

My reading of this was that Mr P.'s mother had projected her defective self onto her son and consequently saw him as in some indefinable way wrong. He always sensed this and, in order to get close to her, would identify with her picture of him. In other words, to be recognized he thought he had to conform to his mother's idea of him. For someone like this, analysis carries a considerable risk of providing a perfect opportunity for re-enactment. The analytic superego, both in the person of the analyst and as a religion of which the analyst was High Priest, was present from the outset. The usefulness of the analysis depended on the development of the patient's scepticism; the temptation for the analyst was to crush it. Job was accused of scepticism, of "drinking up scoffing like water" (Job XXXIV 34, 7). My patient expected similar accusations and tempered his critical comments accordingly. His judgement was good and his natural scepticism was not defensive nor malevolent, but he would subordinate it to any opinion I might be thought to have, or the ancestors whose words I was presumed to worship. It was this way of being that was to change in the course of analysis, but at each step when he challenged me to justify myself as Job did to God, he had to say, like Job, "Let not that dread terrify me into silence." The emancipation of his ego from the adverse judgement of a potentially envious superego was only achieved by the reclamation of his right to form a judgement on his own internal critic. Even though this function could not be silenced, it could be assessed; in a similar way, we may not be able to silence the moral authoritarians in our psychoanalytic societies, but we might be able to form our own judgements of them.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

## The ego-destructive superego

"... can envy dwell  
In heav'nly breasts?"

Milton, *Paradise Lost*

In a paper in 1994, I discussed the inhibiting and distorting effect of publication anxiety; the paper described a fear of making private thoughts public (Britton, 1994b). In this chapter, I am concerned with the inhibition or prohibition that appears to operate at an earlier stage, stifling creativity close to its source within the internal world when the superego threatens, suppresses, and takes revenge on the ego's creativity.

When I wrote about publication anxiety, I cited Charles Darwin as an example. He waited twenty years before reluctantly making public his theory of *natural selection*. Although he feared "crucifixion" when he thought of intimating some of his ideas to senior colleagues, he was not inhibited in thinking them or in pursuing his research. His inhibition operated at the point of making the private thoughts public, the hostility he feared was from the outside world, and the damage he dreaded doing was to his relation-

ships to other people. He was, privately, free to think and to pursue his thoughts to their conclusions.

Having made this distinction, however, I realize that it is not as absolute or clear as it sounds. Though privately Darwin was free to think and to formulate his concepts, he was fearful of writing them down, and while working on his great hypothesis he suffered greatly from tormenting psychosomatic symptoms and fearful hypochondriasis. It was as if he was being punished in private in the way he consciously feared he would be punished for his creative thinking.

In this chapter I want to discuss my ideas about what part envy, and the fear of envy, plays in such reactions. What produces such a fear of arousing envy that it inhibits the creativity of some people? What is it that impedes the completion of a creation and exposes some individuals to self-destructiveness and fear of death when they do achieve something? I shall briefly describe a patient who was opposed internally from fully realizing her creative potential and who was severely punished and threatened with death whenever it looked as though she might do so.

My explanation involves the concept of an envious superego: an internal object opposed to the ego's development and creativity which nevertheless occupies the status in the internal world that the police and judiciary do in the external world. I am referring here not to a harsh, critical conscience but to a destructive superego such as that described by Bion (1959) and more recently explored by Edna O'Shaughnessy; as she puts it, an "abnormal superego that usurps the status and authority of the normal superego" (O'Shaughnessy, 1999, p. 861). The concept of an envious, destructive internal object acting as superego raises two questions. How does this internal object originate, and how does it gain such a position in relation to the ego?

The idea that a part of the personality could be an enemy of the central self was described vividly by Fairbairn (1952). Initially he called this "the internal saboteur", later changing this to "anti-libidinal ego" in a tripartite structure comprising a central ego and a libidinal and anti-libidinal ego. Fairbairn took the view from Melanie Klein that a primordial ego was engaged in object relations from the outset, and that splitting of the ego was its earliest defence. However, the idea that a part of the ego could be opposed to

itself really originated with Freud. In the case of melancholia, he described the superego as committed to the death of the ego:

If we turn to melancholia first, we find that the excessively strong super-ego which has obtained a hold upon consciousness rages against the ego with merciless violence, as if it had taken possession of the whole of the sadism available in the person concerned. Following our view of sadism, we should say that the destructive component had entrenched itself in the super-ego and turned against the ego. What is now holding sway in the super-ego is, as it were, a pure culture of the death instinct. [Freud, 1923b, p. 53]

