The Many Meanings of Play

Cookies for the Emperor:

The Multiple Functions of Play in the Analysis of an Early Adolescent Boy

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> Art is at once our greatest refuge from the world and our surest connection with it.
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> —Goethe, *Elective Affinities*

> In common with all the other gods, Proteus enjoyed the gift of prophecy, and had the power to assume any shape he pleased. The former he was wont to exercise very reluctantly; and when mortals wished to consult him, he would change his form with bewildering rapidity, and, unless they clung to him through all his changes, they could obtain no answer to their questions.
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> —H. A. Guerber, *The Myths of Greece and Rome*

In late childhood, overt imaginative play usually goes underground, transformed into and enriching the inner world of fantasy, daydream, and reverie. In adolescence, this inner world serves many functions: as a safe arena for catharsis, as a realm of rehearsal and "trial action," and as a source of those visions of mastery and accomplishment that give substance to the still nascent ego ideal.

This inner world of fantasy, as brought alive in the transference relationship, is the subject matter of psychoanalysis. In child analysis, imaginative play is often the "royal road" that permits the analyst (and analysand) to scrutinize the configuration of the child's inner object relations, drives, and defenses. In the psychoanalysis of adolescents, however, the regressive temptations of imaginative play are rejected as "childish" by most teenagers, who prefer instead the medium of talk or structured games.

This chapter presents material from the uncompleted analysis of Guido, a young adolescent boy who related to the analyst almost exclusively through the medium of imaginative play. The analysis took place during a two-year hospitalization. Because the dynamics of Guido's symptoms remained obscure within the setting of the hospital, it was only through Guido's use of play in the analytic setting that it became possible to obtain a fuller clinical understanding of his inner life. The

material illustrates the multiple functions that such play served in this analysis and raises important developmental, metapsychological, and technical questions that transcend the specific case.

Case Presentation

History

Guido entered the hospital as an inpatient at twelve years of age after outpatient therapy had failed to alleviate his long-standing depression, withdrawal, school failure, and minor delinquencies. Guido's history was rife with disruptions and losses. After several years of marital strife and intermittent separations, Guido's parents finally porced when he was four. Over the years Guido was in the custody of first one and then the other parent.

Given his parents' preoccupation with their own concerns throughout much of his childhood, it was difficult to discover from them how Guido experienced these many disruptions. As early as age seven, however, he had begun to show signs of depression and regression, which were exacerbated by a brief period at a military boarding school. From age nine on he resided with his father, stepmother, and stepsister, where his labile moods, passive-aggressive behavior, and poor school performance kept him the focus of many arguments. He maintained intermittent contact with his remarried mother.

At the hospital, Guido lived in a residential cottage with a house parent and six other children and attended the hospital's therapeutic school. He saw me, his analyst, four times weekly in my office on the hospital grounds. In keeping with the customary therapist/administrator split, all practical administrative decisions regarding Guido, such as passes, privileges, and restrictions, were made by the administrative psychiatrist who directed the adolescent pision. Although the administrator and I maintained regular collaborative contact, I had no role in these administrative decisions.

The Opening Phase

Seen for the first session at his cottage, Guido spoke openly and directly about his problems; he was rarely to do so again during the first year of treatment. He said that he had trouble with school,

trouble getting along with people, trouble with his moods. "I can be friends with animals more than with people. If I see a dead cow, it makes me cry. My goal is to stop people from slaughtering animals, to make the world safe for dolphins."

Despite this initial frankness, Guido subsequently had great difficulty speaking directly about himself and rarely talked about the events of his life, past or present, or about friends, activities, or school. Instead, from the first hour in my office, he played. He began by having the toy animals and soldiers he found on the desk fight a vicious battle. The animals were fighting for their freedom, and the bloody battles often ended with the animals devouring the people. Although the animals' insurrection was justified in terms of the humans' predations, it soon became clear that the animals were as cruel and sadistic as their oppressors.

Guido's initial honeymoon with the hospital quickly disappeared. At the therapeutic school and in his residential cottage, he was withdrawn, apathetic, and moody. With both peers and staff, he was mistrustful, uncommunicative, and easily aggrieved. Despite bitter complaints about being kept from his home, he did little to maintain contact with his family or to work toward passes home. He spent several analytic hours theatrically mock-planning various escapes, detailing how he would kill the clinical administrator, the teachers, or me and escape through the window. There were periodic outbursts of "I hate everyone, including myself; I'm ugly and weird, and never should have been born. The world is full of problems. I'm mad at everybody." Although he provocatively wrapped a sash cord around his neck in class, he denied feeling suicidal. But his wish to take flight from a painful internal and external reality found expression in a drawing showing him and his cat taking off in a rocket ship and waving, "Good-bye, cruel world."

Attempts to engage Guido in direct discussion of his feelings and concerns, however, were unproductive. If pressed, Guido responded with histrionic imitations of someone being crazy, rolling his eyes, breathing heavily, writhing and grimacing terribly. He similarly rejected any interpretive attempts or efforts to refer the play themes back to the events of his life, past or present. For the most part, such interventions were ignored, mocked, or met with a resentful, "Shut up and play."

