THE WIDENING GYRE: TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE OMNIPOTENT QUEST DURING ADOLESCENCE

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Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot see the falconer
Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold...

_The Second Coming_, W. B. Yeats

In a seminal contribution, Silverberg (1949) delineated the role of the quest for omnipotence in neurogenesis and normal personality development. Drawing upon the formulations of Freud (1911, 1909) and Ferenczi (1913), he traced the infant’s passage from a theoretical state of ‘unconditional omnipotence’ —marked by the sense of total gratification at a time of actual maximum helplessness—to stages of ‘conditional omnipotence’ when, deprived of the mother’s intervention, the child attempts to secure satisfaction and protection by hallucinatory wish-fulfilment, gestures and vocalizations that seem to prove its magical control over the object. As frustration mounts, the ineffectiveness of these modalities is increasingly recognized and the infant gradually learns that his own wishes are not paramount...there is a reality surrounding him that must be taken into account and manipulated in its own terms, if he is to achieve fulfilment of his wishes... (Silverberg, 1949, p. 387).

Thus the primacy of the reality principle and the secondary process is established, slowly and painfully.

Silverberg found the concept of ‘unconditional omnipotence’ weak; he argued there would be no need for effort or progress in a milieu of constant, unbroken gratification. Effortless satisfaction would only be sought _in retrospect_, by an older, frustrated individual, for ‘omnipotence is never something a person believes he possesses...’ (ibid, p. 388). The child never accedes to the imposition of reality with unmitigated joy, and the adult never wholly disavows omnipotent wishes; only grudgingly do we accept the essence of the human condition, the state Silverberg characterized as ‘parti-

Potence’—‘tentative and partially successful manipulations of reality’ (ibid., p. 389).

Partipotence must reign uneasily within the psyche, because ‘hopes for omnipotence (always) remain unconscious’ (ibid., p. 389). A seeming awareness of one’s necessary restrictions inevitably overlays the quest for ‘absolute and unfailing effective aggression, accompanied by an absolute and indestructible self-esteem’ (ibid., p. 396). The next step in the ego’s evolution—the unconditional admission of partipotence—will lie centuries, perhaps millennia, beyond us.

Silverberg further speculated that anxiety-laden perceptions of the antithesis between fantasied omnipotence and actual helplessness might arise during a ‘transitional period’, when ‘experiences of frustration have introduced a drive towards omnipotence, plus doubts about achieving it, but the possibilities and advantages of partipotence have not yet been perceived’ (ibid., p. 389). While he was justifiably hesitant about drawing conclusions on the status of infantile consciousness from work with neurotic adults, Silverberg theorized that the ‘transitional stage’ might be placed near the beginning of effective locomotion—dating an embryonic awareness of partipotence approximately in the middle of the second year.

Silverberg described several intrapsychic manoeuvres, which he saw as holding actions originating during the transitional phase, intended to reify (temporarily) a sense of omnipotence at the very time the child was slowly progressing towards partipotence. He reconstructed these manoeuvres from the analyses of neurotics, but believed they were integral to normal personality development and could
re-emerge ubiquitously, given requisite stress, in later mental life. I shall be concerned only with Silverberg's 'magical manoeuvre'.

The first ingredient of the 'magical manoeuvre' is the seeming acceptance of limitations, but not with any view to acknowledging the virtues of partipotence. The second ingredient is an 'act of faith'—the assumption being that somewhere there exists an agency possessing 'all power over all things'. The third ingredient is the attempt to influence this omnipotent agency by various rituals of placation or flattery, sundry declarations of dependence, to mediate in the suppliant's behalf. However helpless and humble the inceptor appears, 'nothing less is intended than to achieve power over the all-powerful' (ibid., p. 390).

Unfortunately, Silverberg did not explore the transformations of omnipotent wish and fantasy during the years beyond childhood. Let us now consider the special relevance of his theories on omnipotence and the magical manoeuvre with relationship to the metapsychology of adolescence and later psychopathological developments. First, a brief summary of the relevant literature.

Pumpian-Mindlin (1969, p. 219) conceives infantile omnipotence as being 'a major component of the most primitive core of the ego structure, around which primal psychic activity evolves...the prototype for the primary process which mediates the direct discharge of tension...the primordial fantasy, the anlage, from which all fantasy formation stems...'. The superego of the post-oedipal child becomes the repository of earlier omnipotent strivings. The resolution of the oedipus and the consequent establishment of the superego–ego-ideal as a separate psychic system provides a potent thrust for the development of secondary process thinking and the ascendancy of the reality principle. But, despite the flourishing of healthy ego functioning during latency, there will always be a substrate of omnipotent need that surfaces in play activity, daydreams, etc.

As the earlier psychosexual phases are recapitulated during puberty, so 'the ontogeny of omnipotence is also recapitulated with much greater resources at its disposal' (ibid., p. 221). Pumpian-Mindlin believes the most striking manifestation of this recapitulation is the emergence, during late adolescence, of 'omnipotentiality': the youngster is convinced that he can accomplish any task, physical or intellectual, solve any problem—'Yet...he finds it difficult to do one thing and follow it through to completion...[this would mean commitment] which he is not yet prepared [for], because it would mean abandoning all the other possibilities' (ibid., p. 222).

The resolution of this omnipotential phase comes about from acting out omnipotential fantasies, submitting them to reality testing. The youth thereby gains an increasingly solid sense of commitment as appropriate priorities are established. The originality of Pumpian-Mindlin's work is indisputable, but it is unfortunate that he perceives the omnipotential phase as the central vicissitude of adolescent omnipotent strivings. He believes that omnipotential concerns are prevalent approximately from the age of 16 to 22, says little about the early adolescent period. He alludes only briefly to the fate of omnipotent fantasy in adult mental life, referring to the illusion of immortality gained through the propagation of children. Finally, he does not explore the influence of the poignant awareness of mortality at puberty upon the reworking of earlier omnipotent wishes.

