Tyrannical omnipotence in the archetypal father

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Abstract: This paper sets the archetypal relationship between the tyrannical, devouring father and his sons in the context of a disjunction in the parental couple (syzygy) whereby the role of the maternal feminine is eclipsed and excluded. This is shown to originate in an omnipotent defence against infantile dependence on the mother. Successful liberation from the father’s tyranny requires the restoration of mutuality between the internal couple. Although the main focus is on the internal world (and a detailed clinical illustration is given, showing the working out of this process in the analytical relationship), reference is also made to political tyranny, attitudes to the control of Nature by technological means and patriarchal forms of masculinity. The Chronos myth is amplified through the use of two modern variants in the films The Terminator and Star Wars.

Key words: Chronos, Darth Vader, devouring father, internal couple (syzygy), patriarchy, tyrannical omnipotence.

Introduction

The great dictators of the twentieth century have cast a long, dark shadow across the cultural psyche of the present. Hitler and Stalin in particular have assumed a kind of archetypal intensity as icons of tyrannical omnipotence. Is this aura merely a still-echoing reverberation of a not long distant historical nightmare? Or are the great dictators images and enactments of truly archetypal potentials within the psyche? Through reference to myths ancient and modern, clinical material and an exploration of the psychodynamics of masculine omnipotence, this paper attempts to elucidate an archetypal relationship between the tyrannical father and his sons of which the totalitarian regimes of Fascism and Communism provide both image and example. The psychic situation I shall be considering is one in which there is a hyper-valuation of masculinity (characteristic of patriarchy in general) and a total devaluation and exclusion of the role of the maternal feminine. Whether in the internal world, the world of the family or the wider world of culture and society, the role of the feminine is entirely eclipsed by masculine fantasies of domination and power.

I have had a number of male patients whose internal worlds were dominated by their relationship to a tyrannical father. Although these fathers were
feared, they were also idealized, sometimes to the point of worship. That is to say, they were imbued with a quality of numinous, archetypal power. I am sure many other analysts and therapists will have come across similar preoccupations in their male patients, especially in dreams (cf. the negative authority images in the study of initial dreams by Dieckmann [1985]). One of the significant features of this internal – as well as external – domination is the almost complete exclusion of the mother. For example, one of these patients described his mother as a ‘cipher’ who seemed to have no existence of her own apart from his father. It is intriguing to find that this constellation, in which one partner is eclipsed by the other, is a fairly common occurrence in psychotherapy with couples. This strongly suggests that the picture given by individual patients of their family situation is not simply a function of their own internal worlds but corresponds to an actual situation which is, in turn, a function of their parents’ internal worlds.

Ruszczyński (1995) has pointed out that this style of relating, in which one partner takes over the therapeutic space while the other is eclipsed to the point where they may be ‘forgotten’ by the therapist, is a feature of narcissistic object relating. There is usually an unconscious contract between such couples in which the overtly dominant and narcissistic partner ‘takes over’ the other who attempts to find his or her fulfilment by being what is required of them. It is as if the dominant partner assumes that the other is a part of themselves, while the eclipsed partner assumes themselves to be a part of the dominant one. One partner devours, the other is devoured. One is the master, the other the slave. But both are relating to the other entirely by projective identification in which their separate and autonomous existence is denied.

In their delineation of different fathering styles, Colman and Colman (1988) identify this pattern with ‘the royal father’, in which the father appropriates all parental functions to himself. Although they do not consider the narcissistic aspect of this, they do point out that either parent may become the ‘royal parent’ who assumes absolute authority over the entire family. Furthermore, although this style of parental relationship is characteristic of the more extreme forms of patriarchy, many patriarchal cultures display a split between female domination within the family and male domination in the wider world. For Colman and Colman, this pattern is a feature of a split between ‘earth mothers’ and ‘sky fathers’, such as Zeus or Yahweh. It is when the fear, envy and resentment of maternal power lead to a take over of maternal functions that the sky father becomes the tyrannical father. The potential balance provided by complementarity of function in traditional patriarchy is destroyed once patriarchy becomes aligned to narcissistic omnipotence.

I think we have to set tyrannical omnipotence within this larger constellation of the couple in order to understand it fully. This is because it necessarily involves an attack on the centrality and pre-eminence of the couple. If I am to be omnipotent, there must be no other with whom I share power – therefore there cannot be a couple. Like the God of the Old Testament, the omnipotent
father’s commandment is ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’. It then seems to the child as if he has only one parent – his father.

Entire cultures may fall under the sway of this archetypal constellation, as was the case in Germany and Russia in the mid-twentieth century. Hitler and Stalin are images of the archetypal processes occurring in their culture. As Tolstoy argued in the case of Napoleon, no one individual could ever be said to have caused the phenomena of history which involve the actions of millions (Tolstoy 1869). The tyrannical dictator reflects and is reflected in the anxieties and fantasies about the omnipotent father in the small-scale world of the family. Later in the paper I shall also consider how, in a more subtle way, such fantasies about masculine omnipotence may also foster an attitude in which modern technology is seen as a tool for the subordination and control of a feminine Nature.