Although Guido rebuffed direct interventions or comments, he continued to play prolifically,

utilizing a variety of modalities: puppets, toys, dramatic enactment, and cartooning. Using toy figures, hand puppets, and props that he fashioned out of Styrofoam cups and the like, Guido would spend most of each hour playing, sometimes acting all the parts himself, sometimes assigning various personae to me.

In the course of this play, one boy puppet, Chuck, soon became Guido's proxy in various scenarios (such as Sir Chucksalot; Chuck Funghi, boy detective). Chuck was kidnapped, taunted, and tormented by various supervillains, such as Dr. Ook, who carried him off to the planet Ook to lock him up forever.

At times I was directed to play Chuck, but my attempts to find out why these terrible punishments were being inflicted on me were in vain. "Because you were born, because you're dumb" was the reply, and the evil villains would continue to taunt and threaten me. Occasionally, putatively helpful figures would come along and offer themselves as allies. It soon developed, however, that either they too were powerless and were destroyed or they were villains in disguise —a theme of constantly dashed hopes and betrayal by people who offered to help. Although on one level, Chuck's recurrent battles against his would-be tormenters were initially intended in part as angry, sarcastic commentary on the hospital and its staff, they also expressed the sadomasochistic fantasies that colored Guido's perception of all relationships.

These predominantly anal-sadistic and retaliatory themes heavily colored other libidinal concerns (oral or genital, for example) that gradually made their appearance. During most of the first year of the analysis, women figures rarely made an appearance, save for occasional female puppet "fun units" (robot prostitute-slaves) or gorily dispatched villainous women warriors. (Outside the analytic setting, Guido was especially mistrustful of women teachers, nurses, or child care workers.) Although Guido hinted at pubertal sexual interests, these were presented as fraught with aggression and danger. For example, in one cartoon sequence he portrayed his family going to the movies. The movie was X-rated, and his stepmother stalked him with a knife. Nonetheless, he came into the theater loaded with candy, popcorn, and other oral supplies. The image of a naked lady on the screen gave way momentarily to a threatening male face and a gigantic fist that reached out from the screen to punch Guido in the face. ("Pow, right in the kisser!") In the last frame, Guido

was still sitting there, contused and beaten, watching the naked lady. ("That's all folks! Ha-ha-ha!") The moral appeared to be that this is what happens when you try to enjoy yourself.

In another early play sequence, Guido giggled as he wielded the puppets. Chuck visited the doctor, who ominously informed him, "You are going to get a dick operation, because you only have the dick of a one-year-old. . . . There's doodoo in your underpants." The doctor and nurse puppet taunted him that they would chop off his penis so that a new king-sized one would grow. Chuck was then given medicine that made him grow a huge Pinocchio-like penis, which extended across the room knocking everyone about. The doctor's true name was then revealed as Dr. King.

During this initial period, Guido's play was highly fluid and prone to regressions and disorganization. This fluidity was apparent in the play's kaleidoscopic *content*, which usually concerned aggressively charged, polymorphous perverse libidinal themes, and in the play's *variable ability to contain* his emotional turmoil. Thus, during the first few weeks, the play itself would often break down into agitation and halfhearted assaults on me, my office, or Guido's own person. (However, although he provocatively brandished pillows or other objects, Guido seemed more intent on trying to discomfort me than to hurt me.)

Seen from the perspective of the drives, Guido's play served a clearly *cathartic* function in giving relatively direct vent to aggressive and polymorphous libidinal impulses. Traditional, conventional forms, such as cartoons, superheroes, archvillains, were used to clothe and elaborate perverse, sadomasochistic fantasies, which included voyeuristic and exhibitionistic components. These fantasies, in turn, were complexly influenced by Guido's unstable relationship with his capricious mother, an intermittently nurturant relationship with his unreliable and self-absorbed father, and the stimulating influence of a new stepmother and stepsister.

Thus, sadistic, aggressive themes, tinged with narcissistic rage, predominated. Their expression in play served more than cathartic purposes, however. They also represented *defensive* attempts to cope with lifelong hurt, vulnerability, and disappointment by means of converting passive into active, compensatory, grandiose self-sufficiency or a manic defense against depression. Attempts to manage paranoid and depressive anxieties were apparent in Guido's repetitive creation

of various split-off good objects or aspects of the self (the "good animals" or "good guys"); these, however, were in constant jeopardy of becoming contaminated by Guido's rage or deteriorating into hated and hateful persecutors.

Although these instinctual concerns threatened at times to overwhelm the patient (and analyst), Guido also showed a well-developed capacity for narrative or artistic representation that simultaneously served *adaptive* and *interpersonal* purposes, as well as cathartic and defensive ones. Guido's play not only served a defensive function by displacing and disguising the true objects of the painful affects in his life; it also created what Neubauer (1987) has termed an "arena of displacement" or *Spielraum* in which these painful affects could be permitted representation via what might be termed, by way of analogy, the "dream works."

