

Towards Tolerability of Guilt and its Precursors

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Conscious and unconscious guilt, their roots and consequences, are inevitably linked with the human condition and therefore have always been an area of interest for psychoanalysis. This work focuses on when a sense of guilt is so intolerable to be excluded from lived experience. It explores the destructive, disintegrating effects guilt can have in a person's life, and the psychical manifestations of these effects (primarily in the form of unconscious guilt). The aim is to discuss the origins of this experiential exclusion of guilt and its precursors (a discussion which brings to light certain paradoxes) and to investigate the ways in which a sense of guilt may be transformed and rendered tolerable. As a background to my reflections I will first outline their conceptual framework, which derives from the work of Freud, M. Klein and W.R. Bion.

With regard to Freud's vast-ranging investigation of guilt, I would like to focus on two key theoretical notions that are of important practical implications in clinical practice.

The first of these is the stress which Freud puts upon the paralyzing and destructive effects that the unconscious sense of guilt can have on a patient's life and on analysis itself (which is, in effect, a struggle to save that patient's life); there is, for example, particular focus on the notion of a negative therapeutic reaction in Freud's *The Ego and The Id* (Freud, 1922).

The other point is the key function of the Super-ego as an internal point of reference; nowadays, applying the concept of «unconscious fantasy», one might think of this in terms of an «internal Object» or as the «function» of an internal Object. Such a Super-ego as a paternal introjection rather surprisingly, but with striking human sensitivity and acumen, Freud criticises as troubling «itself too little [...] about the happiness of the ego» in terms of the satisfaction of impulses (Freud, 1929, 143). A parent, one might well think, should be concerned about the happiness, about the needs of a child!

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud expresses himself in these dramatic terms «We find that the excessively strong super-ego [...] rages against the ego [...] as if it had taken possession of the whole of the sadism available in the person concerned» (1922, 53). He then goes on to say «The ego gives itself up because it feels itself hated and persecuted by the super-ego instead of loved... to the ego, therefore, living means the same as being loved» (1922, 58). The result is a terrible mix of libidinal needs, with surrender and submission to the sadism of an Object that desires death, to the point of self-destruction. And the clinical manifestations of this mix pose a technical challenge to the analyst, who must dismantle this destructive paradigm.

Freud's pessimism with regard to clinical success here seems to me to be linked to two things: the problem of the duality of drives, of their fusion and defusion (1922), and the question of the very origins of the Super-ego.

The vital needs of the Eros which unites must, at least partially, be defeated by the requirements and needs of civilisation, of which the Super-ego is the representative. As a result of the de-sexualisation and sublimation of the paternal image which occurs in the Super-ego «the erotic component no longer has the power to bind the whole of the destructiveness that was combined with it, and this is released in the form of an inclination to aggression and destruction» (1922, 54). And later still, Freud adds: «But since the ego's work of sublimation results in a defusion of the instincts and a liberation of the aggressive instincts in the super-ego, its struggle against the libido exposes it to the danger of maltreatment and death» (1922, 56).

In the light of the notion of Object relation — which she considers to be present and operative from birth — Melanie Klein would, in my opinion, introduce a fundamental turning-point in the discussion of this theme. Throughout her work she explores the substantial link existing between libidinal impulses, destructive impulses and the Object, arguing that the relation with the Object is a dynamic presence from the very beginning of an individual's life.

This approach introduces into the discussion of guilt a type of dynamism that is intrinsic to the forces at work. The result is that the «working-out» and resolution of the psychical consequences of guilt becomes «natural», even if far from straightforward and painless.

The sense of guilt originates not in libidinal impulses *per sé*, but in destructive impulses (or in the sadistic component of libidinal impulses). From the very first months of life, the infant tries to work through destructiveness in its various forms in order to save, to protect the Object; and in doing so, it is driven by love of this Object and deep sorrow for its loss rather than by fear (of castration) or disgust (at non-civilisation).

An Object with the function of a benevolent Super-ego — an expression of the capacity for love of parents and child — develops and takes on existence alongside the strict and persecutory Super-Ego. This striving to protect the Object occurs as part of the child's development whilst he is working through what Klein calls the «depressive

position>>. And the internal Object involved is one that concerns itself with happiness; that feels compassion in reaction to sorrow and pain. Hence guilt does not become excluded from lived experience (Klein, 1935, 1940).

That the Libido not only looks for release, but looks also for an object relation changes our point of view with regard to the resolution of psychical conflicts. And even today the full consequences of this change are difficult to evaluate in full.

Bion's theory of thinking and his use of the concept of the container-contained relation in the development of psychic life made a further important contribution to this discussion (Bion, 1962, 1963, 1967).

His work describes a model of the mind that originates in the first relations between child and mother. When rêverie activates her alpha function, the mother acts as a container that detoxifies the child's anguish. She gives meaning and sense to the sensorial data and crude perceptions that the child projects/communicates into the mother; she makes them both bearable and usable. And with the repetition of experience, such a container (and the functions it performs) is gradually introjected.