The devouring father and the Oedipus complex

The tyrannical omnipotent father is represented in mythology in the image of the devouring father, associated particularly with Chronos/Saturn who represents the archetype of the senex (Old Man) (Jung 1955, para. 208). In alchemy, Saturn is sometimes represented as the prima materia devouring his son, representing a process of rejuvenation and rebirth. (Jung 1944, para. 436, illustrations 161 & 168). Subsequent writers have elaborated the devouring aspect of the Saturnine senex as ‘the sick father’, an archetypal metaphor for a situation of stagnation and decay in the psyche and its need for rejuvenation by its archetypal opposite, the puer (Stein 1973; Vitale 1973; Hillman 1975; Tacey 1997). Neumann also distinguished between those sons who are captives of the father and those who are possessed by him (Neumann 1954, p.187). It is only in the former, who have been devoured by the father, that there appears the Saturnine timidity and conventionality of those who are ruled by guilt and fear; in the latter, where the sons are in identification with the father they have devoured, there is a situation of inflation and hubris, ‘an overvaluation of the ego that ends in disaster, death and madness’ (Neumann, ibid.). This suggests that puer and senex are two poles of the same archetypal constellation: the apparent puer, Icarus, being a definitive example of the inflated hubris of father-possession (Neumann, ibid).

Although the integration of the feminine is a major theme in traditional Jungian thinking, this is largely seen in terms of the development of the hero for whom the anima is the ‘prize’, the reward for his successful struggle against the terrible father. There has, I think, been less emphasis on the importance of the relation to a parental couple – the idea that the son cannot finally defeat the terrible father without the assistance of the maternal feminine. Without this dimension, the father/son struggle is doomed to be repeated down the generations ad infinitum. Unless the hero has also worked through his relationship to a parental couple, the hero-anima couple is likely to repeat the pattern of patriarchal domination-submission.
This theme has been taken up in a recent paper by the Kleinian analyst, John Steiner, who has explored the dynamics of the tyrannical father in terms of the Oedipus complex (Steiner 1999). He argues that the traditional resolution of the Oedipus complex as proposed by Freud enshrines a paranoid-schizoid view of the world in which the child is required to submit in fear to the dominating power and control exercised by the father. This tyrannical father is then internalized through identification with a persecuting object which becomes the core of the super-ego. Steiner points out that ‘if the child solves the problem of his hatred through identification he will in turn become afraid of being overthrown by his own sons and will treat them with the same tyrannical power his father used with him’ (p. 23).

This is exactly the situation described in the myth of Uranos, Chronos and Zeus. Uranos shuts up his children in the earth from where they are released by their mother, Gaia. It is she who persuades her youngest son Chronos to overthrow his father by castrating him. Chronos attempts to prevent the same fate befalling him by eating all his children as soon as they are born. Eventually he is outwitted by his distraught wife, Rhea, who substitutes a stone in place of her son Zeus. When Zeus grows up, he forces his father to drink a draught which causes him to vomit up the stone and all the other children he has swallowed. These then become the pantheon of Gods on Mount Olympus with Zeus as their father-brother. Hera, his sister-wife, becomes a power in her own right. While patriarchy remains intact, Zeus is no tyrant: Hera ensures that her husband’s pretensions to omnipotence are continually frustrated.

This archetypal myth of the devouring father is echoed in fairy tales such as the ogre in *Jack and the Beanstalk* and the wolf in *The Wolf and the Seven Little Kids*, who, like Chronos is given a stone as substitute for the children he had devoured. In both stories, the son-hero is also assisted by the mother in the task of liberation from the devouring wolf-ogre father. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud (1913) created his own version of the myth in the idea of a supposedly prehistoric primal horde in which the sons, resentful of the father’s control over all the women, ganged up to kill him. This, as Jacoby has pointed out, is a condensed version of the Chronos myth (Jacoby 1975, quoted in Dieckmann 1985). Interestingly, in Freud’s version, it is the sons who devour the father and this becomes the means of their identification with him. They take on his powers but, as Steiner points out, ‘do not free themselves from his influence because through devouring him they possess him through an identification’ (Steiner, op. cit). The father continues to operate from within as a sense of persecutory guilt. However, in Freud’s version of the myth, there is no mention of the mother – women are merely the possessions of a violent and jealous father. Freud has created a myth in which the feminine is entirely under the control of the tyrannical father.

Steiner sees no essential difference between this version of the myth and those in which women play the role of helpful accomplice under which heading he includes the relationship between Oedipus and Jocasta. In my view,
however, the Oedipus story is quite different from the Chronos cycle since it is not about the omnipotent father at all but about the omnipotent mother. I would prefer to speak of a Chronos complex, involving the struggle against the omnipotent father, as something distinct from the typical Oedipus complex where the struggle is against the (feared) omnipotence of the mother. This follows a distinction made by Neumann who argued that the killing of the terrible father is not because of rivalry with him over the possession of mother but to do with overthrowing the old order (Neumann 1954, p. 184).

It is true that Laius (the father of Oedipus), like Chronos, attempts to prevent himself being killed by his son by taking the pre-emptive action of killing him first. But the role of the mother is very different in the two myths. Both Gaia and Rhea are more than accomplices – they are the active initiators of deceiving their husbands in order to bring down his omnipotent tyranny. They do not seek control themselves but wish to restore the natural order: the process of birth and the regeneration of life through future generations. Furthermore, unlike Oedipus (and Uranos), neither Chronos nor Zeus marry their mothers: the separateness of the generations is maintained, enabling a clear distinction between past and future, active and passive, progression and regression (Neumann 1954; Tacey 1997).