Characteristically morose, withdrawn, and guarded in his daily life at school and in his residential cottage, Guido was able, in his analytic hours, to mobilize and reveal in play to the analyst (and to himself) the angry, hurt affects that dominated his inner life. Thus, in addition to serving as a compromise between drive discharge and defense, Guido's strong push toward representation through play served other preservative, reparative, and interpersonal motives. On the one hand, play was compelling to Guido as an escape from a painful and intolerable world of reality. On the other hand, seen from the perspective of the synthetic function of the ego, the play attempted to give narrative form and meaning to his own inarticulately chaotic inner life, a form and meaning that was shared with me, albeit in a carefully controlled fashion. By simultaneously revealing and disguising himself, engaging and fending me off, Guido used play as a means of making and regulating contact. My intermittent sense of being sadistically controlled indicated the stringency of Guido's "conditions for contact," a phrase Ekstein (1966) used to describe certain borderline children, with a deliberate echo of Freud's (1910) "preconditions for loving."

Each of these many perspectives on the function of Guido's play carried important, but at times pergent, implications for the analyst's role and activity. When did the analyst serve as a new real object, a transference figure, an audience, or a collaborator and coauthor in the patient's play? Correspondingly, which activities or interventions of the analyst were likely to be experienced as helpful, empathic, or deepening the therapeutic relationship and which were experienced as

disruptive or intrusive? In the first few months, comments, questions, or interpretations were either ignored or rebuffed as intrusions. As a result, during this initial period, the sole viable approach seemed to be to accept the only overture for relating that Guido offered—that of play—and to confine interpretation to within the metaphor of play (Ekstein, 1966).

Consultations with the Inspector

After the first few months, Guido's play became better organized and disruptions less frequent. The analytic hours continued to be peopled with various superheroes and villains, pieces of whose regalia Guido would often bring to the office. These included Big Caesar, who wanted to restore the Roman Empire, pitted against Animal Master, who, disguised as a mild-mannered veterinarian, redressed wrongs and protected animals throughout the world. A talented cartoonist, Guido drew pictures of the Big G. and his gang, a rather seedy-looking crew of mobsters. At times, Guido himself played the Big G., who together with his henchmen, Dr. Laser-finger, Dr. Heat-wave, and Captain Boomerang, comprised a gang who could not shoot straight. The Big G. and his gang would start out by trying to terrorize me, threatening to shoot up the office or zap me with their exotic weapons; however, they most often ended up hitting themselves by mistake.

Despite the frequently humorous and pleasurable aspects of the play, work with Guido could also be frustrating. Large parts of hours would be taken up with seemingly sterile, repetitious play in which opposing warriors and armies endlessly annihilated one another. In addition to this stereotypic, perseverative play, Guido's strenuous resistance took other forms. He sometimes deliberately pretended not to understand even simple statements on my part. On other occasions, he tried to confuse me by denying or misrepresenting some otherwise trivial fact; indeed, at times he succeeded in leaving me feeling bewildered or uncertain. At still other times, he acted extravagantly goofy or histrionically crazy. Commenting directly on either the defensive or projective identificatory aspects of this behavior ("You would like me to know what it feels like to be jerked around and confused") seemed largely unproductive.

Consequently, when one of Guido's characters, Inspector H20, the world's greatest detective, made an appearance (played by Guido himself), I decided to seek his assistance. I explained to the

Inspector that I was up against a very tough case, the case of Guido, and described the fiendishly clever weapons that had been deployed against me, neutralizing and immobilizing anything I tried to do to help: the repulsion field, the stupidity-ray, the goofy-ray, the confusion-ray, and so on. Any advice Inspector H20 could give would be greatly appreciated.

The Inspector's advice proved very useful. In the guise of Inspector H20, Guido listened very seriously and said, "Well, this is a very interesting case. It's clear he didn't get enough attention and affection growing up. He's having trouble getting started. He needs your help. He needs for you to kind of give him a little push to help him get started. Show him you're friendly and he'll open up. I think he's just scared. He is scared that his father will be cheated, or maybe that he will be cheated. I think you should just kind of let him know you like him and give him a chance. Make him comfortable, tell him to relax, and he'll come along."

Taking this advice to heart, I lessened my interpretive zeal. As I did so, the themes of loneliness and abandonment that underlay many of Guido's fantasies of compensatory grandiosity emerged more clearly in the play. As we traced the myth of the birth of the hero, one of Guido's superheroes explained that he had been given his powers by a dying predecessor who had made him a superhero "so he wouldn't have to feel lonely," commanding, "The only friends you may have in the world are animals." On one of the rare occasions that Guido spoke about himself directly, he said he was "interested in power—to have an army and a castle, to rule people, to save the animals, to stop criminals; the power to save all the ones who do good." Asked what sort of powers Guido felt was available to him, he helplessly turned his thumbs down and said, "None at all."

In an extended series of hours before my first vacation, Chuck and several characters took shelter against catastrophes that threatened to destroy the world. With his mother dead and his father away in the army, Chuck tried to find a safe place for himself. In the course of this, General Ook, who fluctuated between being Chuck's partner and one of his adversaries, revealed that he was really Chuck's father. Chuck denounced him as a "Benedict Arnold," but then relented, saying, "You really did love me all those years." Soon thereafter, in some parlous adventure, General Ook altruistically let go of the life raft, saying, "I'll let go; I've been a rotten father to you." Then the play returned in a more stereotyped way to old themes of mutual annihilation. I observed to Guido that

with my impending vacation, Chuck again felt abandoned, and evil geniuses again took over the world. Guido's response was, "Stop whining to me."

