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CHAPTER TWO

The lost child: Whose is the face in the mirror?

Maria Rhode

In children who are developing well, healthy self-love goes hand in hand with love for others and a lively interest in the outside world. A narcissistic child takes his parents' love as though it were his right and the natural consequence of his own qualities. A child who is himself capable of love, on the other hand, will feel loveable precisely because he can trust in their love for him, in spite of the normal conflicts of the Oedipal constellation. In such a benign cycle, the child's sense of his own goodness reinforces his capacity for love and gratitude, and is reinforced by it.

In contrast, in the situation that Freud (1914c) characterized as secondary narcissism, conflicts arising in relation to others can lead to a turning away from the outside world and to excessive self-absorption. In other words, Freud saw secondary narcissism as a means of safeguarding the self against the hazards of relationships. Equally, in primary narcissism, which Freud postulated as secondary narcissism's normal developmental analogue, he suggested that well-being was linked to the absence of relationships: that is, he thought of object cathexis as draining libido away from the ego. As Britton (2003a) has recently pointed out, Freud's discussion of narcissism tended to emphasize its function in underpinning the sense

of identity, whereas Abraham's emphasis (1919) was much more on the negativistic character of narcissistic patients, which led them to attack the possibility of relating to anyone who was not under their control.

This distinction has been carried over into much subsequent work on narcissism. For example, Rosenfeld (1987) contrasted thin-skinned narcissists, who often had a traumatic history and whose pleasure in their own achievements precariously bolstered their sense of a cohesive identity, with thick-skinned narcissists, in whom the growing part of the self was imprisoned by a Mafia-type gang led by a mad aspect of the personality that was opposed to any kind of dependent relationship. While Steiner (1987) proposed that such pathological organizations could serve as a retreat from depressive anxieties as well as from the fear of chaos, Britton (2003a) has contrasted those narcissistic alliances between twin parts of the self where the aim is to preserve the possibility of loving with those where the aim is jointly-executed murder. On the other hand, Kohut (1971, 1977) and analysts whom he influenced, particularly in America, placed far greater emphasis on the patient's need to underpin the sense of self. Stolorow and Lachman (1986), for example, define as narcissistic anything that contributes to a cohesive sense of identity.

Another area of continuing debate that was opened up by Freud's 1914 paper on narcissism has centred on the likely nature of the infant's experience—normal primary narcissism or early object relatedness? It is perhaps worth reminding ourselves of Balint's observation (1969) that Freud himself had more than one theory, and never fully integrated his different formulations. In 1914, he postulated a state of normal primary narcissism; but in the *Three Essays* (1905d), he had written that the baby's first object was the mother's breast, and that this was true from the beginning of life. This statement was not modified when he revised the *Three Essays* in 1915, though was diametrically opposed to his position in the paper *On Narcissism*. Since then, different authors have emphasized the implications of one of Freud's various theories over those of another.

Recent advances in developmental research (see, for example, Stern, 1985; Trevarthen, 2001) have demonstrated that very young babies are capable of intense and complex object relationships—something that psychoanalytic workers had come to realize through the discipline of infant observation (Bick, 1964). This does not, of

course, imply that these relationships are sustained at a uniform level: the baby who goes to sleep after a feed with the nipple in its mouth is likely to be experiencing a state in which self and other are far less differentiated than is the case for a baby who is satisfied, alert, and ready to engage with others.

The "lost child" of my title is that part of the child's personality that *is* capable of love, that *does* have potential, but is not given the opportunity to flourish because of the dominance of a Mafia-type organization or gang. This "lost" part, as we know, continues to exist even when a destructive aspect of the personality is in command, although, as Steiner (1982) has described, the loving part may sometimes engage in perverse, collusive submission to the gang leader. The question then is whether and how it may be possible to speak to the growing part of the child's personality. A particular problem arises from the despair and dislike which such children can inspire—and dislike is a sufficiently unusual response to a child to deserve, I think, to be taken very seriously as a pointer to a possible narcissistic organization. Besides, despair and dislike can easily overwhelm the therapist so that their communicative value may be overlooked, and so can the traces, however faint, of a potentially growing part of the child's personality.

