Walking Heads

ON THE SECRET FANTASY OF BEING AN EXCEPTION

ANTONIE LADAN

Translated by MARJOLIJN DE JAGER

2

The Disavowed Child

> I was *never* a small person!
>
> Roald Dahl
> *Matilda*

In the previous chapter it became clear that entrance into the world of our childhood experiences is not self-evident. I dealt with three factors, directly linked to the functioning of our memory, that can lead to "accessibility problems." In this chapter, I shall delve more deeply into psychological motives that hamper entrance into our own childhood world. I shall also focus on developmental-psychological aspects that are important for a better positioning of these motives and thus for a greater understanding of the special problems of "walking heads." In particular, aspects of the attachment theory will be discussed and the manner in which attachment patterns begin to be part of the earlier mentioned implicit life scenario.

ACCESSIBILITY PROBLEMS AS A RESULT OF PSYCHOLOGICAL MOTIVES

Problems in remembering events from our childhood years may be the result of psychological motives to hamper entering our own childhood world. The defense used thereby and the period during which this is applied will differ from one person to the next, but it has approximately the same result, namely a more or less pronounced internal separation between that earlier world and the present one.

One of the most obvious examples of such a separation with which I am familiar is to be seen in Miss Trunchbull, the school principal in the novel *Matilda* by Roald Dahl. In her case, the separation is extreme. She has thrown away the key to the door of the nursery, as it were, for Miss Trunchbull never was a child. This rather original outlook is something she articulates to her first graders in the following way:

> "Small people should never be seen by anybody. They should be kept out of sight in boxes like hairpins and buttons. I cannot for the life of me see why children have to take so long to grow up. I think they do it on purpose."
>
> Another extremely brave little boy in the front row spoke up and said: "But surely *you* were a small person once, Miss Trunchbull, weren't you?"
>
> "I was *never* a small person," she snapped. "I have been large all my life and I don't see why others can't be the same way."
>
> "But you must have started out as a baby," the boy said.
>
> "*Me!* A baby!" shouted the Trunchbull. "How dare you suggest such a thing! What cheek! What infernal insolence!" [p. 151]

The separation that Miss Trunchbull has caused seems absolute, both cognitively and emotionally. Although it is quite probable that deep inside someone like this knows very well that she, too, must have been a child once, she is unable to admit it. She has killed the child inside her, so to speak, which concerns a different kind of death than the one to which Boltanski refers (see Chapter 1). Usually, the separation between the world of the adult and the one of the child does not go this far, not even for "walking heads." On a cognitive level it is a matter of simple knowing and of admitting, too, that one was once a child even if that was a long, long time ago. The problem then lies more in the inability to truly feel what that was

like, in other words, in the inability to let it be a firm truth that the given individual really had been a small child. Why is that sometimes so very difficult?

HELPLESSNESS

I believe that it is the helplessness of children that especially comes into play here. This helplessness arises on physical, cognitive, and emotional levels. Children are dependent physically and psychically and have fewer possibilities of mastering the world intellectually. Not only are they to a great extent at the mercy of the external situation in which they find themselves, but also to that which presents itself internally. Today, much is said about the immense competence that children have and, of course, they really do possess that. Children can endure a great deal, have much potential and many reserves, and, to some extent, also create their own parents (Boer 1998). At the same time, this is all relative. If one really observes a child carefully, one cannot help but realize that he's, above all, a dependent being. Thus, we can understand that we are not always so keen to project ourselves onto children by partly feeling like a child again, that is to say by remembering what it was like to be a child. Not only does the distance in time help us here, but the distance in our physical and mental situation does as well. The physical difference between the eight-year-old boy and myself as I am today is quite vast and therefore truly refers to a different world in which I was physically far more dependent and helpless.

The same thing holds true for the mental situation in which I find myself as an adult. For example, as an adult I usually have the ability to "read" what is going on inside someone else, which gives me a sense of mastery over social contacts (Tuch 1999). This ability supposes a certain measure of cognitive development in dealing with other people. Thus, I have to realize that in all kinds of situations there are many different viewpoints possible. After all, I am not making a copy inside my head of the external world but construct it in a personal manner that does not exclude different constructions. I must also understand that a certain conviction may be incorrect and that the possibility exists that someone is trying to mislead me. Furthermore, I have to have developed the notion that personal characteristics are long-lived internal states, which can explain why someone behaves the way he does. Finally, I must have metacognition, that

is to say that I have to be able to think about how I think and how someone else thinks about what I think (Tuch 1999).

