

Personification in the Play of Children

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In an earlier paper¹ I gave an account of some of the mechanisms which I have found in my analysis of children to be fundamental in their play. I pointed out that the specific content of their play, which recurs again and again in the most varied forms, is identical with the nucleus of the masturbation-phantasies and that it is one of the principal functions of children's play to provide a discharge for these phantasies. Further, I discussed the very considerable analogy which exists between the means of representation used in play and in dreams and the importance of wish-fulfilment in both forms of mental activity I also drew attention to one principal mechanism in games in which different characters are invented and allotted by the child. My object in the present paper is to discuss this mechanism in more detail and also to illustrate by a number of examples of different types of illness the relation between the 'characters' or personifications introduced by them into these games and the element of wish-fulfilment.

My experience so far is that schizophrenic children are not capable of play in the proper sense. They perform certain monotonous actions, and it is a laborious piece of work to penetrate from these to the Ucs. When we do succeed, we find that the wish-fulfilment associated with these actions is pre-eminently the negation of reality and the inhibition of phantasy. In these extreme cases no 'characters' ever appear.

In the case of my little patient, Erna, who was six years old when we began the treatment, a severe obsessional neurosis marked a paranoia which was revealed after a considerable amount of analysis. In her play Erna often made me be a child, while she was the mother or a teacher. I then had to undergo fantastic tortures and humiliations. If in the game anyone treated me kindly, it generally turned out that the kindness was only simulated. The paranoid symptoms showed in the fact that I was constantly spied upon, people divined my thoughts, and the father or teacher allied themselves with the mother against me—in fact, I was always surrounded with persecutors. I myself, in

1 'The Psychological Principles of Infant Analysis,' this JOURNAL, Vol. VIII, 1927, p. 25.

2 I hope before long to publish a book in which a more detailed account of this case-history will be found.

the rôle of the child, had constantly to spy upon and torment the others. Often Erna herself played the part of the child. Then the game generally ended in her escaping the persecutions (on these occasions the 'child' was good), becoming rich and powerful, being made a queen and taking a cruel revenge on her persecutors. After her sadism had spent itself in these phantasies, apparently unchecked by any inhibition (all this came about after we had done a good deal of analysis), reaction would set in in the form of deep depression, anxiety and bodily exhaustion. Her play then reflected her incapacity to bear this tremendous oppression, which manifested itself in a number of serious symptoms.² In these final phantasies all the rôles engaged could be fitted into one formula: that of two principal parts—the

persecuting super-ego and the id or ego, as the case might be, threatened, but by no means less cruel.

In these games the wish-fulfilment lay principally in Erna's endeavour to identify herself with the stronger party, in order thus to master her dread of persecution. The hard-pressed ego tried to influence or deceive the super-ego, in order to prevent its overpowering the id, as it threatened to do. The ego tried to enlist the highly sadistic id in the service of the super-ego and to make the two combine in the fight with a common enemy. This necessitated extensive use of the mechanisms of projection and displacement. When Erna played the part of the cruel mother, the naughty child was the enemy; when she herself was the child who was persecuted but soon became powerful the enemy was represented by the wicked parents. In each case there was a motive, which could be made to appear quite plausible to the super-ego, for indulging in unrestrained sadism. By the terms of this agreement the super-ego was to take action against the enemy as though against the id. The id, however, in secret, naturally pursued its predominantly sadistic gratification, the objects being the primal ones. Such narcissistic satisfaction as accrued to the ego through its victory over foes both without and within helped also to appease the super-ego and thus was of considerable value in diminishing anxiety. This compact between the two forces may in less extreme cases be relatively successful: it may not be noticeable to the outside world nor lead to an outbreak of illness. But in Erna's case it broke down completely because of the excessive sadism of both id and super-ego. Thereupon

- 194 -

the ego joined forces with the super-ego and tried by punishing the id to extract a certain gratification, but this in its turn was naturally a failure. Reactions of intense anxiety and remorse set in again and again, showing that none of these contradictory wish-fulfilments could be sustained for long.