Narcissism and autism

The children whose material I wish to discuss in this chapter all had a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder, though they withdrew to different degrees from relationships with other people. On a purely behavioural level, children with autism seem to present an extreme degree of the withdrawal from relationships that characterizes the narcissistic states described in adults. However, the structure of the two conditions has generally been approached from different vantage points. Even leaving aside the implication of genetic and neurological factors in autistic spectrum disorders, many authors from Melanie Klein onwards have regarded these as stemming from an inhibition of development rather than from regression (Klein, 1930). In her last book, Tustin (1990) referred to some cases in which she thought that autistic coping strategies were invoked in order to hold a psychosis in check, a formulation that seems to converge with Steiner's (1987) view that psychic retreats can serve as a protection

against chaos. However, in the main she viewed autism proper as a sensation—dominated state in which autistic objects and autistic shapes provided, respectively, hard sensations that allowed the child to feel strong and soft sensations that allowed him to feel soothed (Tustin, 1981). Since dependence on separate people was side-stepped, the child's internal personality structure was correspondingly rudimentary and impoverished. Because of this, she thought that narcissism was an inappropriate term to use in describing children with autism, because they did not possess a sense of self as this is usually understood (Tustin, 1986c). Meltzer and his colleagues (Meltzer et al, 1975) similarly emphasized the characteristic mindlessness of autistic states and the poverty of personality development: those children who had developed narcissistic structures, such as Isca Wittenberg's John (1975) did so after emerging from the autistic state proper. Such a deficit model sits well with both relational (Hobson, 2002) and cognitive theories of autism (e.g. Frith, 2004; Baron-Cohen, 1988), although, as Alvarez (1999) has recently pointed out, individual children with autism differ with regard to the balance in each case of issues of defence and of deficit.

Both the central motivations for narcissism—shoring up the sense of existing and the pull away from relationships—apply also to autism. The difference may be a matter of degree, in that the child with autism is concerned, as Tustin described, with shutting out anything that could impinge on the feeling of physically "going on being". Because the outside world can feel so dangerous, the child does not engage in the relationships that could allow his sense of self to develop. Instead, he relies on self-generated physical sensations rather than on defence mechanisms. A marked sensuality has often been noted in children with autism (Tustin, 1972; Meltzer, 1975); this bodily dimension constitutes an important distinction between them and others with whom they may share important patterns of motivation and behaviour. For example, I have described elsewhere (Rhode, 2004) two boys with autism who had each responded to trauma according to one of the alternatives—subjectivity and objectivity—delineated by Britton (1998) in relation to patients who felt in danger of being overwhelmed by what he called a "Chaos Monster" as a consequence of the closure of the Oedipal triangle. The difference was that the two autistic children experienced the threatened danger as a bodily mutilation, and responded on a physical

level. One sought bodily fusion which was in danger of being cut into by an intrusive father element, while the other literally hardened himself against the threat of being physically engulfed.

Clinical illustrations

The three children I shall refer to in this chapter had all developed beyond the state of autism proper, though two of them, Anthony and Lina, continued to rely, to different degrees, on the physicality of autistic objects and autistic shapes. At this point, it becomes helpful to think in terms of narcissistic patterns. While a vignette (Shulman, 1998) concerning the first child, Andrew, illustrates how communication, particularly verbal communication, can be vetoed by a narcissistic gang leader, Anthony and Lina both turned to narcissistic withdrawal as a means of dealing with the lack of a cohesive sense of self and with their profound fears about the state of the mother figure. Lina, a nine-year-old with a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome, managed to achieve an accommodation with an Oedipal couple who provided a framework within which her sense of identity could develop. In contrast, Anthony's experience of the Oedipal couple was one in which narcissistically-absorbed parents were seen as mirror images of each other who cruelly excluded him. His own narcissistic imperviousness seemed to involve identification with such a couple, in which I was to be the cruelly excluded child. In both children, the narcissistic part of their personality that led them away from human relationships turned out to be based on a frightening parental figure: a damaged, engulfing mother in Lina's case, and a sadistic father in Anthony's.

Andrew: Autistic withdrawal as dictated by the narcissistic gang leader

Before I go on to the second part of my title, which concerns the child's reflected image of himself, whether in the context of narcissism or of object relations, I would like give an example of the interplay between loving and narcissistic aspects of the child's personality and the therapist's countertransference response. This vignette also illustrates how the mutism that is typical of autistic states may be imposed by the leader of a narcissistic organization.