By contrast, Oedipus and Jocasta are both more or less victims of their fate, wrapped up in the nightmare of a past from which Oedipus is only able to free himself with the greatest difficulty and at terrible cost. Jocasta, unlike Gaia and Rhea, opposes his efforts and seeks only to maintain the state of regressive illusion in which they are both held fast. This is not surprising: it is she who will pay the price of Oedipus’ liberation with her own death. Oedipus confronts not a devouring father but a devouring Sphinx, which can be seen as the split-off omnipotence of the mother. His triumph over her is only an apparent one, like the son whose Oedipal fantasies are stimulated by his mother as a means of keeping him close to her and preventing him from ‘killing her off’ and making a life of his own. Oedipus’ position as King is an unreal one, his defeat of the Sphinx an illusion which, far from liberating Thebes, only brings about an even worse blight that can only be brought to an end by a conscious effort to shake off his regressive slumbers in maternal unconsciousness. Oedipus has been swallowed up in the mother; he lives in the darkness of blind unknowingness.

Whereas in the Uranos/Chronos/Zeus cycle there is ‘too much father’, in the Oedipus story there is ‘too much mother’ and not enough father – the father having been killed off by a trick of (maternal?) fate before the play begins. These stories portray opposite poles of an imbalance in the parental couple or, in other terms, between masculine and feminine energies in the psyche. The syzygy is out of joint. In the Chronos cycle, mother and son join forces to set it right, but if the son fails to acknowledge the independent power of the feminine the cycle is bound to be repeated. Ultimately, the problem is omnipotence itself.
We can recognize this in the theme of ‘devouring’ which represents the wish for omnipotent control, that is the attempt to control the world by swallowing it, as the patient I will describe in the clinical section said of himself. In this fantasy, all the world is a part of oneself, separateness is abrogated and along with it, the anxiety of dependence on others who are not under one’s control. This is the state of mind Rosenfeld called narcissistic omnipotent object relations in which the patient’s unconscious fantasy is that he is inside the analyst or that the analyst is inside him (Rosenfeld 1987, p. 20). This is reminiscent of Neumann’s distinction between the devoured captives of the father and those who are possessed by the father they have devoured (à la Freud) (Neumann, op. cit.). But like the narcissistic couple I described earlier, here again, in both cases, the relation to the father (and to their own sons) is by projective identification. There is an absence of ‘triangular space’, Ron Britton’s term for the recognition of separateness and otherness which hinges on the child’s relation to a parental couple (Britton 1989).

The state of total projective identification between father and son is a totalitarian state, like living inside the stomach of Chronos with no access to the maternal feminine and no possibility of escape. In fact, I would suggest that this is the archetypal situation operating in a totalitarian state. The omnipotent dictator, whether internal or external, seeks to crush all opposition, especially any possibility of creativity. The children are consumed by the father, kept under his control by remaining a part of himself, inside him, denied any life of their own. Procreation is strictly controlled since any new life is felt to be a threat to the existing order. There is an enmity between the controlling senex and the rebellious puer in which each seeks to destroy the other, failing to recognize the common bond between father and son. In terms of the father, this enmity consists of his opposition to change, progress and the future since this must inevitably mean his eventual decline and fall, to be replaced in turn by the son as he replaced his own father. For the son’s part, he also refuses to acknowledge his destiny as the father; in seeking to be rid of the father and all his works, he is ultimately plotting his own downfall. With this in mind, it is not difficult to understand Stalin’s paranoia, for example, or Herod’s decree against the children of Israel. Chronos (Time) seeks to control time, to prevent the ongoing cycle of birth, death and renewal.

Masculine omnipotence and the assault on Nature

Omnipotent fantasies of controlling the generative powers of Nature have an extra resonance for us today as a result of the increasingly rapid advance of modern science. Although Nature has always been conceived as a bounteous Mother, in the past her terrible and destructive aspects were far more apparent: mankind – and I use this term deliberately – has always been dependent on an arbitrary Nature which may either give or withhold her blessings and which certainly required great effort from her children to yield up her fruits. Modern
technology has made the possibility of being able to gain control over Nature look much more likely. Science and technology now seek to wrest from Nature her deepest secrets, ultimately the secret of life itself.

There is a danger that these scientific advances may become imbued with fantasies of omnipotent control and, to the extent that Nature is conceived of as feminine, technology may be felt to be masculine. Certainly until very recently, science has been seen as a masculine occupation and has been dominated by men. For some men, science may offer an area of activity which is free of the messy emotional difficulties they associate with women. As Jane Haynes points out: ‘It is easy to idealize the phallus – straight, erect, clean, a torch of light; how can we ever balance it with the invisible and terrifying messy landscape of the maternal cradle?’ (Haynes 1998: personal communication). Such men may be able to retreat into an identification with the clearly defined phallic rule of scientific measurement whereas the ‘messy landscape’ is projected onto the material world which they seek not merely to understand but also to control.

This kind of archetypal characterization is also prevalent in those who are worried by the increasing domination of science and technology in the modern world. The significance of the name in the ‘Gaia’ hypothesis speaks for itself. It is also interesting that the growing awareness of the many ecological threats to our planet has coincided with the development of feminism. Technology may then be seen as a tool of masculine domination in which intercourse with Nature has become rape and plunder and the wounded earth cries out against the damage being done to her. Such fantasies and anxieties are clearly represented in the spate of ‘apocalypse’ style movies of the 1980s and early 1990s. Hollywood turns cultural and historical realities into the stuff of fantasy. Both the films I shall now discuss could also be seen as transformed representations of World War II, as indeed they are. However, the very need of Hollywood to reduce complex phenomena to almost cartoon-like representations is what lends them their archetypal flavour. To be successful, these films must draw on the emotional significance of current and historical events, which is to say they must play on the archetypal sensibilities of their audience.

