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The Wish for Revenge

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The wish for revenge is a ubiquitous response to narcissistic injury, and particularly to the narcissistic injury that accompanies oedipal defeat. Vengeful fantasy serves to represent and manage rage and to restore the disrupted sense of self and internalized imagining audience that have resulted from injury. Clinical and literary examples demonstrate the split within the representation of the self and the imagining other that underlies the wish for revenge, and the way that this split operates differently in the psychic economy of the transiently and the chronically vengeful.

Introduction

Revenge is a ubiquitous theme in mental life. The wish for revenge draws the avenger into a narrow, dark world of power and hatred. Entry into the state of conscious vengefulness is often sudden, felt to be a magical solution to aggressive conflicts that reverberate on many levels. This quality of a sudden crystallization has led **Rosen (2004)** to describe the emergence of vengeful wishes, aptly, as “falling in hate.” The experience of vengefulness in ourselves and others also makes us aware of the tenacity of vengeful wishes. One does not fall out of hate as readily as one falls out of love. Revenge pushes for action but is not satiated by it. The wish for revenge tends toward obsession, as the avenger, who consciously aims to dominate a painful situation, becomes dominated by his vengefulness.

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Although revenge is a frequent theme in literature, the subject of revenge has been relatively neglected in psychoanalytic writing. Often, both in literature and in life, the quest for revenge is set in motion by an oedipal defeat, the loss of a loved one to a rival. This loss is felt by the avenger to be both unjust and unbearable, a catastrophic narcissistic injury that demonstrates not only that he is not loved, but that his very right to have desires of his own and to be heard on an equal basis with others is in question.

In response to this injury, the avenger constructs a story that is familiar to us all. First, he construes what has occurred as a personal attack, casting himself as the innocent victim of a demonized perpetrator. Then, in a dramatic reversal, he righteously seizes power and relentlessly pursues the punishment of the designated agent of his injury. Often, this punishment fits the crime exactly as the avenger inflicts on his enemy the very injuries that he himself has suffered.

Psychoanalytic writers about revenge have explored the interplay of oedipal and preoedipal themes in the injury that triggers the quest for revenge. For the avenger, oedipal disappointment rekindles early narcissistic rage; the later, triangular situation permits displacement of this rage from the disappointing early parent, now identified with the beloved oedipal parent, onto the rival. The presence of vengefulness as a prominent motive has thus been seen as an indication that oedipal wishes screen and are animated by narcissistic concerns (**Arlow 1980**; **Riviere 1932**; **Socarides, 1966**). The almost universal presence of vengeful wishes may be seen as evidence of the widespread survival of early narcissistic conflicts and their ready availability to be revived under conditions of heightened aggression.

A number of analytic writers have explored the qualities of the scenario that the avenger constructs and the way this scenario functions to manage aggression. The avenger's familiar tale of victimization, villainy, and retribution reflects a regression to an object world dominated by splitting and projection (**Lansky 2001**; **Steiner 1996**). The figure of the beloved oedipal parent is split as a defense against the avenger's rage. Split-off, hated, and destructive

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aspects of this parent are condensed with the figure of the rival/perpetrator, and this demonized figure is also felt to contain the avenger's own projected rage. The avenger enjoys the luxury of guilt-free hatred and destructiveness, both because of his self-perception as blameless and because of his imagined alliance with a superego figure (the beloved oedipal parent), who is felt to demand the punishment of the perpetrator **(Steiner 1996)**. The turn to revenge is also seen as a defense against the shame associated with narcissistic injury and perceived helplessness (**Lansky 2001**; **Wurmser 2000**).

In this paper, I will explore what I believe is another critical dimension of the quest for revenge. This dimension has to do with the universal wish to maintain a sense of individual meaning, to pull together the threads of one's life into a story, and, inextricably tied to this wish, the wish for the sense of an audience, an imagining other, by whom this story will be known and valued. From this perspective, the injury that kindles the wish for revenge is felt by the avenger-to-be as a disruption in his sense of individual meaning and value, and, correspondingly, a disruption of the sense that his story is important to, or even recognized by, those figures in internal and external reality whose recognition is felt to be of critical importance. The wish for revenge reflects the avenger's efforts to construct a story from this experience of felt disruption and anger and, linked to this, to reestablish the sense of an audience to whom this story can be made known.