The sessions following my vacation were filled with resentment and complaints. I was arraigned and indicted by Count Inferno on charges of "general weirdness and bad psychiatry." Mephistopheles presided over the imaginary trial at which numerous other patients and characters denounced me. Guido himself testified that he liked me, but only after having sworn to tell "the lie, the whole lie, and nothing but the lie." I was sentenced to be "shot in the balls and in the eyes." In fact, the hour ended with Guido becoming overwrought and actually shooting me with a rubber band.

At the beginning of the next hour, Guido announced he could not stay. He hurried out, and a second later, there was a knock at the door, a signal that usually heralded the arrival of one of his characters. It was Inspector H20. I confided to my erstwhile consultant that Guido and I had been having a rough time, that Guido had felt very upset and abandoned during my vacation, but it was hard to talk about.

The Inspector again listened carefully and said, "Well, listen, let me get this straight now. He's a smart kid, imaginative, looks nice, right?" I concurred. "Well," the Inspector continued, "he's got a lot on his mind. He doesn't know how to use therapy; you've got to help him learn how to use it."

A few minutes later, however, the Inspector irascibly said, "Listen, why don't you just dump this kid? This kid is obviously ignoring you. Why don't you just get rid of him?" I replied that I thought Guido was perhaps worried about this; he might have felt I was dumping him by going on vacation. At this point, the Inspector quickly retorted that he had better things to worry about; he had spent the whole night chasing the cat burglar. He imperiously ordered me to get him a beer, stretched out on the couch with a blanket, and turned his back to me, pretending to sleep. I said I was always glad to have the Inspector pay a visit and to make himself comfortable, but I was not sure whether the Inspector was going to sleep because he was comfortable or in order to give me the cold shoulder. The Inspector flashed a big grin and said, "You're crazy." In his sleep, however, the Inspector sang a medley of Beatles hits: "You can't always get what you want," "Help me if you can,"

and "Take a sad song and make it better."

On other occasions, however, the Inspector was less helpful—for example, when he came in, looked around at the various props Guido had made, and asked, "What is this stuff?" I explained it was the stuff Guido and I used to work together; it was hard for Guido to talk about some things directly, so sometimes we had to play about them. The Inspector shook his head incredulously and said, "Boy, that sounds pretty childish to me." (Guido was always very furtive as he opened the office door, lest anyone should see we had been playing with the toys.)

The Nature of the Therapeutic Alliance

Guido's fluidity and ability to operate on several levels at any given moment and over time were striking. These fluctuations occurred along several dimensions: libidinal phase, relative balance of drive versus defense, affective tone, closeness to reality, preferred play mode, and relatedness to the analyst. Glaring discrepancies existed between these levels of functioning. For example, his seemingly near total inability to speak directly about himself during the first year of the analysis could coexist with his ability to create a proxy, Inspector H20, who could articulately and insightfully describe his situation.

As the first year's work progressed, these shifts and seeming anomalies continued to raise important developmental and diagnostic issues. On the one hand, many aspects of Guido's functioning—his intense concerns over aggression, his propensity toward splitting, his fantasy attempts to relieve a pervasive sense of powerlessness through compensatory grandiosity and pseudo-self-sufficiency—seemed to reflect not only the impact of external trauma but also significant depressive, narcissistic, and perhaps even borderline character pathology (Kernberg, 1984). On the other hand, his fluidity, his desperate struggle with the drives, his difficulty in articulating feelings, and his wariness toward adults could also be seen, from a developmental perspective, as typically early adolescent features of a repeatedly traumatized boy.

The tenacity with which Guido continued to cling to the play mode was also puzzling and challenging. Interpersonal relations appeared to Guido so fraught with dangers of abandonment,

attack, and disappointment that the buffer of play seemed necessary to create an arena of safety. (Of course, these threats reflected not only Guido's subjective experience of his chaotic past but also the dangers of his own projected aggression and narcissistic rage.) Interpretation outside the play and other analytic interventions threatened to disrupt this safe haven by challenging the "suspension of disbelief" essential to Guido's illusion of control and robbing him of a vehicle for expression. Implicitly echoing Winnicott's (1970) aphorism, "The reality principle is an insult," Guido experienced most explicit analytic interventions as at best unempathic interruptions and at worst thinly veiled attacks. (As one of John Barth's fictional heroes put it, "All self-knowledge is bad news.")

Another related conceptual and technical challenge was the difficulty of defining what islands of therapeutic alliance might exist in the stormy transferential sea of Guido's relationship to me. Guido initially acknowledged that he had come into the hospital to get help, but this tenuous explicit alliance soon evaporated as he brought his characterological ambivalences to bear on the new objects that the hospital provided. Nonetheless, in the implicit "play contract" that Guido offered and through proxies such as the Inspector, he tacitly acknowledged a wish for communication and cure. His use of play to communicate, however, seemed predicated on his concurrent ability to use the play mode to control and titrate the degree of intimacy and dangers attendant in relating to me. Thus, through the play, Guido both revealed and disguised, acknowledged and disavowed, his feelings. While fending me off, Guido also used the play to keep alive my interest and hope, as though saying, "Don't get too close, don't expect too much, but don't give up on me!" In this respect, Guido's play was an elaborate Scheherazade scheme, an extended attempt to seduce, control, charm, and disarm me. Indeed, as the play unfolded, the Scheherazade theme became explicit in a sequence in which I was required to entertain and assuage Guido's drowsy, testy Emperor with nightly tales.