The next example shows how difficulties analogous to Erna's were dealt with differently in certain particulars.

George, who at the time was six years old, brought me for months on end a series of phantasies in which he, as the mighty leader of a band of savage huntsmen and wild animals, fought, conquered and cruelly put to death his enemies, who also had wild beasts to support them. The animals were then devoured. The battle never came to an end as new enemies always appeared. A considerable course of analysis had revealed in this child not only neurotic but markedly paranoiac traits. George had always consciously³ felt himself surrounded and threatened (by magicians, witches and soldiers), but, in contrast to Erna, he had tried to defend himself against them by the aid of helping figures, also, it is true, highly phantastic creatures.

The wish-fulfilment in his phantasies was to some extent analogous to that in Erna's play. In George's case too the ego tried to ward off anxiety by identifying itself with the stronger party in phantasies of being great. Again, George too endeavoured to change the enemy into a 'bad' enemy, in order to appease the super-ego. In him, however, sadism was not such an overpowering factor as in Erna, and so the primary sadism underlying his anxiety was less artfully concealed. His ego identified itself more thoroughly with the id and was less ready to make terms with the super-ego. Anxiety was warded off by a noticeable exclusion of reality.⁴ Wish-fulfilment clearly predominated over recognition of reality—a tendency which is one of Freud's criteria of psychosis. The fact that in George's phantasies parts were played by *helpful figures* distinguished his type of personifications from that of Erna's play.

Three principal parts were represented in his games: that of the id and those of the super-ego in its persecuting and its helpful aspects.

3 Like so many children, George had invariably kept the content of his anxiety a secret from those around him. Nevertheless he clearly bore the impress of it.

4 As George had developed, this withdrawal from reality became more and more marked in him. He was completely enmeshed in his phantasies.

- 195 -

The play of a child with a severe obsessional neurosis may be illustrated by the following game of my little patient, Rita, aged two and three-quarters. After a ceremonial which was plainly obsessional, her doll was tucked up to go to sleep and an elephant was placed by the doll's bed. The idea was that the elephant should prevent the 'child' from getting up; otherwise the latter would steal into its parent's bedroom and either do them some harm or take something away from them. The elephant (a father-imago) was to act the part of a person who *prevents*. In Rita's mind her father, by a process of introjection, already filled this rôle, ever since, at the time she was a year and a quarter to two years old, she had wished to usurp her mother's place with him, to steal away the child with which her mother was pregnant and to injure and castrate both parents. The reactions of rage and anxiety which took place when the 'child' was punished in these games showed that in her own mind Rita was enacting both parts: that of the authorities who inflicted punishment and that of the child who received it.

The only wish-fulfilment apparent in this game lay in the fact that the elephant succeeded for a time in preventing the 'child' from getting up. There were only the two characters: that of the doll, which embodied the id, and that of the deterring elephant, which represented the super-ego. The wish-fulfilment consisted in the defeat of the id by the super-ego. This wish-fulfilment and the allotting of the action to *two* characters are interdependent, for the game represents the struggle between super-ego and id which in severe neuroses almost entirely dominates the mental processes. In Erna's games too we saw the same personifications, consisting of the influence of a dominating super-ego and the absence of any helpful imagos. But while in Erna's play the wish-fulfilment lay in the compact with the super-ego, and in George's mainly in the id's defiance against the super-ego (by means of withdrawal from reality), in Rita it consisted in the defeat of the id by the super-ego. It was owing to the analysis which had already been done that this hardly maintained supremacy of the super-ego was possible at all. The excessive severity of the super-ego at first hindered all phantasy, and it was not until the super-ego became less severe that Rita began to play phantasy-games of the sort described. Compared with the preceding stage in which play was completely inhibited, this was progress, for now the super-ego did not *merely threaten* in a meaningless and terrifying way but tried with menaces to *prevent* the forbidden actions. The unsuccessful compromise

5 Rita suffered from an obsessional neurosis unusual at her age. It was characterized by a complicated sleep-ceremonial and other grave obsessional symptoms. My experience is that when little children suffer from such illnesses, which bear the stamp of obsessional neurosis as we see it in adults, it is very serious. On the other hand, isolated

obsessional features in the general picture of neurosis in children are, I think, a regular phenomenon.