Using clinical and literary examples, I will demonstrate the way in which the avenger's response to a meaning-disrupting injury, and

his struggle to reestablish the sense of a meaning and an audience to hear it, are built upon fantasies about meaning construction and the relation of the meaning-constructing self to an internal audience. These fantasies are rooted in the avenger's early wishes and experiences with constructing a sense of self, and linked wishes and experiences with his early audience, the imagining parent. It is the quality of these enduring fantasies about the way meaning is constructed together, by self and imagining parent—fantasies that long antedate the specific injury triggering

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the wish for revenge—that determines whether vengefulness will be a passing concern or a lifelong quest.

The Imaginer and the Imagined

In an earlier paper **(LaFarge 2004)**, I explored the group of fantasies that depict the child and the imagining parent who participates in the construction of the child's inner world of objects and meanings. I called these *fantasies of the imaginer and the imagined.* In narcissistic disorders, these fantasies are often split **(Britton 1998)** and highly fantastical, and they are very prominent. As the analysis of narcissistic patients unfolds, fantasies of imaginer and imagined often give rise to chronic enactments in transference and countertransference that come to dominate the analytic process. The dynamics of revenge show us the way that fantasies of the imaginer and the imagined are shaped by aggressive tensions between parent and child and play an important ongoing role in the management of these tensions.

The use of the revenge scenario to restore a damaged sense of individual meaning and value and to make this known to others is an aspect of revenge dynamics that has been neglected in psychoanalytic writing, but it is a central theme in many literary works about revenge. In the revenge tragedies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, the avenger's wish to make his story heard is often depicted as a motive as equally powerful as his wish to punish the perpetrator of his injury; and such plays frequently end on this note, with the declaration that the avenger's story is fully told and known (**Anonymous 1606**; **Kyd 1587**).

In the clinical situation, fantasies of revenge are often difficult to bring into focus. The patient's vengeful wishes are frequently hidden behind a masochistic presentation or, less frequently, behind a sadistic one. Pieces of the story of revenge tend to be fleeting, broken up, and perceived by only one participant at a time. Revenge is often an organizing plot in the background that we recognize only in retrospect, or at least at a considerable distance from the here-and-now process. Transferences of revenge tend to

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touch upon highly conflictual areas for both patient and analyst. Involving as they do issues of the origin of aggression—in the individual psyche, in the object, or in the interaction between the two, in the present moment or in the past—these transferences are linked to overdetermined fantasies about the roots of anger in each participant's own history. Close attention to the way analyst and patient interact as they construct a version of the vengeful patient's experience can help to bring into focus the fantasies of meaning construction that are central to the dynamics of revenge.

A Clinical Example of Revenge

A clinical example from late in the analysis of a patient whom I will call Miss A illustrates these dynamics as they emerged in transference and countertransference. Miss As analysis was conducted on the couch at a frequency of four sessions per week. As I will describe, the scope of Miss As vengefulness, and its rootedness in both her history and in the transference, was particularly difficult for me to recognize. The broad organizing effect of revenge dynamics upon Miss As inner life and upon the analysis became apparent only late in the analysis. (Details of this material are, of course, disguised.)

Sadistic and masochistic themes were prominent in this long analysis. I felt that Miss A and I worked unusually well together. Her associations seemed to unfold with exquisite clarity, and I felt able to understand and integrate them well in my interpretations. Miss A in turn responded to my interventions with a further rich unfolding of material. She moved back and forth between the transference and experiences outside the analysis, in the past and in the present; and our analytic work appeared to lead to significant life change.

Over the first several years, I became aware of an unusual, steady countertransference reaction that I had to Miss A: I always felt engaged and interested in her, but almost never felt shaken or disturbed. This steady listening was reflected in a particular

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style of imagining that I tended to adopt with Miss A: as I listened to her, the characters and scenes that she described came alive for me in a flow of visual imagery. Other sensory cues that I might have felt were dim or absent altogether. This was particularly notable in light of the extreme violence and anger of many of Miss A's associations, and the gradual crystallization in her history of an image of her mother as intrusive, paranoid, and at times openly psychotic. Somehow, I did not feel really implicated in Miss A's anger, even when it was manifestly directed toward me. It was as if I felt myself always as a transference object, rather than shifting back and forth between this as-if experience and fuller immersion, as I ordinarily do with patients.