If the mother does not receive within herself these projections — if her rêverie is obstructed; if innate characteristics make the child incapable of putting it to use; if specific circumstances interfere with the mother/child relation — then the container-contained relation is also disturbed. The result is not only serious consequences for development in general,¹ but — I would argue — also for the origins and vicissitudes of guilt.

The application of Bion's ideas to the discussion of the issue of guilt forms the core of the argument developed in this paper.

My interest in the theme led me at a certain point to observe that guilt is in fact situated at the centre of a paradox. It is a paradox between the need for guilt to be recognised as such — the fact that an inevitable part of the passage to maturity is the raising of guilt to the surface of awareness — and the destructive, paralysing grip of guilt which Freud so accurately noted.²

Must we therefore think in terms of some sort of transformation if the destructive potential of guilt is to be defused, if it is to be <<worked-out>>? And what occurs at the juncture between this <<bearable>> transformation and the emergence into perception of the unconscious sense of guilt?

In their recent work a number of Italian analysts have investigated some features of this paradox.

If guilt — especially unconscious guilt — arouses such terrible and destructive feelings (Cancrini and Corrente, 2000; Cancrini, 2002), how can it be contained? Who would want to contain it? And how can the process of transformation into more benign forms — the sort of forms Speziale Bagliacca refers to when talking about the development from the <<logic of guilt>> to a logic of <<tragic responsibility>> (Speziale Bagliacca, 1998) — take place without a passage through the sort of <<transformational container>> described by Bion?

These questions led me to consider the need for a dynamic transformational container for guilt. Thereafter came the problem posed by the integration of the Self, and the integration and quality of the Object insofar as they function as containers.

Section One. A Container for Guilt: The Self

As an illustration of the theme of the transformation of guilt in relation to the integration of Self, I have chosen a patient I will call Luca and a sequence of dreams which underwent significant transformation during the course of his analysis.³

A forty-year old, Luca was as unfocused and immature as a twelve-year-old, for all that he appeared to have a perfectly ordinary work and family life. In talking, he gave an incredible sense of emptiness and flatness. The patient experienced a powerful anxiety of non-existence; his sense of being under continual threat of reduction to nothing, of nullification, had, with increasing frequency, resulted in panic attacks. Later these feelings would become anxiety at not knowing <<what is right or wrong>>, not knowing if <<he was right or wrong>>. Overall, one could see enormous yearning and effort to be able to exist. However, these were juxtaposed rather than being internally integrated.

¹ Developing upon Bion's notions with regard to the formation of psychical life and mental development, A. Ferro recently (Ferro, 2002) provided his own original and ample contribution regarding the factors and dynamics at work in illness and healing in a number of different situations.

² This paradox bears out the well-known observation offered by L. Grinberg, which is of continuing relevance here. He comments on how some psycho-analysts focus their interpretations on the need to rid patients of a sense of guilt — considering this as a negative, pathological feeling to which they have masochistically submitted, an unjust burden that has been imposed upon them by severe and terrifying Superego images — whilst others consider that the core of all neurotic conflicts is precisely the denial of the guilt felt because of one's own aggressive fantasies against Objects (Grinberg, 1971).

³ It seemed to me meaningful to try to trace the construction of conscious thought regarding guilt through the sequence and nature of dreams as they occur in the analysis of a borderline patient. I would agree with Roberto Tagliacozzo (2005) that the nature and sequence of dreams — together with the conditions within which they are brought into the analysis — reflect the mental state of the patient in relation to his or her Object; the possibility of maintaining integration or falling victim to disintegration.

Luca was one of those patient who appear to be almost <<historyless>>, who are initially incapable of providing an account of or recollections regarding themselves and their life.

He was clearly terrified at the thought of being touched by emotions, so he could not let others get close to him; nor would he let mental objects get close to each other. He could neither establish links with others nor allow such links to become established. Within the analysis, this resulted in such a powerful impression of obtuseness that at times I wondered if he was not mentally <<slow>>.

Then I thought of the possibility of a mother whose rêverie had not functioned properly, whose mind had perhaps been too occupied by the concrete and practical; a mother who could neither perceive signals from her child nor leave traces of herself. Or perhaps the origin was a child who communicated weak messages that were difficult to perceive or understand; a child who would too easily abandon such attempts at communication. Whatever the source, something had led to the development within Luca of a defective mental container and alpha function.

Our initial work on his need to be able to exist — to feel that he did exist and that I was aware of his need for existence — led to the appearance of his first dreams.

Dream 1 — The Dream of The Pope. The Pope searches him out for professional advice (him, of all people!). Whilst he himself doubts himself, the Holy Father (the good Father) searches him out and validates him. The dream and the associations (as if the dream referred to a real event) gave Luca enormous pleasure and a sense of vindication.

Thus, thanks to this initial formation of a relation with an Object (the mind of the analyst that, within the transference, is trying to understand him and hence contains him), Luca begins to exist. At this point, emotivity gradually emerges, with hints and snatches of disturbing violence.

