

## A core phantasy in violence

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In this chapter I would like to discuss my understanding of the function of violence in the analysis of a violent young man. I will describe how, in the course of trying to understand and treat him psychoanalytically, I began to identify a plot or narrative in his material which expressed an unconscious phantasy, a personal myth of origin, namely that he was born of a violent intercourse between his mother and himself. I will indicate how these phantasies were externalised in the transference and apprehended in the transference and counter-transference in the course of his analysis.

Although there is an extensive literature on the understanding of aggression in psychoanalysis, mostly from the 1970s and 1980s (see Perelberg, 1995 and chapter 1 of the present book), little material is available on the role of violence. Most authors, however, do attempt to discriminate between different types of aggression and to establish distinctions between what is perceived as healthy assertiveness and acts which are defined as aiming to destroy and humiliate the object or inflict pain in the service of sexual pleasure (sadism). Specific concern with defining violence can be found in the work of Glasser (1985), Shengold (1989, 1991, 1993) and Fonagy and Target (1995 and chapter 2 in this book).

Following Walker (1968), Glasser (1985) defines violence as the intended infliction of bodily harm on another person. This definition thus confines violence to conscious acts on the body of one person by another person. While aggression is biologically built into human beings as a reaction to danger, violence is 'the bodily actualisation of aggression which aims to negate the danger' (p. 3). In self-preservative violence (or aggression), the aim is to negate the danger; in sadism (malicious violence), the aim is to inflict physical and emotional suffering. What happens to the object in the first type of violence is irrelevant, whereas it is crucial in the second. Fonagy and Target also attempted to distinguish between sadism and violence: 'sadistic behaviour is not an attempt to defend the self. In contrast, the violent individuals we consider here, having

sought proximity, then feel trapped by a persecutory object' (1995, p. 488). In the light of an analysis of a violent patient they discuss the hypothesis of violence as a 'wish to attack thoughts, in oneself or in another' (p. 489).

Thus, although psychoanalysts have been able to discriminate between sadism and aggression, recent attempts to do so indicate how difficult it has been to define violence.

### Clinical material: Karl

#### *Background information*

Karl is a man in his early twenties whose father left his mother before he was born and who describes his relationship with his mother as very close and special. His mother married when he was still a baby, and this man adopted Karl as his son. A few years later the couple had a baby girl and a few years later another girl. Karl feels, however, that his mother always let him know that he was the most important person for her in this family. At the same time, he experiences his mother as unable to tolerate his sexuality and even less his being a man. He said recently that his mother used to tell him that she wished he was gay because gay people never leave their mothers.

His father was violent towards him throughout his childhood, hitting him frequently around the head. He recalls being frightened of his father, never fully being able to differentiate when his father was playing with him or actually threatening him. Recently in his analysis, for instance, he recalled an incident in the swimming pool, when his father was pulling him by his legs. He felt he was drowning and felt that his father was actually trying to kill him. In his late teens Karl decided to study martial arts and feels that his father then became frightened of him and stopped hitting him.

A year after entering university Karl sought help at a psychotherapy outpatient department. He complained of having difficulties in his relationships with peers, that he was failing academically, that he had got involved in rows with his tutors at university and had returned to live with his parents. He was assessed and accepted for analysis in the Young Adult Research Scheme.<sup>1</sup> The full extent of his violent behaviour became clearer only after a few months of his analysis. During the period Karl has come to analysis, he has been involved with serious criminals of whom some have gone to prison (one for murder), others have been hurt in knife fights and, recently, two have committed suicide.

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to the members of the group for helpful discussions of my patient. I am also particularly grateful to Donald Campbell and Ronald Britton who have both helped me in critical moments in the analysis of this patient.

### The analytic process: the patterns of the transference

In his first consultation Karl presented me with a question that he felt had become an obsession for him and which expressed his concern about the nature of his parents' sexuality. He told me that his parents were involved in 'sado-masochistic games'. He 'knew' it since his childhood because he and one of his sisters had listened to them behind their bedroom door. They had been reading to each other passages from a book where there were details of sado-masochistic games. Later they had 'practised' these games and the children had 'heard' them. At the consultation I experienced that there was a great deal of confusion in Karl's account, but also that his account represented a screen memory for a primal scene phantasy. The confusion of his account was also derived from the fact that the book he mentioned was a well known bestseller and I found myself scanning my memory of the book for any such scenes. In this same consultation, Karl started to let me know about the extent of the violence he had been engaged in. At university, he had got involved in serious violent situations with other young men and in escalating violence in his sexual relationship with a girlfriend. He returned home, afraid that the police were after him.

In his analysis Karl has attempted to escape from an experience of losing his mind completely each time he achieves some understanding from his analyst. He believes that he will cease to exist if he does not retreat. When the analyst understands him, he has to disappear by not coming to his sessions for a while. At the beginning of the analysis this was expressed basically in the states of sleep Karl would get into, from which he could not be awakened, either by several alarm clocks or by his mother shouting at him. He could disappear from the sessions for a week, for instance, without realising that this time had passed since his last session. The interpretations during this period consistently pointed to this complete retreat both from the encounter with the analyst and from the obstacles Karl inevitably experienced in his relationship with me. Karl's sleep was dreamless, and I interpreted this as a flight not only from me, but also from the experience of having a mind. Karl also compulsively played computer games where violence was expressed in a robotic way against dehumanised enemies.

In the fourth week of analysis, for example, he smashed a friend's computer after having been beaten by a computer game. At the time, in the context of the session, I interpreted to him that he feared that I would inevitably become useless to him. I would either be unable to understand him or, if I did understand, he would experience me as 'beating him'; then he feared he would have to destroy me, again making me useless. In a subsequent session he described a nightmare that had terrified him: he unbuttoned his shirt and discovered he was a computer.