For Blos (1962), object relinquishing and finding occupy a crucial position in the psychological work of adolescence. Painful or joyful affects attendant upon mourning and falling in love are bound up with object decathexis and recathexis, processes which acquire a turbulent urgency as physiological maturation propels the youngster away from his parents. Previously empedestalled as protectors and moral enforcers, the parents now lose their former 'mightiness'. In this context, the ego-ideal achieves a special provenance. Blos views the mature ego-ideal as a differentiated part of the ego, cathected with narcissistic and homosexual libido, which assumes a guiding role similar to the childhood superego, but lacks the latter's uncompromising tyranny and primitive cruelty, and is more deeply 'personal'.

The ego-ideal gradually assumes many super-ego functions, and finally attains a definitive organization with the decline of the early adolescent homosexual stage, as the negative oedipal position is surrendered and a viable sexual
identity becomes consolidated, with the disposition towards heterosexual object choice. Super-e ego and ego-ideal are both powerful goal and choice determining agencies that give life new direction, new meaning. Both are strongly involved in the regulation of self-esteem and narcissistic balance, and are powerfully invested with primitive elements of omnipotence:

The megalomania of the young child is shattered by the undeniably privileged position and power of the parent; its remnants are taken over by the superego, which thus partakes of the 'magnificence' of the parents. In early adolescence, the megalomania of childhood that allowed the child a sense of perfection so long as he was part of the parent is taken over by the ego-ideal (Blos, 1962, p. 78).

In this regard, Jacobson has written:

The insufficient distinction between object and self during the beginning constitution of an ego-ideal, or rather its precursors, explains why in its deep unconscious core we may detect fusions of early infantile images of both the love object and the self, and why at bottom the superego and the ego-ideal harbour the grandiose wishes of the pre-oedipal child, as well as his belief in parental omnipotence. In fact, parental demands . . . can become internalized only by joining forces with the child's own narcissistic ambitious strivings, to which . . . they give an entirely new direction . . . the double face of the ego ideal, which is forged from ideal concepts of the self and from idealized features of the love objects, gratifies . . . the infantile longing to be one with the love object. Even our never ending struggle for oneness between ego and ego-ideal reflects the enduring persistence of this desire (Jacobson, 1964, pp. 95–6).

The pubescent youngster never progresses steadily away from childhood attachments. The often bewildering modulations of behaviour so common to the period attest pointedly to the ebb and flow of libido between self, old and new objects, as remodelling of the psychic apparatus proceeds. During the phase in which dependence upon the parents is giving way to the ascendance of the competent, actualizing self, the aching void created by dethronement of the objects is filled by a variety of surrogates. Some live in the real world, others exist purely within the perimeter of imagination and fantasy. These include (a) a close friend or chum, usually of the same sex; (b) an opposite-sexed peer to whom the adolescent manifests 'tender love', with an avowed sexual component; (c) an adult or older adolescent actively involved in the youngster's life; (d) a 'hero', usually removed from the adolescent's immediate life space; (e) the peer group; and (f) the self.

A significant determinant in surrogate selection is the youngster's attempt to recapture the 'lost' omnipotence of childhood, the belief in totally effective control over one's inner and outer world, at the very moment when basic security is threatened by psychological distancing from the objects, and the concomitant awareness of the certainty of personal death.

The obvious inference is that this time of trial recapitulates the infantile stage postulated by Silverberg, between absolute dependency and partipotence. Confronted with the terrible insight that his parents possess neither omnipotence nor immortality, the adolescent strives to recover the mediation of an all-powerful other, into whose keeping he will temporarily entrust his autonomy. This act of faith, an essential component of the magical manoeuvre, is yet another of the necessary holding actions of puberty, taking its brief place on the psychic stage while the instruments of identity are forged.

The quest for omnipotent intervention can continue into late adolescence and youth, in more sophisticated guises (e.g. Pumpian-Mindlin's omnipotent phenomenon). This one would not necessarily consider pathological, especially in a culture that extends to its young ever longer moratoria to refine their commitments. However, there are many instances where the search miscarries, leading to devastating psychic damage. Let us now examine the manifold ways adolescents use the inheritors of parental prerogative to work through omnipotent strivings. Examples will be drawn from clinical practice, literature and the current and past social scenes to illustrate normal and pathological variations of the omnipotent quest.

THE FRIEND

Blos theorizes that the typical friendship of early adolescence is rooted in narcissism (1962, p. 77). The friend is prized for a constellation of qualities obviously related to identifications with the infantile objects, particularly with the same-sexed parent. These characteristics are acquired by proxy, in a passionate attachment to the
idealized other; thereby the youngster obtains mastery and a sense of repair of the incomplete self.

Blos analyses the typical friendship of Tonio Kroger in Thomas Mann's famous novella. Tonio's father is a small-town official, fastidiously dressed, with piercing blue eyes, and strict and critical towards his son. But Tonio's mother is a dark fiery woman of an artistic and unabashedly romantic nature. At puberty Tonio is torn by a welter of conflicted feelings for these disparate two, grows bored and depressed, does badly in his studies and is painfully cognizant of his differences from his placid peers. He is drawn to a schoolmate, Hans Hansen, outgoing and immensely popular. Although lacking Tonio's sensibilities, Hans is an excellent, if conventional, scholar and conforms to the town's image of a well-bred boy.

Tonio anguishes mightily in his 14-year-old soul for Hans: 'who else has blue eyes like yours... he who loves the more is the inferior and must suffer'. His yearning partakes of slavish devotion, yet withal is informed by a curious contempt. Hans is all his father is and wished him to be—even with a pointed physical resemblance. By loving Hans, Tonio creates a temporary illusion of prestige and control in his world, unmistakably cast in his father's mould. Through Hans, he will become a force to be reckoned with in the town—like father. Yet his maternal inheritance presses upon him the identity of the sensitive outsider, observer and recorder, clearly incompatible with his father's persona. The infatuation with Hans is perforce transitory, although vitally necessary for the decathexis of the father. Once this has taken place, Hans shrinks back to life size and Tonio's attachment withers.

