

On *Perverse Socialization*: The Shared Fantasy of Limitless Sweetness

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University of East London Conference on “Disordered Personalities and Extremism”, March 21, 2016

I.

The present paper focuses upon human destructiveness and our frequent obliviousness to acts of malignancy. Often unnoted in the complex compromises of our daily life accommodations are the tensions between social and antisocial elements of personality. Embedded in interpersonal relations, these reach expression in action across the jagged continuum from conscious awareness to the unformulated in the range defined by Bion between amnesia and oblivion (Miller, 2015). Recognized or unattended, the complicated balancing act between the known and unknown, between our capabilities both for destruction and affirmation of who we are in relation to ourselves and others, underlies our active engagements within ourselves and the world.

Psychoanalytic thinkers describe a well-worn conceptual path that locates the balance of what is consciously meaningful, central in our

thought, to what is peripheral through reference to empirical, real world examples. Perhaps the finest examples are local: in the daily inattentions to the meaning of the Charing Cross by regular London commuters, observed by Freud (1905); or in DW Winnicott's (1949) observations on the theme of murder lurking in the bucolic lyrics of the nursery tune, "Rock-a-bye Baby". Within each, the individual's central focus on one level of attention casts another level of attention to the periphery of thought--- even to nothing at all, a denial of any meaningful possibility of what is unformulated and unconscious: pure amnesia, complete oblivion.

The Freud example is 110 years old, the Winnicott 65 years old. In today's world, we hear the expression in everyday English, "he is dead to me", and think nothing of it. Indeed, in colloquial urban English, its actively engaged, aggressive form is called "blanking": one sees another and acts to affirm the other's nonexistence.

The progression from the prescriptive "he is dead to me" to the action of blanking illustrates our contemporary blunting of emotions in the civil and interpersonal spheres; and the ease with which the "Other", another person (no matter what he or she represents or is purported

to have done) is located as being beneath thought, a No-Thing.

Nothing.

“He is dead to me” announces intentionality. Not only does the speaker intend to erase the Other, very literally expressing the desire that he be dead, but the listener--- as member of the public or even representing a more personal relationship--- is meant to stand by and to tolerate this expression as being within the realm of civility. The speaker’s own intention to deaden himself psychologically to other people and to their acts, as well as to inflict his own rather passionate violence upon the listener, goes unattended, passing itself off as colloquial expression. That is, it does not claim our central attention. It operates at the periphery of our notice. And reminds us that our psychological capabilities extend along a continuum of positions from 1) center to 2) periphery to; 3) the unfamiliar or uncanny and then 4) to the unthinkable, unimaginable.

In hearing “he is dead to me”, the passive listener is meant to support a twisting of social communication according to its asocial intent.

Easily blunted by the multiple assaults of daily life, recognitions of daily trauma including our forms of aggressive verbalization, require

the capacity to “imagine the real” (Buber, 1957) within our resonant witnessing. Just as we as listeners become inured to such colloquial expressions as “he is dead to me”, we endure a twisting, or perversion of what it means to be socialized. In this perverse socialization, we tolerate destructive non-being at multiple levels within which, perhaps the most prominent is that associated with caring and identification--- with our own belonging at the expense of others’ difference. Of course, there is a continuum of distortion within such socialization. Mistakes, errors, failures between people as between generations, are common; but a moral divide separates those that, with reparation and reconciliation can be mended, and those that cause final, inexorable destruction to others.

We accept “he is dead to me” because we wish in our passive acquiescence to the speaker, to be civil, to be accepted or respected. We do not wish to give offense; and because we believe that we value the affirmation of what is social over its destructiveness, we absorb (almost without noticing) destruction and murder in our complicated affirmations and negations of the Other. As listening participants in this social interaction, we contain hatred in the service of daily discourse; just as Winnicott’s nursery ditty acts to calm the child

while providing a container for maternal hatred lingering just outside of the infant's direct linguistic understanding. In a similar way, Roald Dahl's childhood classic story of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (Dahl, 1964) delights the reader as it portrays both the violence and gratification of shared, intergenerational fantasy, the stuff of loving identification with a caring Other that results in the intentional, murderous malignancies of perverse socialization.