As development progresses, this increase in social cognition leads to the fact that our memories are constantly subjected to "developmental reconstructions," a special form of the "present remembering context," whereby the original experiences are reevaluated and may acquire a different weight and meaning. To look at a specific experience with the eyes of the child I was then, the adult I am now would need to give up his cognitive achievements, at least temporarily. In view of the changes that appear in the cognitive neuro-architecture of the brain over the course of time, this does not really seem possible. Thus, it is not very likely that the memory of an event, stored with the help of the motor and perceptual schemes the young child has available to him at that moment, could be found again much later on in unchanged form with the aid of the explanatory and interpretive schemes of the adult (Ceci 1995). As early as 1899, Freud suggested that we probably do not have a single conscious memory *from* our childhood, but only *of* our childhood. This becomes visible in the nature of those childhood memories in which we see ourselves as a child, knowing that we ourselves are that child, but where at the same time we are placed in the position of a spectator. This signifies that a sweeping rearrangement must have taken place, because the original observation occurred, of course, through the eyes of the child (Freud 1899). And insofar as a return to the "child's viewpoint" is even possible, it will frequently signify a reluctant return to a period of being-small and of cognitive helplessness, when many things were unclear, confusing, and incomprehensible (Tuch 1999).

Because of all this, it is far more logical that I would want to take my distance from this confusing state of being-small and remain entrenched in the cognition I have attained, so that I can "calmly" turn my thoughts to adult issues. In this reluctance, envy, in addition to helplessness, may also play a role. After all, the child's cognition renders unrestrained expectations of the future possible, something a child enjoys with such self-evident intensity. Conversely, as an adult I have had to learn to control a great many things and have seen few of all those lovely childhood fantasies come to fruition (Van Leeuwen 1989).

The desire to take our distance from the state of being small is not restricted to adulthood, but may already be present in the childhood period. Think, for example, of the older child who disdainfully looks down on the younger brother or sister. Shame about his personal intellectual

constructions may play a role in this, now that the child knows more: "He still believes in Santa Claus!" Or guilt and shame over intense oedipal yearnings: "I surely do know better than to want to marry my mother later on!" It may also be one way in which to make room for the intense envy of and rivalry with the younger sibling: "I don't feel those stupid, childish desires!" This envy can be further increased when the little brother or sister is allowed to do things the older child would still like to be doing, too, but which he has outgrown, such as unabashedly peeing and pooping in his diaper.

Sometimes the child's growing disappointment in his parents can also play a role here: the parents appear to be increasingly less powerful than the child had hoped or believed them to be. These disillusions, too, can reinforce the feeling of helplessness that goes hand in hand with childhood and later diminish the inclination of the adult to want to feel like a child again.

DEVELOPMENT AID

The reluctance to want to remember what it was like to be a child may be reinforced if during our childhood things happened that were difficult to bear, as is the case for "walking heads." It does not necessarily have to be a matter of clear-cut traumas alone. I am thinking here primarily of what it means to children when the adults in their environment are not sufficiently supportive.

This support should be broadly interpreted. It is not merely a question, for example, of a child being terrorized by a brother or sister in a family without the father or mother interfering, or of a child being beaten or sexually abused by the parents. Even if it is not a matter of obvious neglect, a child can be damaged because, based on all sorts of circumstances, it receives a different kind of attention and love than it really needs (Sroufe et al. 1999). As proven by studies on development, not only does the quality of the parental care come into play but the moment in time at which this is provided as well.

It is becoming increasingly clear that there are specific, essential periods in the young child's life in which it *must* interact with a responsive environment in order to have the brain and the personality develop in a satisfactory manner (Kandel 1999). What is particularly important here is whether the child is able to develop a secure bond with the parents, in

which the child's feelings are sufficiently noticed and verbalized. The importance of this secure bond refers to the attachment theory as originally developed by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), which is of great significance for psychoanalysis (Diamond and Blatt 1999a,b). Bowlby believes that there is a universal human need to enter into intimate emotional relationships. He sees this need as an innate motivational system, comparable to hunger and thirst, which organizes the memory processes of the child and incites him to seek the contact with and closeness to the mother (Kandel 1999). From the standpoint of evolution, the child's chances of survival hereby increase, so that there is a greater chance that he will later pass on his genetic material.