Guido's morose withdrawal and passive aloofness left teachers, child care workers, and peers feeling thwarted in their efforts to engage him. Indeed, even after several months in the hospital, he remained, as one teacher put it, "the boy nobody knows." The dynamic meaning of his external behavior thus remained frustratingly opaque to the usual kinds of scrutiny that an intensive therapeutic milieu permits. Within the analytic context, however, Guido's ongoing dramatic play revealed many of his most important concerns, including his ambivalence and wariness about most relationships, his despair over finding reliably gratifying attachments, and his fantasies of

compensatory narcissistic grandiosity.

"Emperor or Nothing"

In the school and hospital setting, Guido rebuffed the staff's attempts to encourage activities or gratifying relationships. In his play, however, Guido's motives in refusing to risk the vulnerability implicit in acknowledging needs or aspirations became clearer. For Guido, grandiose omnipotence seemed the only safe way to secure his needs. Thus, in one hour he came in with a new belt buckle to which he had attached various devices. Rearranging the couch cushions, he devised a drill ship in which to drill to the center of the earth. Back at base headquarters, I tried to maintain radio contact with the ship as it drilled its way through the earth. Guido hit the kingdom of the Mole people and cast me in the role of their leader. He then proceeded to kill me off and crown himself the Emperor of the Mole people, to whom he proclaimed imperiously, "My rules are simple: obey or die!" Queried on his dictatorial style, he insisted that he just *had* to be Emperor. "It's life or death being Emperor; I am going to be Emperor or nothing." He agreed when I remarked that he felt if he couldn't be Emperor, it was like being nobody at all. Appropriating the blanket from the foot of the couch as his imperial toga, Guido announced that he was going to lead an expedition back to the surface to steal food; he would conquer the earth, kill all the policemen, and clean out all the restaurants. When I remarked that the Emperor was feeling pretty desperate and certain that no one up there would want to help him get food, he replied, "I know the earth better than you. It's savage up there. Now that I am the King, it's going to be different; no one will push us around again."

Although Guido rarely spoke openly of his relationship with his family, his play occasionally permitted glimpses of his discontents. For example, in family meetings with his social worker, Guido began to reproach his father for his perceived unreliability and emotional unavailability. The father had difficulty in hearing these grievances without launching defensively into counterattacks that usually led to Guido's withdrawing. During this period, Guido spent one analytic hour stacking the couch cushions into a very high but tippy throne. He sat on it as the imperious Mummy God, demanding of all who came by, "You must praise me." Even a moment's hesitation in singing the appropriate hosannas was met with instant punishment in the form of terrible lightning bolts. I remarked that some people became terribly upset and mad unless they could feel constantly and

totally admired. Guido replied, "You mean my dad?" He spent the rest of the hour angrily hurling thunderbolts, but he made it clear that this was a god with feet of clay, whose excesses inevitably led to his toppling off his shaky pedestal of cushions. Guido's identification with the aggressor was also apparent in the vicissitudes of his puppet protagonist Chuck who would become as ruthless and as nasty as the villains from whom he tried to save the world. When I remarked on this, Guido interrupted, "I know just what you're going to say: that I've become just like my dad. He yells at me, I yell at him."

Guido's play in the analytic setting also provided a fuller picture of the dilemmas that intimate relationships posed for him. These complexities of Guido's internal object relations became apparent in his perse uses of the analyst, explicit and implicit. In the overt dramatic *content* of his play, Guido starkly portrayed the conflict between his hopeful wishes for contact, help, and support on the one hand, and, on the other, the feared reemergence of bad objects, hurt vulnerability, and his own primitive sadism, which continually threatened to undermine his play characters' relationship with one another and with me. For example, over several weeks, Guido, in his role as Rex Pacino, ace test pilot, frequently enlisted me as his partner for various dangerous missions—sailing the high seas or sledding across the frozen tundra to search for Big Caesar's hideout. Partnership with Rex, however, was precarious. At best, Rex was imperious, high-handed, or contemptuous. During our campaigns against Big Caesar, Rex often abused or deceived me. Pretending to step outside our imaginary tent for a quick smoke, Rex left me behind to be blown up by a hand grenade he had planted in the tent. Inquiry or protest on my part drew only a string of invective: I was "a faggot," "a chicken," "a traitor." On several occasions when we were stranded on a life raft in the mid-Atlantic, Rex announced we were running low on food. He then eyed me hungrily and instructed me to say feebly, "I guess I'm not going to make it." Where Rex's next meal was coming from seemed all too clear. Thus, as Rex's comrade, one never knew from moment to moment whether one was going to be a partner, a mentor, a nurturer, an enemy, or a degraded object to be controlled, tortured, deceived, abandoned, or eaten.

Guido was aware of this inconstancy and devised a play metaphor to represent it. In an hour that followed Guido's having seen me walking on the hospital grounds with another patient, Rex enlisted me in yet another mission against Big Caesar, one with a Gotterdammerung-like climax. I was unfortunately wounded, and, ostensibly more in sorrow than in anger, Rex had to give me the

coup de grace. Next, after finishing off Big Caesar, Rex proceeded to shoot all of his own men and finally himself.