The Terminator

The relentless, inhuman force of technological power is vividly represented in the figure of The Terminator in the 1984 movie of the same name (the one where Arnold Schwarzenegger uttered the famous line ‘I’ll be back’ – returning to demolish an entire police station). The Terminator is a cyborg assassin from a future ruled by machines in the aftermath of a nuclear apocalypse. It has been sent back in time, programmed to hunt down and kill the woman who will become the mother of the human resistance movement’s rebel leader. With its echoes of genocide and the irresistible efficiency of technological means of extermination, The Terminator’s World War III projects the unresolved terrors of World War II into a nightmare scenario of the future. At the same
time, the film operates on a mythic level in which the Terminator is the agent of a tyrannical father whose aim, like Chronos with Zeus and Herod with Jesus, is to cut off the dangerous father-killing hero at birth – or in this case, even before conception. The ultimate in totalitarian omnipotence, the Terminator is literally inhuman and frighteningly invasive. It seeks to destroy the maternal womb which is the only remaining limitation on its absolute power. The film depicts the battle of Nature against the Technological Machine.

As the Terminator is attacked, his human exterior is progressively stripped away until he is revealed as pure machine, a metal man; even when it is broken into pieces, the separate parts go on trying to pursue their murderous mission right to the very end. Although our fears of the ultimate technological nightmare are reassured when the cyborg is finally destroyed, it remains a frightening image of destructive omnipotence.

For some men, the Terminator provides an opportunity to identify with an image of their own violent fantasies – hence the popularity of ‘I'll be back’. Schwarzenegger portrays a highly desirable object of omnipotent destructiveness. Men’s fascination with destructive machines represents a fantasy of invulnerability. It is really a case of ‘if you can’t beat them, join them’. Identification with the tyrannical father offers to confer omnipotence on the vulnerable, dependent child-self. If I identify myself with destruction, I cannot be destroyed and, in fantasy, I have absolute power to destroy others. Here is the motive for the sons’ rebellion in Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* myth (1913), but, as Steiner points out, this leads only to the perpetuation of internal and external tyranny. It is the dilemma of every revolutionary: how to rebel against the tyrannical father without becoming a tyrant oneself, without recourse to identification with the oppressor.

*Star Wars*

This is the underlying theme of the original *Star Wars* trilogy. Alongside its gung-ho heroics and special effects wizardry, a darker tale unfolds through the three films – the Macbeth-like tragedy of Darth Vadar, the ‘Dark Father’ (or ‘Death Father’?) seduced by the Evil Emperor, whose lust for power becomes his eventual downfall.

Half-man, half-machine, cloaked and armoured in black from head to foot, his face a masked visor, Darth Vadar strides through the trilogy literally head and shoulders above everyone else – a huge imposing figure of tyrannical authority. Originally a Jedi knight, he has gone over to ‘the dark side of the Force’ and become the first lieutenant of the Evil Emperor. Now only the inferior forces of the rebel alliance and its young hero, Luke Skywalker, can prevent the Evil Empire from launching its ultimate weapon – the Death Star that can destroy an entire planet. Here again, there is an echo of World War II in the theme of resistance to a totalitarian dictator hell bent on world domination, as well as the post-nuclear fantasy of invincible technological might.
Initially Luke believed that Darth Vadar killed his father. Then he discovers that Vadar is his father, transformed into a masked man of iron by his identification with the dark side. His father has been consumed by his own hatred and rage and now exists buried within a carapace of armoured invulnerability. Now he, and the Emperor whom he serves, seek to ‘ambush’ Luke into joining their satanic pact, attempting to seduce him with the vast resources and unlimited power of the Evil Empire, against which the vulnerable rebel alliance is helpless, ‘gravely mistaken’ in its pathetic belief that its ‘puny’ forces can defeat such omnipotent might. Luke, for his part, is engaged in trying to rescue his true human father, Anakin Skywalker, the man his father once was, from the destructive identification with tyrannical omnipotence that has consumed him. Through the power of his own hatred, Vadar is held fast in the grip of the Evil Emperor, the personification of tyrannical omnipotence. Although his identification with ‘the dark side of the Force’ has given him great power, in relation to the Emperor, he is still a servant.

The conflict between father and son is played out as a conflict between the invincible power of hatred and destructiveness on the one hand and the soft vulnerability of youth, innocence and love on the other. While Vadar is black-armoured and impenetrable, Luke wears only loose-fitting, white cotton robes. Vadar and the Emperor seek to corrupt Luke by arousing his hatred and destructiveness. At the climax of the final film, Return of the Jedi, Vadar challenges his son in battle, trying to goad him into fury. Luke is in an impossible position: if he kills his father, he will have succumbed to the dark side and will himself be beaten. Yet, if he does not, he will surely be crushed and destroyed. Finally, Vadar goads Luke into making a furious attack on him in which Vadar’s hand is severed. This symbolic castration of the father evokes a similar attack made by Vadar on Luke in the previous film. A compassionate identification overcomes the destructive one and Luke draws back from inflicting the final blow. Luke is then exposed to the full force of the Emperor’s destructive power while the now helpless Vadar looks on, caught between the master of hatred and the son of love. At this point, just as the power of love is on the verge of final defeat, Vadar turns on the Emperor and kills him.

