CHAPTER

2

Brainwashing and the Defensive Consequences of Psychic Murder

Soul, or psychic, murder involves trauma imposed from the world outside the mind that is so overwhelming that the mental apparatus is flooded with feeling. The same overstimulated state can result as a reaction to great deprivation. The terrifying too-muchness requires massive and mind-distorting defensive operations for the child to continue to think and feel and live. The child's sense of identity (that is, the emotional maintenance of the mental images of his or her self) is threatened. Our identity depends initially on good parental care and good parental caring—on the transmitted feeling that it is good that we are there. The little girl kicked by her mother cannot turn to the mother for physical or psychological rescue. Yet to whom else can she turn? How can she deal by herself with the pain, fear, humiliation, and above all the rage? We know that when overwhelmed by feeling, people can react by fainting or with the more adaptive defense of shutting off all emotion, often by using autohypnosis (see Fliess 1953; Dickes 1965; Shengold 1967; and chapter 8, below).

Everyone needs to evolve defenses against overstimulation. A development of defensive systems starts with the inborn physiological barrier against stimuli and develops into the complicated and interlocking psychic series of mechanisms of defense and defensive character structure of later childhood. There is a burgeoning of defensive functioning dur-

ing the so-called anal-sadistic period of development (from about one year of age to three and a half years), which I have described elsewhere (Shengold 1985, 1987) as "anal-narcissistic defensiveness." Here part of the mind functions as a kind of emotional counterpart to the anal sphincter, supplying control by shutting down feeling. After the subsequent, oedipal phase of development and transformation, the mind forms a massive repressive barrier that initiates the so-called period of latency (where the force of the instinctual drives is calmed). These defensive operations are necessary for the development of thinking and the consolidation of a separate identity. Because so much of the defense is related to anality, we are all left with a variable proportion of anally related obsessive-compulsive defenses, character traits, and symptoms. These obsessive propensities become part of a defensive mental structure that effects some necessary distancing of the primal intensities of our earliest life, permitting us to say no to the urgency of our instinctual drives and accept the inevitable frustrations imposed by the human condition. Our primal drives and narcissistic claims must be partly given up for us to become human. Like Adam and Eve, we must lose the promise of the glory of Eden—in part to escape the hell of the overstimulation brought on by the intensity and inevitable frustrations of our drives (especially aggression). In situations of crisis and trauma, these developmental defensive efforts guard us from within as once our parents guarded us from without. But if the traumatic crises are recurrent or chronic, ordinary defenses will not suffice and regression to early, massive, "anal-narcissistic defenses" (which used to blank out primal feelings) will also become chronic. What happens to the child subjected to soul murder is so terrible, so overwhelming, and usually so recurrent that the child must not feel it and cannot register it, and resorts to a massive isolation of feeling, which is maintained by brainwashing (a mixture of confusion, denial, and identifying with the aggressor). A hypnotic living deadness, a state of existing "as if" one were there, is often the result of chronic early overstimulation or deprivation. As Ferenczi (1933) put it, "The [abused] child changes into a mechanical obedient automaton" (p. 163; this is what happened to Kaspar Hauser). But the automaton has murder within.

After a period of inherent infantile resistance to overstimulation, infants are vulnerable to too-muchness coming from within or without the body. What ensures survival through this dangerous period when

the mind and a separate identity are starting to form is the care of a mothering figure. Spitz has observed that the child who has scant emotional care may not even survive.

I have stated that the child who is tormented by a parent must frequently call on that same parent for help and rescue. The other parent is only too often weak or absent, or is at least an unconscious abettor of the tormentor: "A parent's propensity for abuse is commonly supported by a corresponding tendency in the spouse . . . thus the abuse or neglect of offspring can often be an unconscious collusion or cooperation between the parents, even though only one of them is the active agent" (Steele 1976, 14). If the child must turn to the very parent who inflicts abuse and who is felt as bad for relief of the distress that the parent has caused, then the child must break with what has been experienced and out of a desperate need for rescue, must register the parent, *delusionally*, as good. Only the mental image of a good parent who will rescue can help the child deal with the terrifying intensity of fear and rage that is the effect of the tormenting experiences. The alternative—to maintain the overwhelming stimulation and bad parental image—means annihilation of identity, of the feeling of the self. So the bad has to be registered as good. This is a mind-splitting or mind-fragmenting operation. To survive, such children must keep in some compartment of their minds the delusion of good parents and the delusive promise that all the terror, pain, and hate will be transformed into love. These need not be psychotic delusions—neurotic delusions are frequent enough. The mysterious compulsion to repeat traumatic experiences (here the compulsion to provoke parental abuse) can be understood partly as the child's need to affirm in action that the next time the contact will bring love instead of hate. The desperate need to hold on to the *promise* of the good and loving parent is the source of the greatest resistance to the therapist's efforts to undo the delusion. Interpretations of "objective" reality threaten to effect the loss of the mental image of the "good" parent, thereby restoring the danger of annihilation and its attendant traumatic anxiety. The child's mind is split into contradictory fragments to separate the bad from the good (Ferenczi 1933, 165). I am describing not schizophrenia (although in psychotic children a more destructive fragmentation of the mind can also occur in response to trauma) but the establishment of isolated divisions of the mind in which contradictory images of the self and of the parents are never permitted to coalesce. This compartmentalized "vertical splitting" transcends diagnostic categories. Feeling and thinking are compromised; registration of what has happened and what is happening is divided into "compartments" and therefore is inadequate. Orwell describes this in *1984*: brainwashing is used to enforce the delusion that Big Brother is good. Orwell's "doublethink" is a system of vertical mind-splits that makes it possible to believe that two plus two equals five:

> To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing both . . . to forget whatever it is necessary to forget, then to draw it back into the memory again at the moment it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all to apply the same process to the process itself . . . consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then once again to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. (1949, p. 36; note that Orwell knows about the use of autohypnosis in brainwashing)

With the attainment of "doublethink" (imposed by the need for rescue during psychological torture), Winston Smith can go on to identify with his tormentor and to "love Big Brother."

It is easy for an adult to become a Big Brother and to crush a child's joy in life, to attempt to "murder his soul." This was a crime for which Dostoyevski could not forgive himself, his parents, or God:[1]

> This poor child of five was subjected to every possible torture by [her] cultivated parents. They beat her, thrashed her, kicked her for no reason till her body was one bruise. Then, they went to greater refinements of cruelty—shut her up all night in the cold and frost in a privy, and because she didn't ask to be taken up at night . . . they smeared her face with excrement and forced her to eat it, and it was her mother, her mother did this. And that mother could sleep, hearing the groans of the poor child locked up in that vile place at night! *A little creature, who can't understand what's done to her*, in the dark and cold of that vile place, beats her little aching

1. As Freud mentions in his work *Dostoyevsky and Parricide* (1928), there has been much speculation, derived from the initially deleted section "Stavrogin's Confession" of *The Possessed*, that Dostoyevski himself might have sexually abused a little girl.

breast with her tiny fist and weeps her bloody meek unresentful tears begging dear, kind God to protect her! (Dostoyevski 1880, 286)

Since the child "can't understand what's done to her," her mind is unable to deal with, to work over, what is not understood and what may not even be allowed to register. It is this inhibition of the ego's power to remember and test reality that makes soul murder so effective as a continuing force. The absolute need for good mothering makes the child believe in the promise that her parents and "dear, kind God" will be good and rescue her, and to believe that she herself must be bad. The moral facts get confused along with the realistic ones—the child can take on the guilt for what the parents do, guilt that the righteous, god-quoting parents may feel only briefly, if at all.[2] (The tyrant becomes god for the crushed victim.) After a sexual attack on a child, "the harsh behaviour of the adult partner tormented and made angry by his remorse renders *the child* still more conscious of his own guilt and still more ashamed. Almost always the perpetrator behaves as though nothing had happened, and consoles himself with the thought: 'Oh, it is only a child, he does not know anything, he will forget it all.' Not infrequently after such events, the seducer becomes over-moralistic or religious and endeavours to save the *soul* of the child by severity" (Ferenzci 1933, 162–163; my italics).

Like Ferenczi, Steele (1976) studied the abusing parents; he states that they were themselves abused as children and quotes their justifications, adding: "These . . . examples show how deeply embedded the pattern of abuse can be and also indicate the strong sense of rightness, if not righteousness, with which behavior learned from parents can be repeated" (p. 15). Idealization of the offending parent leads to enhancement of the child's unconscious need for punishment and to intense masochism (see Berliner 1940; Fliess 1956). Later in life these children, in a compulsion to repeat, masochistically provoke their parents or turn to other people who are tormentors in the continuing delusive expectation that this time they will be loved. This makes for a pattern

2. There are still many Victorian households that recall that of Schreber; and the defensive denial of the behavior of (for example) alcoholic, abusive parents would provide a widespread modern equivalent that would have the same effect: of projecting guilt onto the child even in a superficially different moral and religious atmosphere.

of sadomasochistic relationships. The child's defensive need to "keep" the parent, even to merge with the parent, is often complemented by the disturbed parent's need to prevent individuation and hold on to the child, who is regarded as a need-fulfilling adjunct or even as part of the parent's self-image (Mahler and Furer 1968). Submitting to and becoming part of the tormentor can alternate with a more total identification with the tormentor, or function alongside such an identification. Ferenczi speaks of two ways of forming identificatory imagos: "anxiety-ridden identification" and "introjection of the . . . aggressor" (1933, p. 163). Identification with the aggressor enables the former victim to follow the compulsion to repeat, playing the active, sadistic, parental role. This too can be motivated in part by the delusive wish to make the bad parent good: "I'll be father and do it, and *this time* it will be good." The child's contradictory mental splits, or fragments of impulse and identity—reflecting the confusion between victim and tormentor, good and bad—were noted by Ferenczi, who also indicated the brainwashing (without using that term) that prevents synthesis: "When the child recovers from [the adult's sexual] attack, he feels enormously confused, in fact, split—innocent and culpable at the same time—and the confidence in the testimony of his own senses is broken" (1933, p. 162).