- 196 -

between the super-ego and the id gave place to that forcible suppression of instinct which consumes the subject's whole energy and is characteristic of severe obsessional neurosis in adults.⁵

Let us now consider a game which originated in a less serious phase of obsessional neurosis. Later on in Rita's analysis (when she had reached the age of three), a 'journey-game,' which went on through nearly the whole analysis, took the following form. Rita and her toy bear (who then represented the penis) went in a train to see a good woman who was to entertain them and given them presents. At the beginning of this part of the analysis this happy ending was generally spoiled. Rita wanted to drive the train herself and get rid of the driver. He, however, either refused to go or came back and threatened her. Sometimes it was a bad woman who hindered the journey, or when they got to the end they found not a good woman but a bad one. The difference between the wish-fulfilment in these cases (much disturbed as it is) and that in the cases I mentioned earlier is obvious. In this game the libidinal gratification is positive and sadism does not play so prominent a part in it as in the earlier examples. The 'characters', as in George's case, consist of three principal rôles: that of the ego or the id, that of a person who helps and that of a person who threatens or frustrates.

The helping figures thus invented are mostly of an extremely phantastic type, as the example of George shows. In the analysis of a boy of four-and-a-half there appeared a 'fairy-mamma', who used to come at night and bring nice things to eat, which she shared with the little boy. The food stood for the father's penis, which she had secretly stolen from him. In another analysis the fairy-mamma used to heal with a magic wand all the wounds which the boy's harsh parents had inflicted on him; then he and she together killed these harsh parents in some cruel way.

I have come to realize that the operation of such imagos, with phantastically good and phantastically bad characteristics, is a general

⁶ We have an example of this in the phantastic belief in a God who would assist in the perpetration of every sort of atrocity (as lately as in the recent war, in order to destroy the enemy and his country).

⁷ In my two latest papers I had come to the conclusion that in both sexes the turning away from the mother as an oral love-object results from the oral frustrations undergone through her and that the mother who frustrates persists in the child's mental life as the mother who is feared. I would refer here to Radó, who traces to the same source the splitting-up of the mother-imago into a good and a bad mother and makes it the basis of his views about the genesis of melancholia. ('The Problem of Melancholia,' this JOURNAL, Vol. IX, 1928, p. 420.)

- 197 -

mechanism in adults as well as children.⁶ These figures represent intermediate stages between the terrible menacing super-ego, which is wholly divorced from reality and the identifications

which approximate more closely to reality. These intermediate figures, whose gradual evolution into the maternal and paternal helpers (who are nearer again to reality) may constantly be observed in play-analyses, and seem to me very instructive for our knowledge of the formation of the super-ego. My experience is that at the onset of the Oedipus conflict and the start of its formation the super-ego is of a tyrannical character, formed on the pattern of the pre-genital stages, which are then in the ascendant. The influence of the genital has already begun to make itself felt, but at first it is hardly perceptible. The further evolution of the super-ego towards genitality depends ultimately upon whether the prevailing oral fixation has taken the form of sucking or of biting. *The primacy of the genital phase in relation both to sexuality and to the super-ego requires a sufficiently strong fixation to the oral-sucking stage.* The further from the pregenital levels both the development of the super-ego and the libidinal development progress towards the genital level, the more closely to the figures of the real parents will the phantastic, wish-fulfilling identifications (whose source is the image of a mother who furnishes oral gratification⁷) approximate.

The imagos adopted in this early phase of ego-development bear the stamp of the pregenital instinctual impulses, although they are actually constructed on the basis of the real Oedipus objects. These early levels are responsible for the phantastic imagos which devour, cut to pieces, and overpower and in which we see a mixture of the various pregenital impulses at work. Following the evolution of the libido, these imagos are introjected under the influence of the libidinal fixation-points. But the super-ego as a whole is made up of the

8 Fenichel, in his account of my contributions to the problem of super-ego formation (*Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse*, Bd. XIV, S. 596), is not correct in assuming that I hold that the development of the super-ego terminates in the second or third year of life. In my writings I have suggested that the formation of the super-ego and the development of the libido terminate simultaneously.

