruction' and could do to himself what others had done to him previously.

I interpreted that here too he had unplugged, sent me warning signals and let me know that nobody could prevent him doing harm to himself.

He reacted with angry bouts of rage, saying that he was pleased that his parents were away. He claimed to be the only person who could help himself by rebuilding his fortune. Otherwise life was meaningless for him.

I suggested that he regarded my endeavours as pretty useless, felt terribly lonely and doubted that anyone could understand his despair. In doing so, I had little hope of being able to reach him and was close to giving up.

It was at moments like this that Mr. B. occasionally got into a state of deep sadness. Then his superiority and rage collapsed and he became completely desperate and helpless. I feared that he would harm himself at the point of relinquishing his defensive system and said that he attempted to hold himself together by sustaining his grievance so as not to be overwhelmed by sadness, dependency and guilt. He replied that he agreed with my 'analysis', but he *just could not forgive*.

Much to my surprise, he told me in the last session before the Christmas break that he had replied to Christmas cards for the first time in years and was planning to visit friends. After he had said his good-byes and wished me a good Christmas, he turned round and said with tears in his eyes: 'And thank you very much for being always here for me in the past year!'

Such moments could be moving and gave a glimpse of a hidden capacity for gratitude. Mr. B. worried that he might not be able to finance the four times weekly sessions once the health insurance stopped paying, although I had indicated that I was prepared to make financial accommodations for him. He wanted to know whether he was allowed to return to the analysis at a later date and whether I was prepared to have him back and he announced that if he were to make money on the stock exchange, he would invest it in his analysis. His mother had said he shouldn't worry so much about his future and he had begun to talk more with his father.

These movements made me feel hopeful, but could easily be obscured when humiliation and shame predominated. Then his accusations grew to monstrous proportions and he retreated into his rage-fuelled defensive system, where he 'ordered about' his parents like unruly children and wished them dead. At such times, he spoke of his three 'basic premises' for any kind of possible change. Firstly, he had to get back his lost fortune, secondly, *others* were the guilty ones and *they had to change first*, and thirdly, the clock had to be turned back and the bad experiences of his childhood had to be undone.

Conclusions

Mr. B.'s three anti-therapeutic 'basic premises' illustrate the foundation of his defensive system. Because of his professional failure and the demeaning experiences of his childhood he felt humiliated and demanded that others took responsibility for this. The persistence of his grievance and the omnipotence of his wrath made any attempt at reparation for a long time nearly impossible. His way of dealing with a primitive super-ego was to identify with its ideal, omnipotent aspects as well as its cruel and paranoid ones. In this way he felt superior to his parents and seemed entitled to look down on them and to humiliate them.

In the analysis both aspects were projected into me so that I was either an ideal object, which evoked his envy, or a cruel object, which demanded 'absolute obedience', put him down and relentlessly rebuked him with 'sharp criticisms'.

For a long time there seemed to be no way out of this situation, especially when I felt unable to tolerate my own sense of failure and disappointment. Then I would put the blame on him and demand that *he* change, and insofar seemed identified with my patient in dealing with my failure by projecting it into him. So we got into a situation *where each demanded that the other change*, a dead end which facilitated the thriving of grievance and feelings of revenge, but made reparation very difficult.

Nevertheless, reparative attempts were not entirely absent. They became visible when Mr. B.'s mood became more mournful and he felt helpless. However, those movements evoked such a degree of despair in him that I feared any further progress would possibly endanger him to kill himself. Thus, when anxiety and guilt became unbearable, he often retreated into his defensive organisation once again.

I think of *grievance* as a state in which the wounds are kept open and the wish for reparation is projected into an object whose every wish for reparation will be denied (Weiß 2008). On the other hand, in his *wrath* Mr. B. seemed identified with a morally superior position, where at times he felt like a god that the world was not good enough for him to deserve his love. In such a position, as Edna O'Shaughnessy mentioned, reparation is only possible in the form of *mercy*.

Both states of mind, *grievance* and *wrath*, render the processing of guilt extremely difficult. Instead of enabling reparation, they trigger feelings of humiliation and revenge. Mr. B. was well able to see this vicious cycle and even agreed with my 'analyses', as he said, but added, that he just *could not forgive*.