But of course, Dahl's story of Willie Wonka is about children. Umberto Eco reminds us that in certain depictions of children, for example in the popular comic strip, *Peanuts*

The poetry of these children arises from the fact that we find in them all the problems, all the sufferings of the adults, who remain offstage. These children affect us because in a certain sense they are monsters: they are the monstrous infantile reductions of all the neuroses of a modern citizen of industrial civilization.

They affect us because we realize that if they are monsters it is because we, the adults, have made them so. In them we find everything: Freud, mass culture, digest culture, frustrated struggle for success, craving for affection, loneliness, passive acquiescence, and neurotic protest. But all these elements do not blossom directly, as we know them, from the mouths of a group of children: they are conceived and spoken after passing through the filter of innocence. Schulz's children are not a sly instrument to handle our adult problems: they experience these problems according to a childish psychology, and for this very reason they seem to us touching and hopeless, as if we were suddenly aware that our ills have polluted everything, at the root (Eco, 1985)

Unlike Charles Schulz' world of *Peanuts*, Dahl's world is not without adults. Nor is it benign-- simply a naïve reflection of contemporary neurosis or even a "culture of narcissism" (Lasch, 1979). Towering above it is the maniacal figure of Willie Wonka, who is seen by the singular life-affirming individual in young Charlie's life, his Grandpa Joe, as a godlike presence. Indeed, it is through Charlie's loving identification with Joe that the conundrum of perverse socialization is highlighted. For Joe, belief in Willy Wonka is an article of faith, as the boy naively inquires, "And is Mr Willy Wonka *really* the cleverest chocolate maker in the world?" (Dahl, 1964 p 10). The answer, is Grandpa Joe's singular conviction

My *dear* boy, said Grandpa Joe, raising himself up a little higher on his pillow, "Mr Willy Wonka is the most *amazing*, the most *fantastic*, the most *extraordinary* chocolate maker the world has ever seen! I thought *everybody* knew that!

And indeed, Charlie receives this consensual knowledge, given by the man he most loves. It is knowledge known by "everybody", hence freely given for the taking--- something rather rare in the Bucket family's life of socioeconomic deprivation. And because there is a barb in Joe's direct address, as if something is amiss with Charlie's

uncertainty, Joe's doctrine functions too as a pointed instruction: to belong, to be like everybody else, and most importantly to be like me, to be loved, you must also believe as I do.

Charlie lives with his family in a world defined by physical starvation relieved only by the shared fantasy of belief in the mysteries of Willy Wonka. They live on cabbage soup purchased with an income insufficient by 75% to maintain the family: Charlie, his mother, father---- an unemployed factory worker---- and four elderly grandparents who share the home's single bed.

Dahl's descriptions of Charlie's personality concern the torture of economic suffering; and of his wild fortune, confirming the delightful joint wish of Charlie and Grandpa Joe that Charlie win one of the precious "Golden Tickets" offered by Wonka, extending to the five winners a factory tour and a lifetime supply of Wonka product, a concretization of unlimited sweetness. Against this deprivation, Dahl draws the entitled ease of the other winners of Wonka's Golden Tickets. And with this, Charlie is marinated through loving exposure to the envious, contemptuous hatred of his family elders for the middle-class winners who temporarily, cast Charlie's deprivation into

a bright beam of intense darkness. Grandma Georgina, for example, asks “Do *all* children behave like this nowadays- like these brats we’ve been hearing about?” (p 40). Grandpa Joe later opines, that they deserve a “good kick in the pants” (p 97).