Initially, events that disturb closeness with the mother are upsetting to a child. It reacts with defiant behavior such as crying, which is aimed at restoring the closeness and thereby putting an end to the dangers that are linked to being separated from the mother. When, in spite of the protest, closeness is not restored, defiance changes into resigned despair. Thus, energy is preserved and danger is avoided. Resigned despair may also be seen as the child's attempt to prepare himself for lengthy and passive survival during the mother's absence (Kandel 1999).

Still, the ability to elicit a protective reaction from an adult in situations of danger does not appear to be the only evolutionary function of the attachment system (Fonagy 1999b). The closeness of mother and child also makes it possible that the child's attachment system is reflected in the sensitive emotional responses the mother gives to his signals. On the one hand, these responses serve as reinforcement and affirmation of the child's positive emotional states. On the other, they aim at subduing negative emotional states by offering the child protection and security when he is upset. These constantly repeated experiences are stored in the implicit memory system as expectations, which can help the child feel secure (Kandel 1999) and also offer a context in which the child can learn to regulate his emotions. The ability to adequately regulate his emotions is one of the child's most important developmental goals and is connected to a strong sense of well-being. In addition, we need to remember that regulating emotions is more feasible when the child knows to what these emotions refer. Wanting the ability to regulate his own emotions cannot be detached from the child's strong desire to understand what is happening in an emotional sense, both in himself and in the other person.

When a secure attachment exists between mother and child, it gives the child a self-evident sense of being at ease with himself as well as with

others. On the other hand, insecure attachment leads to fear in these situations (Kandel 1999). As I will clarify later on, this fear is connected to insufficient support or to the expectation of insufficient support. It causes the child to feel helpless and at the mercy of whatever presents itself in his inner being and in the external world. Research actually shows that the quality of parental care is predictive of the extent to which a child will be able to make secure attachments (Fonagy and Target 1998).

ATTACHMENT PATTERNS

Because the attachment pattern is stored in implicit memory and will become part of the implicit scenario, it tends to be quite stable over time and also affects the way in which an adult will function in relationships. Thus, the adult who grew up as a child in a secure parent–child relationship will have a better chance of developing a stable sense of autonomy. He will have been able to develop his inner world and make it his own: this is my unique inner world, this is who I am. Such a secure parent–child relationship also promotes the development of the earlier mentioned ability to "read" what is going on inside someone else. He will particularly understand that both his own behavior and that of others do not come falling from the sky but are established by internal states, that is to say by thoughts, feelings, desires, fantasies, and convictions. By "knowing" this, both his own internal world and the relational external world become more meaningful and predictable (Fonagy and Target 1998).

This ability to explain one's own behavior and that of the other person in terms of internal states refers to having a theory about how people function internally. As developmental research shows, a child does not become directly conscious of his own internal states, but it ensues through the other person (Gopnik 1993). Only by first observing the intentions, wishes, and convictions in the other—usually the caretaker—will a child gradually come to know what is at play in his own inner world (Fonagy and Target 1998). The sensitive caretaker acts in such a way toward the child that it becomes clear to him that the caretaker assumes the child is driven by wishes, convictions, or feelings. "Why are you crying? Are you hungry? Is your diaper wet? No, I think you're feeling lonely, you just want to lie down with me for a bit. Yes, that's better, you're smiling again."

What a child makes his own as the core of his psychological self-structure[5] is neither an internally rising self-awareness nor the caretaker

who pays attention to the child, but rather the caretaker's behavior at the moment that he is in reflective attunement with the child as much as possible (Fonagy and Target 1998). For that matter, a child will do the same with a less sensitive caretaker, whom the child feels is taking inadequate care of him. In this case, the child will pick up the attunement strategy of this caretaker and make it part of his own implicit relational pattern. This can then lead to a pattern of insecure attachment, in which roughly three groups can be distinguished.

First of all, there is the *avoidant style*, in which the child tries to regulate his need for security and control by turning away from the other, implying that "I'm just minding my own business. Whatever you're preoccupied with, whatever your attitude toward me may be, and whether you run out on me or not, makes no difference to me at all." In such a case it often concerns a caretaker who appears to ignore the child's state of being upset, denies it, and thereby seems to say, "If you're upset, don't expect me to do anything."

In the *ambivalent style* of insecure attachment, the child actually turns to the other person like a clinging vine: "I am continually preoccupied with what is of interest to you and what you feel for me and what that means to me." In this style, it is primarily a question of caretakers who do acknowledge the upset state but magnify it and do not put it in sufficient perspective. What they seem to express is that "you cannot do without me, without me you become upset, and you are not able to regulate that by yourself."