Freud also said that for the ego not to be loved by the superego is the same as death. "To the ego, living means the same as being loved—being loved by the super-ego . . . (ibid., p. 58). This last, seemingly extreme statement makes more sense if one looks at Klein's ideas of the origin of the superego. She wrote:

In my view, the splitting of the ego, by which the super-ego is formed, comes about as a consequence of conflict in the ego, engendered by the polarity of the two instincts. This conflict is increased by their projection as well as by the resulting introjection of good and bad objects. [Klein, 1958, p. 240]

Here we have a different view of the origin of the superego to that of Freud, who viewed it as the heir to the Oedipus complex. Klein here is describing something much earlier in development: a splitting of the ego giving rise to the superego when the ego takes into itself the good (loving and loved) object and allocates to this split-off part the bad (hated and hating) object. She also thought that some introjection takes place into the ego and some into the super-ego:

The ego, supported by the internalised good object and strengthened by the identification with it, projects a portion of the death instinct into that part of itself which it has split off—a part which thus comes to be in opposition to the rest of the ego and forms the basis of the super-ego. [ibid.]

Melanie Klein repeatedly stresses that this original hostile internal object is only modified and mitigated by love. In her model, therefore, the introjection of a loving mother and father is *absolutely necessary* in order to modify the potentially ego-destructive super-

ego. The integration of self and object is described in the account of the depressive position in favourable circumstances, but even then, if we follow this theory of Klein's, there remains in the core of the superego something hostile to the ego. Klein, because of her insistence on love and hate as innate primary factors in the personality, was often described as underestimating the effect of the child's actual environment. In fact, as I see her theory, the actual quality of parenting is even more crucial, as it has to remedy innate endowment. *Love is necessary for survival*. Christian theology repeatedly expresses this in the form of the notion of redemption from original sin, whether through faith as in Protestant thinking, or the gift of grace as in Catholic theology.

Bion enlarges on the danger of an unreconstructed superego in his theory of containment. He emphasized that the result of a failure of maternal containment "is an object which, when installed in the patient, exercised the function of a severe and ego-destructive superego" (Bion, 1959, p. 107). He was thinking of the mental self-mutilating attacks that he saw in some psychotic patients. I suspect that the most terrible outcome of the development of a murderous superego is an ego-syntonic identification with it. An apparently conscienceless killer is the consequence of this, such as that Christopher Marlowe represents as Tamburlaine.

The cases I have in mind are not so psychically impaired as those that Bion was referring to in his paper "Attacks on Linking" (1959), nor do they identify with a murderous superego, but they suffer from it. They are, I am suggesting, internally menaced by a hostile superego, particularly when they show signs of independent personal development, sexual maturity, or creativity. It is as if the superego is modelled on a parent whose loving care can encompass the very earliest stages of infancy but whose continuing love is complicated by envy of the child's personal capacities and, when there is separate development, creativity. In such cases, the stifling of their creativity is felt to protect them from the wrath of their internal furies or some representatives of them in the outside world. Klein wrote, "creativity becomes the deepest cause for envy" (1958, p. 202). She referred to an "envious superego" in "Envy and Gratitude" (1957) but did not enlarge much on it, and she did not examine the interaction of internal and external factors in its origins.

When thinking over cases where *fear* of envy has been conspicuous, a number of questions come to mind. How much does projection play a part in the production of this internal envious parental figure? How much and in what way does the nature of the original parental object play a part? What is the relationship between the death instinct and envy? Before addressing these and other questions further, I would like to describe the sort of clinical material that raised them in my mind and sent me back to the literature on envy, on the negative therapeutic reaction, and on the origins of the superego.

#### *Clinical discussion*

I described in the last chapter Mr P., who felt threatened whenever he asserted himself and showed what he had, afraid that his defective internal object—manifesting itself as the superego—would attack him. The patient I describe in this chapter, Mrs D., was not so inhibited as Mr P. and her ambition was not so suppressed, but the adverse consequences of achievement were much greater. Punishment regularly followed achievement. She suffered from recurrent, psychically mutilating negative therapeutic reactions whenever she progressed, and she feared for her life.

In order to describe the varying relationships to envy exemplified by this patient, I shall schematize the different phases of the analysis. In fact, the sequences were repeated throughout a long analysis that proceeded by cyclical progression. The improvement in the analysis was marked by a shortening of the duration of these cycles and an increasing capacity for relatively rapid recovery from negative therapeutic reactions.