Andrew was a four-year-old boy with mild to moderate autism whom I assessed together with a colleague, Graham Shulman.¹ Andrew's disruptive behaviour meant that his parents could not take him anywhere; in addition, he insisted on sleeping in their bed, and they felt it would be cruel to stop him. On the positive side, he had begun to make more contact since his mother became pregnant, and he also made good contact with my colleague. I, on the other hand, found myself feeling a strong dislike. This was not because of the way he climbed over me as though I were a piece of furniture: that is more or less expectable in a child with autism. It was more because of an implacable, machine-like quality in his behaviour.

My colleague took Andrew on for intensive psychotherapy (Shulman, 1998), and he progressed to the extent of transferring to a mainstream school and of being able to sustain a warm and cooperative relationship with his therapist. However, he then noticeably reverted to playing and talking without allowing any real emotional contact. One day, after a conversation with his therapist, he turned to address a brick that lay on the floor among other scattered toys. "I'm sorry" said Andrew "that I spoke in words." It was a chilling illustration of his submission to an inhuman part of himself that forbade contact with other people and had presumably reasserted itself to cause Andrew's change of attitude. I suspect that, during the assessment, these two aspects of Andrew had produced a countertransference response that was split between my colleague and me, much as his refusal to sleep in his own bed split the parental couple, and that our separate responses taken together gave a good indication of how things were to go.

It was not until Andrew had been in treatment for four years and had improved greatly that his mother was able to talk about the terror that a violent uncle had inspired in her when she was a child. She had experienced Andrew's tantrums as though he were a reincarnation of this man: she could not stop him from coming between herself and her husband, who felt equally unable to assert himself. Many writers (e.g. Rosenfeld, 1971; Meltzer, 1973, 1992; O'Shaughnessy, 1981; Sohn, 1985; Steiner, 1982, 1987) have described the process by which parts of the self are located in various figures with which they are then identified—one reason for the resistance to change of the resulting narcissistic organization. In Andrew's case, there were additional transgenerational complications: his

aggression had become confused with the aggression of one of his mother's internal figures. These circumstances must greatly have heightened Andrew's fear of the cold, destructive part of his personality, which no one seemed to be able to stand up to. Jackson (2004), writing about a child who was not on the autistic spectrum, has illustrated in detail how the absence of adequate boundaries can contribute to the growth of destructive narcissism.

This vignette illustrates the centrality of Andrew's revolt against Oedipal restrictions. It also illustrates how his ability to make contact increased through the realization that his attacks had not been successful: that he had not prevented the conception of the next baby. I would like to develop this line of thought by considering the importance of the balance between the place occupied by the developing child and the place he or she may imagine is occupied by central figures in the mother's mind. This balance, I believe, is crucial to the capacity to internalize experience, and therefore to the development of a sense of self that is based on relationships with others rather than on a narcissistic stance. I will illustrate this with material from work with Lina, a girl with a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome who made extensive use of the mirror in the search for her own identity.

*Lina: "I'm looking for myself"*²

As Winnicott (1967) proposed in *The mirror role of mother and family in child development*, the baby derives its fundamental sense of existence and goodness from what it sees reflected in its mother's face: on that most basic of levels, we are what we see. If the mother's pre-occupations intrude excessively for too much of the time, then these are what the baby will see in her face rather than himself. I shall suggest that this line of thought can usefully be combined with Melanie Klein's observation (1961) that small children tend to personify the mother's qualities. They think of these qualities as though they were literally people who lived inside the mother's body rather than more abstract properties of her mind and character. (For example, in *Narrative of a Child Analysis*, Klein's patient Richard wanted to turn off the glowing bar of an electric heater which had previously been understood in terms of the father's presence inside the mother. Once he had done so, the playroom felt dead to him (Klein 1961,

p. 46–49). The mother may be felt to contain a benign internal family that receives the child with love, or a hostile internal family that makes her into someone angry, or intrudes into his relationship with her and undermines his sense of self. This means that, if the mother is mentally preoccupied, the child can experience this as though she were physically occupied; if she is depressed, the child may feel that she is literally full of ghosts. This is of course unrealistic, and may sound like introducing unnecessary complications; but it is, as it were, the fairy-tale component of the way young children often interpret eye contact.