It became progressively clearer that he had been persecuted and excited by violent phantasies since childhood. He remembered two films that persecuted

and terrified him, *The Omen* and *The Vampires of Salem*. We talked about these films over a few sessions. The scene in *The Omen* he specifically talked about was that of a journalist who had come to investigate the facts about the Omen, and was decapitated by the Omen. In the film about the vampires, the memorable scene was one in which the boy's best friend had become a vampire and had tried to get the other boy to open the window for him to let him in. The boy could not resist and therefore also became a vampire. Karl seemed to understand my interpretation about his fear of not resisting homosexual invitations; but became frightened by my formulation that he was afraid either he or I were being experienced by the violent part of him (the Omen) as the journalist who had to be decapitated because of our research into aggression and sexuality. In fact, he might well believe that he had already succeeded in decapitating his thinking self in his dreamless sleep and absence from sessions.

Karl gradually revealed how difficult it was for him to maintain contact with real living people, since this involved levels of frustration, violence and terror that he simply could not tolerate. Yet as his confidence in the analytic relationship grew, his thoughts and aggressive interactions outside the sessions became more vividly present in his accounts during the sessions. At times he inundated me with accounts of extremely violent behaviour which left me frightened and hopeless about any possibility that analysis would have any impact on him. I often also wondered if he had any idea of the effect he was having on me.

Karl would also tell me both about his longing for and flight from encounters with women. It seemed to me that his phantasised and actual violence towards men protects him from his terror of women. His refuge is less than comfortable because it immediately confronts him with his own impulses. These two aspects – the violence against other men and the problem of relating to women – seemed to form a pair and he himself could not fail to acknowledge the simultaneity of these accounts as I consistently pointed them out to him in sessions. At this stage I felt able to say no more than that his violence seemed to follow on from his fear of my intrusiveness in the transference. He responded by telling me that he had got a gun and cartridges and had been keeping them at home. As he talked about this, it became progressively clear that he was keeping a part of himself and me as hostages, terrorised by his potential destructiveness. Inevitably my interpretations were rooted in the anxiety I felt in the counter-transference, which allowed me to show him that he needed to know if he could terrify me, as a way of protecting himself from his own fear of me.<sup>2</sup> My interpretations led him to get rid of the gun but this left him without the power to terrorise me, leaving him lost, abandoned and deeply

<sup>2</sup> Being able to detect fear in me had the function of reassuring Karl that the fear was no longer in himself which would then allow him to feel safer. Sandler (1959) has suggested that in order to preserve its feelings for safety, the ego will make use of whatever techniques it has at its disposal and gives examples of the way in which defence mechanisms can operate in the service of this 'safety principle'.

depressed. To counteract his depression, he intensified his accounts of criminal activities. He consciously acknowledged, without initially realising the implications of what he was letting me know, that it was easier for him to come to the sessions after dangerous criminal encounters, such as obtaining and selling stolen diamonds. This gave him a sense of omnipotence. I suggested that this was because he felt less frightened of my power over him. His criminal activities thus served to distance him from me and while they have many determinants, one transference aspect was undoubtedly the wish to avoid a meaningful emotional relationship.

This presented a technical challenge which I believe is present for many patients who need to make use of this primitive destructive narcissistic process of protecting themselves. For Karl, understanding in the transference was unbearable because to engage in a meaningful dialogue would submerge and destroy his fragile sense of self and identity. My attempts to understand him were experienced as a seduction into a relationship which he could not survive, a relationship which would destroy his vulnerable sense of self. He took flight from it into what he believed was a male world. The paradox, though, is that he found no escape as he again fell into the perverse universe of his mother. After all, she promised him cover for selling some stolen jewellery, thus giving him permission for his criminal activities. Karl felt confused, and did not understand when I pointed out to him the contradictions between his different projects: analysis and college on the one hand and his criminal career on the other. For him, they are equivalent, an illustration of a chaotic internal universe where there is no differentiation or separation.

At the time we were also able to examine the way in which the sessions he missed were like the stolen diamonds, especially as his treatment was subsidised by the Anna Freud Centre. The fact that I continued to see him or waited for him at each session was also experienced by him as my being like the collusive mother. The only avenue to me was that of carrying on attempting to put into words the many binds and paradoxes present in his analysis at the time.

These configurations have important implications for analytic technique. My challenges to his way of relating are experienced as the phallic mother taking over; this leads him to find an escape in a world where he feels surrounded by his male friends. There, however, the relationships are also filled with violent and murderous phantasies. If I leave a space between us, this is experienced as leaving him to the terror of sado-masochistic homosexual relationships. His response to the first could be murder, to the second, suicide.

In his analysis it has been possible to trace, in the vicissitudes of the transference, the contexts in which violent thoughts and behaviours surfaced. They were, each time, related to the terrifying anxiety about a breakdown in the emotional distance he attempted to maintain in the transference to me. He is afraid of becoming imprisoned and succumbing to what he experiences as his mother's wishes for him to have an exclusive relationship with her. The dilem-

mas for the transference are obvious, and he attempts to deal with his terror of me by carefully regulating his attendance and spending the time he was supposed to be at his sessions sleeping a sleep that is profound and dreamless. If there is an obvious sado-masochism implied in frequently keeping me waiting, and in the process of letting me know of the various criminal activities in which he is engaged in the outside world, I feel that the main function of all this is not to attack me, but to defend his very survival. For a long period of time, interpretation of affect had to precede interpretation of the terrifying phantasies.