Mrs D. was a professional academic in early middle age when she came into analysis. She was from a part of the United Kingdom where political differences caused tension and violence, and this prompted her to leave her family home for London to do her postgraduate training. Her parents were united by their political beliefs, and she, who did not share them, hated their prejudices. She had not completely fulfilled her considerable potential and now suffered from writer's block. Her reason for seeking analysis was for depression.

As an analytic patient she was truthful to a quite unusual degree and in some ways suffered social disadvantage because she was incapable of the usual amount of hypocrisy. She was also given to strong loving feelings and personal loyalty. I mention these because they are the two factors—truthfulness and a capacity for love—that Melanie Klein singled out as necessary to mitigate the adverse effects of envy in analysis. I shall describe three phases in her analysis that were for a long time repeated cycles. The first was characterized by aspiration and inferiority, the second by envious feelings, and the third by internal death threats.

In the phase of aspiration and inferiority, I was idealized as her analyst. This was of small comfort to her as my imaginatively enhanced achievements set her a standard by which she was to be internally judged and found a failure. In order to avoid internal condemnation, she had to believe that she would accomplish as much. Her idealization of me took the form of believing, erroneously, that whatever I did was a result of effortless superiority, and hence any struggle or effort on her part was a sign of failure. In this stable but stifling system, I appeared to be the external representative of the ego-ideal by which her superego judged her and by which standard she was to be forever striving and failing. It was as if her superego believed that if she were perfect she could be loved. I came to think that this equation was based on the phantasy that her mother's ego-ideal and her own would be identical, unlike their respective egos. Her mother was a chronic psychic invalid, incapable of effort, with an ideal self that would have enjoyed effortless achievement, whereas one of my patient's virtues was her capacity to struggle. The more she did this, therefore, the more she differentiated herself from her mother and the more she was at risk.

In this phase, she was able to work but not to feel successful nor to exercise her imagination. Her quick grasp of my interpretations and her ability to further her own analysis by her own capacity for insight was clear to me, but not to her. In retrospect, I can see that in this phase the internal agreement, between her negative self-opinion and the adverse judgement of her superego, gave her a sense of internal coherence at the expense of self-denigration. Mrs D. felt somewhat depressed in this phase but stable. However, she felt shackled and looked to her analysis to enable her to leave the

oppressive security of this morbid "psychic retreat", just as she had left her constricting family home.

The second phase was one in which there was a mitigation of self-deprecation and an enhanced ability to work, but at the price of extremely painful, direct experiences of envy. Whenever I said something that had not occurred to her and which, moreover, she was convinced she would *never* have thought of, she was afflicted with what she called "terrible envy". This was so directly felt, and she so prepared to disclose it, that it provided us with an opportunity to see the rapid sequence of feelings involved. The immediate one was the wish, "if only I had thought of that". There was a longing to be able to do that, to be like that. This was rapidly followed by feelings of hatred towards me, with a wish that I should suffer some misfortune. This in due course led to pain and remorse. When this phase reached its peak, she seriously contemplated giving up analysis because she could no longer bear inflicting hatred on me and enduring the remorse that followed. But giving up her analysis meant giving up all her ambitions to write, as she believed she needed analysis. Working through this phase led to painful progress each time in her work and in her analysis; this would then lead to the third phase.

This phase, a negative therapeutic reaction, followed characteristically after each forward step. It came with greatest force in the analysis when she finally achieved the academic position to which she had long aspired. There was a series of attacks, each following a similar pattern. The first component was a psychosomatic reaction that then served as the basis for doubt about the efficacy of her analysis: we were both failures, and our analytic baby was still-born. Analysis of this, with some abatement of the despair, was rapidly followed by a hypochondriacal conviction that she was suffering from a fatal illness. One such sequence will give the flavour of the transactions. Mrs D. was writing during a short break from her analysis. She found herself, to her surprise, inundated with ideas and a feeling of pleasurable anticipation instead of her usual dread or stultification. The writing continued to flourish, but my patient did not. She became convinced that she was suffering from a fatal illness. At first it was leukaemia, then cancer of the bowel, and eventually cancer of the breast. The reassurances of the doctors she consulted were welcome but not completely

effective in removing her pessimistic expectation. This developed into a more general fear of death, which she now described as somehow extraneous, like an internal curse. "It feels like a terrible irony," she said. "Just when I get what I have wanted all these years, I will die. I feel cursed, as if someone had put a curse on me."