Dream 2 — The Dream of the Doberman Puppy. Luca dreams he has a Doberman puppy which he himself eggs on to attack first one person, then another. The identity of the person remains undefined. Once the dog attacks, another time it does not. Then in the associations... But why did it once attack someone it shouldn't have, but then not attack the next time? Why the good person and not the bad person? But in the text of his original account of the dream, there was no such justification regarding the nature of the people.

As often happens, what he says becomes incoherent and difficult to follow, with the result that I myself feel disorientated, caught up in the mental fog that Luca himself sometimes complains of feeling.

It is inevitable: as soon as emotional links are formed, especially if insufficiently contained, violence erupts.

Starting from my own feeling of disorientation, I decided to look for interpretations which test out the ground and lead Luca towards mental explorations of ideas. What, I ask with regard to the dream, *is the puppy's act of biting?* As the patient offers no associations I suggest, after a certain wait: *One can bite out of anger. out of impatience, out of hunger Is it to tear something apart? Or it is a determination not to let go, a form of determination to save oneself?*

Almost spelling them out, I thus try to offer a way of identifying emotional components, which will enable him to distinguish the components which are more or less life-giving from those which are destructive. In effect, this involves us in a mental digestion of reality.

Gradually during the course of the analysis Luca began to talk of the fog lifting slightly, of glimpses of light becoming visible. As he felt more solidly compact, the anxiety attacks decreased in number and the patient managed to become more autonomous within his profession, shouldering greater responsibilities.

Though Luca himself denied it, I began to see a projection onto secondary figures of a clash, a sense of rivalry, with his father, of the admiring envy of a child who imagines the power of the adult to be limitless — even the (narcissistic, pre-genital) power of dishonesty and violence. It now seemed more possible to separate hostile attack from the defence of one's own identity, with the result that the patient now had to deal with a perception of his own aggressivity.

It is the Doberman puppy that attacks; this is reflected in transference.

Whilst in the moments of recovered well-being, there is an intense idealisation of analysis, the patient also attacks me unconsciously for the power I have to make him feel better — a power which for him is good and restorative but nevertheless mysterious. For example, once the patient opens the session with the usual questions: *Why is there no longer the anxiety and the feeling bad? Is it possible that I am better?... So, what does it mean? etc. etc.* And then he begins with a whole series of organic/physical explanations, until he then starts talking about the fog again. I interpret this to mean that his questions are working to break down the positive experience of his work with me, to the point where they also deprive it of significance... and ultimately he doubts whether such positive experience actually exists. Hence the fog.

He responds with a dream (which at thus point strikes me as practically an hallucination).

Dream 3. The Dream of Anatomical Parts. There were remains, human body parts, scattered around the ground. Then a surgical operation on an open chest cavity... Some coloured liquid was being inserted into the intestine... they were putting some coloured liquid inside me that would show up my internal organs.

I was rigid in my chair, feeling an indescribable horror: the image of a sectioning room, where cadavers are dissected, is overlaid with an image of an operating-room, where bodies are cured and treated. The anxious and guilty

thought emerges that the interpretation of his condition had damaged the patient's fragile mental container. For a moment, it seems to me that Luca is hovering between dream — an unconscious explorative and curative insight of both him and I being taken to pieces (represented by the reference to radiography and surgical operations) — and hallucination (the evacuation of fragments, of the remains and body parts scattered around the ground, through the organs of sense) (Bion, 1967).

For one horrible moment I experience the sense of guilt which the analyst feels as a result of the fear that he/she is incapable of helping the patient, indeed may be causing harm. Perhaps I had committed some brusque gesture that had broken a fragile object?

It seems inevitable that if guilt is to be understood and included within the analysis, then it must also pass through the analyst; it must be part of the analyst's own experience and the analyst must show him/herself capable of bearing it and thinking it through. The fact that, within the lived experience of the analytic relation, an Object can emerge that is capable of managing the horror of guilt in a different way, can thus become a factor of change for the patient as well. Such an Object accompanies the patient along his/her own path; its functions can actually be assimilated by the patient.

Later in the same session, Luca said: *Where do those pieces come from? We need to recognise them. Could they be mine? But if I am in pieces like that, I can't put the pieces together. So there is no solution.*

In a very dramatic, but very clear way, the patient was posing a fundamental problem. If he is in pieces (and his Object is in pieces), how can he put those pieces together? That is, how can integration and repair come about? If there is no prospect of such reparation, how can guilt be experienced — an experience that is a necessary passage towards putting the pieces together and recovering the (analytical) Object which he needs? Furthermore, why did the vision of analysis as fragmented and scattered — a vision brought about by my interpretation — result not only in persecution but in a veritable derailing of the mental process? Perhaps because the interpretation had arrived at the point where the patient depended so much upon my mental functioning, upon his relation with me, that a loss of them would mean that he himself got lost.

At its more primitive levels, the integrity of Self depends enormously on the integrity of the relational Object (Lupinacci, 1986), so that a perception of damage in or loss of that containing Object results in disintegration, with the fragments produced having to be evacuated. In effect, they are evacuated and I receive a sense of horror. I experience an almost intolerably violent emotional impact, whilst Luca seems rather detached.