While in the avoidant and ambivalent styles of insecure attachment it is a matter of a clear, well-organized pattern, this is not the case for the third, the *disorganized style*. Children who use the latter attachment pattern to deal with the stress of insecure situations, almost appear as if they do not know what to do any more (Lyons-Ruth and Jacobvitz 1999). In this pattern of disorganized attachment, we are dealing mostly with children who have capricious and unpredictable caretakers, who might be quite pleasant one moment and in the next abuse and neglect or even become frightened by the child's behavior, based on unresolved traumas in their own past. Instead of lessening the child's fear and offering him security, they become a source of fear themselves. Understandably enough, the feelings of insecurity are the strongest in these relationships. The child seems to tell the other, "I can't figure out what keeps you going and how you'll behave toward me. I constantly have to keep my eye on you and tune in to your moods. What you feel, what your behavior calls forth in me, and how

I myself feel are all too frightening to know. I cannot think and feel, I am petrified" (Diamond and Blatt 1999b).[6]

The sufficiently sensitive caretaker will help a child develop an internal world in which he is amply aware of his own feelings and those of others and in which he self-evidently sees himself as a worthwhile (and not a ridiculous) person. This also means that, while the child fully realizes what is going on in someone else's world, at given moments he is nevertheless able to give self-evident priority to his own thoughts and feelings. In other words, you could say that in this manner a child can separate and individualize into an autonomous individual, who is worthy in his own eyes as well. The importance of this last point becomes particularly obvious in situations that are difficult for the child. Thus, it makes an enormous difference whether a child is able to ascribe his mother's withdrawn and rejecting behavior to her emotional state or whether he projects this behavior onto himself and begins to see himself as a boring and bad child (Fonagy et al. 1999).

ADEQUATE DEVELOPMENT AID

What is also a part of the realm of giving adequate development aid is the parent's attempt to explain events to the child that he cannot yet comprehend very well and to do so on his level. When this does not happen, the child will often try to fill in the missing pieces with the help of his imagination: "Immature social cognition sets the stage for the fantastic comprehension of complex social situations inadequately understood by the child at the time the experience occurred" (Tuch 1999, p. 157).

One example of this is the child who does not yet understand that his mother is exaggerating when she shouts for the *n*th time that she is dying. It is terribly important for the nature of the inner conflicts that may arise due to this behavior whether the child takes these comments literally or with a grain of salt (Tuch 1999). In this case the help of another person, the father for instance, is required to provide the missing cognitions and to clarify to the child what the actual meaning of Mother's outcry is.

Another example is the way in which young children "comprehend" a divorce. Sam, well over three years old: "Divorce is when Mommy and Daddy hate each other and your family is dead." Anne, four: "It means you're never going to marry again, never, never, never again." Ben, five: "It's when

somebody signs a paper, somebody leaves, and then the children cry" (Pruett and Kline Pruett 1999). These examples illustrate that children need to be given the clearest possible explanations of what exactly is going on in their life.

Tuch also shows how the level of social cognition can be a determinant for later accessibility to the memory of a specific event. He gives the example of an eight-year-old boy who is at the barber's. While snipping the hair, the barber is rhythmically moving his lower body against the boy's arm. It is clear to an adult onlooker that the barber is masturbating. If the boy himself understands what is going on here, it is conceivable that he will protest or become so frightened—because of the homosexual connotations of the experience, for instance—that he feigns ignorance and will try to forget the incident. The subsequent accessibility of the experience will depend, among other things, on the extent to which certain things continue to be laden with fear.

Suppose, however, that he does not yet understand what is happening at that moment. In that case, there will be three possible outcomes. First, the experience could be of such small significance that the attention needed for storage in memory was not given. A second possibility is that the experience is stored in a form that corresponds to the boy's relatively naïve social cognition at that age; he may think, for example, that the barber is dancing. A third possibility is that the experience is not stored in a meaningful context but awaits the solution, as of a riddle. In that case the experience may well be remembered because of the unrecognized, confusing emotions it calls forth (Pruett and Kline Pruett 1999).