There follows the most poignant and significant moment of the trilogy: on the point of death himself, Vadar asks Luke to remove his helmet and we see the vulnerable and wounded face of a human being, Anakin Skywalker, pasty and bloated from having been out of the light too long. Darth Vadar, it turns out, was only an outer shell: a hard exterior armour of mechanical invulnerability which covered up the soft, vulnerable flesh within. Darth Vadar is a persona, a death mask which provides power at the cost of true living. The irony of this tragedy is that tyrannical omnipotence is shown to be an internal relationship of master and slave. The apparent master, Darth Vadar, is a slave to his own hatred and destructiveness which rule him from within, personified by the Evil Emperor. The aim of this relationship is to obliterate all vulnerability and dependence, all traces of the helpless child that the father once
was. Tyrannical omnipotence is rooted in infantile rage on the one hand and identification with the aggressor on the other.

Clinical illustration

Jonathan came to see me following a period of depression when he had realized that his soaring ambitions of wealth, fame and power were not going to be realized. Although he had been successful in business, he had not been able to match his father – a ‘self-made’ man who had risen from humble origins to become a wealthy tycoon. This Icarus-like situation was expressed in a recurring dream of having to pilot a plane through a narrow gap between two skyscrapers. He was terrified that the plane would be too wide so that he would hit the buildings and crash.

Jonathan’s inner and outer life had been entirely dominated by his ambivalent fascination towards a father who had taken on archetypal proportions in his mind. He did not need to have read Neumann to be able to say of himself that he was possessed by his father. By the time his analysis began, Jonathan had mainly succeeded in extricating himself from his father’s influence over his external life. In his inner life, though, he was ruthlessly persecuted by what he called his ‘superstructure’ for failing to live up to the omnipotent fantasies he had created for himself. Then, as he said, he would ‘beat myself to a pulp’, tormenting himself with fantasies of disaster that were bound to engulf him. The superstructure functioned like an internal tyrant; like a Mafia godfather it offered absolute protection but only on condition that its omnipotent demands were obeyed (cf. Rosenfeld 1987; Kalsched 1996).

This internal archetypal object was clearly modelled on the actual relationship to his father which was equally archetypal in form. Jonathan was an only child. He felt that his mother had never really wanted a child and had only produced him as a sort of gift to his father. He described her as a cold, superficial, narcissistic woman who took little interest in him and seemed mesmerized by his powerful and glamorous father. Yet his father held her in contempt and fostered this attitude in Jonathan, secretly ridiculing her shortcomings to him and flaunting his many infidelities. By turning Jonathan against his mother in this way, his father fed his own narcissism by ensuring that all Jonathan’s love was directed towards him; the image of the couple was collapsed into the one parent who would be both father and mother. Both parents encouraged him to develop an attitude of worship towards his father, continually impressing upon him what a lucky boy he was to be the son of such a wonderful father. There were to be no rivals for Jonathan’s love: when he became attached to his nanny, the nanny was dismissed. Truly this was a father who ensured ‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’.

‘I didn’t merely want to be like my father’, Jonathan told me, ‘I wanted to be my father. It was as though I was born of father and didn’t have a mother – like Macduff, from the womb untimely ripped’. In this situation a normal
Oedipus complex cannot develop; instead Jonathan developed a Chronos complex in which he was divided off from his mother and swallowed up in his father. This archetypal scenario was not simply a function of Jonathan’s own unconscious since it had clearly been elicited by his parents’ actual behaviour and is therefore best understood as a function of the interaction within the family. The entire family was ‘captured’ by the archetypal image of the omnipotent father-god. The ‘self-made man’ was blown up to the archetypal proportions of the God of Creation.

Jonathan’s picture of his father also reminded me of Jung’s picture of Yahweh as an infantile tyrant, obsessed with his own glory and requiring absolute obedience to his will (Jung 1952). Like Yahweh with Job (and like Darth Vadar with Luke), Jonathan’s father was intent on impressing his son with his limitless potency, while ridiculing Jonathan with dismissive scorn as ‘puny’. No wonder Jonathan became confused between the lucky boy he was supposed to be and the impotent rage and humiliation he actually felt.

These awkward contrasts were reflected in my countertransference during the first few months of working with Jonathan. On the one hand, I felt somewhat intimidated by his forceful personality and commanding presence; yet, at the same time there seemed to be something of a lost child about him, silently pleading with me not to hurt him. My sense of him as both excruciatingly vulnerable and dangerously powerful aroused a deep sense of uneasiness in me. I now think that what I was picking up was the intense internal conflict in him between the tyrannical ‘superstructure’ father and the tyrannized son. At this point neither of us were sure how these roles might get played out in the transference.

Gradually I came to understand how Jonathan’s identification with the destructive archetypal father functioned as a defence against his vulnerability to humiliation and exposure. He described how he had sought to exclude all feelings and replace the soft, naked warmth of human flesh with the cold, hard, shiny facts of scientific knowledge and the strength, power and control of man-made objects: especially big, powerful shiny cars and the mechanical obsessional control of computers. He saw this as a kind of necrophilia – the love of dead objects. Indeed, Jonathan was fascinated by violent death, evil and criminality. He knew a great deal about massacres, serial killers and executions and felt there was some secret truth contained in them. He seemed to feel that if he could have knowledge of death, he would have power over it and, hence, over his own vulnerability. He would be as he imagined his father to be – god-like and omnipotent.

