A PSYCHOANALYTIC ODYSSEY
For Delia
For Eugene, John and Emer
And in memory of Sabrina
To follow knowledge, like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.

—Ulysses, Alfred Lord Tennyson
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Eugene J. Mahon, MD, is a Training and Supervising Analyst at the Columbia Psychoanalytic Center for Training and Research and at the Contemporary Freudian Society. He is also a member of the Center for Advanced Psychoanalytic Studies, Princeton, New Jersey. He won the Alexander Beller Award of Columbia Psychoanalytic Institute in 1984, and has been on the editorial boards of the International Journal of Psychoanalysis, the Journal of The American Psychoanalytic Association and he is currently on the editorial board of the Psychoanalytic Quarterly. He has published articles in all the major psychoanalytic journals on a great diversity of topics: memory, dreams, mourning, repression, the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, play, working through, prejudice, the golden section. He has published poetry, plays, and applied analytic essays on Shakespeare, Anna and Sigmund Freud, Beckett, Bion, Vitruvius, Oscar Wilde, and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. One of his poems, “Steeds of Darkness”, was set to music by the American composer Miriam Gideon. He practices Child Analysis and Adult Analysis in New York City.
This is a book about psychoanalysis in general and psychoanalytic process in particular. Psychoanalysis, though difficult to describe intellectually, is a visceral, emotional, thoughtful, sometimes exasperating, precarious relationship between an analyst and an analysand. It “is not about something” as Beckett famously observed of Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, “it is the something itself.” I have conceptualized it as an odyssey, a journey through the uncharted regions of the mind every daring analysand must make. The analogy of psychoanalytic process as an odyssey first came to me through child analysis. In the midst of a child analysis, which was a most creative hybrid of play and language, Alexander, aged five, having enacted a drama of a storm-tossed ship at sea, built a terminal for the ship to return safely to. Stepping out of this engrossing play and stepping into the transference insightfully, interpretively Alexander said: “maybe you can become a person terminal for me.” In a few words the child had captured some of the key ingredients of psychoanalysis, its creative energies (person terminal is an amazing condensation of play and transference), its therapeutic momentum, its capacity to transform storm and fear into trust and engagement. Alexander also made boats out of wood, painted them and gave them very significant names. In mid-analysis a boat was
called The Catch-Up, as if the child sensed he had much to catch up on, emotionally and developmentally; at the end of analysis a boat was given a code name of letters and numbers that signified the analytic consulting room where the odyssey had ended and begun. Again, it was the same child, in the midst of engrossing play, who demonstrated a rudimentary understanding of the interpretive process itself when he remarked, “you like to make things out of what I say.” I believe nascent insight, therapeutic alliance, and object relationship are all represented with eloquent subtlety in such remarks.

An odyssey is a journey of excitement, discovery, danger and daring. “All serious daring starts from within” Eudora Welty commented in One Writer’s Beginnings. She might have been talking about the odyssey of each analysand and the intrapsychic process of analysis, given the serious daring it takes to begin a journey of free associative exploration into the unknown within. It is the excitement of such psychoanalytic odysseys within that I will be stressing in this book even though conflict, compromise, anxiety and resistance cannot be left out of the reckoning either. I remember the excitement I felt as a young psychoanalyst-in-training when a three-year-old child asked, “who painted him?” when confronted with a substitute pet (of a slightly different color) a few days after his beloved guinea pig died. He was one of thirty nursery school children trying to process their first confrontation with death. “Who painted him?” was a question that seemed to emanate from the depths of a very young soul indeed as it tried to take the measure of one of life’s inevitable existential assaults on the short lived Edens of childhood experience. The child’s question lodged in my own mind, demanding to be addressed as seriously, as scientifically as its own quite serious spontaneity and curiosity insisted upon. It is the excitement of questions such as these that inform all psychoanalytic odysseys, an excitement I want to try to capture in the pages of this book.

I am a child psychoanalyst and an adult psychoanalyst: play, dreams, transference, free associations, fantasies, screen memories, resistance, insights, interpretations and excitement have been the raw material of my professional engagement for the last forty years. Excitement can be pleasurable, or challenging or even precarious as the mind tries to take the measure of its immediacy. “Who painted him?” is exciting and baffling all at once as the mind tries to do justice to its creative spontaneous energies. Children’s play in general can be fascinating and baffling nowhere more so perhaps than accounts of children playing in
the Holocaust. When Jan Karski, a Polish diplomat, visited the Warsaw Ghetto and saw children playing amidst the disease and stench and degradation of the wartime ghetto experience, he remarked with shocked spontaneity: “They only make believe it is play” (Brenner, 2012). Questions such as “who painted him?” or statements such as “They only make believe it is play” shake the mind out of its complacency into a state of intellectual and emotional excitement that will not rest until their troubling urgencies are engaged with passionately.