When I presented my analysis of Miss A for peer supervision, colleagues reported a divided reaction: they felt excited and

appreciative of the analytic work, and at the same time they tended to feel aware of ugly, disturbing feelings that Miss A stirred up in them, as she did not in me. None of them would have wished to be alone in a room with Miss A They observed that data from the countertransference, and particularly from the negative counter-transference, played less of a role in my formulations than was usual for me. Although I was aware of the dark side of Miss A's material, and this was at the center of my interpretations, it was clear as I listened to my colleagues that I did not feel this dark material as they did.

Anchoring my own fleeting negative responses in the group's countertransference, I was gradually able to allow a fuller sense of disturbance, rage, and paranoid experience to emerge in transference and countertransference. These experiences disrupted the analysis, but the background sense of a steady, understandable unfolding was never lost in a prolonged way, and Miss A and I were ultimately able to integrate the new, disturbing experiences with it.

Late in the analysis, Miss A told me that she had recently committed a serious financial indiscretion at work. She felt guilty and afraid of exposure. Many sessions were devoted to the details of her crime and its context, her seeking legal counsel, and so on. My countertransference was intense and painful. Stunned by Miss

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A's revelation, I felt swallowed up by anxiety and unable to think clearly. I felt extremely shaken to learn that, near the end of what had seemed a successful analysis, Miss A would act in such a self-destructive way; and I questioned the meaning of her having concealed her behavior from me as well. I found myself preoccupied with her realistic situation, turning the pages of the morning paper with terror that Miss A's crime would be reported. Fantasies that she would be exposed blended, in my heightened state of anxiety, with fantasies that I, too, would be exposed, as Miss A would openly blame her actions on my failure to understand and help her. I felt as if my fate—and my emotional state—was entwined or even blurred with Miss A's.

After two weeks, Miss A announced gleefully that the whole story of the financial indiscretion had been a fabrication! She had wanted to frighten me and to control my mind. The field that she had chosen in which to elaborate her story was one where she had sensed correctly that she had expertise and I did not. Analysis led to her identification with her psychotic mother and her wish to make me suffer as she had suffered, drawn into the mother's paranoid concerns, uncertain of her own knowledge of the world in the face of the mother's superior experience.

Miss A traced her anger at me and wish to punish me to my recent summer vacation, when I had been off having a good time while she was left to suffer. Like Miss A, I attributed her rage at me to her feelings of exclusion and abandonment at my recent vacation. My own sense of what had happened was dominated by my experience of Miss A's extreme cruelty to me. I was also able, "empathically"—and, as we shall see, defensively—to extend my understanding to encompass the suffering that Miss A herself had experienced at the hands of her mother.

Only long afterward did I realize that, in her cruelty to me, Miss A took a *specific* form of revenge for a *specific* wrong that she felt I had done to her. This realization came in the context of new material that emerged a year later, after we had set a termination date. Miss A now spoke of her sense that she did not exist as a separate person, but was enclosed within my body. *Her* analytic

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work had been in fantasy *encased* within *my* thinking. In our ongoing sense of rich, productive analytic work, we had enjoyed the pleasurable aspect of this fantasy: Miss A's continuous sense of my steady thinking and imagining had permitted her to elaborate a continuous, unfolding sense of herself and to work with this sense of herself analytically. Her sense of safe encasement in the mind of a thinking other had initially precluded any direct expression of her anger, but, ultimately, we were able to include considerable anger within our purview.