In Mrs D., the strength of these internal death threats diminished as her own desire for death was acknowledged. The basic wish to die became quite conscious and was linked to envious feelings, born of disappointment. The recognition that her achievements would never bridge the gap between herself and her idealized version of me provoked a spurt of hatred towards me followed by a spasm of self-loathing. The eventual reduction of idealization reduced "the sharpness of the serpent's tooth" but led to dejection at the thought of living in a lesser world than she had hoped for, with less impressive and less pleasing people in it.

Repeatedly disentangling what belonged to her and what was a property of her object was crucial to these changes. The overall effect was that the internal object—which could only be described as murderous—lost its moral power within the patient's internal polity and could no longer be described as having the role of conscience, with its claim of moral judgement.

Some years ago I wrote a paper (which for reasons of confidentiality has remained unpublished) on the analyses of patients who had parents who were seriously psychiatrically disturbed. I described in that paper the evolution of an unassimilated internal object opposed to these patients' normal ego functions, and I called it an *alien object*. In Mrs D., this appeared to be the status of this inner object once it was deposed from its place in the superego. Though it remained a disturbing presence, like a bad neighbour, it lost its power as a ruling party. For similar reasons, I think that for Christians it has often seemed preferable to believe in a Devil rather than to think of a cruel and hostile God. From the latter there is no escape and indeed one cannot even want to escape, for there is nowhere to go. Such is, I think, the psychological force of the superego as a consequence of its position in the internal world, as the ultimate source of the ego's need for love and approval.

To return to Mrs D.'s analysis, we managed in her analysis to disentangle her own wish for self-annihilation from the extraneous death threats. Her suicidal wishes became stronger, and she cursed

me for making it impossible to kill herself, as she felt unable to inflict that on me. I therefore kept her alive against her wishes. As she said, she had no pleasure in life and could see no prospect of any. Her state of mind could be described in Milton's words: "Save what is in destroying, all other joy / To me is lost" (*Paradise Lost*, IX: ll. 478–479).

As this process of disentangling took place, Mrs D. was flooded with memories of her mother. As a child she was beaten by her mother, whom she recalled threatening to kill her, and she told me of a recurrent childhood image—she was never sure whether it was a memory or a phantasy—of her mother trying to suffocate her in her cot. Mrs D. was an only child; from what she told me, I formed the opinion that her mother was an extremely disturbed woman and her father a stoical, stable man whom Mrs D. greatly resembled, much to her mother's chagrin. Her mother's ambivalence to her daughter greatly intensified in her adolescence; she took little pleasure in her daughter's good looks and intellectual gifts but saw the one as likely to lead her into moral danger and the other into wrong ways of thinking. From the outset it seems that her relationship with her mother was troubled. As a baby she was passionately attached to her mother's breasts and was weaned late and with great difficulty. In contrast to this, she carried for life an image of her mother's eyes staring at her and her mother's voice screaming at her in hatred.

Her analysis was filled with live and painful recollections of her mother from time to time, which appeared to be part of a process of re-categorization of good and bad memories and a re-shaping of the internal relationship. The gradual displacement of the hostile internal object from its position as moral arbiter and the diminution of her actual mother's power to demoralize her moved in parallel. The progress of the analysis appeared to be achieved by repeatedly working through the cycles I have described.

#### Discussion

To return to the questions I raised earlier: How much does projection play a part in the production of the envious superego? How much does the character of the original parental objects play

a part? What is the relationship between the destructive instinct and envy? There is obviously a prior question: Does the concept of an envious superego make any sense? Is it conceivable that the internal moral arbiter, the prototype of God, could be motivated by so human a weakness as envy? Milton raised the possibility in *Paradise Lost* through the mouth of the Serpent when he was tempting Eve to eat of the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge though God had forbidden it:

“And wherein lies  
Th’ offence, that man should attain to know?  
What can your knowledge hurt him, or this tree  
Impart against his will if all be his?  
Or is it envy, and can envy dwell  
In heav’nly breasts?”

[ll. 724–730]

Can envy dwell in heav’nly breasts? Can God envy mankind? Can parents envy the children they have conceived and created? Experience tells us that they can, and the history of religion shows that in some moods the gods that men imagine for themselves are given to attacking those who manifest independent creativity. To discuss this further, I need to explain how I think of envy as a potential, innate force in the human personality.