That level of excitement cannot be sustained throughout a book perhaps but I do believe that the raw materials of psychoanalysis are endlessly exciting as analytic process engages them day after day. In Chapter One, I address the controversial issue of mourning in childhood, a topic I return to again in Chapter Nine when I address the mourning of Sigmund Freud and suggest that mourning and dreaming may have been the key triggers of a remarkable period of creativity that led to *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In the intervening chapters I address repression, insight, transference, child analysis (where play is introduced, not only in its tragic manner as in the Warsaw Ghetto, but in all its protean manifestations, as the great hybrid of fantasy and reality that in fact it is throughout childhood, not to mention its important extensions into the world of adulthood), children’s and adults’ dreams, screen memories, and insight again in a more ironic iteration of itself than introduced in Chapter Three.

Throughout the book I engage with issues that every analyst deals with every day, as the table of contents briefly referred to earlier suggests. But the contemplation of the most classical topics always seemed to me to have facets of the unknown embedded in their certitudes and therein lay the possibility of renewed excitement as opposed to reverential acceptance of received conventional wisdom. For instance why has insight become a less than inspirational topic at the moment in psychoanalysis? Could it be that its extraordinary initial promise left one, and still leaves one, disappointed, as insights, which began with such exuberance, quickly seem to lose their nerve, so to speak, and retreat into repression or resistance again, their initial expectations never realized?

I address this seeming lack of resilience on insight’s part: I personify the issue, so to speak, suggesting that insight is always transgressive, always challenging the psychic status quo of superego authority and intimidation and that the ensuing anxiety often leads to a quick retreat from its initial clarity and verve. I rely on a biblical etymological definition
of the expression “ahah” (as in the “ahah” phenomenon that usually announces insight’s bold entrance) and a clinical case example to suggest that insight is always transgressive and therefore always questioning its own authority and even abandoning it altogether.

In Chapter One as mentioned earlier, I address the issue of children and mourning. The conventional wisdom had for years suggested that young children do not, or cannot, mourn. It was implied that the immaturity of their egos could not sustain such a complex process as mourning. Children “mourning” a school pet made me realize that their emotional reaction, by whatever name we call it, is a phenomenon worthy of study. Painting over, or ignoring the reality of their conflicted suffering seemed like the wrong psychoanalytic attitude to me. I went on to conclude that mourning is possible in childhood as long as the adult observer does not insist that it mimic adult mourning rather than expressing its grief in its own unique way.

Repression is the cornerstone on which the whole theory of psychoanalysis rests. A clinical case in which the word re-press (as in the making of multiple copies of a disc in the recording industry) figured at first in dreamtime, and subsequently in the excitement of analytic process itself, introduced an ambiguity into the term repression which illuminated the concept in novel ways. The return of the repressed had always suggested that the repressed does not subside, but returns symptomatically when the ego’s repressive energies falter. But I wanted to stress the idea that the ego’s function was not merely to exclude turbulent issues from consciousness but to find ways to re-introduce the repressed in adaptive ways, to re-press them, so to speak, back into service in a more functional, resourceful, resilient consciousness. I address these ideas more completely in Chapter Two.

The concept of transference is almost as fundamental a psychoanalytic concept as repression itself. I try to see it in a new light by approaching the topic developmentally. I consider the necessary developmental achievements required before the mind would be capable of engineering an act of transference in the first place. In other words, if transference is defined as a displacement of affects from one object relationship (usually a most significant genetic component of the facilitating environment) to another, more recent one, differentiated self and object representations would have to be established in the mind before such a transfer could be even conceptualized. This is not just a theoretical splitting of hairs with no clinical relevance. With borderline
patients it can be difficult to ascertain whether precise differentiation of self-representations and object-representations has actually been accomplished intrapsychically. A lack of differentiation between analysand and analyst can therefore masquerade as transference when in fact something far more primitive needs to be addressed clinically. I engage this issue more fully in Chapter Four.

In Chapter Five I introduce child analysis, emphasizing play as one of its core features. Freud suggested that a child’s play and fantasy were basically the same except for the fact that play relies on practical, concrete objects (toys, playthings) to express its interiority. I have always found this definition of Freud’s to be illuminating and exciting and I expand on it by suggesting that playing and working through are analogous in ways that have not been appreciated. This neglected analogy between play and working through dissolves unnecessary boundaries between the essentials of child analytic and adult analytic process. I state very briefly en passant that an adult’s capacity to play is an important ingredient of parenthood, a crucial skill that is largely unacknowledged, despite its central role in maintaining the fabric of society.