An important aspect of working with such a violent patient is that it seems to me that a degree of 'acting out' is inevitably present during the process because of the actual threat of violence breaking into the consulting room (in the patient's mind such violence may be derived either from me or from him). I think that a great deal of intellectual understanding is progressively built up and goes ahead of the process, providing a kind of scaffolding that will allow enactments to be progressively brought into the consulting room. I learnt to know that in the periods when Karl was away from the sessions, an important process of trying to safeguard the analysis was taking place. It was important, therefore, to accept his pace. Each time when Karl came back, it was possible for us then to discuss the function of his absence.

As he finds himself wanting to relate to a woman, Karl is in a state of terror of the woman's poison, of her trickiness and perversion. His reaction is that of flight from the woman/analyst/girl, which leaves him feeling ashamed, humiliated and confused. He engages in criminal activities with his male friends but is then overtaken by an extreme state of anxiety about his homosexual feelings. He attempts to deal with them by aggression and violence, which again leave him frightened and persecuted. This configuration is present in many of his sessions: the primitive Oedipal anxieties and the oscillation, from which there is no escape.

In the following more detailed clinical material of sequences within sessions, some of the important themes connected to the core phantasy in violence will be illustrated: violence as a defence against overwhelming anxiety about abandonment, and violence as present in the relationship between a dangerous couple.

In the first session after the second summer break Karl spent the session telling me about a fight he had got involved in with a group of 'scientologists' who had opened an office 'next to his home'. They had been taking money from the girlfriend of a friend of his, and he had started a fight with them about it. Several of his friends had joined in, and their 'campaign' against the scientologists had involved threatening phone calls, letters and aggressive visits. He had spent a great deal of his holiday studying their ideas, after borrowing books from the local library, and said that they were really crazy. He told me that they had been founded by Hubbard, who has now died. He was worried

about the number of his 'heroes' in show business who had become scientologists, and mentioned Michael Jackson and Tom Cruise. 'They had to be stopped', he had said. I told him that his campaign against the scientologists during the holiday break had echoes of his feelings towards me and his analysis during the break. In my absence he had become afraid that psychoanalysis was something crazy and exploitative, and that analysts had to be stopped by someone. He then said that he himself had had vague thoughts about possible connections between the two. He mentioned that on one of the occasions he went to their offices he had become so nearly out of control that he was glad when the police arrived, because then he had pulled himself together. I related this to his relief about my coming back, and a 'policing' role that he also attributed to me.

On the following session, a Friday, he told me that at the beginning of the holiday he had kept a tape recorder by the side of his bed and recorded his dreams. Then they started to be more and more disturbing, and for a few days he could not remember them.

He said: 'I want to tell you about the first dream I had during the holiday, because it was so upsetting. It was with Freddie. It was so odd, I was speaking with a childish voice into the tape saying that Freddie had died. I do not know why. He has not died in reality and I have no idea as to why I would dream about him.' I wondered what came into his mind about him. Karl said: 'Freddie was the husband of my child minder when I was little. I used to go to them during the day in the year before I went to school because my parents had to work. I had not thought about them for ages. I remember that I used to spend a great deal of time with Freddie, and that he was so supportive, really encouraging. I remember telling him that the world was round, so that if you send something in a straight line, it would actually go out of orbit. He had been really impressed with that, for some reason. They had a son called Philip, who was a few years older. Philip once made a drawing which they had put in the kitchen, of a lonely man in the moon. I was really impressed by that drawing.' Karl then talked about going to school the following year and missing them very much. Philip gave him the drawing, which he had treasured. He then talked about not liking going to school, and finding it too big. 'You know, you felt like the lonely man in the moon, like the man in the drawing.' I said, 'I think that is the way you felt over the holiday too, missing me, like you missed Freddie when you went to school.' He said: 'I remember at the beginning of the holiday thinking that I could not discuss with you what was happening with the scientologists. But then I forgot about it.' I said: 'At the beginning of the holiday you could experience me like the supportive childminder's husband, who was supportive of your explorations. You were then afraid, however, that during the break I had died. You could not talk to me. You forgot about me. I think, because you experienced me as forgetting about you.'

He then remembered that they used to look at the atlas together, and that Freddie probably taught him about the continents. I said that he also

experienced me as helping him to explore his internal world, his internal continents. He said he sounded so childish in the tape, he could not recognise his voice and added that the violence in the dreams had also started to increase. Then Stephen, his friend, had taken the tape recorder away. I said that he was describing the violence in the dreams as connected with his anxiety about the childish voice and the child in him who missed Freddie and who missed me during the break. Stephen represented the part of him who wanted to get rid of the tape recorder because he was frightened of his increasing anxiety.

Karl then went back to talking about the scientologists, and what he and his friends had planned to do, such as planting a bomb in their office. He also went through an elaborate description of a kidnap plan. Karl also added that now he felt it belonged to another moment in time, and that he did not think they were going to do it any more. I interpreted to him: 'I think that when you feel that you miss me and the analysis you also get frightened of these feelings of dependence and you try to get rid of them by making plans which are full of violence. My absence makes you feel you are thrown back into this violent internal world. I then become like the scientologists, whom you experience as harming people. I think that you scare yourself with this violence, even if it makes you feel less vulnerable, at the same time.' (I also felt that he sounded more incoherent at that point, and that this incoherence was a consequence of the part of the session when we had made more contact.) He said that they were not going to do any of it any more. They had scared them enough. He laughed. It was time to finish.