Lina used a mirror very creatively to explore and communicate aspects of her sense of self. Since the mirror was an inanimate object that she could control, her reliance on it could in itself seem narcissistic. In fact, it served as a stepping-stone towards more direct contact, and allowed us to understand some of the reasons why this felt so dangerous to her. (While Winnicott [as well as Spitz (1955), Meltzer (1986), Haag (1985, 1991) and Wright (1991)] emphasized the developmental contribution of being seen by another, Lacan (1941) saw the mirror stage as the beginning of alienation. More recently, Britton (1998, p. 45) has quoted Sartre on the alienating gaze of the Other, and Steiner (2004) has described the destructive function of the gaze in relation to narcissism.) Sinason (1999) has described a similar useful function of the mirror with learning-disabled patients. Looking into a mirror need not be narcissistic, any more than was Narcissus's behaviour towards his own reflection. It is easy to forget that Narcissus pined away and died when his reflection did not respond to him; he declared his love to it as though it were another person, and as though he were a child who could not yet recognize his own reflection in the mirror. From this perspective, it is not so much that self-love made him turn away from other people as that his sense of identity was inadequately developed, leaving him without the necessary emotional equipment to sustain reciprocal relationships. Some 40 years ago, Lichtenstein (1964) pointed out the difference between being in love with oneself and being in love with one's reflection, and suggested that such a fascination with one's own mirror image was related to fundamental problems of identity. One need only

remember how Freud's grandson in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (Freud, 1920g) repeated his fort-da game with his own mirror reflection to realize that looking in the mirror can be object-related. Athanassiou (2006) has provided a fascinating discussion, from a psychoanalytic perspective, of the developmental studies on children's recognition of their mirror image, shadow and photographic image carried out by Fontaine (1992).

Lina had been echolalic and extremely withdrawn, but she improved to a gratifying extent during treatment. I began to work with her when she was six-and-a-half, following a family bereavement. Not surprisingly, she was inhibited by her confusion between growing by taking things in and by damaging other people. She maintained a narcissistic mode of relating in the sense that she usually ignored me. She either read for the whole 50 minutes unless I stopped her, or filled up the session by reproducing pictures she had seen in books or television programmes. Sometimes these were used communicatively, to help me to understand something about her; but often they were used as a means of feeling that she could be the source of everything she needed, and that it did not matter whether I was in the room or not.

Lina seemed quite clear that my qualities were a function of my internal occupants: she even brought along a plastic toy with a pregnant-looking stomach that could be rotated in order to change the expression in the eyes—from happy to sad to angry to surprised. In addition, she was preoccupied with the difference between the reflecting side of the mirror and its opaque wooden backing. She compared the wood to the door of the room which felt shut to her between appointments, and also to the wall, which she tried to run through with predictably painful results. In contrast, seeing herself reflected in the mirror seemed to feel like finding the doorway into my eyes and mind. She became capable of much more enduring eye contact, though she could still feel in danger of being engulfed, and habitually made rafts for the toy animals to save them from drowning in the sink and being eaten by the crocodile on the bottom.

I would read this as a vivid illustration of Lina's desperate, precariously balanced clinging to surfaces, and of her fear of dangerous depths in other people and in herself. However, she did manage to differentiate this version of a malign internal family from a helpful

one that could provide support. This support was represented by the solid trunk of a pot plant on the draining board, on which the farm animals sought refuge so as not to drown. Lina tended to attack this plant, as though she felt it to be a rival that was always in my room; but gradually she began to want to look after it. It was as though she had come to value the enduring presence of an object that she had not been able to get rid of, and the solidity of which saved her from being engulfed, just as the presence of the father serves to regulate the distance between mother and child. She began to feel that it was possible to get through emotionally without destroying the solid paternal function and being sucked into the depths.