Since 1900 dreams have been considered as fundamental to any in-depth understanding of the unconscious mind. I have tried to bring attention to certain features of dreams not emphasized by Freud or subsequent scholarship. Freud was fascinated by children’s dreams, given how transparently they seemed to corroborate his basic theory of dream as the disguised fulfillment of an infantile wish. The infantile wish seemed so undisguised in children’s dreams it did not take so much to convince the dubious of its obvious role in the formation of the dream. To my knowledge Freud did not study children’s dreams from a developmental point of view. I had an opportunity once to study three dreams from different developmental epochs in the same child as he grew from five years of age to twenty. I was practically able to see the infantile wish get modified as it moved through developmental phases and altered the manifest appearance of dreams accordingly. Freud mentions dreams within dreams quite briefly in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He argues that if something appears in a dream within a dream one can be sure that that is a sure sign that it really happened and that its reality is being denied vehemently by being embedded so deeply. I was struck not only by Freud’s ingenious explanation but also by his neglect of the bi-sectional structure of a dream within a dream. Clearly there are two
compartments in a dream within a dream, two reels of film, so to speak, from a cinematic point of view. I suggest that there is a key dynamic connection between the two cinematic dramatizations that should not be neglected. The complex story is told in all its detail in Chapter Five. I also personify a “cunning artistry of the dream work” as I try to explain the many ingenious disguised inclusions it is capable of inserting into the manifest content of a dream. I bring particular attention to dreams where a parapraxis, a joke, a pun or even an uncanny proper name is inserted into the manifest content in the interest of disguise. I argue that the latent content is being protected in secrecy while all of this beguiling display is going on in the manifest limelight.

I have always found screen memories as intriguing to contemplate and work with analytically as dreams themselves, which they resemble. I bring special attention to one feature of screen memories that has not been accentuated heretofore. When an analysis nears termination the screen memories that have been worked on directly and indirectly throughout the course of the analytic process can sometimes undergo a remarkable, subjectively perceivable, change in their appearance. They tend to lose the luminous “halo” effect that is sometimes (not always) so characteristic of them. I have argued that this noticeable change in the structural façade of a screen memory can be one indicator of a readiness for termination. I also suggest that it is not only termination that can be illuminated by the analysis of screen memories but the ongoing analytic process as well. I describe a case in which symptom, screen memory and dream seem to engage with the same genetic material over time suggesting how organic and integrated analytic process is as it tries to take the measure of genetic conflict and experience throughout all the phases of analysis.

In the last three chapters I bring attention first to a symptom that seemed to mock the very processes of insight that human development depends on. If “seeing the light” usually refers metaphorically to the acquisition of insight itself, I argue that seeing the light literally, as opposed to figuratively, can be a troubling symptom. From symptom I turn to character, in Chapter Nine, arguing that the distance between the two may not be as great as nosology insists. Then in a final chapter I return to the topic of mourning, this time not painted over, but actually used by Freud to pry open one of the great psychological mysteries of the human mind. I am referring to Freud’s discovery of the Oedipus complex in 1897 and the critical role mourning and dreaming may have
played in it. It is a triumphant note to end an odyssey on, an odyssey that began with mourning but ends in triumph as insight, schooled in the existential lost and found shops of human experience, extracts gain from loss and finds resilience in the deconstruction of its own conflicts, going beyond transgression toward transcendence.

It is a conceptual psychic odyssey I am imagining of course and a most arbitrary one at that. I link together the concepts of mourning, repression, insight, transference, play, working through, dreams, screen memories and the Oedipus complex as if they were co-ordinates on some map that lead toward a reachable destination but a destination that is, in fact, not attainable at all. Objection sustained. The mind is not a region whose concrete co-ordinates can be mapped out. And yet my design, such as it is, is not completely arbitrary. There are linkages between the various concepts that might not seem obvious at first. For instance if play is defined as fantasy that needs to link itself to childhood toys and other concrete objects in order to give expression to itself, transference could be conceptualized as unconscious genetic fantasy that insists on linking itself to the person of the analyst. Dreams could be defined as unconscious latent desires that need to link themselves to manifest imagery in the service of evasion of censorial detection; screen memories could be defined as the infantile amnesia maintaining its unconscious privacy by highlighting one luminous moment of memory while repressing all the rest. Repression could be characterized as insight in flight from itself, yet always trying to retrieve its status by re-pressing itself back into adaptive functioning. Insight in conflict with its transgressive nature could be viewed as a confused hybrid of bold defiance and fearful retreat. Mourning and the Oedipus complex could be seen to share an internal structure that is not immediately visible in the manifest activities that define them. So in a way all the conceptual ports-of-call of this psychoanalytic odyssey are linked. I hope that at least a few significant cross sections of the mind are illuminated as the unconscious mind is mapped in this idiosyncratic manner and one human, limited odyssey proceeds.
CHAPTER ONE

A painted guinea pig

All that lives must die
Passing through nature to eternity.