Some months after this it was Luca himself who suggested the metaphor of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Though this suggestion was made with a deep sense of unease and anxiety, it was an indication that he had achieved a level of integration such that the mechanism of splitting no longer took solely the pathological defensive and offensive forms which result in disintegration. Now, splitting could also be applied in its vital (developmental) function to create distinctions and see things in order, with the result that at least something good is recognised and preserved. And without this latter function it would be impossible to face and tackle guilt.

Thanks in part to the work on Dr. Jekyll and his alter ego Mr. Hyde, there was a subsequent dream in which Luca tried to bring together in analysis the themes of ambivalence and guilt.

Dream 4 — The Dream of the Cyclists. The patient is driving a racing-car on a race track when suddenly two women on bicycles and a man on a motor scooter appear in front of him. He sounds his horn, but he cannot stop. He drives in between them, but one of the cyclists loses her balance and falls and his car drags her along for a short distance. He then goes up to her and plays things down;: «Never mind, no harm done» Then he is seized by panic and starts shouting that her spinal marrow has been damaged; her face and eye are horribly injured.

After having commented on how well the car worked and upon his own composure — his calm in real life, his ability to function, have now increased — the patient in his associations begins violently to put the blame on those who let the people onto the race track. At this point what he says becomes chaotic, the phrases produced in the dream cannot be distinguished from those he offers in the associations made during the recounting of the dream. It appears to be an explosion of «beta» elements.

If we look at the dream characters linked with the theme of unconscious guilt, they are initially a «puppy» and «undefined persons» (dream 2). They then become human beings that are partially identifiable, even if horribly dismembered (Dream 3). Now they are clearly visible people (the patient, a man, two women), who are alive, whole and functioning. Even the «fact/event» causing guilt is represented, but anxiety and panic then explode; the mind seems to disintegrate.

Once again, but here even more clearly, the fact that the Object (the woman, the mother, the maternal aspect of the analyst) is damaged — and damaged in its function of support (the spinal column) and receptive perception (the eye) — means that the mind cannot contain and tolerate guilt. The fall of the Object not only sets in motion annihilation and evacuation of persecution and guilt («no harm done»), but also seems to rupture the links of sense that had been established, which are sustained by the relation with the Object. It is the patient's very mental capacities that are negated and evacuated.

How is one to understand all of this? Giving meaning, establishing links leads more deeply into the world of affects.

Using the Bion's formulations with regard to the fundamental emotional links of love, hate and knowledge (L, H, K) which unite two objects in a relation (**Bion, 1962**), we might say that when there is a K function — for example, in an analytic situation when the analyst tries to understand and the patient feels that he/she is understood — one creates a movement that expands from K towards L and H and adds to them. But if in the psychic reality that is then called into play the Object appears to be destroyed, the affects may no longer be sustainable.

I am suggesting that in a fundamental, primitive area of the mind, if contact is established with a damaged container, what might result is the loss of the functions of thinking.

However, after some time Luca — the very same Luca who had very few memories of his childhood! — managed to talk to me for the first time about a dramatic episode in his life when, as an adolescent, he inadvertently knocked over an aged and much loved aunt who would die due to the complications resulting from the fracture caused by the fall. The recovery of significant memories is always an important moment in analysis. But this was particularly important, precisely because it showed guilt being felt and borne in a way which made it possible for it to find expression in conscious life.

Section Two. A Container for Guilt: The Object

For a patient such as Luca, with a fragile, ill-integrated Self and problems regarding containment and the processes of thinking, the first perception of guilt can be an annihilating experience; it results in the content forcing the container to rupture, throwing the patient into chaos. In fact, such a patient cannot rely on an internal Object that acts as a centre core for the cohesion and aggregation of the Ego; which constitutes a benevolent and tolerant — even if objectively fair — presence. Nor can he identify himself with one of the main beneficent functions of that Object: the transformation of raw-state emotion and impulse *in statu nascendi* into an ordered fabric (**Ferro, 2002**).

Significant here is one of Luca's recurrent dreams, a childhood nightmare that consists of a single image: an immobile marble-like face with empty, threatening eyes, which he at one time associated with a nun at primary school who had terrorised him. This represents the alienating, inhuman (marble) threat of an Object whose eyes are empty; which absorbs (the eyes are nevertheless a cavity) but does not reconstitute, does not form images endowed with sense and meaning. Such an Object does not see, does not give meaning or existence to the child; it simply gives the sensation of an unchanging, unforgivable <<mistake>>, of being oneself somehow <<wrong>>.

At times I myself found myself experiencing the blindness and immobility of this Object, finding myself incapable of seeing or understanding, of doing anything. Above all, I felt that anything I said would sound empty and meaningless; and at the same time I experienced the patient's anguish and sense of inadequacy. I was identified at that moment with the blind Object and with the anguish of the Self when faced with this Object.