He was also fascinated by the great dictators, particularly Hitler and Mussolini on whom he was something of an amateur expert. In his late teens, an Israeli couple had befriended him, but their friendship was destroyed during a visit to Rome by Jonathan’s admiration for the strength and power of a building built by Mussolini. His friends thought the building crass; Jonathan was hurt and disappointed but, as a result, resolved to go more towards this hard strength
and power and away from anything soft. I commented on the quality of exaggerated (phallic) masculinity in all this. Jonathan corrected me: ‘not exaggerated masculinity’, he said, ‘*dead* masculinity. It’s to do with ripping and tearing – nothing to do with human flesh’. Jonathan was excited by both sides of this sado-masochistic coin, since he could also identify with the wish to be possessed, dominated and *ravaged* by a strong, powerful male, like Winston Smith’s total submission to the omnipotent control of O’Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Orwell 1949). This was not about sexuality, Jonathan insisted – if there was an erotic quality, it was not the excitement of sex but the erotics of *power*.

Nevertheless, Jonathan’s identification with tyrannical omnipotence had never been total and, by the time he came to see me, there was also a strong wish to be free of it. He longed to be able to ‘just be’, to float in the sea of life, as he put it. I came to see this as the intra-uterine sea from which he had felt ‘untimely ripped’. When he asked me where I thought this longing for power and control had come from, I said it came from an experience of being completely in the hands of someone whom he could not rely on to be concerned for his survival. There was a pause and then he said ‘My mother’.

The defensive function of these fantasies of invulnerability emerged clearly one day when he asked me if I could change a session time for the following week and I had to refuse him. He felt rebuffed and went on to talk about being armoured vs. being naked. Father’s way, he said was a complete denial of nakedness, as though there was nothing but armour. He was a ‘metal man’, as inseparable from his armour as the Spaniards on horseback whom the South American Indians had taken to be one creature. Like his father, he said, he had developed a persona armour which had become so welded to him that, as he said, ‘I became unable to take off my persona armour even when I was alone. But when I asked you about the session time, I felt that you were clothed, while I was naked’.

This was the first of several occasions where I was reminded of the world of Darth Vadar and the Terminator. While Vadar, like Jonathan himself, is metal outside and flesh inside, his image of his father is more like the Terminator or the apparently frail figure of the Evil Emperor – apparently human flesh on the outside, on the inside he is nothing but metallic death.

These associations were confirmed in the following session in which Jonathan talked about an ‘ambush’ part of him. This part sniped and scoffed at him as his father had done, calling him puny and effeminate, but also filled him with fantasies of omnipotence. When he was 18, he told me, he was invited to a pyjama party by a girl he was interested in:

> It was the worst experience of my life. I hated it. I felt awful, horrible in pyjamas, even though everyone else was wearing them. I wanted to be anywhere else but there. Then the ‘ambush’ part of me offered to take me away and make me great, told me that I could be anything I wanted to be but that, above all, I would be self-contained.
Like a pact with the devil, it offered him the fantasy of unlimited power (omnipotence) in return for control over his soul. Like Darth Vader, Jonathan had succumbed to the insinuating voice of the Satanic Emperor and ‘gone over to the dark side’.

I said that his relationship with me represented a threat to that part of himself since its propaganda relied on being able to persuade him that any exposure of his vulnerability would only result in further humiliation, like at the pyjama party. This was the fear that was aroused by my ‘rebuff’ in the previous session. But if I could be trusted, then its control over him would be undermined. ‘Yes’, said Jonathan, ‘You threaten it with death. But it’s not really two people – it’s me. You’ve slipped past my defences. It’s as though I have to die to myself in order to live’.

Despite the considerable progress Jonathan made in his therapy and despite the warm and cordial relationship that developed between us, I remained uneasy about a sense of lurking violence and aggression in him that was not being challenged. I now see that I too was having to ward off internal accusations that I was being ‘puny’ in not standing up to him.

Eventually, what I thought was my opportunity to confront him arose. One day, just before I was due to be absent for a couple of sessions, Jonathan said that he could have felt angry about my absence but had decided not to be – he had immediately suppressed it. I decided it was time to bring the negative transference into the open and therefore pursued his anger quite vigorously.

He argued that his suppression of anger was not a fearful avoidance but a deliberate choice. After some intervening material he spoke of a visit he and his family had made to his parents’ house. His father had been playing a game with his 8 year old son. In the ‘game’, his father would twist his son’s fingers and the boy would have to say ‘Submit’. Then his father would give him money, but only if he would say ‘Submit’. Jonathan remembered his father playing similar games with him: ‘The trouble is, I did submit; and then took over the process myself so that it became me trying to force myself to submit’. As a result he had always felt as if he was a square peg trying to force himself into a round hole.

I linked this story to his suppressing his anger with me – how important it was to him to keep our relationship free of issues of domination and submission. I said,

You do not want to think in terms of having to submit to me when I go away and then feel angry about having to fit into the round peg of my arrangements. Nor do you want to dominate me and make me submit to your anger.

Jonathan was very moved by this understanding and gratefully confirmed it.

It was only later that I realized the deeper dimension of the story – that the negative transference had been constellated not so much in his suppressed anger but in my pursuit of it. In doing this I had fallen into an enactment of the countertransference. My anxiety about being taken in and seduced by him
had led me to be the one who had behaved like the cruel sadistic internal father who demanded that he submit to my authority. I had got caught up in the archetypal situation I have been describing in which there is only the tyrant and the tyrannized, with no mediating third element.