—Hamlet, Act One, Scene Two, William Shakespeare

At the end of the prologue I introduced an analogy: children painting over some aspect of psychological life that was too painful for them to process consciously could be compared to the unconscious act of repression in general, or indeed, all defensive strategies of the mind. The death of their school pet, a beloved guinea pig, was perhaps the first taste of tragedy most of these three year olds had ever experienced, and it might have gone unnoticed had the curiosity of one child not brought attention to the slightly different color of the pet’s replacement. When the child asked “who painted him?” a process of rudimentary mourning was set in motion, tragedy, with the assistance of a sensitive school teacher, addressed as opposed to denied. It may seem excessively morbid to begin a psychoanalytic odyssey with mourning, loss and cover up, rather than joy, expectation and optimism as the oars of momentum launch the developmental vessel toward its goal and ultimate destination. And yet from a historical
developmental point of view life’s journey does start out breathlessly in the womb and ends breathlessly in death; it begins its post-uterine existence in helplessness and total dependency but then gradually embraces pre-Oedipal attachment, individuation, independence, the industry of latency, the challenges of adolescence, the fulfillments and disappointments of adulthood; and all along the way loss and gain stamp experience with their indelible affects, shaping the mind’s character and identity as nature and nurture, constitution and environment alloy themselves in the conflicted alchemy of development. So if I begin with sorrow and loss, there is a resilience of the mind I am also stressing, a resilience that characterizes the childhood odyssey that not only thrives on love and nurture but also learns to master adversity and turn it to its developmental advantage. There is no need to romanticize this resilience, this dogged sense of momentum and courage, since psychopathology often illustrates how regressive defeat and failure can also characterize experience as much as courage and success can. But psychoanalysis takes human experience as it finds it, and has been instructed and enlightened by psychopathology as much as by normal development. It has learned from Virchow and from Freud. Virchow believed that death dissected, pathology investigated, could instruct health about what led to death and pathology, if science was not afraid to grip the scalpel of investigative daring in its hands. And Freud taught us that childhood was not all Victorian innocence, but that its polymorphous nature, its sexualities and hatreds, could help us understand our adult selves, our life instincts, and death instincts if we did not deny the developmental complexities we sprang from. And so I begin with thirty three-year-old nursery children trying to understand their complex reactions to a new sudden addition to their school curriculum, the concept of death. A child will lead us, so to speak, into the later, deeper waters this book attempts to navigate.

Guinny, (aka Betsy) as he was affectionately called, a pink-eyed guinea pig who made a squeaking noise that endeared him to the children, died in February of the school year. He died in the home of one of the children (each weekend a different family took the guinea pig home to return him each Monday morning, when he took up his residence as school pet for another week). The initial reaction of this child’s mother was denial: she immediately wanted to buy a new guinea pig exactly like the old one. The teacher explained to her that the guinea pig had died and that it was unwise to try to cover it up; but a new guinea pig could be bought sometime in the future. The mother agreed. The
children were told in class that their pet had died. Their initial reactions were not easy to measure. However, when a new guinea pig was brought to the classroom a few days later, many interesting reactions were observed. The school teacher had decided to get a new guinea pig that did not look exactly like the old one, but was of a slightly different color. When the children first saw the new guinea pig, one asked and a chorus of others chanted: “Who painted him?”

But initial curiosity turned to denial and avoidance. The children shunned this new pet like the plague for three weeks. The children who used to bring food for the old pet every day and hold and touch him incessantly did not touch the new pet at all; nor did they bring him any food. Some of the children took food from home for the new guinea pig, but lost it on the way to school. Other children pinched the new guinea pig. One girl who had always brought carrots for the old pet would think of bringing a carrot for the new pet, but then close her refrigerator, saying, “I’ll bring something tomorrow.” Clearly the children were angry at their old pet for leaving them and took it out on the new one.

The teacher was at all times sensitive to the feelings the children were struggling to express, as the following example illustrates.

TEACHER: You loved Guinny very much, but he isn’t here anymore.

CHILDREN
(IN A CHORUS): No, he died.

PHILLIP: Where is he dead?

NICKY: He is thrown away.

ROGER: Thrown away in the sandbox.

POLLY: In the Zoo again.

TEACHER: No, Guinny died and he was buried in the park. I know you loved him and it is sad, but he will never come back.

RUTHERFORD: I don’t love him because he is dying and going away.

TEACHER: I think you’re angry, Rutherford, because he died. It’s all right to be angry. (As the discussion turns to the new pet:) Remember you said you wanted a new guinea pig?

CHILDREN
(IN A CHORUS): Yes.