The feeling of guilt, in fact, places the psyche in a tragically paradoxical situation (another paradox of guilt). By its very nature it marks the destruction of the Object, which at a deep level is always felt as the primary Object which should transform raw and terrifying experiences through love; which should give a meaning to such things; which should contain and delimit them and therefore make them <<thinkable>>. But in perceiving guilt as an emotional experience, the Ego simultaneously perceives the damage or destruction and loss of the containing Object. It is a moment of solitude and disaster. The emotional <<K bond>> which exists between people — the specifically human bond of <<trying to know>> — becomes almost impossible. The emotive experience is not <<thinkable>> because the Object is destroyed and such thinking is a function of the relation with it.

This perception of guilt which is not contained internally can only be expelled, evacuated; the resultant experience is therefore one of persecution, paralysis and breakdown.

What I wish to underline is that in the destruction of the Object there is both the dramatic loss of a good, loving and loved Object and the elimination of the hated, hostile Object (the hinge conflict which, together with integration, is at the heart of the emergence of the <<depressive position>>) (Klein, **1935, 1940**). However, the <<good Object>> lost is <<good>> not only in the Kleinian sense but also in the Bionian sense — that is, it is not only an Object that nourishes and protects (Klein) but also a mother capable of rêverie, of the K link. And it is this latter which is essential to establish the function of contact with one's own mind as such. If it is lost, what remains is a marble face with empty eyes.

In my opinion the critical point is the moment of (perhaps unconscious or preconscious) perception of guilt; of seeing and of being seen. It is the moment in which the mental apparatus finds itself at risk, precisely because of the destruction of the Object and because it is a function of the relation with that Object. This is what we have seen happened in the case of Luca.

Nevertheless, seeing, being seen and being able to see oneself constitute one of the goals towards which analysis strives.

The exploration of the quality of the internal objects that the patient puts forward in transference — their transformation within the analytical relation — is thus fundamental. It proceeds alongside the construction/reconstruction of an Object which contains the devastating experience of guilt, accompanying and nuancing the perception of that experience; an Object from which this function is learnt.

Within the process of the assessment and recognition of psychological truth, at the moment of risk when the perception of guilt is an overbearing, indigestible event, it is essential that one has someone at one's side. This presence conveys the fact that guilt has not destroyed all ties and bonds. And if for a moment we look backwards to the point in life when this internal Object originates, the significance and meaning of this is even clearer. Imagine, for example, the various possible scenarios of infant development, involving: a mother who obsessively assigns blame and guilt or one who unites scolding with a touch of benevolent irony; a mother who falls silent or one who gets agitated; or a mother who recognises that things are not that serious, who consoles and comforts.

With great sensitivity, Winnicott recognises the need for the real mother to offer the child the real chance to make things good (Winnicott, 1958). As is well known, this theme of reparation had already been introduced by M. Klein. But the concession of the chance to make things good involves something more; it incorporates as structurally inseparable components of the same process both the reparation and the acceptance of that reparation. This constitutes another way in which the Object contributes to the working-through of guilt. To put in it terms of the experience to be seen in South Africa: alongside the truth there is also reconciliation both with oneself and with the Other.⁴

In the analytic situation, we as analysts must first of all be able to contain (to reconcile ourselves to) our feelings of limitation and insufficiency; to recognise (in both senses of the term) our errors, defects and limits of characters (psychical truth). Thus, «up-stream» from our relation with the patient, we have to create a container which is such that the work of analysis can direct the patient towards a similar process.

Bion considers truth as a nutrition for the psyche.

So I am interested in the conditions in which the need for psychological truth and the encounter with psychological truth are emotionally sustainable (Lupinacci 1991). This concerns both the conditions of infant development and the technique used in analysis.

Here I will cite a brief passage from the clinical report of the analysis of a patient I will refer to as Rosa. Within this patient was the sedimented experience of another who would not tolerate any form of protest. It seems that she even held the infant Rosa's dummy in place by means of a cushion, so that the girl could not spit it out; once the infant almost risked choking to death when she violently regurgitated food that she could not expel from her mouth. Gradually, the patient had developed an internal attitude of total surrender, of submission to any sort of event or demand — to the point where she seemed to annul her very Self. Guilt and shame at existing were blended together in a very dangerous cocktail.

After a few years of analysis, during which Rosa had slowly come to feel herself as existing, she would go through a rather long period in which she showed intolerance and belligerence in analysis, as well as at home and at work. The quality of this belligerence was the same as that of the old partial Object of the dummy/cushion: «obtuse», impenetrable and persecutory. The note of obtuse cruelty that emerged made me think of the anxieties, needs and sufferings that had been bound together with the impenetrability of a mother who had perhaps adopted a merely concrete/practical approach to the discomforts and needs of her new-born child.

In spite of a noticeable improvement — and of the care that I took over both the timing and the form of interpretations — it seemed that from the «treatment» with me the patient unconsciously expected nothing other than a «digging into» her guilt, defects and weaknesses, a process designed to make her «cough up everything». Having identified herself with an impenetrable Object, she could not manage to keep anything down (inside); she felt merely exposed, dug into.