**TENDER LOVE: FIRST HETEROSEXUAL OBJECT CHOICE**

Blos notes that the first heterosexual object choice of early adolescence is endowed with a 'conglomerate of sacred, precious attributes' (Blos, 1962, p. 101). The youngster is primarily concerned with exclusive possession and preservation of the object which, like the 'friend', often completes a narcissistic equation, the beloved owning characteristics the lover desires that bring him closer to his own ego-ideal. Here, however, it is the attachment to the opposite-sexed parent that is most obviously recapitulated under the sway of biological maturation, and the pressure to work through the oedipal constellation more definitively.

Not unexpectedly, the beloved is granted all the glamour, charisma and—more obviously in the boy's case—the fabulous nurturing abilities of the first object (the adolescent girl's passion for her boy-friend often masks strong yearning for maternal sustenance). Nowhere is the glorification of the beloved in the first flush of youthful longing given more lovely portraiture than in *Romeo and Juliet*; the warmth and grandiloquence of Shakespeare's poetry are informed by the essence of the magical manoeuvre, a consuming act of faith in the beloved's omnipotent beneficence.

A more mundane example is the case of Martin, whose mother overwhelmed him with unnecessary attention, the paradigm of which was forced feeding when he balked at her enormous meals. She discouraged autonomy at every crucial life juncture, making him fearful of imminent collapse without her help. He avoided contact with women during high school; at the age of 17, shortly after leaving home for college, at a time when he felt himself 'collapsing', he met Candy (sic)—a young lady several years his senior. With her he formed an intense parasitic bond, reciprocated by cloying care remarkably like his mother's devotions. Sexual activity was minimal. Instead, he spent long hours cataloguing his fears, which multiplied relentlessly despite her reassurances that no ill would befall him with her at his side. Gradually, Martin came to feel as if he were being 'swallowed whole'. In desperation, he stopped seeing her and sought therapy. Although chronologically a young adult, he was developmentally far younger. Candy accepted his slavish fealty only too willingly, recreating the hostile symbiotic tie with his mother. As he grew closer, his fear of being entrapped and incorporated by her grew, as did his rage at her domination.

**ADULTS AND OLDER ADOLESCENTS IN THE YOUNGSTER'S PROXIMATE WORLD**

The vacuum created by parental decathexis cannot be filled by peers alone, so adults or older teenagers become a focus for starry-eyed
worship. These may serve in some obvious leadership or guidance function—teachers, coaches, etc. Sometimes an older relative is chosen. Idealization of the older person serves the same psychological ends already mentioned. However, these relationships acquire a special flavouring precisely because of the age differences involved, and because the worshipped one often holds a realistic position of prestige or authority, is therefore particularly suited to take up the mantle of parental ‘magnificence’.

Heterosexual or homosexual feelings may develop towards the surrogate, especially in the characteristic ‘crush’ of the period. Ultimately, however, the object of the crush is to be ‘loved passively, with the aim of getting a hand-out of attention or affection’ (Blos, 1962, p. 83). It is in the crush that one often sees omnipotent strivings expressed in an undisguised fashion, with a peculiar suffusion of admiration and eroticism, eroticization thinly concealing a wish for total, blissful nurturing.

Mary came from a crisis-ridden family. Her mother and father were chronic alcoholics; mother was a neglectful creature who confusingly smothered her with boozy affection, or rejected her out of hand. From the first, Mary was highly dependent upon her, and exceptionally fearful when denied her presence. Father was harsh and punitive. In her tenth year, her parents separated, placing her in an orphanage where her withdrawal behind a façade of preternatural goodness masked enormous pain and rage over her abandonment. At 16, mother refused to take her back, but allowed a younger sister to return home. Mary renounced all contact with mother, then took vows with a nursing order devoted to the care of the elderly ill.

Her identity as a nun was consolidated around her relationship with the Mother Superior. She delighted in performing small, sometimes unknown services for her, tried to model herself after her, would often come to her for advice and encouragement. The older woman fostered Mary’s dependency, beseeching her to unburden everything that lay in her heart, so that she might be brought closer to God. The idyll ended rudely when Mother Superior refused to allow Mary to take courses that would give her a nursing degree. Instead, a younger sister was granted this privilege! Mary felt betrayed and despondent. She set fire to the infirmary basement, quickly extinguished it and confessed her crime to the Mother Superior, who immediately relieved her of her duties and arranged for hospitalization, but refused to see her again. After a serious suicidal attempt one year later, she entered therapy, and formed an intense dependent transference, believing that I had complete authority over her well-being. She then came to realize that her mother had been perceived as the original, capricious possessor of that authority. Her crush on the Mother Superior, heavily laden with barely repressed homosexuality, gave way to murderous anger and suicidal despair when this obvious maternal surrogate thrust her away, preferring the younger sister, as did the real mother.

THE HERO

The idealization of a friend, beloved or older mentor pales in comparison with the glorification of the hero, who offers headier possibilities for the repair of narcissistic injury and the acquisition of ‘magnificence’ by proxy. The devotion of the adolescent hero-worshipper easily verges over into frenetic slavishness. The hero is prized variously for physical attractiveness, artistic or athletic prowess, one or another feature of life style, political adherence, occasionally even intellectual force—or far less tangible attributes that contribute to an ineluctable charisma.

Mass media are impressive progenitors of current adolescent heroes. Rock groups and folk-singers have inherited the mantle of yesterday’s baseball players, film idols and crooners. The essence of the relationship between the teenager and hero is amusingly captured in many of the comic strips that still appeal to adolescents of all ages. Recall how frequently the Superhero has had a teenage sidekick who accompanies the mighty one on his perilous adventures, shares in his miraculous powers—but only to a limited degree—and is constantly being rescued from one masochistically tinged predicament after another. The sidekick is likely to live in ambiguous dependency upon the Hero in everyday life. Thus Robin (Dick Grayson) is Batman’s (Bruce Wayne’s) ‘ward’. In another popular strip the omnipotent hero
and his charge are condensed when Billy Batson, a crippled (sic.) newsboy, is transformed into the valorous Captain Marvel by speaking the magic word, Shazam!