In parallel with these developments, Lina took courage to be naughty and rebellious, whereas previously she had had the fairy-like, somewhat unreal quality that is characteristic of some children on the autistic spectrum. She seemed initially to experience this unintegrated side of herself as though it were a double or alter ego, like Bion's (1950) imaginary twin. She had always been annoyed by the presence in a glass-fronted cupboard of some toys used by the colleague with whom I shared the room. She had similar toys of her own, but the fact that the ones in the cupboard were, as she put it, "not playable" understandably felt tantalizing and provocative, so that they became connected in her mind with my own supposed internal occupants. One day she took a mouthful of water after some play at the sink, and held it in her mouth without swallowing while she stood gazing into the cupboard. She swallowed, then became acutely distressed. She wailed, "My sister Flo—I'm looking for my sister Flo," and had to run to the lavatory. As I waited for her, it struck me that her panic had been triggered by the act of swallowing, as though she feared that it might have destructive consequences. She was still quite distraught when she emerged from the lavatory, and in the room went back to stand in front of the cupboard, talking about her sister Flo whom she could not see. I said to her that perhaps, when she felt annoyed about things in the cupboard or in me which she felt blocked her access, she might get muddled between the kind of taking in that she needed to do in order to grow, on the one hand; and, on the other, the effect of what she had previously called her angry "monster mouth". It might be hard then to feel that she had the right to keep the water inside her after swallowing, instead of letting everything "flow" (Flo) out of

her. She calmed down, and went to look at herself in the mirror as though to reassure herself that she was still there. In the next session, she again swallowed a mouthful of water while standing in front of the cupboard, and I asked whether she was looking for her sister Flo. "No," she answered in an assured tone of voice, "I'm looking for myself." Addressing her hostile impulses towards my internal occupants allowed her to look for her own reflection without feeling that she had bitten them out of me (compare Tustin 1990a, p. 203). This meant that she could retain what she took in—the water, for example—and use it as a source of strength, instead of equating herself with me as someone that water "Flo'ed" out of.

Some weeks later, in a pivotal session, Lina developed the theme of her position relative to the mother's internal occupant:

Lina drew many little circles in different colours on the surface of the mirror. Previously, this had been in the context of wondering how babies were made: she had said that the circles were created by Mr. Green, Sir Blue, and so on. Now, she said, a bit defensively, "I'm only trying to make stained glass." I said that perhaps she thought stained glass looked lovely—all those colours with the light coming through—and that she was curious about how it was made, and would like to make some. In terms of her and me, this would be like feeling that it was she who elicited the expression—the colour—in my eyes when I looked at her—that it was important to feel that she could make something nice like that happen, instead of imagining that a baby inside me determined my expression, as seemed to be the case with her toy. She wiped the coloured circles off the mirror, and said, "It looks grey now," moving her hand furtively past her bottom as she threw the tissue in the bin. Wiping off the coloured circles, which did in fact get in the way of her own reflection, made her feel that my mirror-gaze was empty—depressed, grey, and messed up.

Now she drew a bull on the mirror, with angry-looking eyes, coloured in red as though it were bleeding. She turned the mirror over, and seemed to be trying to see herself in the wooden back. I commented that one couldn't see oneself in that side, but that perhaps she was also wondering whether that was where the picture of the bull came from. Then she held up the mirror

at an angle to the window, and said, "Now the light is shining through." In fact, of course, it was not; but I said she was looking for a situation where the light could shine through, without being blocked by the picture: where there was room for life to go on behind my eyes in a way that encompassed her, and did not get in the way of room for her feelings.

Lina responded, "You can do something else, too." She took the mirror to the sink, and, balancing it carefully, filled it up to the rim of the frame with water, so that the picture of the bull was now beneath the surface. She bent over it, as though, again, she were looking for herself: this time, however, she said, "I can see myself." I agreed that the water was different from the mirror, because it had actual depth, so that the picture of the bull did not get in the way of her seeing herself reflected.

I would like to highlight two related issues: first, the position of the child in relation to the mother's internal occupant: second, the importance of depth within the mother which this occupant does not fill. (Early in treatment, Lina seemed to illustrate this when she meticulously arranged two calves face to face, one on a plate, one outside it, in such a way that they were equidistant from the rim.) Where this balance is right, the baby can bring his own qualities to engage with the mother's, as in developmental imitation (Rhode, 2005), without feeling either that his own vitality or aggression are causing damage (so that he is sucked into the depths where a crocodile waits for him), or that he will be crowded out or projected into by an internal occupant of the mother who lies, as it were, "too far forward". In a situation such as Lina managed to establish, the child's way in is not blocked: space is available for emotional containment, the light "shining through" makes the child feel that he can elicit a response, and, at the same time, the presence of the internal object means that the child is neither in danger of being engulfed nor of feeling responsible for an empty mother-figure. In other words, mother and child are both complete: they can evolve reciprocal interactions that the child can internalize. Because he has had the experience of not being crowded out of his mother's mind by her internal occupant, he can in turn take her in without feeling that doing so may crowd him out of his own mind; and in this way he can enrich his own personality in a way that is based on relationships instead of relying on a narcissistic stance.