A session a few months later provides a good example of his belief in the dangerous experience of the mother-analyst. Karl had missed the Monday session, because he had been unable to wake up for it. On Thursday he had started the session saying that he could not understand why he could not wake up to come to all his sessions. When he came he always felt better afterwards because he had learnt something new about himself. He wondered whether it was difficult to wake up because he was literally waking up 'to his mother' (she was the one who tried to wake him up), and that perhaps he should stay with a friend and see if anything different happened. I pointed out to him that this became a way of regulating his distance both from me and the analysis – he felt that he was waking up for his analyst as well as to his mother. Then he remembered fragments of a dream from the previous night. He had good feelings in this dream, and a sense of being where he wanted to be. He was visiting somewhere really foreign, the Incas, he said. That was all he could remember.

He continued that the Incas were a tribe in South America, or Central America. Then he asked me if I knew where they were from. He remembered that as a child he had gone on a trip to South America with his parents and sister. Venezuela was full of wildlife. He described the animals he saw, even at the airport. Then they visited the Andes, and went on a trip on the Orinoco River. He was, at the time, fascinated by the piranhas. He was amazed how

they could eat a whole man. He briefly described some of the fights between various animals he had read about in books and told me of his feelings that the piranha would beat all of them. He spoke about people being frightened of sharks, which he was not. There was something about piranhas, perhaps related to the disproportional size of their mouth in relation to their bodies. At the end of the trip his mother gave him a stuffed piranha. He was obsessed with them, read a lot about them, and at home gave a talk about the piranhas to his whole class.

I interpreted his description of his experience about this trip as containing some echoes of his experiences in his analysis. He felt it was like a trip to this far away place, into the wilderness of his mind, a place full of interesting wildlife, that attracted and excited him, but also frightened him. Although he knew about piranhas, he was frightened of them, like I think he was also frightened of me and the analysis. He needed to keep the sessions stuffed and dead – as when he was absent – otherwise they became dangerous to him. There was a great deal of elaboration on this theme, from him and from me. I felt this was the counterpart of the dream he had had a long time ago, of a crocodile eating Caroline, his first girlfriend. Unless he eats, he is eaten up, and this becomes his belief about relationships between people. He said that a month ago he was offered another stuffed piranha, this time an antique, from someone who had stolen some antiques. He had bought it for £10, but had kept it in a friend's house. He did not know where his other one was, perhaps hidden somewhere in the house. Now the two piranhas were a couple, and he could build a family. He spoke about crocodiles as being driven entirely by their drives, as well as terrapins. I felt he was frightened of experiencing both of us like piranhas, a mutually destructive homosexual couple. If my words were experienced by him as a source of understanding and containment, he was also afraid that I would take him over. Later in the session I pointed out to him that asking me if the Incas were from South America might express his wondering about where I came from.

### Comments

The first session after the holiday illustrates Karl's experience during the break when his father-analyst had left. He believed that he had been thrown into the chaotic maternal universe made up of the scientologists whose founder and father, Mr Hubbard, had died. The dream he had at the beginning of the holiday break, that Freddie had died, represented his equation between his analyst's absence and death. Karl activated violent thoughts and behaviour to deal with the terrifying feelings of being left to the scientologists, and attempted to find an alternative. In the letters he wrote to the scientologists during the holiday, he said that a new group, named 'The Sons of Hubbard' was being founded. The

analysis of the process in that session indicates that the experience of re-establishing a positive contact with me was also followed by incoherence towards the end of the session. In the subsequent session this process was more explicit. Karl was, at that point in his analysis, able to have dreams which provided markers of his experiences in the analysis. His conflict between his wish to explore his mind and his experiences in the relationship with his analyst, on the one hand, and his fear of his destructive self and the devouring analyst, on the other, gain symbolic representation in the shape of the piranha that he found during his trip to the wilderness of the Andes. In the following session he found refuge from his conflict in his account of violence between men. The multiple functions of his violence and the core phantasy attached to it are, nevertheless, accessible for our joint understanding: (a) violence creates an emotional distance from the analyst as the pre-Oedipal mother, as illustrated by the scientologists or the piranha; (b) it allows him to project outwards his destructive self; (c) it is an attempt to create a distance between him and the potentially violent patient-analyst couple as represented by the two piranhas; (d) it allows him to experience himself as being the creator of another 'movement', after the death of the father, which does not require a father. The 'sons of Hubbard' thus become an alternative to the movement founded by the father. I understand this experience as derivative of his phantasy of the primal scene, where there is only himself and his mother, and from which the father was excluded.

An aspect which is important to note in relation to these sessions is the pace of the interpretations, that is, the way in which the analyst periodically formulates interpretations after short segments of the patient's material. I have found that an important aspect of Karl's analysis is that long silences have tended not to be productive and are followed by more disorganised material. I thus find myself being more active in the session than I usually tend to be, making short interpretations at short intervals of time.

A segment of another session illustrates a transformation of the phantasy of a primal scene from which men are excluded. The following material became more completely understood only one year later. Karl had missed two sessions. When he came back he told me that it had taken him a few days to realise what had been happening in his mind. On Sunday he had read in the newspaper about a movement organised by women, from which men were excluded and in which women participated in sado-masochistic relationships which involved beatings and mutual torturing. The article had terrified him, and he had not realised why. It was only two days later that he suddenly realised that he was making a connection between that women's movement, me and the analysis. Then he had had a dream: he had followed a woman into the toilet and he suddenly realised that she had a nose in the shape of the penis. Nevertheless, he tried to get close to her, but was terrified and woke up.