Charlie’s economic and material deprivation is embroidered with his familial awareness both of difference and envious hatred for the more economically fortunate. And against this is his faith: faith in his Grandpa’s own belief and beyond this, making that belief his own, faith in the miraculous nature of Willie Wonka . And through this loving dedication, this identification into faith of familial care against the torturous and brutal hardships of an uncaring world, is the loving foundation of Charlie’s perverse socialization. The twist comes in its conviction, beyond love and the singularity of faith, of limitless sweetness.

II.

Unlimited sweetness within Dahl’s Charlie-world is a fantasy that spans a value horizon from bad to good. Dahl’s entitled, middle class caricatures of children, brats who eat too much, disrespect parental authority, are addicted to television and their own self-interest, are actually, just as desirous of unlimited sweetness as is Charlie. Yet

their unlimited sweetness derives from their socialization in society's promise as conveyed by their anxious, narcissistic parents; and is ultimately unattainable. Despite the delivery of lifelong sweets, their need for more is never satisfied. For them, unlimited sweetness is a function of class entitlement in which they believe the Golden Ticket is their due. From Wonka's harshly moralistic perspective, they do not suffer sufficiently. Their narcissistic preoccupations are insufficient evidence of suffering, however they are predicated on psychic emptiness. Wonka's perspective obliterates consideration of how human beings think and feel. It reduces human concern to brutal, physical survival and passive submission to irrational authority. Humanity for Wonka, is about greed. Greed itself is divided into greed that is virtuous as a function of its overt suffering (and so, submissive to coercive power) and greed that is gratuitous (and so, disrespectful of arbitrary power). According to Wonka's reductionism, the only real criterion is whether greed can be made submissive to Wonka's destructive narcissism and self-aggrandizing power. For Willy Wonka, this is the singular moral good.

Against the gratuitous greed of entitled children is Dahl's polar opposite, a virtuous fantasy of unlimited sweetness that is rooted first in intergenerational faith, illustrated by Charlie and his Grandpa Joe; and next by the virtue of enduring painful suffering, making the sufferer malleable, and recognized in Charlie and Joe by the god-like Wonka, who in his narcissistic encapsulation, seems immune to their religious devotion. Wonka recognizes only power and manipulation; in his harsh aloneness, he repudiates interpersonal identification and loving relatedness to another. He misses what is most lovingly human in Charlie and Joe. However, blinded in their devotion to Mr Willy Wonka, and identifying with the correctness of his demonstrated brutalities, neither Charlie nor Joe recognizes that what they most value in one another, their loving care, is missing in Wonka.

In contrast to the other children, Charlie's Ticket emerges as singular: through an identification and mimicry of Grandpa Joe's intense faith. In a sly nod to this intergenerational pairing, Dahl underlines this special relationship. While Wonka permits each child to visit the factory in the presence of two adults, it is only Charlie who proceeds with a single adult, Grandpa Joe---- and this, despite his own father's

desire to see the wonders also narrated to him by Joe, his own father. Simply put, Charlie's father lacks the singularity of Wonka-faith manifested by Charlie and Joe. Made redundant on the assembly line where he'd screwed caps on tubes of toothpaste, Charlie's Dad is a man too beaten by the world, too aware of the compromises forced by Reality to be rewarded within the shared fantasy of unlimited sweetness.

Wonka himself is a fierce judge of suffering. Indeed, apart from his miraculous capacity at invention, Wonka's singular, human trait is in recognizing and exploiting the starvation of others through the promise of unlimited sustenance. The twist in the plot is that survivors of Wonka's factory, maimed and tortured, are provided with the reparations guaranteed by their Golden Tickets, a lifetime supply of Wonka stuff; but the real payoff of unlimited sweetness is Wonka's promise to Charlie that Charlie will become Wonka's successor, after his family is absorbed within the factory in a dramatic conclusion involving the Freudian, phallic rocketing of a lift at speed, through a glass elevator shaft, achieving explosive ejaculation and destruction of the Bucket family home.