Lina's ninth birthday, some weeks after this pivotal session, encouraged her to feel that she would one day be a woman who could herself have children, and to be more able to identify with me in that respect. In parallel with these developments, her hostility, including the anal attacks that had been hinted at in connection with the mirror's becoming grey, came more directly into her play and could be worked on. Equally, the fluctuations in her use of drawing, between narcissistic and communicative modes, became an explicit focus of the therapy and could be related meaningfully to breaks between sessions and during holidays.

This material suggests, I think, that Lina's narcissistic withdrawal and attempts at self-sufficiency had the aim of protecting her from the feared consequences of her own aggression, whether expressed as attacks against the "father" plant or as the angry devouring of a rival who was felt to inhabit me (her sister Flo) (These fears would of course have been aggravated by the family bereavement.) Along similar lines, Hamilton (1982) has suggested that the narcissistic adolescent has often lacked a strong father and therefore has difficulty in freeing himself from the way his doting mother perceives him.

After a session when she had been more than usually withdrawn following a break in treatment, she drew a fantasy creature with spirals in his eyes, whose name, she said, was Swirly. Looking straight at me, she said, "He hypnotizes people." I said that she needed to be sure that I would not hypnotize her, so that she lost a will of her own and was sucked into my eyes; and that, when she was frightened of this, she allowed herself instead to be hypnotized by a part of her own personality that lured her into the world of fantastical drawings and away from contact with me. In other words, the narcissistic part of her was based on the damaged mother figure by whom she was afraid of being engulfed.

Anthony: Identification with a narcissistic couple³

I would now like to discuss some material from the treatment of Anthony, a boy whose autistic spectrum disorder was much more severe and intractable than Lina's. Like her, Anthony was faced with loss he was unable to cope with. However, while she allowed herself to be hypnotized by a part of her personality modelled on an engulfing mother whose internal occupants had been eliminated, he was

dominated by a cruel narcissistic part based on a sadistic fantastic father figure, which actively enjoyed killing off his own capacities.

Anthony was referred urgently at the age of six because he was attacking other children. He was described as intelligent, and he was capable of speaking emotionally, indeed poetically. Before the first Christmas break, he drew the curtains: "Dark," he said, "dark, dark, dark. No more lady, never, never, never." However, most of the time he was unreachably withdrawn, and produced mutilated bits of words and sentences in voices not his own; as though, like Andrew, he were truly not being allowed to "speak in words". The voices included that of the cruel Giant from *Jack and the Beanstalk*, who threatened to devour him; and also a caricatured version of a mother who seemed to be humouring him rather than taking him seriously—a voice that he called "cruel Mummy". He constantly repeated what seemed to be catastrophic birth sequences such as Winnicott (1949) and Tustin (1981a) have described, in which he let himself fall off the desk, struggling to reach the safety of a chair. As he did so, his mouth was twisted into a painful, lopsided shape, and he clutched the drawstring of his trousers as though he thought it could support him. He looked tortured, and in turn he inflicted tortures on the plastic toy animals, whose muzzles, hooves, ears and tails he cut off. Although they pleaded, "Please don't do this to me," he habitually continued until I stopped him. At such moments, his cruelty seemed to involve identification with two aggressors—a cruel Giant father who actively inflicted these torments, and an impervious mother who took no notice.

I should emphasize that these meaningful sequences occurred quite rarely: most of the time Anthony was unreachable. His preferred position was on a table, high above me, where he either muttered in the Giant's voice or reassured himself in the robotic voice of a computer: "Those-answers-are-all-correct. You-are-a-genius." At the same time, his balance was uncertain, and I had to take care to make sure that he did not fall. The gulf seemed unbridgeable between the helpless, traumatized infant and the sadistic, narcissistic bully.