TEACHER: Well, you haven’t been taking care of him.
NICKY: But he is a little shy.
BROOKE: I didn’t like my guinea pig to be sad.
TEACHER: I think you are the ones who are shy and sad because he isn’t here, your old guinea pig. That’s all right. You can still play with this one and care for him. You don’t have to love him yet. You loved the old guinea, cared for him and had a good time with him.
JENNIFER: My goldfish died.
ANDREW
(POINTING TO THE NEW GUINEA): He won’t die because we love him.
TEACHER: Even when we love something it may die. We loved Guinny and he died. But it’s all right to love another pet. Are you afraid that if you love this new guinea it will die too?
ELIZABETH: He needs to be in my arms.
TEACHER: Maybe you think you shouldn’t love this guinea because you loved the other guinea pig and he went away.
CHILDREN
(IN A CHORUS): No, no.
TEACHER: Well, you haven’t been caring for him. What does he need?
CHILDREN: Blankets, blankets, breakfast, some food, lunch, he needs to go home, he needs a basket, celery and carrots.

The teacher (in consultation with a psychoanalyst) had such conversations with the children in small groups, allowing them to express their feelings about the old pet and helping them to understand their reactions to the new one. She did not push the children into a grief they were unable to handle, but her influence was a crucial determinant of their reactions. For instance, when they saw pictures of pets in books and became sad, the teacher identified this affect and discussed it to the limit of the children’s wishes. Then the matter was dropped until other verbal or nonverbal cues alerted the teacher to pick it up again. Gradually the children became a little freer in discussing their feelings. In a general conversation about pets one day Cathy said, “Guinny died. That was Betsy (another name for the old pet).”
NICKY: I only like little guinea pigs.

TEACHER: You loved Guinny very much. You miss him, I know. You don’t have to like this new guinea pig right away.

NICKY: It doesn’t squeak like Betsy. I like to hear squeaking.

TEACHER: I know, that’s one of the good things you can remember about Guinny.

NICKY: Yes, Guinny had pink eyes.

TEACHER: Yes, you have so many good things to remember.

A few days later in another discussion about pets Phillip started to say, “We don’t have a guinea pig anymore; Betsy died,” but Rutherford interrupted: “Phillip is sad because Guinny died.” When Phillip denied this, the teacher asked, “Well, what are you, Phillip?” With what seemed like a concrete nonsequitur, Phillip announced: “I’m a boy.” (Perhaps this was not a nonsequitur, but Phillip’s way of expressing his feelings that boys were not supposed to show sadness and cry.) The teacher responded, “Yes, Betsy is dead, but we have a new guinea pig to care for.” Phillip said, “He needs love. I do that when I hold him.”

On another occasion, the boy in whose house the school pet had died expressed his worry by asking, “Why did Guinny die? Maybe he died because we fed him too much. Maybe he died because I loved him too much.” The teacher tried to correct such guilt-ridden distortions.

Here are the children’s reactions to the death of the guinea pig in chronological sequence. On February 19th, the children were told that the guinea pig had died. On February 22nd, a new guinea pig was brought to the classroom. By March 15th, none of the children had brought the new guinea pig any food or held him except for Polly, who on March 8th sat quietly holding and petting the new guinea pig in her lap. By April 9th, the children had passed through their grief for the old guinea pig and were ready to accept the new one in his own right. They were assisted in this “mourning” by the auxiliary ego of a very sensitive schoolteacher. They called the new guinea pig Piggy on April 9th, and by April 11th the children were heard to say, “We have a pet, Piggy.”

The children’s initial reactions were denial and displacement, which can be seen in part as a refusal to accept reality, a refusal to “mourn” the loss of their pet. With the teacher’s help, these eventually gave way to more appropriate expressions of grief for their lost pet, their generic
sounding “Guinny” or their more intimately loved “Betsy.” Finally, when the period of grief and “mourning” had elapsed, the children were able to accept their new pet, not as a painted ghost of an object they were unwilling to relinquish, but as a pet in his own right.

The teacher also dealt with the reactions of individual family members. One mother complained that all this talk about burying the guinea pig ran counter to her religious beliefs. She believed that cremation was a more appropriate form of burial. On the surface this sounded like a religious issue, but the teacher sensed that there were other more important worries at the root of her attitude. The real issue was, in fact, that the grandmother in this family was old and the family felt very uncomfortable discussing anything that pertained to death. The teacher was able to help this family understand that denial was not the most adaptive way of dealing with painful concerns. Another child in the class had “lost” her mother when she was six months old and ever since had been cared for by her uncle. The teacher sensed that the guinea pig’s death and the classroom discussions of death had a very special meaning for this child and her family.