One of the aspects we discussed in that session was his terror of this 'all women' sado-masochistic world, the analysis, where men did not have a place. *At this point*

in the analysis the images and the terrifying experiences have been brought to the centre of the transference relationship. It is important to observe too that Karl's insight into the process had to take place while he was absent from a number of sessions. He had needed distance from me in order to be able to think, although this, at the same time created a sense of omnipotence that 'he could do it on his own'. The phantasies underlying these dreams refer to a world that preceded any division between the sexes and where the dominant character is the 'primal parent' as representing the pre-Oedipal relationship to the mother, before the child has solved the riddle of the distinction between the parents (Shengold, 1991).<sup>3</sup>

#### Clinical material: Maria

The second example, which I will present more briefly, is derived from the analysis of a woman, whom I have discussed in another paper (L'ereberg, 1997). Maria is in her late fifties, and has been in analysis with me for several years. She is the oldest of two sisters and a brother and she feels that her younger sister was always her parents' favourite. She feels that throughout her childhood her mother was never available to her, being a withdrawn and cold woman, unable to show affection either emotionally or physically.

Progressively in her analysis we have gained access to a deep terror of her mother. She has vague memories of her mother leaning towards her, screaming at her and trying to throttle her. Maria turned to her father from very early on, seeking his love and support, but was bitterly hurt by the realisation that her mother always came first for him.

Her attempts to leave home when she was 18 years old failed, and she returned to live with her parents. She fell in love with Alex, a Frenchman on holiday in Britain and told me that although she felt very attracted to him sexually, she could not let him touch her. She describes herself as 'being turned on in a way from which there was no relief'. She 'turned herself inside out', feeling 'raw'. At the time she read in the newspaper about a man in the States who had raped and killed several women and said that she could well understand that someone could feel like raping and killing. She remembers feeling that the only way out for her was to cut her genitals. Progressively in her analysis her terror emerged that she might have done something to this man she loved, and it became clear that her breakdown was also a way of protecting him. In the following years she reached such a state of anxiety and neglect of herself that colleagues at college felt she might need psychiatric help. She cut

<sup>3</sup> The material being presented, crystallised in the dream of the woman with the nose in the shape of a penis may be related to several frames of reference in the literature, such as that of a 'combined object', i.e., the bad parents constantly fused in a dangerous intercourse, a terrifying persecutory fusion of man/woman (Klein, 1945) or the phallic woman (see especially Chasseguet-Smirgel, 1964).

her hair herself very short and walked about the campus unwashed and dressed in rags. She was given Valium but soon rebelled against the idea that she needed it. She finished college and embarked on a successful career. She did not get involved in a romantic relationship again.

She came to analysis because of her inability to form relationships but also presented several hypochondriac symptoms in various parts of her body which indicated failures in her capacity to mentalise (see Fonagy, 1991). During our sessions together, Maria embarked on long and repetitive monologues about the various pains in the parts of her body. On the first two anniversaries of the beginning of her analysis she suffered two major accidents, each of which might have killed her. These two accidents and the damage she believes they did to her body, along with the misunderstanding and cruelty with which she has felt treated by the various professionals who came in contact with her, constituted the manifest content of her analysis. The repetitive quality of her interactions with me was also relentless. My patient's sense of being misunderstood and not heard was profound. She spent most sessions on a raging crusade against almost everybody. The atmosphere in the sessions throughout the period of several months following each accident was of absolute terror and despair. We both felt for some time in her analysis that she was capable of violent behaviour either against me or herself. My experience was of profound precariousness. If I said too much, the risk was that she would actually attack me; if I left her too much on her own she might feel so despairing and abandoned that she could kill herself.

It was only gradually that we came to understand how this material contained the externalisation of the violence of her internal world. This violence, which she consistently turned against herself in the battering of her body with her many hypochondriac ailments and which was externalised in the two accidents she suffered, was frequently close to being enacted in the consulting room against me. Slowly Maria was able to put into words her wish to smash my head whenever I said something she felt she could not agree with. We have been able to understand these violent thoughts and impulses as her attempts to regulate a distance in relation to me, whenever she felt I was too close (being kind to her) or too distant (being cold and unloving). These thoughts have also expressed her belief that this is what a sexual relationship between a couple is about.

In the second dream she brought to analysis, a month into treatment, a huge block of concrete suddenly fell on top of three women. The women were completely flattened and then started to rush about crazily. Maria said it looked like a cartoon. She said it was a dream but it did not feel like a dream. She then said that perhaps this was what had happened to her when she was 18. In this session we talked about her experience that this had not felt like a dream because it was so integral to the way she felt – that she had lost her feelings and her three-dimensionality and had become flattened. It was also her experience of feeling disconnected from herself in the present, and of her way of relating to me, of flattening me in the sessions.

This dream which 'had not felt like a dream' took on another layer of meaning, expressing a terror that she was going to be 'hit' by the analysis and would not be able to cope. Perhaps, too, the three women represented herself, her mother and the analyst, all flattened out of recognition.

Another example of her experience that relationships between people were bound to be violent encounters is derived from a dream she brought some four years into her analysis. In this dream, she had stuck a knife into an adder, which she explained was the only poisonous snake in Britain. She remembered that she saw one when she went to the zoo with her parents and they had spent some time together in the snake house. Other associations led me to interpret her fear of the poisonous strength of her rage and her capacity to provoke other people to attack her; she was terrified of what she might provoke in me. This was an image of a primal couple, who were both lethal. I then said that this was what she believed happened in the consulting room between us, that it was like the snake house.