Anthony appeared to share many of the catastrophic anxieties that Tustin (1972, 1986a,b) and others (e.g. Haag, 1985) have described in children with autism. These include falling, having a damaged mouth, and losing parts of the body. He behaved as though

these anxieties had been caused by an actively cruel father and an impervious mother, whom he seemed to experience as though they were mirror images of each other and formed a narcissistic "unit" that had eyes for no-one else. For example, he tipped a toy cow forward so that it stood on its muzzle on the mirror, and, pointing to the reflection, he said, "Mummy and Daddy". When he ignored me, he seemed to be identified with this narcissistic parental unit; and indeed he would enact being his mother on the telephone—"Yes, all right, darling"—or a performer singing into a microphone that he held as though it were a mirror and he were receiving the adulation of an adoring public. Alternatively, as I have mentioned, he tormented the toy animals as though he were at the same time a cruel father and an impervious mother; or he tormented me by mutilating the dolls, arranged inside the shut dolls' house as though they were my family. He would follow this up by physically attacking his own head, as though demonstrating the equivalence between his own mental capacities and my supposed internal occupants. Similarly, he might play at setting fire to the house, gloating at the dolls' ineffectual struggles to escape, and then lurch about the room grimacing and laughing madly, muttering fragments of words as though his sanity and his capacity for thought and speech had been literally incinerated along with my family.

I hoped it might be possible to use the mirror as a third object that could reassure Anthony about making eye contact, so I tried to play at "finding" him by catching his eye in the mirror. Usually this did not work: it seemed that Anthony felt too insecure to tolerate my reflection in the mirror alongside his. It was as though he himself, together with his reflection, had to constitute the mutually-adoring, twin-like, mirror-image parental couple, whose preoccupation with each other left no room for my existence to be recognized. He may well have expected any intruding third person to be hostile and dangerous. However, one day when he was feeling more robust, he did allow my reflection in the mirror alongside his, so that I could catch his eye. Smiling with pleasure, he said, "Hullo mirror." Unlike Lina, he did not seem to think of me as a human mirror, someone who could reflect him and reflect on him: instead, I seemed to be in the role of a rival—like her sister Flo—competing with him for the mirror's reflecting surface, much as Britton (2003b) has recently described in *Narcissistic problems in sharing space*. But on this occasion,

when he did feel able briefly to tolerate another face in the mirror, he appeared to be liberated for a moment from his imprisonment in sterile narcissism, and he found his voice to speak to the mirror as though it had human qualities. It is as though the narcissistic couple who were mirror-images of each other had become a couple that provided space for a child. Briefly, the growing part of Anthony escaped from its usual condition of mutilation, and so did the words he was able to produce.

Gradually, Anthony began to be able to use the mirror to fulfil its proper function—to provide information about himself rather than to confirm that he existed. One of the things that most held his attention was moving the mirror away from his face and back closer to it while making terrifying grimaces. He seemed to be experimenting with getting the right distance to a monstrous part of himself, and trying to establish where it was located. It was as though he were concerned with differentiating between his own active cruelty and the cruel Giant figure by whom he felt excluded and in danger of being mutilated. Like Lina when she referred to her monster mouth, Anthony seems to have felt responsible for the state of the mother figure he was so frightened of losing (“no more lady”). Again as with Lina, the narcissistic part that held Anthony in thrall was modelled on a figure of whom he was frightened. However, with Lina this was a damaged mother figure by whom she was frightened of being engulfed; with Anthony, it was the sadistic father figure who enjoyed inflicting tortures on him.

As I have suggested, the effect of these narcissistic devices on the countertransference can be complex, particularly where the child does not have the opportunity to divide the narcissistic and growing aspects of himself between two therapists as Andrew did during his assessment. I was often submerged in despair, particularly when I compared Anthony’s habitual behaviour with what I knew him to be capable of; and it could be difficult to believe that this despair was a communication, not just an appropriate response to the realistic situation. I also came to realize how easily any step forward could disappear by the next session as though it had never been; and not only in Anthony’s mind, but in mine as well. Partly, no doubt, this was Anthony’s narcissistic organization reasserting itself after every break, no matter how minor; but partly I think it was also an indication of the degree to which I had actually become a “cruel Mummy”

who did not notice what was happening, whether it was a terrible event or an important development. This easily turned into a vicious circle in which hopelessness ground me down to such an extent that I became incapable of doing justice either to faint indications of promising developments or to the full degree of the cruel Giant’s destructiveness. It was as though Anthony’s narcissistic organization had hypnotized me as well as himself. This lack of energy in his therapist was bound to leave Anthony even more at the mercy of the narcissistic part of his personality.