9 The further the analysis progresses the less powerful does the influence of the threatening figures become and the more strongly and lastingly do the wish-fulfilling figures appear in play; at the same time there is a proportionate increase in the desire to play and in the satisfactoriness of the ending of the games. Pessimism has diminished: optimism has increased.

10 Children often have quite a range of parent-figures, from the terrifying 'Giant-mummy', 'Squashing-mummy' up to the all-bountiful 'Fairy-mummy'. I also meet with a 'Medium-mummy' or a 'Three-quarters-mummy', who represent a compromise between the other extreme examples.

- 198 -

various identifications adopted on the different levels of development whose stamp they bear. When the latency-period sets in, the development of both super-ego and libido terminates.⁸ Already during the process of its construction the ego employs its tendency to synthesis by endeavouring to form a whole out of these various identifications. The more extreme and sharply contrasting the imagos, the less successful will be the synthesis and the more difficult will it be to maintain it. The immensely strong influence exerted by these extreme types of imagos, the intensity of the need for the kindly figures in opposition to the menacing, the rapidity with which allies will change into enemies (which is also the

reason why the wish-fulfilment in play so often breaks down)—all this indicates that the process of synthesizing the identifications has failed. This failure manifests itself in the ambivalence, the tendency to anxiety, the lack of stability or the readiness with which this is overthrown, and the defective relation to reality characteristic of neurotic children.⁹ The necessity for a synthesis of the super-ego arises out of the difficulty experienced by the subject in coming to an understanding with a super-ego made up of imagos of such opposite natures.¹⁰ When the latency period sets in and the demands of reality are increased, the ego makes even greater efforts to effect a synthesis of the super-ego, in order that on this basis a balance may be struck between super-ego, id and reality.

I have come to the conclusion that this splitting of the super-ego into the primal identifications introjected at different stages of development is a mechanism analogous to and closely connected with

- 199 -

projection. I believe these mechanisms (splitting-up and projection) are a principal factor in the tendency to personification in play. By their means the synthesis of the super-ego, which can be maintained only with more or less effort, can be given up for the time being and, further, the tension of maintaining the truce between the super-ego as a whole and the id is diminished. The intrapsychic conflict thus becomes less violent and can be displaced into the external world. The pleasure gained thereby is increased when the ego discovers that this displacement into the external world affords it various real proofs that the psychic processes, with their cathexis of anxiety and guilt, may have a favourable issue and anxiety be greatly reduced.

I have already mentioned that in play the child's attitude to reality reveals itself. I want now to make clear how the attitude to reality is related to the factors of wish-fulfilment and personification which we have so far used as our criterion of the mental situation.

In Erna's analysis it was for a long time impossible to establish a relation to reality. There seemed to be no bridge over the gulf which separated the loving and kindly mother of real life and the monstrous persecutions and humiliations which 'she' inflicted on the child in play. But, when the analysis reached the stage in which the paranoiac traits became more prominent, there was an increasing number of details which reflected the real mother in a grotesquely distorted form. At the same time there was revealed the child's attitude to reality, which had, to be sure, undergone much displacement. With a remarkably keen faculty of observation Erna took in all the details of the actions and motives of those around her, but in *an unreal way* she worked all these into her system of being persecuted and spied upon. For instance, she believed that intercourse between her parents (which she imagined as invariably taking place whenever her parents were alone) and all the tokens of their mutual affection were mainly prompted by her mother's wish to excite jealousy in her (Erna). She assumed the same motive in all her mother's pleasures and, indeed, in everybody's enjoyment, especially in the case of women. They wore pretty clothes to cause her chagrin and so on. But she was conscious that there was something peculiar in these ideas of hers and took great care to keep them secret.