In the course of Maria's analysis I have been able to understand that the two accidents she suffered during her treatment were concrete representations of the damage that can happen in the encounter between two people, of the destructive violence of the couple. As the analysis progressed, however, it also became clear that this was her belief about her early relationship with her mother. My suggestion is that these different time dimensions – the pre-genital relationship with the mother and the primal scene – not only became condensed into one in her mind in terms of *après coup*, but later became re-enacted in other relationships. As we have come to understand in her transference to me, she has had to distance herself from people she loves because of her terror that she might have to murder them.

### Discussion

In the analysis of my patients it has been possible to identify the specific points in the transference where violent thoughts and behaviour occurred. They were, each time, attempts to create an emotional distance in the relationship with the analyst. My hypothesis is that they relate to a *core phantasy* both about their primary relationships with their mothers and about their phantasies about the primal scene, that is, the original act which created them as individuals.

#### The oscillations in the primal scene phantasies

In a session when he had started to talk more about his childhood Karl made a slip and said: 'The problem with my stepfather is that he cannot bear the thought

that he was not present when I was conceived. There were only me and my mother, he was not there.' Karl is thus expressing a phantasy of being present at his own conception, from which his (step)father was excluded. This leaves him experiencing himself as living in a world where only he and his mother existed from the beginning, a world in which he feels treated as an extension of her desires. After all, he felt that she would have wanted him to be a little girl or gay, because gay people, she felt, never left their mothers. Karl believes that his mother supported his beliefs and that she too stressed his biological father's absence from his conception.

Although Karl acknowledged his slip about the absence of his father from his conception at the time he made it, it was only a few months later when a dream allowed us to bring that belief fully into the transference that he understood the implication of his beliefs. In that subsequent session, we had fuller material in the transference and I was able to point out to him again that he experienced himself as having had no father. In a dream he presented at that session he was searching for his father, but was again presented with his mother. He felt enclosed in a world created by his mother or by his analyst, where he experienced any questions about his father as being blocked. Karl stated that it was such a powerful thought, that it was odd but he indeed had never really thought of himself as having a biological father. He said that he was in contact with his paternal grandmother, but he had never linked her to his biological father. It was as if she was on the side of his mother's family too. She had told Karl that his father had been violent towards her and that he had turned her off men for ever. In that same session Karl said that he felt that he had just reached an understanding that was going to change his life. I think that he was right because it marked an important turning point in his analysis and he has since been able to come to his sessions more consistently.

In the next phase of his analysis, Karl was able to tell me about something unbearable that he felt he had had to carry in his mind throughout his life. This was his belief that his mother engaged in violent sexual activities. He had a 'memory' that he had never told anyone before of seeing her spanking his sister. He had come home unexpectedly one day and had 'heard the spanking noises'. He felt that he had surprised his mother spanking his sister in a sexual way and that they both had looked guiltily at him. They had never mentioned the incident again but he remembers still the 'look' in his mother's face when she saw him. He became very frightened of his mother, especially as she had told him that she wished he would never leave home. His account of the look reminded me of the wolf man, and I understood this 'look' as the expression of Karl's projections of his own desires and identifications. As Freud said in relation to the attentive looking of the wolves in the dream: 'The attentive looking, which in the dream was ascribed to the wolves, should rather be shifted on to him' (1918, p. 34). In subsequent sessions Karl's account seemed to oscillate between referring to this as a memory and also

feeling confused about what he had actually seen. The 'look' became the clearest evidence he had for this account.

Wollheim has pointed out the connection between imagination and desire. In discussing Freud's paper 'A child is being beaten' he points out Freud's suggestion that the problem patients may have in describing what they have imagined is a difficulty in recognising their desires (1984, p. 96). Thus one can identify the oscillation in Karl's different phantasies in this period of his analysis between an image of a sado-masochistic interaction between his mother and father, brought to the analysis at the very first consultation, a sadistic interaction between him and his father, and a sadistic interaction between his mother and his sister. I think their order of appearance in the analysis may be a reversal of their chronological order, from a phantasy of an exclusive relationship with his mother, homosexual phantasies towards mother but identifying himself with a little girl, to a more potentially heterosexual phantasy. In the transference these phantasies oscillated and the oscillations seem to me to be transformations which express different desires for heterosexuality and for a homosexual encounter in the primal scene. They also indicate contradictory beliefs. Thus the belief that his father was not present in his conception exists side by side with the belief that the intercourse between his mother and father was violent.

Having tracked this observation in the transference, I turned to the literature to look for further definitions on the theme of violence. As discussed in my review of the literature (chapter 1), I identified that Freud did not seem to be aware that he used the word 'violence' mainly in connection with the primal scene.

### The function of violence: hypothesis

In the course of his analysis, we have been able to reconstruct Karl's terror of his mother. Throughout his late adolescence and young adulthood Karl engaged in violent sexual interactions with women, where penetration was absent, but where he enacted a sense of power and control. This violence, as we have come to understand, represented an attempt to create a shield against his terror of women. These violent encounters became progressively out of control when he was at university. He ended up spanking his girlfriend in such a way that they both became frightened and ran away from each other, which led Karl to come back to London. Another example of this experience of a shield, now in interactions with men, was present in a session when he told me how, after being involved in a violent scene with other young men he had experienced himself as immune to everything. He described the way in which he was wearing just a tee-shirt in freezing weather, when everybody else around him was wearing jumpers. He had felt completely immune to the cold and to the three youths whom he had defied.