THE PEER GROUP

Adolescent peer groups form spontaneously, or may be organized under institutional auspices with some kind of adult supervision. Group membership in early adolescence is often drawn exclusively from one sex. A commonly shared belief or value system may provide the binding central to the group’s existence. Redl (1942) states that peer groups give crucial outlets for a wide variety of instinctual needs, protect the member from unhealthy anxiety and guilt, and help to develop mature life patterns. Group drive gratification may be primitive and direct, as in the more aggressive species of gang activity, or sublimated into athletic, social, political or intellectual endeavours. One group in its time may pass through an entire spectrum of more or less socially sanctioned behaviours—and not necessarily in any orderly fashion. Complex, intense identifications occur with the group leader, other members and a collective ethos which the individual is often only dimly aware of.

Blos (1962, pp. 211–12) believes that adolescent groups are an important locus for the appropriate displacement and resolution of dependency needs no longer satisfied within the family. Consequently, the group, its leadership and its principles are readily invested with the omnipotence once granted the parents. By accepting group membership, the youngster partakes of power, albeit always after some sacrifice of personal prerogative and the submersion of the self. Group initiation rights frequently partake of the magical manoeuvre. In return for submissive acts that almost always involve obsequious and humiliating displays of devotion, the initiate is raised up, given access to the secrets and entitlements of the group.

Once admitted, the member continues to acknowledge group sway by secret languages, obscure greetings, conformity of dress, songs, chants, cheers, etc. From these rituals spring a wonderful feeling of purpose, a penumbra of essential rightness renewed by periodic exhortations from the leadership. A high premium is placed on excluding and scapegoating those unfortunate enough to be deemed unfit to belong. Real or simulated combat with other groups constitutes yet another ritual by which intragroup tension is discharged and mutuality recemented.

Adolescents—and all too many adults—may be only too willing to follow leaders who offer facile promises of absolute, unfailing effective aggression at the expense of another’s freedom. Erikson (1942) wrote of Adolf Hitler’s hypnotic hold over the young people in his country. He portrayed the Führer as a shrewd exploiter of the widely prevalent feeling amongst German youth that the establishment had betrayed them; the despair subsequent to the debacle of World War I compounded the normal disillusionment with parental competence. With terrible enthusiasm, the children of Versailles bent their will to their omnipotent leader’s wishes, he would repair the narcissistic injury so intimately related to their country’s downfall. They were compelled to follow Hitler as the prototype of the adolescent who never gave in to the demands of outworn authority, a man in revolt against the petty tyranny of his own father, a glorified older brother who shrewdly enmeshed them in escalating crimes against the human spirit, from which there could be no way back.

More recently, the Manson case presented a group of restless American youngsters woven into a satanic solidarité by a balefully attractive leader who preached regressive revolution, offering total security in return for total obedience and surrender of conscience from his followers, with macabre results.

THE SELF

As a function of the heightened narcissism of early adolescence, the teenager temporarily takes himself as his love object, investing the self with the omnipotence of the parents. This auto-inflation is acted out in displays of unbridled arrogance and conceit, counterphobic risk-taking or typical “dreams of glory” fantasies. The omnipotent phenomenon localized by Pumpian-Mindlin in late adolescence thus actually appears in statu nascendi much earlier, more crudely expressed in an exuberant overestimation of personal strength, daring or
beauty than in the later, more mature over-estimation of intellectual and creative ability.

A particularly malevolent miscarriage of adolescent self-agrandizement occurred in 1958, when two New Zealand girls murdered one of their mothers while psychotically exalted. The case received wide publicity and was inevitably compared with the Leopold–Loeb affair. Both youths had relatively distant fathers, their relationships with each respective mother were ambivalent, intense and dependent. Each suffered from debilitating physical illnesses during childhood, each was shy, temperamental, isolated, and given to grandiose daydreams.

Over two years they evolved a rich, increasingly evil fantasy world ruled by sadistic tyrants who subsisted on a regimen of carnage. They believed they were supreme geniuses, set above the common herd, ungoverned by ordinary morality. The murder occurred when they were threatened with separation, and was exceptionally brutal and clumsy. Medlicott documented a striking lack of remorse, persistent exaltation, accompanied by a profound conceit and arrogance. An excerpt from their poem, ‘The Ones I Worship’ attests to the height of their megalomania:

> The outstanding genius of this pair . . .
> Is understood by few, they are so rare . . .
> The world is most honoured that they should
deign to rule . . .
> I worship the power of these lovely two
> These wonderful people are you and I!

(Medlicott, 1955, p. 209)

Medlicott theorized that the natural adolescent increase in narcissism presented unusual dangers to these already narcissistic individuals. The pair acted upon each other as ‘resonators’, increasing the pitch of their shared grandiosity and delusions of omnipotence. Instead of worshipping the charismatic hero, the self—and the self of the partner—was adulated.

FEAR OF DEATH, MORTAL TERROR, AND THE OMNIPOTENT QUEST

Prolongation and miscarriage of the adolescent quest for omnipotence may be attributed to multiple parameters in early life which increase dependency, compromise narcissistic balance, and undermine the potential for mastery of the external and internal world. These include poorly understood hereditary–constitutional factors, a wide variety of postnatal physical insults, and pathological rearing behaviour. Distortions in the achievement of partipotence and the recognition of its virtues are particularly apt to occur in one who has been forced to participate in an intense, symbiotically warped nurturing experience, and who, grown to a pallid semblance of maturity is condemned, a desperate Diogenes, to pursue the illusion that there indeed exists an agency with ‘all power over all things’.