In George's play the isolation from reality was, as I have already said, considerable. Rita's play also, in the first part of the analysis, when the threatening and punishing imagos were in the ascendant, showed scarcely any relation to reality. Let us now consider that

- 200 -

relation as revealed in the second part of Rita's analysis. We may regard it as typical of neurotic children, even of children rather older than Rita. In her play at this period there appeared, in contrast to the attitude of the paranoiac child, the tendency to recognize reality only in so far as it related to the frustrations which she had undergone but never got the better of.

We may compare here the extensive withdrawal from reality which was revealed in George's play. It afforded him great freedom in his phantasies, which were liberated from the sense of guilt just because they were so remote from reality. In his analysis every step forward in adaptation to reality involved the releasing of large quantities of anxiety and the stronger repression of phantasies. It was always a great advance in the analysis¹¹ when this repression was, in its turn, lifted and the phantasies became free in their relation to reality as well.

Neurotic children have to make a compromise. A very limited amount of reality is recognized; the rest is denied. At the same time there is extensive repression of the masturbation-phantasies, which the sense of guilt inhibits, and the result is the inhibition in play and learning which is so common in these children. The obsessional symptom in which they take refuge (at first, in play) reflects the compromise between the extensive inhibition of phantasy and the defective relation to reality and affords on this basis only the most limited forms of gratification.

The play of normal children shows a better balance between phantasy and reality.

I will now summarize the different attitudes to reality revealed in the play of children suffering from various types of illness. In paraphrenia there is the most extensive repression of phantasy and withdrawal from reality. In paranoiac children the relation to reality is subordinated to the lively workings of phantasy, the balance between the two being weighted on the side of *unreality*. The experiences which neurotic children represent in their play are obsessively coloured by

¹¹ Such an advance was always accompanied also by a considerable increase in the capacity for sublimation. The phantasies, released from the sense of guilt, could now be sublimated in a manner more in accordance with reality. I may say here that the results of analysis in children far surpass what analysis can accomplish in adults in the way of increased capacity for sublimation. Even in quite little children we constantly see that, when the sense of guilt is taken away, new sublimations appear and those which already exist are strengthened.

their need for punishment and their dread of an unhappy issue. Normal children, however, are able to master reality in better ways. Their play shows that they have more power to influence and live out reality in conformity with their phantasies. Moreover, where they cannot alter the real situation they are better able to bear it, because their freer phantasy provides them with a refuge from it and also because the fuller discharge that they have for their masturbation-phantasies in an ego-syntonic form (play and other sublimations) gives them greater opportunities of gratification.

Let us now review the relation between the attitude to reality and the processes of personification and wish-fulfilment. In the play of normal children these latter processes testify to the stronger and more lasting influence of identifications originating

on the genital level. In proportion as the imagos approximate to the real objects a good relation to reality (characteristic of normal people) becomes more marked. The diseases (psychosis and grave obsessional neurosis) which are characterized by a disturbed or displaced relation to reality are also those in which the wish-fulfilment is negative and extremely cruel types are personated in play. I have tried to demonstrate from these facts that here a super-ego is in the ascendant which is still in its early phases of super-ego formation, and I draw this conclusion: the ascendancy of a terrifying super-ego which has been introjected in the earliest stages of ego-development is a basic factor in psychotic disturbance.

In this paper I have discussed in detail the important function of the mechanism of personification in children's play. I have now to point out the significance of this mechanism in the mental life of adults also. I have come to the conclusion that it is fundamentally a phenomenon of great and universal significance, one which is also essential to analytic work in both children and adults, namely, in the transference. If a child's phantasy is free enough, he will assign to the analyst, during a play-analysis, the most varied and contradictory rôles. He will make me, for example, assume the part of the id, because in this projected form his phantasies can be given outlet without inspiring so much anxiety. Thus, the same boy for whom I represented the 'fairy-mamma', who brought him the father's penis, repeatedly made me act the part of a boy who crept by night into the cage of a mother-lioness, attacked her, stole her cubs and killed and ate them. Then he himself was the lioness who discovered me and killed me in the cruellest manner. The rôles alternated in accordance

- 202 -

with the analytic situation and the amount of latent anxiety. At a later period, for instance, the boy himself enacted the part of the miscreant who penetrated into the lion's cage, and he made me be the cruel lioness. But in this case the lions were soon released by a helpful fairy-mamma whose part also I had to play. At this time the boy was able to represent the id himself (which indicated an advance in his relation to reality), for his anxiety had to some extent diminished, as was shewn in the appearance of the fairy-mamma.