In an attempt to find out what happened I called on Inspector H20, one of the few times that I actively attempted to evoke one of Guido's personae. I asked the Inspector what was going on and wondered if it related to my encounter with Guido earlier in the day. The Inspector informed me that Rex was suffering from *korika*, a "disease like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. There's a good guy and a bad guy in the same body, fighting and not knowing which way to treat people." The theme of Rex's korika and its possible treatment recurred periodically throughout the analysis.

"A Good Interpretation Is a Feed" (Winnicott)

Guido's wants and aspirations remained enigmatic in the hospital setting. In the play, despite their frequent greed and grandiosity, Guido's various characters were for the most part able to repudiate the painful aspects of their longings for care or admiration; instead they could simply command or omnipotently seize whatever they wanted. Within the safe context of ongoing play, however, Guido gradually began to represent and acknowledge his thwarted longings more clearly and to tolerate the vulnerability this entailed.

Over the next several weeks, the plot shifted. Big Caesar had escaped to the moon where we finally defeated him, preventing his dastardly plot to destroy the earth. As before, however, Rex himself now took on many aspects of Big Caesar. Now Rex himself destroyed the earth, being careful to save two of every living creature as well as a few mercenaries and a large number of "good-looking women" whom he took along on his spaceship. As we wandered about the universe looking for a place for Emperor Rex to establish a colony, Rex held gala shipboard suppers. Rex's guests at these gourmet candlelight extravaganzas of steak and pizza were the good-looking women and me, who had now been promoted to Captain of the Guard. (Interestingly, one of the "good-looking ladies" bore the name of Guido's mother.) Over a series of several analytic hours, these bacchanals were followed by the Emperor ordering me, the Captain of the Guard, to tuck him in, to serve him imaginary cookies, and to tell him bedtime stories that I was ordered to make up. I used the opportunity to regale the drowsy Emperor with several interpretive tales. One of Rex's favorites,

which he demanded to be retold on several occasions, concerned a boy, also named

Rex, who had had a hard time of it growing up and who felt he could not count on people loving him or caring for him the way he wanted. As a result he worried that people would not like him just for being himself. He vowed that when he grew up, he would become Emperor of the World and could then order people to give him the sort of love, care, and admiration that he wanted. Whenever he felt slighted or jealous, he became so hurt and angry that he just wanted to blow up the whole world and everyone in it.

This sequence of sessions had a genuinely cozy feel that was unique in the overall context of the analysis. Although Guido and I shared other moments of empathic contact or mutual enjoyment in play that was especially exciting, creative, or communicative, these "bedtimes for the Emperor" were among the very few times that Guido permitted himself to represent himself as receiving and enjoying care and nurturance. Brief though they were, they retained a memorable significance as a hopeful sign that islands of nonthreatening, pleasurable human contact might be possible for Guido.

The Evolution of Play during the Middle Phase and the Emergence of Direct Discourse

As the hospitalization entered its second and final year, Guido began to hazard a few tentative attachments with his housefather and one or two peers. In the analytic work, Guido's tenacious insistence on play posed a continuing technical and diagnostic dilemma. From one perspective, it could be regarded as a defensive fixation—a rigid avoidance of external reality in favor of a perseverative transference reenactment of primitive sadomasochistic fantasies. From this perspective, too extensive collaboration (or collusion) by the analyst in play ran the risk of countenancing, or even encouraging, an untherapeutic regression that served no progressive purpose. This view seemed to mandate more strenuous efforts on my part to interpret the play in relation to external reality and to confront more vigorously the play's defensive function. As before, however, such attempts were usually unproductive and experienced by Guido as a breach in empathy. For example, even within the play, when as Captain of the Guard I remarked how it always seemed to be a matter of kill or be killed, Guido replied, "Stop giving me all this complicated stuff. Why don't you just shut up and let me have a good time. Bring in the dancing girls!"

In contradiction to the view of Guido's play as primarily regressive and defensive, his play also seemed to serve important communicative and organizing functions. As noted, the play provided the context in which moments of empathic contact with Guido were possible. Furthermore, as the material of the second year illustrated, Guido was able to use the play as a means of organizing, and subsequently articulating, his own perceptions of internal experiences that earlier in the analysis could only be compulsively reenacted. These developments in turn gave hope that the analyst's collaboration in the play served a therapeutic and progressive function, rather than being simply a surrender to Guido's defensive attempts at omnipotent control or a collusion in a sterile transference reenactment.

The progressive developments during the second year of analysis took several forms. Guido's play became more highly nuanced and expressive of his concerns about himself and his increasingly unsettled family life. Perhaps most significant, however, was Guido's ability to find his own voice and to speak directly at times without the mediation of play about his feelings and perceptions.

While still remaining in displacement, Guido's play began to deal in greater detail with the events in his life. Among the most important of these was the impending porce of his father and stepmother, a development that was to unleash forces that ultimately disrupted both the hospitalization and the analysis.