With her sadistic manipulation of my thinking, Miss A had shown, and wreaked revenge for, the persecutory aspect of the same fantasy of encasement. Spinning a web of rich associations for me to imagine and integrate, Miss A had felt at one and the same time both understood and emotionally abandoned. Parts of her emotional life—her terror, and her deep sense of disturbance —had remained outside the encasing shell of my imagination, warded off by our joint wish to avoid them and our consequent engagement at a particular level of imagination. For Miss A, the experience of angry aloneness with these unheard experiences had been built up into a second, negative image of an encasing, imagining parent, who had sadistically forced upon her an all-encompassing experience of fear and anger. This sadistic figure drew upon Miss A's history with a psychotic mother, but also incorporated negative aspects of her being heard and imagined by me.

At the time of Miss A's stunning enactment, my defensive retreat from experiencing myself as this persecutory, thought-controlling figure had led me to focus on the historical origin of Miss A's sadomasochistic enactment in her relationship with her mother, to link this to the here-and-now transference, and to sever these from the considerable transference history that we had undergone together. Thus, the story of revenge had been broken up and obscured. My wish to retreat was intensified, I think, because Miss A's negative transference was to me in my activity *as analyst* **(Bion 1958)**. For me, as for Miss A, this transference threatened the legitimacy of my own voice.

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Revenge Dynamics in the Case of Miss A

The case of Miss A illustrates the operation of underlying fantasies of imaginer and imagined that I think are central to the dynamics of the chronic avenger. These fantasies emerged in a series of enactments in transference and countertransference. Over the course of a long analysis, Miss A and I played out identifications with a split fantasy of the imaginer and the imagined. This split configuration is, I believe, universal in vengeful wishes and action, and it is the *chronicity* of this split that distinguishes the inner world of the chronically vengeful from that of the transient avenger. The fantasy of encasement in the mind of the imagining parent, so central to Miss As experience, is one that is common, although not universal, in the dynamics of the chronic avenger. Similarly, Miss A's use of lying to accomplish her revenge is a frequent but not universal feature of chronic vengefulness (**Kernberg 1984**; **Wurmser 2000**). In a sense, the avenger's lie can be seen as the extreme example of his reversal of the experience of encasement within the mind of the sadistic parent: the compelling lie functions as a sadistic seduction that draws the parent/perpetrator into a hostile, false reality in which he is to be betrayed and lost.

A closer look at Miss A's material shows us the complex way that the enduring split fantasy of imaginer and imagined, and the linked fantasy of encasement, operated in her inner world. In what I experienced as the main part of our work—my steady listening, Miss A's engaging telling, and our shared sense that we were building a rich model of her inner world—we played out the more positive side of this split fantasy. I was identified with an imagining parent who wanted to know all the facts about Miss A, but was unempathic to certain emotional parts of her experience, particularly her anger and fear.[1] Miss A was identified with a child who

[1] **Grotstein (2004)** usefully characterizes this figure of the containing parent as one devoted to reality rather than to truth.

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subtly shaped her communications in order to maintain the sense of a tie to a parent who was not fully connected to her emotionally.

During the same long phase of the analysis, outside my awareness, and, I believe, outside Miss A's awareness as well, Miss A and I also enacted the darker side of this split fantasy. Here my non-receptiveness to her full panoply of emotions was felt by her to be a sadistic act by a hostile imagining parent who forced an experience of angry, terrified aloneness, insignificance, and betrayal upon the child. My vacation late in Miss A's analysis provided an organizing framework in which this second, sadistic fantasy of imagining parent and imagined child could come alive. In her stunning act of revenge, Miss A both punished me and forced her own painful experience upon me by reversing roles in the fantasy, assuming the role of the sadistic imagining parent and placing me in the role of the child.

For Miss A, *each side of the split figure of the imagining parent was associated with a different level of communicating her experience and constructing a story from it.* The predominant, more positive fantasy, where I was cast as an imagining parent whose attention was continuous but limited in depth, and Miss A as a child who tailored her communications in order to be heard by me, was the setting for the elaboration of a complex story that was told mostly in words. Both Miss A and I consciously felt this story, which deepened and evolved over the course of the analysis, to be authentic, and both of us considered it to be a shared construction, one to which we both freely contributed in a creative way. At this level of story construction and storytelling, I consciously felt that I knew Miss A, and I believe that Miss A consciously felt known by me. This story included anger, but *the anger almost never reached a pitch between us where it disrupted our joint experience of looking and knowing.*