The ego damage caused by grossly inconsistent, rejecting, overstimulating and intrusive nurturing is, of course, often associated with borderline or psychotic states, in seriously troubled people, who also regularly demonstrate the deepest, most stubbornly abiding hope for omnipotent intervention from the therapist, and who evoke the most glaring manipulations to secure this end—supplication, grovelling, bargaining, threats—every species of the magical manoeuvre. The stakes played for are the highest—these patients’ fear of death, articulating with their omnipotent quest, is agonizing, overwhelming, and desiccates any pleasure in life.

Stern (1968, p. 4) states that fear of death is essentially the ‘fear of repetition of mortal terror, experienced in the ubiquitous early biotraumatic states of object loss’, evoking the possibility of the ego’s extinction. Adaptation to the fear of death is vital to healthy maturation; deficiency in its integration is a significant, often overlooked determinant of emotional illness. The fear of death is already quite conscious during early childhood, appearing at least by age two to three, connected with the death of pets, relatives, or witnessing scenes of devastation on TV. Children equate death with separation, the dark, the horrors of helplessness. They invariably describe death in terms akin to pavor nocturnus, being immobilized, unable to breathe or to cry out.

Thanatophobia is no less troubling during adolescence and adulthood, although it may be defended against more artfully. As man grows more autonomous, more certain of his real strength, so does awareness of the inalterable fact of his ending wax more poignant:

Death [is] a state of eternal trauma. Previous traumatic situations have been overcome, but from
death there is no recovery... the outcome is final...
(Stern, 1968, p. 23).

The mother–infant bond protects the child from trauma and death—'libidinal input derived from gratification of libidinal needs through neutralizing internal aggression, wards off annihilation, establishes once and for all symbiosis as defence against death...' (ibid., p. 24). Individuation proceeds, but the threat of object loss remains a constant, providing a substrate of Angst for the unique vicissitudes of successive developmental epochs—the castration fear of the Oedipus, and the struggles to consolidate viable identity during adolescence.

Stern described severe thanatophobia in borderline patients refractory to termination of analysis because 'transference... was fed by craving for fusion with the analyst, the representation of the protective mother, as defence against the fear of death' (ibid., p. 6). He was repeatedly to discover in these cases a highly disturbed, ambivalent mother–child union, replete with overstimulation and basic rejection. The infant locked into this pathological system steers a panicky course between fear of object loss and danger of destruction by the object's hostility. This primal ambivalence is maintained in the continuing splitting of the emerging ego, which remains brittle, prone to facile oscillations between more or less differentiated levels of integration. Fixation to primitive modes of mental functioning and genital gratifications prevents successful separation—individuation during childhood and later during adolescence. The groundwork is thus laid for unconscious reification of the symbiosis upon exposure to a variety of life stresses, including success, that portend separation from or abandonment by the object, evoking mortal terror. Under these circumstances, the patient retreats into fantasies, often with a perverse component, through which the danger of separation and the consequent threat of extinction are warded off by the intervention of an omnipotent agency.

Rod suffered from attacks of tachycardia as a child, due to a mild abnormality in cardiac conduction. Despite repeated reassurances by many specialists, his mother reacted hysterically to each episode, 'rescuing' him by rushing him to the hospital emergency room. His physiological distress was compounded by panic over his imagined demise. Although the tachycardia subsided in latency, he lived in dread of its recurrence. His grandfather, to whom he was quite close, died of a heart condition when he was seven, heightening fears of himself or his parents dying. He would summon up the image of grandfather in his coffin, trying with a shudder to imagine what it would be like to be dead—'a lump'.

Rod's thanatophobia receded during the prepubertal years, but resurfaced during adolescence, coincident with family problems and academic difficulties. Once again he began ruminating about his grandfather, had repetitive traumatic dreams in which he saw himself in the old man's coffin, being lowered into the ground. He fought sleep, felt himself growing smaller as he lay in the dark, shrinking into a pinpoint of consciousness, starting up into shocked wakefulness just as it seemed that point might vanish, too, leaving him forever 'not there... not anywhere... a nothing...'. Psychotherapy showed an integral connexion between his fear of death, and a profound adolescent identification with a popular rock-star, Bob Dylan, and Jesus Christ (following a heavy dose of LSD, he believed that he was a combination of Dylan and the reincarnated Christ, returned to bring eternal peace to the world). Dylan's fame provided a specious immortality to his unconscious, while Jesus triumphed over death through his suffering. In a perverse recurrent masturbatory fantasy, Rod would see himself wrestled to the ground by a heavily muscled Amazon, who would then pin him against her body, gradually squeezing the breath out of him, caressing him into a delirium of painful pleasure while his air supply was slowly cut off. This fantasy recapitulated his infantile dependency upon and ambivalence towards his mother (the wrestler's costume was a reworking of her underwear, glimpsed in childhood), the horror of being shackled to a powerful, destructive force which he strove mightily to be liberated from, yet could never manage to escape, losing autonomy, identity, and finally life itself!

Partipotence holds no viability for such an adolescent. The thrust of maturation hurls him into unwanted, frightening independence, and the recognition of death as a meaningful outcome of life, intrinsic to the mourning work of
the period, will cause epic distress, reawakening and strengthening the thanatophobia of childhood. Passing of the illusion of the idealized parents does not occur, grief consequent to the perception of that illusion is not resolved. Hence the turning to surrogates with inordinate longing, to maintain the fiction that security from life’s trauma and rescue from death’s finality can be forthcoming. Each godhead as it fails is replaced by a newer one, and a fruitless search is joined that may consume a lifetime.