**The child’s and the adult’s conception of death**

It is obvious that these children did not wish to accept the death of their pet as a fact, even though it was explained to them rather graphically, by the nursery school teacher. But let us begin with an adult’s conception of, and reaction to, death. In 1917 Sigmund Freud described the normal psychological mechanisms at work in mourning, comparing them to the pathological mechanisms at work in melancholia. Since then the psychoanalytic literature has reflected a continuing interest in the mourning of adults and children. Despite a wealth of literature, we do not have a clear picture of the psychological building blocks that the developing mind uses to attain the ability to mourn. We do know that adults mourn. We have Freud’s unequalled classical description of the processes of mourning. We do know that children react to the loss of important objects, but that the reaction is phenomenologically and descriptively different from that of adult mourning. If Helene Deutsch (1937) is correct in her notion that children do not grieve because their immature egos cannot sustain the difficult task of mourning, then it would seem that there must be developmental steps in the acquisition of these ego functions that seem to be lacking in children but are present
in adults. How do children who cannot mourn become adults who can? Wolfenstein (1966) states that children cannot mourn until adolescence. In adolescence the normal task of object removal (Katan, 1937), the detaching of the libido from the primary objects and investing it in non-incestuous objects outside the family, is a kind of trial mourning (Freud, 1958). Wolfenstein believes that until this trial mourning has been accomplished in adolescence, mourning in the adult sense is not possible. She observed that prior to adolescence the opposite of mourning is the rule in children: the lost object is hypercathected in fantasy. There is a refusal to let go. Nagera (1970) reiterates Wolfenstein's hypothesis when he argues that children cannot mourn for fear of the developmental vacuum that acceptance of the loss would entail. Nagera maintains that the child needs the psychic representation of the lost important object to foster normal development.

Erna Furman (1974) disagrees with authors who say that young children cannot grasp the meaning of death. "In our experience, normally developed children above the age of two years could achieve a basic understanding of 'dead' if they had been helped to utilize their daily experiences with this goal in mind" (p. 50). She believes that the child will be able to comprehend the reality of death if the adults do not misrepresent or obscure the objective facts. She illustrates her argument with poignant case material:

Susie was barely three years old when her mother died. After being told this sad news, Susie soon asked, "Where is mommy?" Her father reminded her of the dead bird they had found and buried not too long ago. He explained that mommy, too, had died, and had to be buried. He would show her where whenever Susie wished. One month later Susie reported to her father, "Jimmy (the neighbor's six-year-old son) told me that my mommy would come back soon because his mommy said so. I told him that's not true because my mommy is dead, and when you're dead you can't ever come back. That's right, daddy, isn't it?" (p. 51).

One feels like applauding Susie for her ability to maintain her newly found reality testing, in the face of great temptation from Jimmy and his mother.

*Primary and secondary objects*

If these children’s reactions constituted mourning, such a conviction needs to be reconciled with the objections of Wolfenstein and Nagera
and others who contend that children cannot mourn important objects until the trial mourning of adolescence has been negotiated. The word important, and the concept of need-satisfying object seem crucial as this discussion is engaged. The child may not be able to mourn an object of such critical importance as mother or father or other substitute caretaker without the help of adults (Furman, 1964a). But a pet that is dearly loved but not as critical an object in the development of the child as mother or father can be mourned precisely because of this relative diminution in importance. The pet is a trial object, so to speak, which the child can learn to love or to mourn before he loves or mourns “in earnest” after adolescence. The word pet, the dictionary says, is of unknown origin, but petting is, as in foreplay, a kind of preliminary trial lovemaking. This suggests that we may not be incorrect in seeing the pet as a trial object, a transitional toy, so to speak, half human, half plaything, from which the child can learn some awesome existential lessons.

If a transitional object is the first not-me possession (Winnicott, 1953, 1971) which helps a child to define his body boundaries and separateness from mother and which provides an important self-soothing link to her when she is absent, we can conceptualize the pet as a not-me “living” possession of the child. Abrams and Neubauer (1975) have pointed out that beginning at birth, children have highly individualized approaches to “persons” as opposed to “things”, certain children being more interested in people, others being more fascinated by mobiles and other inanimate objects. The quality of the attachment to persons and things is modified by development but continues to be a characteristic trait of a child’s object relatedness. It would seem that a pet, neither person nor thing, can serve an important function for the child in his mastery of object relatedness and reality testing.

A six-year-old boy in analysis, struggling with murderous Oedipal hatred of his father, was very sad when his school guinea pig died. “I’m sorry for guinea,” he said. “The one thing I’m not sorry for is ants. You can kill one without feeling guilty.” Then he turned his attention to some metallic cars he had brought with him as substitutes for the guinea pig. One can sympathize with his struggle to find an object, human or animal or metallic, with which to play out his Oedipal wishes and master his sense of guilt. The ant can be dispatched without guilt, but not the beloved guinea pig, nor the beloved father, for that matter. The availability of objects (be they father or friend, guinea pig or ant, metallic car
or other toy) and his relationship to them will influence the variety of his solutions as he struggles with his wishes and affects.