One recurrent play theme concerned the failure of compensatory grandiosity and the beginning of tentative explorations of other means of survival. As the second year began, Guido was scheduled to go home over Christmas for his first extended pass. In his Christmas Eve hour, Rex set off on an expedition to the planet Zagar to see if there was any chance of its sustaining life. Although Guido's home visit was disastrous, all I learned on his return was that Rex's mission had not gone well. The natives had what we needed, but we were going to have to fight against overwhelming odds to wrest it from them. Rex's various stratagems failed, and he began to despair of being Emperor. He blew up his ship or rampaged around the universe picking bigger and bigger fights with our few remaining allies. When I remarked that being Emperor did not seem like so much fun or get Rex what he needed, he replied, "Well, let's just blow up ourselves, the universe, and everything with us."

During one analytic hour, Emperor Rex ordered me to change places with him and instructed me how to act. I was to order him imperiously about, while he parodied my usual style by asking dumb questions and shuffling his feet. Next, as Emperor, I was to demand admiration, asking him, "Do you love me?" to which he responded with fulsome paeans of praise: "I love you most. Even your feet smell wonderful. I give you Christmas presents instead of my wife and kids. You are perfect." Nonetheless, as Emperor, I too got bored with the endless battles. Rex glibly gave me his advice: "Listen, Emperor, I think what you should do is settle down, be friendly, share your life with someone." When I worried about finding someone reliable, Rex said, "If they leave you, just find someone else."

Chuck, his puppet alter ego, also despaired. Laying down his blood-soaked sword, Chuck tried to give up being King, complaining, "It's no fun; it's a disappointment; I resign." He decided to take time off to be a farmer or to go camping, lamenting sadly, "I never really had a father or a mother. All I had was the old swordmaster, and when I got to like him, something happened to him too. I've got to find out what I want. I'm a terrible person. Here I've killed helpless people; I should be locked up." Bucolic tranquillity did not make for exciting play, however, and Chuck soon found himself embroiled in battles again. "It shows, even if we change our way of life, deep down we're still warriors. There's nothing we can do to change it."

In a new series of adventures, Condor Flint, secret agent, embarked on various dangerous missions, accompanied by his much abused sidekick, Corporal King. Condor Flint used these missions to demonstrate how tough he was—for example, crushing soda cans with his bare hands. As Condor showed me the trick, however, he warned, "You can't let people know your soft spot; you have to have them think you're tough." His soft spot, he confided, was animals.

As his father embroiled Guido in the escalating marital difficulties, Condor found himself caught in a conflict of loyalties between two warring factions. Finally, he blew them both up, announcing, "I know whose side *I'm* on: mine!" He proceeded to plunder the universe, singing his pirate anthem to the tune of "The Yellow Submarine": "We rob from the rich and shit on the poor."

For the first time, Guido began to talk about himself directly. The experience was uncanny

because although I had spent four days a week with him for a year, I felt as though I had never heard the sound of his own voice. In response to his upset look at the beginning of one hour, I asked if there was something troubling him. He responded by telling me directly about the possibility of his father's porce and described the complicated dynamics of his reconstituted family. He wondered who would get what possessions; he would insist on the cat. He went on to say, "It's funny, I never thought I'd ever find anybody to get along with me, that I'd have to find someone just like me, interested in just the same things, like drawing and dolphins. Now if somebody says something, instead of just saying, 'You're crazy,' I think, 'Maybe it makes sense in some other way.'" He wondered how he was doing. In assessing himself, he said, "The fog is clearing. Before, I didn't understand anything about myself; I was just running around doing things." He went on to ask, "Do you believe in fantasies? Do they ever come true?" He related his own fantasy that when he grew up, he would have a desert island to which he would go with his animals. He wondered, "Do you believe in Freud? All that stuff about penis envy, like if a boy sits where his father was when the father is away, does that mean he wants his father's penis?" He didn't believe in all that stuff about sex.

These moments of direct talk were for the most part isolated. Attempts in subsequent hours to take up where we had left off were ignored, rebuffed, or met with a retreat into stereotyped play. Only rarely was it possible to penetrate this insulation. For example, after a prolonged period of repetitive sadistic play, I suggested that he wanted me to know what it was like to feel helpless and upset, sitting on the sidelines while people bashed away at each other, much as I imagined he might have felt watching his parents fight it out. This led to a striking few minutes in which Guido told me in his own voice, "You know, my life is lousy; I'm hassled at the house, upset and confused. I never had a decent day in my life." He wondered why it had happened; was it somehow his fault? He said, "If you were religious, you might think that. Do you believe in Adam and Eve or evolution?" He felt as though the only good thing in his life was his lost dog. I sympathized with how upsetting things had been for him and said I was glad he had been able to tell me how upset he was, because I knew how difficult it was at times for him to trust anyone. He said he wished he had never been born and wondered what he should do. I suggested that it sometimes might help to talk as we were talking. It was very hard for him to leave at the end of the hour.