Although I had initially felt that the father/son transference was the ‘avoided relationship’ (Ezriel 1956), I now came to see that what Jonathan actually needed and was unconsciously trying to find in me was the missing mother who could mediate between father and son. He needed me to provide the maternal containment he so sorely lacked in order that he might ‘float in the sea of life’ with me. Had the devouring father become constellated in the transference, the two of us would have been locked together in the Chronos-claustrum world of total projective identification. This was in fact the situation in Jonathan’s internal world. What Jonathan needed was the presence of a mediating third outside this internal conflict, so that the struggle with the father, when it came, would not be a case of crush or be crushed, devour or be devoured but could have a more positive outcome – one in which the internal couple could survive the assaults of omnipotent fantasy.

It was as if, in the transference, I enacted the part of Luke Skywalker: through maintaining a positive and loving attitude and refusing to be provoked by his attacks, the superstructure’s hold on him became weakened and he was able to turn against it and destroy it. Luke represents the agent of the feminine, Vader’s anima, who reconnects him with his need for love and relatedness. It is a conflict between Eros and Thanatos, Love and Death. The same theme is played out in Jung’s myth of Answer to Job in which Yahweh succumbs to Satan’s insinuations but Job, despite all the evils that are visited upon him, sustains his love and faith in God (Jung 1952). In so doing, Jung claims, Job reminds God of his feminine counterpart in Sophia, thus restoring the image of the syzygy from its immersion in tyrannical omnipotence.

In the last couple of years of his analysis, his attacks on various representations of ‘the law of the father’ increased in frequency and ferocity and I experienced a new kind of discomfort as he trumpeted his atheism and scientific rationalism against all kinds of ‘orthodoxies, prescriptive ideologies and crackpot ideas’ in which he included all forms of religion and spirituality. These were not merely attacks on the father – they were also expressions of his fight against his own masochistic wish to submit to the father by a different name, perhaps especially in the form of the crackpot ideology of Jungian analysis represented by me. In these attacks on the spirit, he must somewhere have known that he was attacking something close to my own (Jungian) heart; in my efforts to tolerate them I felt like the mother who hears the child’s complaints about the father while maintaining her love for them both. It was essential that I could manage to hold the ‘triangular space’ so that he could emerge from the Chronos complex into a more directly Oedipal confrontation with the father.

Through the ongoing dialogue with me, the internal dialogue of ‘crusher and crushed’ was modified and the image of an internal couple in creative
intercourse was restored. Then, and only then, was he ready to take me on as the father in the transference. It became clear that he was struggling to break free of me and he reduced his sessions and began to talk about ending. When I interpreted that he was doing away with the father, he replied, with some heat, ‘I’m doing away with the class of fathers. Gods, fathers and psychotherapists have to get out of the way – or be pushed aside’. Yet he was able to carry this through in an attitude of depressive mourning in which he spoke, for example, of the importance of memorials to the Great War and the reassessment of General Haig as someone who did the best he could in difficult circumstances. When he finally left, it was an emotional parting in which he openly acknowledged the specialness of our relationship. After he had gone, I found myself thinking of Hamlet’s epitaph to his father: ‘He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again’ (I.ii.187–8).

Conclusion: the excluded feminine

In the traditional myths I referred to earlier, it is always the maternal feminine who finds the way to the ‘soft underbelly’ of the tyrannical father. Through her it is possible for the son to find the way to destroy him, like Theseus using Ariadne’s thread to guide him through the labyrinth of the Minotaur. Where the complementary function of the mother is absent or blotted out by the fascinating archetypal power of the tyrannical father, the son remains trapped in the labyrinth, swallowed up in the entrails of paternity.

While the external situation plays an important role in eliciting such an archetypal configuration, tyrannical omnipotence has its own internal psychodynamics in which the son is actively complicit. This is implied in the Star Wars myth: Darth Vader is ultimately a personification of Luke’s own hatred and destructiveness just as the Emperor is a personification of Darth Vader’s. From the point of view of the son, the devouring father represents, at one level, being consumed by hatred and destructiveness and, at another, the son’s wish to live in projective identification with a father who is more powerful than himself. Both these elements are clearly present in Jonathan’s fascination with the great dictators. His identification with them enabled him to indulge omnipotent fantasies in which he could triumph over his father’s humiliation of him. In so doing, he became identified with tyrannical omnipotence himself. This is what the Emperor was trying to do to Luke Skywalker.

Tyrannical omnipotence originates as a defence against vulnerability, helplessness and dependency. In short, the infant defends himself against his smallness and weakness by fantasizing that he is the powerful father.

It is here that the relationship with the mother is critical. If the mother offers a secure, nourishing relationship, the infant is protected against the full realization of his actual weakness and does not need to develop omnipotent defences. But where the mother’s holding has substantially failed him in some way, the child may actively turn to the father, idealizing and aggrandizing him.
as a substitute shield against the terror of being helpless and dependent in the early mother/infant relationship. This is apparent in Jonathan’s repudiation of the ‘soft naked flesh’ of the baby and his horror of being in pyjamas (cf. the soft, flowing robes of Luke Skywalker). The tyrannical father plays on this vulnerability in his attempts to seduce and devour the son: Jonathan’s father ridiculed him for being ‘puny’, the Emperor tries to arouse Luke to rage by contrasting the huge power of the Death Star with the meagre resources of the rebel alliance. Satan’s tactics were ever thus, having their cultural archetype in the temptations of Christ.