These patients frequently present in their adult years as ‘perpetual adolescents’, having gone from job to job, cause to cause, relationship to relationship, beginning each endeavor with boundless enthusiasm only to grow inexplicably bored, anergic and restless, ultimately abandoning what showed much promise, once it appears that a definitive path must be chosen. Commitments are desperately avoided, or if they are made it is with deep reservations the world little guesses at. For commitment, whether to profession, ideology or spouse, is not a creative assent to the life process, but instead narrows down one’s horizons, evoking the terrifying entrapment of the pathological symbiosis; thus any life contract must needs have its escape clause. One also sometimes discovers a pervasive fear of change. Whatever exists, even in the midst of utmost torment, has acquired a cachet of soothing permanence. What is new, different—even if better—presages disruption and catastrophic upheaval.

Devasting damage occurs when the pilgrim questing for omnipotence meets someone deduced enough to believe they are possessors of such power. We see such unholy unions daily, in and out of the office, peculiarly refractory to rupture: a husband hectored by his Xanthippe-like wife; a lesbian browbeaten and brutalized by her partner; a patient in ambivalent flight from a 15-year ‘analysis’ with an authoritarian fonnder and sole member of his own institute; finally, an entire nation held entralled by a lunatic dictator. We ask, ‘How could they let it happen? How can they suffer it to continue?’

The answer lies in the willingness of the victim to become and remain victimized, mesmerized by the illusion that, by an ill-conceived act of faith, triumph may be purchased over human limitation, of which death is the most stringent and legitimate.

**FURTHER THERAPEUTIC IMPLICATIONS**

When the seeker after omnipotence enters therapy he will very likely clamour piteously for help, and will then prove exceptionally oppositional, never more so than when advice or guidance is proffered. He appears to have one foot out the door, or to be lying literally at your feet. Once the therapist is granted supreme power, specific transferential distortions must follow. The therapist is seen as cruelly withholding sustenance, tantalizing with promises of deliverance, but never really coming across with the goods. Or else, the patient is fearful that a heavy price will be exacted for his protection, that he will be transformed into an impotent marionette. Once the questor makes the act of faith, the therapist is resented bitterly, even hated, for being needed so humiliatingly.

Against every proof, the patient continues to believe that he is owed a veritable cornucopia of support, especially since he has manifestly gone out of his way to minimize his gifts. Precisely because of the fear of fusion and the loss of ego integrity, the compulsively sought linkage that supposedly defeats death is in itself life-threatening. These people are characteristically profoundly cynical and occasionally paranoid about the good intentions of others. Possibilities of intimacy provoke intolerable anxiety, leading to enormous ambivalence and negativism. All relationships are conceived along parasitic lines, with blurring as to who is the exploiter, who the exploited.

Not only seriously ill patients suffer from unresolved omnipotent strivings. Deeply repressed material related to the omnipotent quest often surfaces, especially during termination, in the analysis of individuals whose dynamics may qualitatively resemble the borderline or psychotic case, but who show more satisfactory differentiation between self and object, and far greater ego strength. The defences binding traumatic anxiety related to separation and death are better organized; passive-dependent wishes are more effectively repressed and sublimated.

But once the façade of seeming acceptance of partipotence is pierced, one finds that these patients too have never come to terms with the impossibility of realizing their omnipotent fantasies, and that resistances against dealing
with the fear of death are impressive. They too
still rely upon some variation of the magical
manoeuvre for proof against frailty and
mortality. Here too the therapist will mutate
into a mighty rescuer and, when the expectations
of symbiotic sustenance are challenged, a
vigorous protest ensues—if without the degree
of acting out encountered in disturbed cases.
Regardless of diagnosis or depth of psycho-
pathology, the psychic representation of death is
fused with primitive imagery of abandonment,
punishment or retaliation. As Stern suggests,
'The amalgamation of obsolete anxieties ...
with the fear of death, the inevitable final
trauma, perpetuates the impact of early conflicts,
reinforces the clinging to infantile dependency'
(ibid., p. 28)—and, in treatment, reinforces the
overwheaning attachment to transference. Giving
up the analyst is tantamount to self-destruction,
hence termination must be avoided at all costs.

The desire for omnipotence always is linked to
the fear of death! Seeking out the omnipotent
other via the magical manoeuvre may be under-
taken to repair any of the myriad narcissistic
wounds flesh is heir to, but the most constant,
unforgettable of these springs from our
helplessness to avert our end. Stern discovered
when he confronted his patients with the reality
that he could not save them, their first response
was marked depression and the appearance of
regressive symbiotic wishes. Then, slowly, they
were able to achieve a belated sense of separa-
tion—individuation, could work through de-
velopmentally more advanced castration fears,
to obtain a satisfactory oedipal resolution,
consolidation of stable identity percepts, and
impressive gains in object relationships. Mutatis
mutandis, much of the unfortunate acting out
encountered in individuals who have recently
terminated supposedly successful analyses may
be attributed to neglect in working through the
fear of death and its relationship to the omni-
potent quest.

The most felicitous therapeutic outcome is
thus likely to occur when elucidation of the
roots of thanatophobia is accompanied by a
painingstaking investigation of the patient's efforts
to secure omnipotent intervention across the
entire spectrum of relatedness, in work, love and
play, in the present and the past. Gradually the
patient will become aware of his attempts to
garner inestimable power by submitting to the
graces of one or another imaginary omnipotent
agency to act on his behalf. Once the more
accessible dynamics of the quest are assimilated,
the patient is logically prepared to explore the
vicissitudes of the symbiotic phase that have
precipitated dread of the repetition of mortal
trauma, and have prevented the evolution of
autonomy.

A crucial element in this process is the
illumination of the pubertal search for omni-
potent surrogates to maintain, unbroken, the
chain of 'magnificent' helpers, and the relation-
ship of these 'assistants' to the patient's resurgent
fear of death during adolescence. The following
is illustrative.

Martin, whose case has already been men-
tioned, was raised by a depressed mother who
had waited slavish attendance for years upon
her own ailing, tyrannical mother. After her death,
she grew fearful of disaster befalling her infant
son, and transferred her ministrations from
mother to Martin, burdening him with a host of
unnecessary gratification, while sparing no pains
to paint the terrors waiting for him in the
outside world. She was consistently intolerant
of Martin's angry feelings, and met many efforts
at healthy assertion with stern disapproval. She
frequently threatened to starve herself to death
if he did not cease minor transgressions.