In the last two outcomes, when storage does take place in the explicit memory system, the earlier mentioned developmental reconstructions can take place over the course of time. In the example of this boy it may mean that, at the moment of such a reconstruction, it will be the first time he realizes exactly what had taken place on that occasion, and it will also be the first time he has the appropriate feelings that go hand in hand with such an experience. What happens next depends on the nature and intensity of these feelings and on his attitude toward them. If he is able to face the feelings well, then the experience—now (differently) understood—will be integrated into the new context. Another possibility is that he has to defend himself against the rising feelings and will not be able to sufficiently integrate the experience in question. In that case, it is a matter of "Nachträglichkeit," the phenomenon that a particular experience has a deferred effect (Pruett and Kline Pruett 1999; *see also*

Freud 1896, Modell 1990). Although he appears to endure the experience more or less neutrally at first, his increased social cognition suddenly makes him conscious of the actual meaning, with all the emotional consequences thereof.

Developmental reconstructions of memories can, of course, acquire a primarily defensive significance as well. Thus, many adults with painful memories of their youth will use their increased social cognition to put themselves in the place of their parents: "It really was very difficult for him. Just think of the circumstances at the time. And look at what he went through with his own parents: no wonder he acted that way toward me!" There is, of course, nothing negative about having some understanding of the position of one's parents in such situations. However, this understanding is often used so as not to have to look at it with the eyes of the child and not to have to feel the corresponding pain, bewilderment, and mutual hatred. We saw earlier that this movement can also become visible in the position from which a specific event is remembered. A shift then occurs and the observation with one's own eyes, the so-called "field position," moves to an observation from the position of an onlooker. Do I see the events of my grandmother's funeral from the car in which I myself am riding, or am I standing like an onlooker, as it were, on the sidewalk, watching myself from the distance as part of the procession? As is to be expected, in the latter position the memory turns out to be less emotionally charged (Schacter 1996).

All of the above clarifies once again how important it is to help children, not only emotionally but cognitively as well, to learn to get a grasp on themselves as well as on their surrounding world. That way they will not have to wander any longer than necessary through a world full of incomprehensible, confusing events, to which from sheer necessity they will try to give meaning and cohesion with the help of their fantasies.

When this development aid is inadequately offered, there may be all kinds of consequences, one of which is the more complicated access to the childhood world at an adult age (Lynch and Cicchetti 1998).

CHILD AND ADULT

As a final point, I will mention one other psychological motive that can hamper the entrance into the internal nursery. It concerns the ability to be disillusioned with regard to one's own childhood. Appealing to this ability

may come into play, for instance, in connection with changes that occur through parenthood, even when this parenthood presents itself exclusively in the imagination. Once a child arrives, after all, it is necessary to become a parent oneself: only one person can be the child, the other is therefore automatically the parent. This also implies the end of one's own childhood and of all the illusions connected to it, including the illusion of immortality (*see also* Chapter 6). What makes it possible to keep one's childhood and everything that goes along with it intact and untouched is precisely the act of keeping the door to the nursery tightly shut. Naturally, this happens at the expense of any empathy for children, as can be seen in parents who seem to have forgotten they themselves were ever children. A parent's envy of the child that is now present or is to arrive in the future can also play a role in all of this: that annoying child who now receives things the parent has lost or never owned.

I would like to give an illustration of this in a short vignette.

> An analysand recounts the struggle she has with her five-year-old daughter about eating. She thinks that her daughter ought to finish what is on her plate, and forces her to stay at the table for almost half an hour in front of her plate. "I feel she should learn this, she ought to know what is and is not allowed, or else she'll become one of those spoiled, fussy brats!" She is silent for a while and then I say: "Would she? She is only five!" at which point the analysand, a little angry and indignant, says loudly: "I always had to finish what was on *my* plate, that awful sauerkraut and fried bits of bacon!" She falls silent, becomes sad, and says she had forgotten how terrible she used to feel at times like that, facing her plate with that nasty food that almost made her gag.
>
> Her envy of the daughter who might receive something, some understanding in fact, that she herself had not received, is an obstacle to her proper functioning as a mother. In order to be sufficiently empathetic, she needs to be able to remember what it was like for her as a child to sit at the table facing that plate.

IN CONCLUSION

In the previous pages I have mentioned several psychological motives to keep the door to the internal nursery tightly shut and thus to hamper the accessibility to memories of childhood events.

The following chapters will first delve in greater detail into the relationship between the implicit scenario and our ability to fantasize. In ad-

dition, I will discuss what changes when the internal child has been forced to keep silent, to a greater or lesser extent. Thanks to the psychoanalytic situation, these changes can become quite visible. After all, it is very rare in everyday life that a situation occurs in which two people try to understand together over a long period of time what the implicit life scenario of one of the two looks like. Sometimes, in the course of this process, the internal child who seemed to be so very "dead" finds his voice again and turns out to have surprisingly much to say.