In a sense, the child is the first human “possession” of adults, the primary objects who care for him. He is a citizen without rights in a world of adults. Many factors will determine his growth and development, from possession to human being in his own right—full citizenship, so to speak. The child’s own possessions (animate and inanimate) provide him with a secondary world, where he is master. The pet, for instance, can be loved, hated, lost, mourned, but always from the point of view of the child as active owner of the pet, as opposed to the child as a dependent possession of the parents. While the concepts of the child as a possession of his parents and the pet as a possession of the child are gross oversimplifications of the over-determined, complicated ways in which children relate to parents and pets, nevertheless one senses that the child’s modulation and mastery of his impulses and affects in the secondary world of pets help his adaptation and development in the primary world of his relations with parents and peers.

I suggest that because the child’s dependency on the primary objects is so great, their loss generates affects, which threaten to overwhelm the child, but similar, though attenuated, affects can be mastered and studied in the secondary world of pets, toys, and imagination. A pet can be more easily mourned than a mother. A child’s reactions to the loss of secondary objects are easier to observe because they are less overwhelming and less defended against. The secondary world offers the child’s ego a playground for Greenacre’s (1957) “love affair with the world,” Mahler’s (1968) “practicing” sub-phase of individuation, or Winnicott’s (1971) “potential space” between the baby and the mother where “cultural experience or creative playing” can take place. The territories of the secondary world need not be restricted to issues of separation-individuation and “transitional” experiences: the six-year-old boy, mentioned earlier, was struggling with Oedipal conflicts in which a guinea pig and an ant had significant roles. W. H. Auden (1968) has described a primary world of objective reality (“We are born into it and by death disappear from it without our consent” p. 51) and secondary worlds that the poet creates out of his imagination. I would like to suggest that a pet is one of the important dramatis personae of such secondary worlds. The child has this living theatre at his disposal to help his psychological growth and development.
In the attempt to understand a child’s “mourning,” we may have to distinguish between this secondary world and the primary one, and separate the reactions to the death of primary objects from reactions to the death of secondary objects such as pets or friends. The literature has almost exclusively focused on children’s reactions to the loss of primary objects. This may have given us a skewed definition and description of mourning in children, with the result that Nagera can say that mourning is impossible and inconceivable because of its threat to development; and Erna Furman, that it is possible only when adults help the child achieve it. The study of children’s reactions to the loss of other than primary objects allows us to see mourning from another vantage point and describe it from a different angle. It seems reasonable to suggest that it will be easier for a child to recognize and describe his reactions to the loss of a guinea pig than it will be for him to recognize his reactions to the loss of a mother.

Mourning in children and adults

Another reason for the conventional wisdom (Miller, 1971) that children do not mourn may be that the extrapolation from adult phenomenology to child phenomenology has led us astray. Just as we were unable to find schizophrenia or depression in children as long as we looked for adult “symptoms” and used criteria gained from observations of adults, we may have been unprepared to recognize mourning in children because we were looking for the adult model, rather than observing children’s reactions to loss and trying to understand them in their own right.

For example, a ten-year-old boy, on hearing of the imminent death of his grandfather, rode his bike and played with his skateboard all day. He had been told a few weeks earlier that his grandfather would probably die, but he put it out of his head. Now he had been told that it was cancer and that the grandfather would be dead in a few weeks. He rode his bike for hours and played with his skateboard for days. When his grandfather died two weeks later, the boy walked in a park and played ball for a while. He sat down and penciled the names of all his living relatives on a bench. Later he sat on a rock and pensively asked what was the best way to stop a ball from rolling down a hill. He explained how he would pursue the ball and place his shoe in front of it and stop it. Throughout this time, he was playing a game with a quarter, which he placed on his elbow, flipped, and caught before it reached the
ground. At this point, he described to his analyst how his grandfather had been cremated. Later he found a strip of caps from a gun and used a quarter to ignite them. As they exploded and the smoke curled upward, he inhaled it through his mouth and nostrils and then exhaled. When the analyst suggested to him that the cremation had made his grandfather go up in smoke and that he was playing inhalation peek-a-boo to master his feelings about cremation and the death of his grandfather, he genuinely agreed. Two days later, he seemed to be in a better mood. While he avoided questions about his grandfather, he returned to the same rock, lay down and slept (or seemed to sleep) for a while. Days later when his mourning seemed complete, the analyst told him that he had the feeling children and adults “mourn” differently: adults seemed to slow down for weeks or months, look sad, and go over it in their memory. The boy explained that children had not known the lost object as long as the adults had and that was the reason for the shorter period of mourning in children. He went on to explain that adults did not have bicycles and skateboards to express their feelings with, and that was why they appeared so inactive and depressed. When asked what children would do if for some reason they were unable to be active in mourning and could not use their skateboards and bicycles, he replied that they would break out of their restraints and steal and rob.