We see then that a weakening of the conflict or its displacement into the external world, by means of the mechanisms of splitting up and projection, is one of the principal incentives to transference and a driving force in analytic work. A greater activity of phantasy and more abundant and positive capacity for personification are, moreover, the prerequisite for a greater capacity for transference. The paranoiac possesses, it is true, a rich phantasy-life, but the fact that in the structure of his super-ego the cruel, anxiety-inspiring identifications predominate, causes the types he invents to be pre-eminently negative and susceptible only of reduction to the rigid types of persecutor and persecuted. In schizophrenia, in my opinion, the capacity for personification and for transference fails, amongst other reasons, through the defective functioning of the projection-mechanism. This interferes with the capacity for establishing or maintaining the relation to reality and the external world.

From the conclusion that the transference is based on the mechanism of character-representation I have taken a hint as regards technique. I have already mentioned how very rapid the change often is from 'enemy' to 'helper', from the 'bad' mother to the 'good'. In such games involving these 'types' this change is constantly to be observed following upon the release of quantities of anxiety in consequence of interpretations. But, as the analyst assumes the hostile rôles required by the play-situation and thus subjects them to analysis, there is a constant progress in the development of the anxiety-inspiring imagos towards the kindlier

identifications with their closer approximations to reality. In other words: One of the principal aims of analysis—the gradual modification of the excessive severity of the super-ego—is attained by the analyst's assumption of the rôles which the analytic situation causes to be assigned to him. This statement merely expresses what we know to be a requirement in the analysis of adults, namely, that the analyst must simply be a medium in relation to whom the different imagos can be activated and the phantasies lived through,

12 When children ask me to play parts which are too difficult or disagreeable I meet their wishes by saying that I am 'pretending I am doing it.'

- 203 -

in order to be analysed. When the child in his play directly assigns to him certain rôles, the task of the children's analyst is clear. He will of course assume, or at least give a suggestion of playing, the rôles assigned to him¹²; otherwise he would interrupt the progress of the analytic work. But only in certain phases of child-analysis, and even then by no means invariably, do we come to personification in this open form. Far more frequently, with children as well as with adults, we have to infer from the analytic situation and material the details of the hostile rôle attributed to us, which the patient indicates through the negative transference. Now what is true of personification in its open form I have found to be also indispensable for the more disguised and obscure forms of the personifications underlying transference. The analyst who wishes to penetrate to the earliest, anxiety-inspiring imagos, i.e. to strike at the roots of the super-ego's severity, must have no preference for any particular rôle; he must accept that which comes to him naturally from the analytic situation.

In conclusion, I wish to say a few words on the subject of therapy. In this paper I have tried to shew that the severest and most pressing anxiety proceeds from the super-ego introjected at a very early stage of ego-development, and that the supremacy of this early super-ego is a fundamental factor in the genesis of psychosis.

My experience has convinced me that with the help of play-technique it is possible to analyse the early phases of super-ego-formation in quite little and in older children. Analysis of these strata diminishes the most intense and overwhelming anxiety and thus opens out the way for developments of the kindly imagos, which originate on the oral-sucking level, and therewith for attainment of genital primacy in sexuality and super-ego-formation. In this we may see a fair prospect for the diagnosis¹³ and cure of the psychoses in childhood.

13 It is only in the most extreme cases that psychosis in children bears the character of psychosis in adults. In the less extreme cases it is generally brought to light only by a searching analysis lasting over a considerable period.

- 204 -