A Prototypical Instance: The Squashed Fruit

A male patient described the following as a "typical event": The father entered the dining room where the table was set for the family meal. Beside each plate was a fresh piece of fruit—the dessert. The man made a complete round of the table, stopping at every chair to reach out and squeeze to a pulp every piece of fruit except his own. The older children and the intimidated mother, used to such happenings, said nothing. But the youngest, a five-year-old boy, cried when he saw the mangled banana at his plate. The father then turned on him viciously, demanding that he be quiet—how dare he make such a fuss about a banana?

I want to emphasize the terrible confusion the boy was left with. What had happened? Who was to blame? Was father bad, or was the boy himself bad? Mother and the others had not reacted as he had—why *did* he make that fuss about the banana? The father, so confident of his greatness and rightness (like the parents of Dostoyevski's poor little

girl), must be good. But how could that be? (The five-year-old boy's castration anxiety, caused by his oedipal wishes, was surely mobilized by his father's crushing his banana; this compounded his reaction and made him even more readily assume the guilt his father had shown no evidence of feeling.)

Need enforced the preservation in the child's mind of a delusional place in which the father must be good and right, the boy bad and wrong. Yet some registration that the father was bad was made somewhere, as it were in another compartment. (One patient said: "I am not a human being—I live in compartments.") These mental compartments are walled off and their contents cannot be blended; this is part of the defensive isolation brought about by brainwashing. The child is motivated with compulsive force to avoid bringing the contradictory pictures together; the rage associated with the bad, which can overwhelm and destroy, must be kept away from the needed mental image of the good parent, but the rage remains. The boy learned early to cover it over with indifference, with dullness—but underneath, the anger festered: to kill father or be killed by him, or to become the bad father and crush those around him. The murderous rage terrified him. The continuing subjection to his father's terrifying cruelty evoked a vicious cycle: the more the anger was suppressed (and his father saw to it that no angry manifestations went unpunished), the greater was the feeling of danger from it. The boy's unconscious became a murderous cauldron; murder aimed at his father and himself was compartmentalized and usually disconnected from consciousness. It was occasionally felt in relation to scapegoats—creatures more helpless and passive than he was (his father reduced people to the impersonal, so why shouldn't he?). Frequently these creatures were female.

To be able to contain all this, the boy needed first to establish what was happening to him. A more realistic, less masochistic mother might have helped him do this—at least identify that something bad had happened (a necessary first step toward understanding the father's destructiveness). But only a woman who was herself brainwashed could have stayed with this father. As it turned out, the boy was not completely crushed (unlike his banana). He did not fully accept his father's unspoken order not to know and not to feel. Some isolated registration occurred, and in the long course of work that included the murderous business being transferred onto the analyst, the patient and analyst were able to erode the walls of the mental compartment that contained

the emotional imprint of his memories. The patient gradually became responsible for his knowledge of his father's character and how he had identified with him. He had to feel the murder and the cruelty both in his father and in himself. The analysis progressed so that he was able to give up his autohypnosis; the feelings released thereby made emotional conviction possible, so that knowledge could be more than intellectual and provisional. (Only when knowing involves a free range of feeling is brainwashing undone, and inauthentic "as if" living given over.) Within the structure provided by the patient's conviction about the past and especially about his father, the intense rage, without disappearing, became increasingly tolerable. The contents of the mental compartments became subject to a synthesis of emotions and ideas (although the tendency to compartmentalize was not given up completely). The patient could own what he felt and what had happened to him. Avoiding denial and tolerating rage were achieved together; his ego and superego were slowly modified.

Consider the effect on the five-year-old boy's unfolding sexuality of the incident I have described as typical and recurrent. It was a household in which castration was in the air, as Niederland said of Schreber's. At the height of his oedipal development, the boy was driven to compete with a demonic father powerful enough to mold the reality of the family world to match his paranoid grandiosity and establish himself as a domestic Hitler presiding over docile subjects. Mother was a broken yet worshipful victim. Compelled to register his father's cruelty as good and right, the boy could not adequately identify with his antagonism toward his father and come to terms with it. The prospect might seem dim that this boy would be able to transcend his involvement with his parents' overwhelmingly sadomasochistic relationship and the need to become his father's passive, broken, worshipful victim (renouncing his masculinity as well as his identity). Yet somehow this boy acquired some ability to work and love—even, after his analysis, to love women.