In this situation there is also a fateful association in the child’s mind between the experience of being helpless and dependent and the relationship with his mother. The feminine is identified with helplessness and dependency because that was how the child was in his first relationship with a woman. Males come to associate the feminine with their need for a woman – their mothers. This idea conforms with Melanie Klein’s original definition of projective identification: the child splits off and projects his helplessness and dependency into his mother who is then identified with these aspects of himself and repudiated (Klein 1946). As a result, the feminine is treated with a surface contempt, behind which lurks a double hatred and fear: not only of the feared projected aspects which the feminine now holds, but also of the original and continuing power of the feminine in his life.

By definition, the omnipotent defence seeks to be all-powerful and beholden to no one: God is one and all alone and ever more shall be so. But it is not so in the life of a man. Whether heterosexual or homosexual, a man must come to terms with the role of the mother and the continuing power of the feminine in his life. The typical ‘macho’ defence of which tyrannical omnipotence is perhaps the most extreme example, attempts to deal with the problem of infantile vulnerability and dependence by projection and denial. In this sense, masculine omnipotence constitutes a defence against the threat of feminine omnipotence. Alternatively, men may attempt to deny their dependence on women by fusing with them in actuality or in the unconscious fantasy of being a woman. Again, neither of these defences are specific to one sexual orientation or another. As Jonathan indicated, the central issue is not sex but power – and powerlessness.

For some men, homosexuality may offer a safe option that enables them to avoid the powerful threat of being devoured by a woman. The homoerotic elements in Jonathan suggest a different scenario in which, in the context of maternal deprivation, an exciting father provides a stronger pull for the male child’s libidinal desire. Nevertheless, for most men, sexual desire is intimately bound up with their anxieties about vulnerability and dependence on a woman. In the sexual act, the man is required to be hard but must also be able to bear being soft. It is as if the woman draws his strength and potency from him, leaving him spent and flaccid. This theme is beautifully captured in Botticelli’s painting of Venus and Mars, which also conveys an echo of Jonathan’s theme.
of armour vs. nakedness. The couple are depicted ‘post-coitus’: Venus is alert, fully clothed and looks on faintly amused, while Mars slumbers naked, his armour a plaything for the mischievous baby satyrs that surround them. The Old Testament, as we might expect, given the omnipotence of its patriarchal God, has a more paranoid vision: while Samson sleeps, Delilah symbolically castrates him by cutting off his hair.

In the archetypal mythology of patriarchy and male domination, woman is felt to be threatening and dangerous but man cannot do without her – even if he eschews her as an object of sexual desire, he cannot dispense with her procreative role as mother. Therefore, he must try to control her, along with the helpless, dependent infant that still troubles him from within. Hence, omnipotence leads to tyranny, and control and suppression of the feminine becomes woven into the fabric of patriarchy. The role of the mother is downgraded so that she is seen as merely the vessel for the male seed and the father is regarded as the true parent, implicitly the only parent. The stage is now set for the child who is born to the archetypal tyrannical father and for the battle he must fight to overcome him. And, by an enantiodroma, it will be to the mother he must turn for the necessary assistance. The tyrannical father is right to fear the feminine: it is his own consort that will provide the means to defeat him.

The defeat she inflicts is the defeat of omnipotence and the restoration of mutuality and procreativity. She does this through her loving relatedness which mitigates against the hatred, control and tyrannical force of paternal omnipotence. Therefore it is not merely relatedness but mutuality that holds the key to the resolution of omnipotence since it offers both dependence and power, both gratification and restraint. Mutuality is represented, both literally and symbolically by the facts of life. Only in omnipotent fantasy can one parent produce a child without the other: in reality both are needed and therefore each acts as a check on the potential omnipotence of the other. The mutuality of procreativity also acts as a metaphor for the dialogue within the mind between alternative possibilities and the interplay between different parts of the self. The Other acts as a court of appeal between parent and child in which more than one point of view can be considered. Ron Britton has referred to this as the creation of triangular space (Britton 1989). It is as if there is not one God, but two: not the all-powerful Creator who needs no helpmate, neither man nor woman, but both: a divine couple engaged in the eternal intercourse of mutual creation.

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**Translations of Abstract**

Cet article pose que le contexte sous jacent à la relation archétypale entre le père tyrannique et dévorant et ses fils, est une disjonction dans le couple parental (syzygie), au point que le rôle du féminin maternel est eclipsé et exclu. Il est montré que ceci s’origine dans une défense omnipotente contre une dépendance infantile à la mère. Pour
que le patient puisse réussir à se libérer de la tyrannie du père, il faut que la mutualité des deux partenaires du couple intérieur soit restaurée. Bien que l’article se concentre principalement sur le monde intérieur (et qu’il comporte une illustration clinique détaillée, montrant comment le processus travaille et trouve sa résolution dans la relation analytique), il est aussi fait référence à la tyrannie politique, aux attitudes par rapport à la maîtrise de la nature à l’aide des moyens technologiques, et aux formes patriarcales de la masculinité. Le mythe de Chronos est amplifié à l’aide de deux variantes modernes du thème trouvées dans les films Terminator et Star Wars.
Note

1. I have previously discussed this patient in Colman (1999). The material and themes presented in the two papers are substantially different, though, focusing on different aspects of the same analysis.

References


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