I believe though, that genuine understanding is bound up with the possibility of reparation. While humiliation and shame require *immediate relief* (Steiner 2006), reparation requires *time*. When this cannot be tolerated and the way for reparation fails, the repetition compulsion takes over, what may not account just for the individual, but also for certain historical and social developments.

I would like to conclude with a thought by R. Money-Kyrle (1956) in his early paper on counter-transference where he says that the patient comes to stand for the analyst's own damaged internal objects. In his view true understanding goes along with the *analyst's* capacity for reparation. In Mr. B.'s analysis I'd reached more than once a point where I'd lost all hope for development and change. Then I projected my helplessness back into him and held him responsible for my failing.

Only in those moments when I had to acknowledge my limits to tolerate and understand, it became possible for Mr. B. to admit to himself, how lonely and desperate he actually felt. It seemed, as though both analyst and patient had to experience the collapse of their omnipotence in order to recognise the limits of what is achievable and to devise realistic goals (Steiner 2011).

In the case of Mr. B. that meant, as he once put it, that the 'breaking waves' against his lonely island were getting softer and he could ask me whether he might be able to return. I think that this question contained an expression of his uncertainty as to whether I would be able to forgive him. The possibility to forgive is in turn linked to the possibility of being able to imagine *to be forgiven* (Rey 1986). In this sense, I thought, the analysis of Mr. B. could not solve his problems, but might at least have helped him to live with them.

References

- Klein, M. (1958), On the development of mental functioning. In: *The Writings of Melanie Klein*, vol. 3, London: The Hogarth Press 1975, 236-246.
- Money-Kyrle, R. (1956), Normal countertransference and some of its deviations. In: Meltzer, D., O'Shaughnessy, E. (eds.), *The Collected Papers of Roger Money-Kyrle* (pp. 330-342. Strath Tay, Perthshire: Clunie Press 1978)
- O'Shaughnessy, E. (1999), Relating to the superego. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 80, 861-870.
- O'Shaughnessy, E. (2008), On gratitude. In: Lemma, A., Roth, P. (eds.), *Envy and Gratitude Revisited*. London, New York: Karnac, 79-91.
- O'Shaughnessy, E. (2013), Where is here? When is now? *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 94, 7-16.
- Rey, H. (1986), Reparation. *Journal of the Melanie Klein Society* 4, 5-35.
- Segal, H. (1964), *Introduction to the Work of Melanie Klein*. London: Random House.
- Segal, H. (1978), *Delusion and Creativity and Other Psychoanalytic Essays*. London: Free Associations Books.
- Segal, H. (1991), *Dream, Phantasy and Art*. London: Routledge.
- Steiner, J. (1990), Pathological organizations as obstacles to mourning: the role of unbearable guilt. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 71, 87-94.
- Steiner, J. (1993), *Psychic Retreats. Pathological Organizations in Psychotic, Neurotic and Borderline-Patients*. London: Routledge.
- Steiner, J. (2006), *Narzißtische Einbrüche: Sehen und Gesehenwerden. Scham und Verlegenheit bei pathologischen Persönlichkeitsorganisationen* (Hg. Weiß, H., Frank, C.). Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta.
- Steiner, J. (2011), Helplessness and the exertion of power in the analytic session. *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* 92, 135-147.
- Weiss, H. (2008), Groll, Scham und Zorn. Überlegungen zur Differenzierung narzisstischer Zustände. *Psyche – Z Psychoanal* 62, 866-886.
- Weiss, H. (2009), *Das Labyrinth der Borderline-Kommunikation. Klinische Zugänge zum Erleben von Raum und Zeit*. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 2009.

Heinz Weiss

Abteilung für Psychosomatische Medizin, Robert-Bosch-Krankenhaus, Auerbachstrasse 110
D-70376 Stuttgart (e-mail: heinz.weiss@rbk.de)

Sigmund-Freud-Institut, Mertonstrasse 17, D-60325 Frankfurt a.M.
(e-mail: weiss@sigmund-freud-insitut.de)