Rosa could be very destructive; however, my noting of this fact only worsened the situation. I did not fail to realise that this climate of destructiveness was in part due to a negative therapeutic reaction which was predicated on envy (even if this reaction made itself felt in a far from straightforward manner).

I would like to describe an occasion in which this could be confronted.

Rosa had a dream in which she was very agitated as she entered a house in which her mother was present in the background. (She was often in this agitated, flustered state when she arrived for her session of analysis). There were then confused scenes in which she argued with her sisters and then left, deliberately taking away something she said belonged to her. In commenting on the dream she said with bitter belligerence (which nevertheless sounded like masochistic provocation): *my mother did not even look at me... I think... Otherwise, she would have called me back in* (meaning: to tell me off). I had a very strong sensation of countertransference, feeling that she was about to drag me

⁴ The reference is to the process of pacification and peaceful social integration which occurred during the transition from an apartheid to a democratic system in South Africa in the 1990s — in part thanks to the work of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation (Tutu, 1999).

The idea that reparation and acceptance of reparation are structurally part of the same process is, I discovered, surprisingly present in the concept of *ubuntu* as it exists in traditional South African notions of Justice. As explained by Tutu, *ubuntu* means a justice predicated above all on healing wounds, correcting imbalances and binding together ruptured relations. It involves striving to rehabilitate both the victim and the criminal, who is given the chance to become reintegrated within the community that his crime has offended (Tutu, 1999).

into her usual (and pointless) talk of pain, anger and guilt, the form in which she had recently taken to voicing her irrational and destructive convictions with regard to her perpetual unhappiness: that was how things had to be; that was how someone wanted them to be; she herself neither could nor, at this point, wanted to receive anything different. It seemed to be a case of what Freud described as the eroticised surrender of the masochistic Ego to the persecutory Super-ego.

Engaged in worried reflection upon these points, I then had the vision (as described in her dream) of her mother in the background who, for once, did not call her back [*richiamare* in Italian could be <<call back>> or <<reprove>>]; who had <<nothing to say back to her>> [*ridire*: to <<reply>> or <<to find fault with>>]. I calmly pointed out to her: <<Perhaps the mother in the dream had nothing to say back/find fault with>>. There was a moment of amazed interruption; then, contrary to what usually happened, Rosa replied readily with great amazement and immediate relief, almost as if made lightheaded, knocked off balance, by this new view of things.

This was a moment when, within the *hic et nunc* of the session, two things came together: the possibility that Rosa's primary internal Object was present and yet had <<no fault to find>> (visualised within the dream, this was something that had had to be constructed over time in the course of analysis) and the experience that, in the same way, I had nothing to <<say back>> (with the exception of that small observation with regard to the verb itself: *nulla da ridire*). It was a sort of <<selected fact>> constructed by the two of us; a motif played four-handed which served to calm the vicious circle of pain, destructiveness, accusations and guilt which was finding a place in Rosa's analysis.

It was inevitable that, at some point, Rosa should enter into contact with the hostility, ambivalence and even envy that she felt towards the analyst who was managing to help her, whilst she herself had supinely suffered so much and for so long. But she could not do this without herself being received and contained in an Object that is present, that sees her without immediately beginning to criticise her.

What was it that made possible this <<selected fact>> constructed by the two of us? One might say that I had re-dreamed Rosa's dream (my vision of the mother in her account of the dream), re-attributing the meaning of the dream. That meaning now included: the manifest text of the dream; the associations made by the patient, which identified a mother who saw her solely in order to criticise and annihilate her with an analyst who again would criticise her for such thoughts; and my own disquietude as felt in the countertransference, which perceived the projection of the sadistic, impenetrable Object of transference and the risk of my own projective counteridentification if I had accepted her masochistic offer.

The mother in the dream, therefore, <<said [criticised] nothing>>. Perhaps she was a mother who could manage to see the vital component contained in Rosa's jealousy and avidity. Perhaps she was no longer such an incarnation of what Bion calls a <<Super-ego... a superior object asserting its own superiority by finding fault with everything>> (Bion, 1962, 98).

Thus, I too had little to say; the patient had unconsciously got there on her own. All I had to do was point this out to her without denying her any of the credit or merit (without acting as a envious Super-ego); clearly, however, her entire attitude had pushed me towards picking up on and offering a critical interpretation of her jealousy of her sisters and her resentment of her mother. But there was now a relaxation in the impenetrability of an Object that <<remove the good or valuable element>> (Bion, 1962, 96) which is part of the child's anxieties (the energetic and vigorous component within jealousy and avidity). The impenetrable Object which was incapable of containment had been projected into me, but had re-emerged after having been decontaminated through my <<vision of the dream>>, which was a <<dream of the dream>>, a rêverie.