Martin's father was hard-driving in business,
but meek, passive and highly dependent upon
his wife at home. He was subtly competitive and
minimizing towards Martin, obviously resenting
and envying the mother's inappropriate care of
her boy. Martin was a finicky eater, demanded
—and got—his mother's presence close by at
every meal. In his fifth year his sleep was
disturbed by recurrent pavor nocturnus, with
nightmares of a burglar breaking into his room;
he also fantasied that an Indian hid under his
bed, waiting to chop off his feet, and that a
doctor lurked near the parental bedroom, ready
to impale him with a long needle.

In school, he was fear-ridden and alleviated
anxiety by attaching himself to a succession of
female teachers. He was a conscientious over-
achiever, terrified of new situations, suffering
severe discomfort when he was skipped a grade.

During preadolescence, Martin turned away
from teachers as protectors, and instead sought
out handsome, athletic boys who often ended by abusing and demeaning him. He would experience a great surge of warmth when he saw scenes on TV or in films of an older man giving a younger or weaker fellow encouragement, daydreaming persistently about these scenes. At the age of 13 Martin was sent to overnight camp to make a man out of him; he felt very depressed and lonely; when a counsellor told him that his parents had entrusted Martin to his special care, he accepted the help gratefully. The man made homosexual advances which he felt compelled to accept, and these continued the entire summer until another camper informed on the paedophile. Thereafter the counsellor remained an ambivalent presence in Martin’s life, prototypical of the protector transformed into exploiter.

Upon returning home, Martin imagined that he had been rendered homosexual or infertile. He rarely dated in high school, went away to college where, once more, he grew depressed and fearful, and entered into the liaison already described with a woman who remarkably resembled his mother. He started psychotherapy, was soon able to manipulate the therapist into seeing him daily and calling him at the least twinge of anxiety. Concomitantly he fantasised that the therapist suspected that he had designs on his teenage daughter. He became increasingly panicky and clinging; his case was transferred to another therapist who put strict limits upon his parasitism with salubrious results. He was able to finish college, but shortly after graduating and returning home, he suffered recurrence of symptoms while trying to establish a new career. He re-entered treatment with the author.

He presented himself as a pitiful wreck, but after a few sessions he stated that he had found a job and wanted to cut down his sessions or leave altogether. This was to be a repetitive pattern, whenever he was about to engage in autonomous, pleasurable activity. His incessant pleading for assistance regularly surfaced together with exceedingly frustrating, oppositional acting in.

Over the next three years therapy predominantly centred on Martin’s oedipal problems; his expectations for omnipotent gratification by the analyst appeared within the context of the paternal transference. His mother’s seductiveness had whipped up Martin’s competitive feelings towards his father, who in fact responded to Martin as if he were a threat to his security, and exploded into almost psychotic rages which were instrumental in precipitating Martin’s castration fantasies and dreams of the burglar, Indian and doctor.

Martin had effected a faulty oedipal solution by placating the father and rendering himself castrated, homosexually submissive, transforming the father from an insane aggressor into a benign facilitator. Martin’s hostility and competitiveness were held in check, while he achieved a modicum of effectiveness by basking in the reflected glory of his ego-ideal, encapsulated in his daydreams of heroes helping their weaker sidekicks. Through all, he never relinquished the unconscious desire to snatch the omnipotent one’s prerogatives and assume his place. In his first dream of therapy, the analyst was the captain of a chain-gang, mercilessly driving him and his fellow prisoners in work on a ditch; the scene suddenly changed and Martin was the captain with the analyst down in the ditch!

In his magical manoeuvring, Martin compulsively sought out liaisons with one charismatic exploiter after another, who would hopefully smooth his way in the world, the most noteworthy of these during early adolescence being the camp counsellor. The analyst, of course, was soon cast in the role of yet another such exploiter, who would help him only at the price of subjugation. Martin felt tremendous anxiety whenever discussing his heterosexual wishes, fearing the evocation of the analyst-father’s vindictiveness. But, after much exploration of the father’s critical, minimizing attitudes, and of the struggle of father and son for exclusive possession of the mother, Martin gradually grasped that the world was large enough to contain his and another man’s aspirations; much of his distress abated, he achieved considerable success in his profession and married (to a woman whose father had recently died!).

Some headway had been made in explicating the restraints imposed by his mother’s intrusive stifling, but attempts to clarify his ambivalent dependency upon her related to his search for omnipotence met with consistent, considerable
resistance. As the oedipus was understood, his ongoing monotonous recitation of his father’s depredations now took on an obvious defensive quality. Material emerged in his analysis indicating that the oedipal rival was prefigured by someone more powerful, more sought after and more menacing—in one nightmare at this point, his wife changed into a vampire and tried to murder him while he lay in her embrace; previous dreams of attack were exclusively peoples by male combatants. It was increasingly apparent that his quest for an omnipotent male could not be explained away only by the appeasement intrinsic to the oedipal dynamic. He had displaced wishes for sustenance away from a feared engulfing mother, upon the paradoxically less threatening father.

He still remained refractory to work in this area; therapy was at an impasse for several months. Then the therapist fell ill and had to be away from his practice for a few days. Upon his return, Martin said he wanted to transfer to a younger physician. Analysis showed he had panicky fantasies of the analyst dying. When the observation was made that the therapist could truly no longer be seen as perfect, that seeking out a younger doctor would deny the reality of his eventual death, Martin reacted extremely violently and left the office acutely depressed and agitated.

Over the next two months, clinging behavior reappeared with a vengeance. He phoned frequently, demanding extra sessions, medication, reassurance. He angrily accused the therapist of ‘pulling the rug out from under me’ by emphasizing his mortality. He thought of refusing to leave a session, fantasying that the therapist would bring him home, feed him and put him to bed the way his mother had when he was ‘upset’. He confessed to a long-cherished belief that therapy would never end; he saw himself and the doctor forever fixed in time and place, neither growing old, as long as he could come and recite his woes.