I see envy not as an element but as a compound, not as an atom but as a molecule. One necessary element in its composition is the destructive instinct. I mean by this an innate libido-phobic, anti-object relational propensity that seeks to obliterate that which intrudes on the self and is not self, including, therefore, the perception of an object and the sensations that arise in response to it. I now think of this as a *xenocidal impulse*—in its extreme form, a murderous attitude to those or that which is experienced as *other*; in its mildest form, as misanthropy.

If we look to biology for possible reasons for our innate conflict between our attachment to objects and our antipathy to them, we can find it in sexual reproduction. We are not clones, we are half and half. Thanks to sexual reproduction, with its genetic advantages and incidental pleasures, we are presented with a number of physiological difficulties arising from the different, DNA-derived, constitutions of mother and foetus. This has required the develop-

ment, therefore, of considerable natural biological adaptation to prevent mother and child treating each other as foreign bodies. I think that there are psychic analogies to this in the development of the emotional bond between mother and infant. In the psychic sphere, innate hostility to otherness is mitigated by identification. We have become so aware of the psychopathological consequences of excessive identification that we may overlook the fact that it is necessary for life. From this perspective, the extraordinary power of human love and our unending propensity to identify are the necessary counters to an inbuilt impulse to annihilate otherness. In the biological sphere, this expresses itself in the vagaries of the immune system; in the psychological, in the form of a xenocidal impulse; in the social, in the form of genocide. I have suggested that some personalities, prone to narcissistic disorders, have the psychic equivalent of atopia, an allergic tendency towards other minds, whose intimate relationships are therefore bedevilled with antipathy (Britton, 1998, p. 58).

I think of an envious object relationship as a compound of *covetousness* and *xenocide*. The desire to possess the attributes of the object is combined with the urge to destroy the object as the source of such disturbing feelings. The English word “envy” has two sources: from the Old French the word *envie*, which means “desire” and from the Latin the word *invidia*, which means “malice”. Envy, one might say, has both libidinal and anti-libidinal roots. The separation of these is likely, therefore, to release in unfused form a death urge. This, I think, expressed itself in various forms in my patient Mrs D.: as a threatened heart attack, fatal malignant tumours, threats of accidental death, and a desire for suicide. However, though the death-drive increased for a time, untethered in her mental life, admiration and emulation were also liberated from their fusion with it and from their imprisonment in an envious superego. These conflict-ridden, unintegrated states produced real anguish for my patient, and this had to be contained in the analysis within the transference-countertransference. I know, from experience, that this mitigates these states and that the *quantity* of envy is diminished. I am not sure that I can explain how. Certainly what is there to be witnessed is the re-assertion of the ego and its emancipation from the superego. It appears to be the counterpart in the individual to the humanism of the “Renaissance”, with its subtle

shift in the nature of religious belief and its new conviction that man's inquiries are the source of knowledge.

It seems to me that the character of the original parental objects does play a crucial part in the possible development of the envious superego. First, in a negative sense: if we take Klein's view of the superego as that part of the ego initially separated as the container of the death instinct, we can see that it is necessary to mitigate the hostility of the superego by the introjection of loving parental objects.

Second, if the *actual* parent is hostile and envious, it becomes the external location for the projection of this malignant internal object and thus becomes its incarnation. The re-introjection of this alien object may lead to the individual trying to incorporate it within the self by a secondary identification. I think this was the solution adopted by Mrs D. She formed a complex relationship with this malignant maternal object and identified with her, thus forming the envious superego. When she did this, she adopted her mother's ego-ideal as her own aspirant version of herself. They were thus internally united in reproaching Mrs D. for forever failing to become the unrealistic, illusional person that her mother thought she could have been, and which Mrs D. thought she should be. In this way, this internal version of her mother functioned like a harsh, reproachful task master; a severe inner object, but nevertheless a parental figure: a harsh superego, not an alien internal object. The equilibrium that this organization provided was threatened by Mrs D.'s independent ambitions and her actual achievements. This exposed her to the full force of internal attacks in the form of negative therapeutic reactions.

Undoing such pathological organizations in the course of analysis is somewhat like opening Pandora's box, and there are times when it feels like a foolhardy enterprise. At such times, the example of intrepid ancestors and the trust of respected colleagues is a source of inner strength. This, perhaps, is an example of how that complex organization—the superego—manifests itself in our professional lives in a benign way, and how very much we need good figures to have a place in that powerful internal moral position.