Section Three. The “Repellent-Denuding” Object and the Precursors of Guilt

So far I have focused on the fundamental problem of the containment of the experience of guilt, tracing its emergence and transformation within analysis in relation to the oscillating integration of the Self. I have concentrated on the character of the Object of the relation and its different functions (as super-ego, as an agent of rêverie). In particular, I have tried to examine its appearance in transference and its transformation in relation to the process whereby the perception of guilt becomes tolerable, whereby there is a future access to responsibility.

At this point I would like to take a step backwards.

Luca had within him the image of a marble face with empty eyes that do not see, an image that gave him an unalterable sensation of non-existence, of there being something wrong in the very notion of his own existence. For her part, Rosa seemed to have an internal primary Object with the characteristics of an envious Super-ego that rejected life and the desire for life, an Object to which she was intensely and submissively bound.

While the appearance of this internal Object — and its mode of function — will obviously vary from patient to patient, it is these with which we have to deal sooner or later within analysis. However the Object might have developed and been remodelled or consolidated during the course of the patient's life, its roots — with regard to the relation with guilt — go back a long way. I would, therefore, once again like to refer to the developments in psycho-analytical thought offered by Bion when he stressed how the child receives (or does not receive) more than just physical

contact, support, food, pleasure and comfort from the mother. Within the mind of the mother, projective identification serves to evacuate the anxieties and primitive sensorial experience (both internal and external) which hyperstimulate the child and which he is as yet unable to deal with (the «external and internal experiences» concerned include sensations of pleasure/displeasure; the turbulence of emergent drives, the child's sensorial impact with the outside world, etc.). The mother's special psychical condition of receptivity permeated by love is what Bion calls «rêverie». She receives and accepts the projective identifications of the child «*whether they are felt by the infant to be good or bad*» (Bion 1962, 36; my italics). The maternal «alpha» function detoxifies these, restores them to the child in a psychically significant and functional form; they are transformed into emotions and feelings that can be represented and are sufficiently tolerable for the initiation of thought. I would argue that such tolerability in part also comes from the penumbral presence of an Object which returns to the child together with distinct, digested and nominated (identified) emotions. In this process, container and content co-exist in a reciprocal relation — that is, they «are dependent on each other for mutual benefit and without harm to either» (Bion 1962, 91). And as this process is repeated, a specific maternal Object and its functions are gradually introjected and assimilated by the Ego, becoming part of an individual's mental structure.⁵

This is how Bion describes the characteristics of the container: «It may make by meaning clearer if I say that I am in a state of receptive observation as opposed to a state in which I pass judgement on what I observe» (Bion 1962, 95).

Thus, the child acquires an internally-structured Object for which experience is to be understood and represented, not judged. I would argue that this process and this internal structure are the «base precondition» for a situation in which the sensation of guilt — even unconscious or preconscious guilt — does not destroy the mind, does not (unbeknownst to the individual) paralyse or torment life when such sensations of guilt become active at a later stage, after a certain level of integration has been achieved.

However, the relation container/content takes on a «minus» function of rejection or denudation when this exchange of communication between mother and child breaks down. This failure can come about for a variety of reasons: the difficulty the mother encounters in receiving and «processing» what is communicated, in imagining or «dreaming» the child; the particularly high intolerance the child experiences at any frustration of its needs; the intensity and violence of the child's sensations; the prevalence of hatred and envy in those sensations; difficulties that may be intrinsic to both mother and child or else due to external factors that interfere with their relationship. It is now that occurs «the establishment internally of a projecting-identification-rejecting object [which] means that instead of an understanding object the infant has a wilfully misunderstanding object» (Bion 1967, 117). The inversion of the relation container-content and of the «K link» — that is, the misunderstanding — leads to the loss of the «commensal» reciprocity of understanding and being understood, of giving and receiving. What is lost is the striving for knowledge that is permeated with love. Bion repeatedly stresses that «the result is an object which, when installed in the patient, exercises the function of a severe and ego-destructing superego» (Bion, 1967, 107), a «superior object asserting its superiority by finding fault with everything» (Bion, 1962, 98).⁶ In other words, this is an Object that neither knows nor wants to know; it only strives to judge and, through judgement, annul and annihilate. Where there is no meaning there is no existence. What remains is a sensation of nullification and death.

Would it perhaps be going too far to suggest that we are here in an area that is at least partially co-extensive with that area of psychic phenomena which Freud was talking about when discussing the rupture of the erotic bond between the Ego and the Super-ego, a rupture which makes this latter into «the pure culture of the death drive»? Can we think of it as an over-drastring (and precocious) rupture of the amorous bond between child and primary Object — a disruption which undermines the protective function of the latter and makes it into an expression of nullifying/annihilating superiority? Whether it is the mother's rêverie which is defective or the child who is incapable of putting that rêverie to use, the Doberman puppy goes mad; it no longer «knows» itself or its Object.