Guido now began to speak directly about dilemmas and defenses that had previously been

accessible only through play. For example, he came in and announced he was ready to talk, but insisted he really wanted help around only one thing. Biting off a plug of chewing tobacco, he announced that he had decided he wanted to be a mercenary. It would be a crummy life, living in crummy tents and eating crummy food, perhaps getting killed, but it would be *his* crummy life, of his own choosing. His father and I would just have to accept the fact that he was going to be a mercenary and that he was going to smoke cigars and chew tobacco. Looking very queasy, however, he went on to say that he wanted me to help him get rid of his sensitive feelings; he couldn't be a really good mercenary until he got over his qualms about killing people. He felt he needed a shell to be less sensitive. For example, if his roommate was bossy, Guido felt that he did not know how to handle his mixed feelings of hurt, helplessness, and retaliatory rage. If he took the chance of starting to like somebody and to trust him, he began to worry that the person might disappear.

Thus, despite the upsets and threats to the treatment posed by external family events, Guido was able to expand the bridgeheads of relatedness established through the medium of play in order to share his feelings more directly and explicitly.

A final story from the last weeks of the analysis illustrates the increased sense of hopefulness Guido was able to draw from this contact. Entering the office and miming pulling a mask over his head, Guido transformed himself into Tiajuana Snake, space adventurer, who regaled me with his latest adventure. While exploring the solar system, he encountered a spaceship piloted by Guido, a boy who was upset by his parents' porce and who had decided to commit suicide by plunging his spaceship into the sun. Pulling alongside, Tiajuana tried unsuccessfully to talk him out of it as their two ships plummeted side by side toward the flaming surface of the sun. At the last possible moment, when Tiajuana was about to break off and turn back in order to save himself, there was a knock on Tiajuana's airlock. It was Guido, who had decided to live. Boasting of his prowess as a rescuer, Tiajuana went on to tell me that Guido had gone on to prosper and had become an architect and builder of cities.

Discussion

Guido's case illustrates the difficulty of discerning what elements of the analytic situation are

mutative for a seriously disturbed, but maturing adolescent. As the analysis continued, Guido's play became more organized, more nuanced, and more communicative. Guido also developed a greater tolerance for his ambivalence and had fewer bouts of disorganization, rage, and despair.

This progressive evolution, of course, also reflected multiple factors external to, but impinging on, the analytic process. For example, the two years of analytic work extended over a substantial portion of Guido's early adolescence, a time of intrinsically rapid physical maturation and psychic reorganization. Furthermore, the analysis took place in the context of a dynamically oriented residential treatment setting, which provided its own rich array of mutative ingredients, including reliable and empathic adults, firm but caring structure, highly individualized psychoeducation, and an enhanced opportunity for social growth and engagement with peers. All of these factors no doubt exerted important ameliorative influences in their own right and provided a context for the analysis proper.

Despite these caveats, Guido's use of play in the analysis served a crucial therapeutic role, beyond providing the setting for my interpretive activity. Of course, while specific interpretations often had no apparent positive effect, it is possible that, taken collectively, my ongoing interpretive activity within the metaphor of play formed an important part of the analytic situation's matrix of empathic containment. But moments of excessive interpretive or therapeutic zeal were clearly experienced by Guido as disruptive intrusions or attacks. This reaction may have reflected technical deficiencies, such as poor timing or wording, or a more fundamental threat to the suspension of disbelief essential for play. More likely, however, at this stage of Guido's development, he perceived reality as a source of inevitable pain rather than potential gratification. The analyst's attention to both inner and outer reality thus often seemed to Guido to be aversive, even punitive. Winnicott remarked in his typically aphoristic style: "Contrasted with this [creative apperception] is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation. Compliance carries with it a sense of futility for the individual and is associated with the idea that nothing matters and that life is not worth living" (1971, p. 76). (Or, as one of Zola's critics complained, "Why is it when you talk about reality, you invariably mean something unpleasant?")

The contention that the play itself served a crucial therapeutic function raises important questions about the uses of play in analysis. If play potentially serves an intrinsic developmental function, under what conditions can its progressive potential be realized? Guido had been a prolific cartoonist for some time before entering treatment, although the contents were largely the same mix of sadomasochistic, polymorphous perverse fantasies as first appeared in the analysis. What was different about his play in the analysis?

Although play offered Guido a means of representing his painful inner world, his interpersonal dilemmas, and his carefully guarded hopes and longings, it was the *shared* aspects of this representational activity that gave it mutative potential. Play permitted Guido to establish and maintain his relationship with the analyst and served as his principal means of communication for much of the analysis. In the analysis, Guido was able to use the vehicle of play to buffer his intense wariness and to create a "transitional space" (Winnicott, 1971) in which he could meet and use me, provided I tacitly agreed to accept his terms for engagement. Guido thus permitted me to provide an implicit holding function, albeit one conditioned on a developmentally early mode of relating in which I was tacitly asked to enjoy, admire, and join Guido, while permitting him to use me. Guido's progress seemed to reflect in part his use of play in the analytic situation to create a secure setting in which he could experience pleasure and a sense of empathic containment and contact under conditions he could control. Winnicott believed that clinical work is intrinsically linked to communication within the transitional or "potential space," which he linked to play and other creative phenomena: "*Psychotherapy is done in the overlap of the two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist*. If the therapist cannot play, then he is not suitable for the work. If the patient cannot play, then something needs to be done to enable the patient to become able to play, after which psychotherapy may begin" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 63).

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Notes

1This chapter reflects the many valuable comments and suggestions of the members of the Study Group on the Many Meanings of Play in Child Analysis.