Can one conclude from this brief vignette that the child is mourning in his own way? Children are more active than adults, and therefore also need the motor discharge pathways in mourning. Moreover, children have a different sense of time. What is a short time span to the adult seems like a very long one to the child. Freud (1917) suggested that a prerequisite for mourning is the narcissistic affirmation by the living of their own vitality compared to the dead and that this sense of healthy narcissism allows the ego to mourn: “the ego … is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been abolished” (p. 255). This child writes the names of himself and his living relatives on the bench to assure himself that he and the survivors are well. His affect is one of sadness and bereavement, but in the period of anticipatory mourning, he celebrates his aliveness on the skateboard; later, when confronted with actual loss, he is sad. He knows his grandfather has been cremated. He contemplates repair of his loss by stopping a ball from rolling downhill, or catching a falling coin, or inhaling and exhaling smoke. Obviously, one can say this is the opposite of mourning: a manic celebration of
oneself on a skateboard, the denial of death with olfactory peek-a-boo, and the retrieval of lost objects; or one can say the child is fully aware of his grandfather’s cremation and has a sense of loss, experiences the sadness, and handles his memories and affects in play and motor activity, all of which constitute his mourning. The child attempts to undo death in symbolic action as adults so often do in fantasy. Adult mourning is clearly different from this “active” mourning of the child, but we should not equate activity with absence of mourning. If we take the child’s level of development and psychic organization into account, mourning on a skateboard begins to make sense. The adult has solidified and de-personified his internalizations so that his psychic structure is cohesive and well established, its stability being relatively independent of primary object attachments. He mourns in one way: he withdraws into himself and reviews his memories and affects in a quiet, slow, sad, contemplative, and motorically inactive way. The child’s internalizations are still relatively dependent on the primary object attachments; his development, far from settled, continues to pull in the direction of growth and maturation. He will mourn in another way, commensurate with his level of development and psychic organization: he will be sad, in an active way. He will “surround” his sadness with current developmental issues. He will mourn on a skateboard.

Reflections on the psychic fate of a painted guinea pig

The children are now grown-ups and one wonders what residue of their nursery school experience informs their consciousness or unconsciousness after all these years. I myself have a screen memory that dates (or so it seems) from my second year of life. The family had moved from one location in the city of my birth to another and my grandmother returned a pair of red pull-ups (rudimentary childhood trousers) that had been forgotten in transit. The color and the scene of the event in the garden of my new home have remained with me ever since, not unlike the significance of colors in Freud’s celebrated 1899 paper on screen memories. I introduce my own memory by way of speculating about the fate of the painted guinea pig (or at least its psychic representation) in the older minds of the children described in this study. (The fate of screen memories in psychoanalysis is a topic I will address in greater detail later in Chapter Seven.) At this juncture I will only speculate briefly on what their experience must have meant to the children
and how it might have affected their subsequent development. A school curriculum for very young children does not often include lessons about sorrow and loss, death and sexuality, life instincts and death instincts, Eros and Thanatos. It would be perverse, even insane, to manufacture tragedy as a way of enriching a child’s curricular experience, but when loss and death occur it would be equally inappropriate to leave children unassisted as they struggle to come to grips with their emotional reactions. One would like to think that what these children experienced in nursery school may have been of benefit to them as they met with subsequent inevitable losses and hardships along the way. If mourning represents the human mind at its most realistic and courageous, it seems wise to come to the assistance of children when they first encounter it and struggle to manage it. If they paint over it at three, or mourn on a skateboard at a later age, they are also able to address it more directly if adults do not mistake paint and skateboards for callousness or absence of an emotional reaction. Later in this book, the play of children of the Shoah will be mentioned, children whose tragic curriculum included playing with death, not as concept but as reality, and their extraordinary attempts to deal with it; and in the final chapter I will address mourning once again and the critical role it may have played in Freud’s masterpiece *The Interpretation of Dreams*.

I have begun this book with loss and the initial reaction of self-deception that attempts to ignore the impact of loss. But the mind that wants to deceive itself is also the mind that is eager to enlighten itself. If repression is the initial instinctive reaction to psychic pain, banished insight is not content to remain in exile forever. The tension between the psychic force that opts for repression, and the psychic force that insists on insight and enlightenment, will be the subject matter of the next two chapters, as the odyssey proceeds, propelled by the forces that advance it, and obstructed by the forces that impede it.


Freud, S. (1920g). Beyond the pleasure principle. S. E., 18: 3–64.