Wonka oppresses whole tribes of colonial peoples, the Oompa Loompa, who reside in his factory through population transfer; and who both endure through his largesse of unlimited cocoa beans and perish in the fiendish experimental labs of his chocolate factory. Ultimately, Charlie too, will be rewarded for his starvation in exactly the same manner: with the transfer of his family to the factory against the angry protest of family members. Both Charlie and Joe know too well, but make absent as dissociated knowledge, that the factory functions not only in wonder but in its shadowy capacity in human experimentation and extermination, both for Oompa Loompas and entitled children. Such knowledge becomes “dead” to them though; under the seductive promise of unlimited sweetness.

III.

At the center of this modern morality tale is an asymmetrical relation between the physical suffering of starvation from which, based in loving human identification, arises the shared fantasy of faith; and its exploitation by the powerful, as weakness-----eventuating in complicity with extreme human violence.

Wonka disposes of children who are insufficiently cowed by hunger, insufficiently compliant. These, he tortures. He marks their bodies, as

if with the biblical mark of Cain (Genesis 4), with the signs of his power and outrage at their audacious lack of submission. So tattooed, for life, these are the survivors of their own desire for unlimited sweetness.

Perhaps more perniciously, exploiting their genuine need in hunger, Wonka rewards the product of loving identification and shared fantasy with enlistment into the ranks of the factory administration. The Buckets become Wonka's Kapos. Here, in a radical perversion of the biblical "you shall be as Gods" (Genesis 3:5), the condition for godliness is the human effacement of differentiation. The condition of Charlie's elevation to Willy Wonka is the blurring of good and evil. In the final act of perverse socialization, the difference between good and evil becomes dead to me.

Charlie traverses the continuum from what is immediate, whether in reality or fantasy, as center and periphery to what is unimaginable, unthinkable. In his greedy desire, no longer in love for Grandpa Joe, but for unlimited sweetness, he retreats from the unimaginable---- his

own witnessing of the horrors inflicted by Willy Wonka upon others. Four times in Charlie's transit through Wonka's factory, he is exposed to what he takes to be murder; but Wonka's uncaring aggression is absorbed into unquestioning: rather, malignant destruction is reconstructed within the Bucket family's categories of socialization: the other children are brats deserving a kick in the pants; and Wonka is a godlike genius. Indeed, Wonka freely admits his interest in experimentation over the lives it effects. As Violet Beauregarde is turned into a blueberry he says

It always happens like that,' sighed Mr Wonka. 'I've tried it twenty times in the Testing Room on twenty Oompa-Loompas, and every one of them finished up as a blueberry. It's most annoying. I just can't understand it (p. 116)

Oompa-Loompas, children: Charlie and Grandpa Joe observe it all, marveling in wonder rather than horror. They encapsulate their fantasy at the center of their vision; and expel any reality, including the reality of their direct experience well beyond the periphery of thought, past the uncanny and into the unthinkable. And here, resting submissively, flush with the violent destruction of the only family home they have known, the story concludes in perverse gratification of unlimited sweetness: among the disclaimed detritus of physical

destruction and overt evidence of maimed humanity. Charlie escapes the pain of reality represented by his own father's suffering, by substitution of shared fantasy for thinking, reinforced by the addictive prospect of unlimited sweetness. Embracing amnesia and oblivion, Charlie laughingly leads his family into Wonka's chocolate factory accompanied by Grandma Josephine's declarative cry " I'm starving ! The whole family is starving!"

Charlie's rhetorical answer, having himself become Wonka, is

Anything to eat? Cried Charlie laughing. "Oh you just wait and see!"

But a clarity of sight is exactly what Charlie lacks. Like the Sophoclean hero of "Oedipus King", he has blinded himself to the reality with which he has been presented. "Oh you just wait and see!": chilling words, like "he is dead to me". They are unreflective, offering complicity in destruction of what is also good within humanity. Words that are the product of perverse socialization, gratified by a full stomach of Wonka's cocoa in a violent fantasy of unlimited sweetness.

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