The first step in breaking out of this vicious circle, not surprisingly, had to be made in terms of my own attitude, by “working through in the countertransference” (Brenman Pick, 1985). I realized that I was not obliged to continue indefinitely with a treatment that did not seem to be getting anywhere, and that I could consult with colleagues and with Anthony’s school to make sure that, in the event of my stopping work with him, others would be alert to any indication of his becoming more of a danger to other children. In fact, as soon as I had come to this conclusion—as I thought later, as soon as I had freed myself somewhat from feeling hopelessly dominated by his destructive part and uniquely responsible for protecting his good self which was being held hostage—Anthony became far more communicative. He began to enact a conflict: both his burning feelings of aggression against any rivals, and also his attempts to keep these feelings from bursting out. Often he would fall asleep, as though, like Lina, he were being hypnotized to turn away from human contact; there seemed to be a sparing component in this sleeping, much like the sparing component of suicide as described by Klein (1935), since he resumed his aggressive activities as soon as he woke up. At the same time, he was fully aware of the destructive aspect of falling asleep, and several times said “I was dead” after being awakened. He was very obviously engaged in the therapy, and there could be no question of stopping at that point. Instead, I felt able to address his cruelty more firmly, and also to remind him of times in the past when he had shown me the other side of him.

Recently, after a cancelled session, he rushed to the therapy room, all the while growling loudly in the Giant’s voice. I said that I thought he was really glad to be back and was in a hurry to get started, and that, at the same time, he was furious with me for having cancelled his appointment. Somewhat to my amazement, he

answered, in an ordinary voice, "You're right." This did not prevent him from going to sleep quite soon afterwards; but he stirred spontaneously, without my having to wake him, and said, very softly, "I awake." I answered, equally softly, that he wanted to stay awake, and to talk to me, and felt perhaps that he had to tell me very quietly so that the Giant should not hear. On that occasion he succeeded in staying awake for the rest of the time. It remains to be seen how far it may be possible to encompass the good and the destructive parts of himself at the same time, as Lina is beginning to manage: how far there may be room in the mirror, as it were, for both Anthony's good and bad selves.

Concluding remarks

In summary, then, conflicts surrounding the Oedipal constellation—which Lina and Anthony seemed to hold responsible for their own sense of endangered existence—appeared to be central to all three children's narcissistic retreats. While all were trying to circumvent the fear of having irreparably damaged a mother figure, sadistic enjoyment was more prominent in Andrew and Anthony than in Lina. Andrew's case provides an illustration of a narcissistic gang leader who imposes autistic mutism as part of withdrawal from relationships; Anthony, who started from a position of seeking to protect himself against an experience of trauma, appeared to relish the cruelty he enacted, and this aggressive narcissism made it difficult to sustain progress. Interestingly, the idea that extreme distress and helplessness are associated with thin-skinned rather than with thick-skinned narcissism does not seem to be borne out in Anthony's case: what is striking with him is the extreme contrast between the helpless baby and the narcissistic bully. This degree of unintegration is, in my experience, often seen in children with autism, perhaps more so than in those narcissistic patients who do not have a diagnosis of autistic spectrum disorder.

Both Lina and Anthony were in thrall to a narcissistic part of their personality that appeared to be modelled on what they most feared—a damaged, hollow, engulfing mother in Lina's case, and a sadistic, traumatizing father in Anthony's. Anthony experienced the parental couple as sterile, narcissistic mirror images of each other who left no room for the child, and in turn he identified with them,

leaving no room either for me or for the growing part of his own personality. In contrast, Lina increasingly became able to establish the right distance vis-à-vis the mother's internal object, so that she could internalize it without feeling crowded out of her own mind. In this way it became more possible for her to relinquish a narcissistic stance in favour of basing her development on relationships with others, and to identify with me as a woman who could have children.

Notes

1. I am grateful to Graham Shulman for permission to refer to his clinical material.
2. Some of the material in this section has previously been discussed in a different theoretical context (Rhode, 2005, 2008, and is reproduced by kind permission of the *Journal of Child Psychotherapy* and Taylor & Francis, and of Kate Barrows and Karnac Books.
3. Some of the material in this section was previously published elsewhere (Rhode 1999, 2001) and is reproduced by kind permission of Brunner Routledge.

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