As we have also been able to reconstruct in Maria's analysis, she too experiences her father as having abandoned her, but to a cold, cruel and sadistic mother who was unable to relate to her. She also believes that her father raped her mother, and that this was how she was conceived. Maria's first and only sexual relationship with a man is described by her as a rape in which she went out with a boyfriend but 'froze up' when they had intercourse and ended up being forced to submit to him. Both these patients believe that their parents, specially their mothers, supported their beliefs in the violence of sexual intercourse. Karl feels that his mother has consistently stressed to him, in ways which he often experienced as enticing and seducing, the violence in her sexual relationships, whereas Maria thinks her mother led her to believe that sexual relationships were about men raping women. Maria's first dream at the beginning of her analysis – the block of cement which fell on top of three women who were flattened and started to run around crazily like cartoon characters – became paradigmatic in her analysis, also indicating the violent homosexual configuration of her pre-Oedipal experience. Both these patients enacted their beliefs in the violence of the primal scene in the violence of their own sexual interactions and both felt that they had to retreat from sexual relationships. Recently Karl had what he called the 'first penetrative intercourse' in his life. Both their analyses were characterised by the ways in which they retreated from the analytic encounter: Karl in his consistent absence at the beginning, Maria in the endless monologues, and the various professionals she sought to help her with her numerous bodily pains. The analytical task, which involved a great deal of frustration, anguish and fear was to attempt to carry on interpreting the process, as I understood it, to my patients, that is, to try to put into words what was for them still so much in the domain of action.

Glasser has suggested the notion of a 'core complex' to indicate a conflict between on the one hand an intense longing for indissoluble union with the object, which, however, leaves the individual with a fear of being merged and annihilated on the other. In the pervert, Glasser adds, the father is emotionally, if not geographically, absent. Glasser has also distinguished between self-preservative violence and sadism or malicious violence (1985). Meloy (1992) has also suggested a distinction between 'predatory violence' and 'affective violence'. The former is encountered in psychopathic characters, and is violence that is planned, purposeful and emotionless. The latter is a reaction to a specific threat, closer to Glasser's 'self-preservative violence'. What is implied in both 'self-preservative violence' and 'affective violence' is the phantasy attached to the violence, which is the issue I explore in this chapter. I think that Karl's violence can be subsumed under both these categories of 'self-preservative violence' and 'affective violence'. I have suggested that the core phantasy in violence for both my patients is that the primal scene is an act of violence and that the relationship to the pre-Oedipal mother is also engulf-

ing and violent.<sup>4</sup> These phantasies have been developed in a context where their beliefs seemed to correspond to their actual parents to some extent. This idea links with what Wollheim designates as a 'disposition'. Wollheim suggests that when certain events occur in a person's life, the experience of these events establishes a mental disposition, a mnemonic disposition, which has a psychic force (1984, p. 131). The effect is the obtrusion of the past into the present, which at times can become tyrannical. Thus I think that for both these patients, their phantasies about their primary relationships with their mothers and about the primal scene reverberate in their actual experiences of their primary relationships.

I would like to discuss the alternation between maternal and paternal functions in the transference. Conceptually, I understand my patients' violence as a defence against an object which is experienced as terrifying and dangerous, and as an attempt to create an equilibrium where they do not feel either too separate from or too overwhelmed by this object. I feel, however, that when the analyst formulates interpretations – of whatever kind – she is inaugurating something for the patient, independently of the content of the interpretation. The analyst introduces differentiations and separations into a territory previously more chaotic and undifferentiated. The theories present in the analyst's formulations are thus not there, present in the mind of the patient, available to be uncovered, but become constructions made by both the analyst and the patient in the analytic process. In this process, the analyst is by definition creating the paternal function and breaking up the phantasy of a fusion with the mother. When the patients reject these interpretations, in the process of

<sup>4</sup> A recurrent connection between aggressive behaviour and primal scene phantasies is found in the literature about children, adolescents and young adults. In his analysis of the Rat Man, Freud interpreted the violence of the patient's dreams as defensive attempts to cope with his sexual wishes and castration fears within an Oedipal framework (see also Crocker, 1955; Bonnet, 1986; Shengold, 1989; Grotstein, 1982). Authi (1982) has suggested that the theme of murder in detective novels is unconsciously motivated by traumatic primal scene experiences. Quoting from a personal communication by Dr Anna Katan, Greenacre (1950) suggests that children who have repeatedly witnessed primal scenes may be drawn into participating in them by the parents. This may increase the scopophilic-exhibitionistic elements of their character (p. 461). In a moving account of the analytic treatment of a violent adolescent, Letarte (1987) indicates how the violence was understood in terms of the patient's phantasies about her origins. She emphasises the relevance of reconstructive interpretations in the analysis of this adolescent. Harris and Pontius (1975) point out that acts of dismemberment attempt to disintegrate a primary object representation in order to reconstitute it in a more meaningful way. Their paper is derived from written documents and interviews with two men who had been committed to prison for violent murders. Biven (1994) suggests the idea of a 'tableau' as a scene left by some murderers after their murder. Biven suggests that these are coded screen events, 'nonverbal inanimate communications, largely unconscious' expressing a massive perversion compromise formation and attempting to mask childhood trauma. The tableau expresses the dehumanising principle by obliterating any humanity in both the self and the object.

working through, are they then not, by definition, attempting to reinstate the fusion with his mother? Thus the paradox is that if violence, on the one hand, is an attempt to create a separate space where the patient can survive, it at the same time reinforces the experience of being locked up in a chaotic world with their mothers.

I am aware that an important difference between these two patients is that Karl has actually been violent towards other people, whereas Maria has not. Nevertheless, she differs from many other patients I have had in analysis who have either had violent dreams or expressed violent conscious thoughts against me in that at a specific period in her analysis both Maria and I knew that she was close to actually attacking me in the consulting room. Since the beginning of his analysis, Karl has not been as involved in violence as he had been previously.