Out of this regressive phase came the realization that his wishes for eternal gratification were directly linked with the thanatophobia of childhood and the vicissitudes of the distorted union with his mother. The screen memory of her threats to die were traced back to even earlier recollections of mortal terror and helplessness when left alone by her. His fear of death at the hands of malignant oedipal revengers acquired a deeper dimension. He was aware intuitively from the first of the hostility behind her possessiveness, but split off this recognition from consciousness. He had mightily defended against the perception of her as a suffocating, destructive presence of monumental proportions (anxiety evoked by fellatio and cunnilingus fantasies with older women since adolescence stemmed from an unconscious fear of being orally incorporated and destroyed). Yet to be separated and separate was equally unthinkable—so he maintained the illusion of her benign sustenance, denying the independent, assertive needs she so obviously resented, rigorously suppressing his counter-hostility lest she cut him loose. This harrowing ambivalence, his boundless expectation of a dreaded nurturance, were repeated first with female teachers, later with Candy, his first adolescent heterosexual object choice.

Throughout his life Martin turned to his father to rescue him from his mother’s scarifying interventions, but never as much as at puberty. His need to magnify the father’s strength stood in direct opposition to his awareness of the father’s real ineffectiveness. His fantasies of being rescued by a powerful, charismatic man, which gained ascendance in his early teens, were directly related to his concern for protecting his masculine identity, and indeed life itself, from his mother’s incursions.

As his fear and need for the pathological symbiosis became clarified, Martin recovered many previously dissociated memories of adolescent death fears. He recalled attending funerals and being obsessively preoccupied that he might burst into laughter. In each instance this occurred directly after he imagined what it would be like to lie in the grave, cold and alone, still conscious and unable to cry out for help, his mind recoiling in horror.

It was now possible to drive home the connexion between his thanatophobia, the early dread of separation from his mother, and the search for omnipotent surrogates throughout his life, especially during adolescence, when the combination of actual separation experiences and intrapsychic distancing from both parents left him in a particularly fragile state. He
realized that the counsellor, Candy, the first therapist, the present analyst, had all been employed to maintain the illusion that he could be kept safe forever from the ‘final trauma’ if only he could reinstate the dubious protections of the symbiotic mode, at enormous cost to his self-esteem.

As with Stern’s successful cases, these endeavours added to what previously had been worked through enabled Martin to accept death in its own right, uncontaminated by obsolete anxiety out of the past, to greet his independent wishes with pleasure instead of terror, and to obtain much fuller enjoyment from the real satisfactions in his life.

It should be stressed that analysis of the relationship between thanatophobia and the quest for omnipotence is never undertaken lightly. Premature inquiry into the more profound origins of these twin problems may trigger off intolerable anxiety, reactive regression, highly disruptive and even life-threatening acting out, indeed may precipitate abrupt termination of treatment. Inevitably, there will be some cases where the degree of pathology, the intensity of therapy the patient is willing to accept, and other parameters make it feasible to touch upon only the more superficial aspects of the omnipotent quest, leaving deeper fears of separation and extinction essentially unanalysed.

With some extremely disturbed patients, and frequently with younger adolescents embroiled in destructive family transactions, the therapist may temporarily accept the mantle of authority bestowed upon him, and actively play out the role of a benevolent unfailing font of security, while defences are strengthened, the ego supported, and—particularly for the teenager—the patient recovers his compromised developmental thrust. The adolescent’s therapist will perform become a parental surrogate, lending the youngster resolution while minimizing submissive, masochistic aspects of the positive transference. A good medical analogy is the use of the respirator: weaning a pulmonary patient away from the iron lung commences almost as soon as the device is employed. Similarly, if the therapist gives support and sustenance, he must from the outset treasure and encourage the autonomous self, no matter how halting first efforts towards independence may be.

**The fate of the omnipotent quest**

Man is an imperfect creature: one comes to terms with these core issues of being in the world only in a relatively satisfactory fashion. Silverberg thought that the unambivalent acceptance of partipotence lay in the far distant future, and inferred that even the soundest person will indulge in omnipotent fantasies under stress. Correspondingly, Stern states that a completely adequate adaptation to death is rarely, if ever, reached in one lifetime.

Thus man throughout his days continues to pay homage to an external agency that he hopes will shore him up against his ultimate ruin. One may legitimately inquire to what degree devotion to church, country, corporation or other cultural institution partakes of the magical manoeuvre, binding the weak, isolated self to a greater source of prestige and power, whatever other realistic gratifications may be thereby afforded. Stern speaks aptly to this point:

In further development, the symbiotic fusion internalized in the superego becomes re-projected to the group... or on to powers of fate established by the group tradition... this irrational transference acquires realistic power through the erection of the superstructure of culture... the creation of an artificial environment which compensates for man’s unadaptedness. With the help of tradition based on man’s ability to communicate, this superstructure transcends the life span of the single individual and exercises a decisive impact on the structure and development of mankind. Through his participation... infinitesimal as this may be, the individual, though losing his identity, transcends his mortality (Stern, 1968, p. 26).

In no sense do I demean these attempts to secure omnipotence, whether addressed to the larger instruments of acculturation or to the formation of family, wherein the procreation of children does grant a precious semblance of immortality. Yet it may still be said that one is most uniquely, and tragically, human when one’s works, great or small, are accomplished out of the greatest possible awareness of mortality. By acceptance of partipotence, Silverberg never intended a stance of passive, gloomy resignation, but only that one should acknowledge the realistic extent of what can be done in so brief a space to complete personal destiny, and by partaking
whole-heartedly in the dilemma of the life cycle, of which is glimpsed onlydarkly by any of us, to advance man’s cause, the ultimate meaning framed in his own locus in time.

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