In the fearful chaos of impulses, sensations and overbearing emotions, a child must I think feel itself overwhelmed by an indefinable guilt (precisely because of its chaos of feelings). It is a very primitive level of guilt: the guilt of existing, of being what he/she is, of feeling what he/she feels. In effect, it is a guilt that «has no name», and therefore cannot be the object of knowledge.⁷

Perhaps the term «guilt» is inadequate when we are referring to such a primitive and indefinable level of lived experience. What we have is a sort of «thing in itself» that precedes the more integrated levels of experience of Self and Object. Rather than guilt, this is a «precursor of guilt» an *a priori* sense of negativity, which acts as a sort of

⁵ Bion uses the term «commensal» with different nuances of meaning to describe the container/content relation in his *Learning from Experience* (1962) and *Attention and interpretation* (1970).

⁶ Drawing upon Bion's notions with regard to the emotional relations of the infant, O'Shaughnessy suggests that, depending upon how the process develops, it can lead to a «normal Super-ego» or to a destructive «abnormal Super-ego» (1999).

⁷ A particular case of «guilt of existence» is recorded in Green's work on the «dead mother»: the child experiences the incomprehensible withdrawal of maternal investment as indicating his having no right to existence, thus making his own existence a source of guilt (1985)

internal presence that drives the child to make everything negative in its existence and its relations. It is a <<precursor>> in the sense that it forms the basis for that feeling of destruction, of what can become intolerable guilt.

I would argue that the process which Bion ascribed to the fear of death — which, if not contained and transformed, can become a <<nameless dread>> (Bion, 1962, 163) — might also be seen in the emergent turbulence of drives. If these inchoate impulses are not adequately contained and transformed, their intensity can become a violence which then increases exponentially to the point that it destroys Object and Self, becoming a <<nameless guilt>>.

In these conditions, any perception of guilt or sorrow at the violence of drives and the damage they cause is completely inconceivable.

I have talked of the <<base precondition>> and the <<precursors of guilt>> because — together with the intense and profound defences that hide and distort it — guiltas such must, during the gradual integration of the Self and the Object, be perceived, suffered, elaborated and transformed repeatedly and at various levels. But the hard core of guilt — where it is most obscure and most difficult to transform — will have absorbed precisely those pre-verbal impressions which either are not mentally processed or are imperfectly processed. Where such impressions exist, they tend to result in acting-out or in models of behaviour (particularly of a self-destructive or submissive kind) rather than in stories and memories: They can also appear in dreams.

Something similar, I would argue, happened at a certain point in Rosa's analysis. But I might also cite Mrs. A, who perceived in a negative critical way even positive interpretations (<<she managed>> was heard as <<she did not manage>>), or Mrs. B, who could recount good and positive things in such a way as to cast them in a rather gloomy or ambiguous critical light. This is, in fact, an area in which the inversion of sign reigns supreme.

This specific negative quality of a <<denuding>> Super-ego, which is assumed by the Object when it is re-introjected, has clear links with the problem of guilt and self-destructiveness. It can also, I would argue, have an important influence on analysis. Where, for whatever reason in his/her personal history, the patient finds him/herself in this perverse situation, we can expect it to reproduce itself in other relations. It will be reflected in the patient's transference, in the analyst's transference and countertransference, and in the very structure of the patient's personality. Great tenacity will be required as the analyst's work will be attacked and <<denuded>> in a number of ways. Particular attention must be paid to observation, in order to seize and exploit the slightest signs of development within the patient. Great care must also be taken over technique so that, in neither substance nor form, do the analyst's words and interpretations convey any sense of superiority or detachment: if that were to happen, the projected Object with which the analyst is identified would be that which only sees flaws, failings and destructiveness. However, destructiveness does exist, even if one is afraid to see it, to realise that it is present within us. Still, as it can be the source of anguish and suffering, it must be faced. Another paradox.

In other words, this would seem to be the problem: Can one find an Object capable of truth that is not a matter of <<home truths>>?

From my point of view, an Object that <<causes a sense of guilt>> is already a destroyed Object (Obviously I do not mean by this that the patient should not know guilt as an emotion). It is an Object within which the capacity to know without judging has been destroyed; one that is incapable of being close to the <<painful truth>>, of feeling the pain this causes yet also tolerating the guilt which the analyst inevitably feels because of the pain and suffering he/she has contributed to in making the patient aware of the <<painful truth>>. But that is not all. It is also an Object that has lost its generative/creative capacity to recognise beauty, goodness, vitality and change (in the child, in the patient, in the Other); which has retained solely the ability to <<see through>> things, to lay them bare. If suffering, pain and guilt are to become a bearable part of lived experience, we as analysts must try to withstand these types of attack, which not only come from outside but also from within ourselves.

Summary

Guilt can disintegrate and paralyze both the mind and life if it is not contained and transformed. The internal primary Object and its successive representatives, as well as Self as the primary site of perceptions, representations and affects, and their relationship are considered as the psychic places where guilt may (or may not) be contained and transformed. By looking at clinical material and the dreams of two patients, the author tries to follow the transformation of guilt in analysis, taking into consideration how this affects transference and countertransference in particular, as well as looking at certain technical issues. The author also looks at the quality of emotive exchanges in the primary mother-child relationship as a prerequisite if guilt is not to become a drive to the annihilation of the individual.

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