When Karl is locked up in dreamless states of sleep and does not come to the sessions, is it not the paternal function performed by the analytic process itself, independently of anything I say, that Karl is rejecting? When he gets into violent fights with his male friends, could these fights be understood as attempts to eliminate the males, and in the transference, the paternal function of the analytic process itself? His longing – and also his terror – is of fulfilling the phantasy of being in a special and unique relationship with an idealised mother. I emphasise the idea of *fulfilling a phantasy* and not of regression because the phantasy was never a reality. The father as a 'given' was, after all, present from the beginning. The other aspect involved in his fights, however, is that of reaching a special relationship with these men, and in that sense it is a homosexual phantasy that is being enacted.

When Maria is locked up in her endless monologues about the state of her body and the many symptoms she experiences, is it not the engulfing relationship with her mother that she too is expressing? In Maria's internal world men and women had stereotyped representations: the women – like herself – seemed to be lifeless and frozen, unable to relate and produce warmth, leading lives in which men were non-existent or worthless and violent towards women. In the analysis the alternative has been either to keep me as a dead object, frozen and unable to think, or as an object that contains passion, but would be experienced as violent in my attempt to get close (in parallel with her alternating between coldness and violence). Any aliveness seemed to represent an inauguration of a violent relationship with me. In her analysis Maria has relentlessly and sadistically projected on to me her rage at feeling unloved as well as her terror of me. At the same time, she cannot experience differentiation because this means being in touch with an inner reality where the stress is on violence and murderous encounters between two separate people. I would either be experienced as unloving and cruel, in which case she would feel like murdering me, or as kind, in which case she would be possessed by thoughts of violence against me because she feared I would take her over. She has attempted either to contain these contradictory experiences in a relationship with her own body

which has thus been characterised by violence and fragmentation, or to project them outside, as in her experience of the two accidents, which were also violent encounters. She has persisted in encountering an external world that she experienced as dangerous and violent towards her. Her analysis has consisted of a slow process through which we have attempted to understand her profound terror of both fusion with and differentiation from me since she feared she could only find in me a mirror of herself.

Both these patients feel unable to enter a three-dimensional world, which is experienced as violent and dangerous, and they attempt to retreat into a two-person relationship, which in turn is also dangerous and engulfing. Both found it difficult to differentiate between their state of mind and that of the other person, and to think about other people as having separate minds (see Fonagy, 1991, Fonagy and Target, 1994). This led, in both cases, to a dehumanisation of the other and of themselves. Both retreat into a dehumanised and robotic world. Karl's initial dreams in his analysis pointed to his experiencing himself as a machine or a computer involved in dangerous and violent games. Maria experienced herself as possessing a psychotic body, full of bits that attacked and ached. She attempted to hold herself together by becoming a piece of concrete, which she then attempted to drop on her analyst and herself.

I would suggest that it is ultimately the phantasy of the mother's body which both Karl and Maria attempt to get rid of in their violent attacks, a mother who is experienced as not only in possession of my patients' bodies, but also of their intellectual and affective experiences. The violent act is, ultimately, an attempt to destroy the obstacle imposed by the other's existence.

Thus violence, for my patients, has had the function of allowing them to believe that they have created a space in which they can survive in the face of an object who is experienced as terrifying. There is a pattern in which violence is exercised, a *plot* or *narrative*, which allows the underlying phantasy to be identified. This condensed unconscious narrative functions as a screen memory for a childhood 'event' (actual or phantasised) and an explanation formulated by the individual about his existence. Violence is, thus, a communication about these patients' belief systems about themselves, about their relationships with others and, I think, about their origins. The violent act or phantasy tells a story, which is their personal myth of creation and contains both pre-Oedipal and distorted Oedipal theories. The function of the analytic process is to follow the chains of associations as manifested and enacted in the transference and to construct this narrative of origins.

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## Introduction to chapter 5

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In 'Narcissism and its relation to violence and suicide' Anthony Bateman suggests that thin-skinned and thick-skinned narcissistic states as described by Rosenfeld (1987) may be associated with self-destructive and violent impulses respectively. In Bateman's view these are dynamic rather than fixed states although both facilitate temporary stability. Patients may oscillate between the two states, and it is at the point of such movement that enactments of violence and suicide become more likely, since such oscillation results in identity diffusion, which in turn may lead to suicide or violence in an attempt to regain the self and/or to separate from the other. Bateman also believes that interpretation is most likely to be effective at moments of transition from one state of narcissism to the other. He is in agreement with Perelberg's formulation that violence (and, he adds, suicide) are attempts to create a space in the relationship with an object which is experienced as intrusive and terrifying.

Violence is more likely if an individual tries to regain stability and separateness through refuge in a thick-skinned state; suicide occurs if the individual seeks solace through a thin-skinned state. In agreement with Campbell, Fonagy and Target, and Perelberg, Bateman suggests that the underlying phantasy of both actions may be the same, namely, an attack in phantasy on the body of the mother. These attacks are possible because the self or the body becomes identified with a hated other. In his formulation, as in the other chapters in this collection, the role of the father is also emphasised as fundamental in enabling the creation of a triangular space in the relationship with the mother.

Bateman discusses a woman patient in whom a thin-skinned state incorporated self-destructive impulses which were held at bay only so long as the analyst was believed in phantasy to be meeting all her desires and needs. Breakdown of the thin-skinned state after an analytic holiday led to recognition of the underlying thick-skinned state which harboured violence. The patient became defensively identified with the powerful aspect of her mother, attempting to tyrannise over