I think that Miss A engaged me at a very even level of imagining by using language that evoked in me both the sense of a story and a great deal of visual imagery. It was as if she turned my attention toward a lighted screen that showed a world full and complete

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in itself. Also, she herself brought to the analysis a steady level of engagement in which she did not appear to move nearer or farther away from me. The feeling of steadiness was supported by the fact that, in our enactment of this fantasy, Miss A and I did not exchange roles; I remained cast throughout in the role of imagining parent. I enjoyed the kind of analytic work that Miss A evoked in me; Miss A in turn likely recognized my comfort and tailored herself to it, fitting herself to *my* fantasy of the ideal patient **(Smith 2004)**, at the same time that I unconsciously assumed the role of Miss A's fantasy of a steady but emotionally shallow imaginer. As **Wilson (2003)** has described, the close fit between the patient's narcissistic wishes and the analyst's own can lead to an unrecognized, subtle, and chronic enactment.

Miss A did not cease communicating in other ways during this period, but her attention and mine were turned away from these other registers. The second stream of communication, and the image of the split-off listener, was directed to extratransferential figures and, through the parallel process of presentation and supervision, to the members of my peer supervision group.

The second, destructive fantasy of imaginer and imagined, which came into focus with Miss A's turn toward revenge, was associated with a more primitive mode of communication and a more primitive kind of story. In this state dominated by hatred and terror, projective identification was the main means of communication. Words served primarily to induce affect in the other, and each of us came to know the other by being taken over by the other's painful affect. For the child-victim, this experience was felt to be totally encompassing, extinguishing her own independent view, her very individuality. The repetitively enacted story of seduction and betrayal was rigid and inalterable; the only change that was possible was for us to reverse roles in it.

It seems likely that, for Miss A, *an enduring split within the figure of the imagining other protected both the image of a more positive, steady parent and, linked to this image, the capacity for a higher-level mode of self representation and self experience.* Miss A's consistent

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identification of me with the more positive side of the split fantasy protected me both from her childhood rage at her parents' failures to understand her, and from the contemporary rage that she might feel at my own failures to understand her fully. And, operating within this split-off, positive system of fantasy, Miss A was able to use our dialogue as a platform to develop and sustain a well-elaborated sense of herself, a story of herself that had a complex, continuous, and flexible narrative structure.

In addition, the fantasy of an imagining parent-child pair who could not tolerate certain fantasies and feelings supported the exclusion of forbidden *content*—particularly, but not exclusively, aggressive content—from the narrative that was constructed. Thus, the splitting off of the more primitive, aggressive fantasy of imaginer and imagined served to protect both a higher-level mode of story construction and particular, wished-for stories.

At the same time, the more primitive fantasy can itself be seen as a way of conserving a second level of meaning and story construction. Although Miss A's dramatic act of revenge was triggered by a specific incident—my vacation, which represented a defeat for Miss A on both oedipal and preoedipal levels—further analysis led to the understanding that the system of angry fantasy that came alive had been built up over a long period. It seems possible that Miss A's fantasy that I, like her mother, had sadistically annihilated her experience of reality—a fantasy that she played out in reverse with her sadistic manipulation of my thinking—was a way of making sense of myriad experiences of being unseen and unheard, or only partly heard, and the anger and injury that these evoked in her. From this perspective, the fantasy of a malevolent imaginer who encased the child in an annihilating reality could be seen as a way of conserving a link with an imagining parent who was felt to be disconnected, fragmented, or lost, and of reestablishing a framework of meaning around the felt disruption that the sense of unknownness and disconnection evokes. **Searles (1956)** described the defensive function of revenge dynamics in warding off the experience of object loss. The use of the fantasy of

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a sadistic imaginer as a means of maintaining a primitive object tie also accords with Galdston's **(1987)** description of hatred as providing a form of continuity that represents an early stage of object constancy.

At both levels of thinking and communicating, Miss A maintained a fantasy of being *encased* within my mind. At the higher level, she unconsciously believed me to participate almost omnisciently in constructing a narrative with her, understanding everything that she said, elaborating a story from her associations in total synchrony with her, and guiding the constructions that she made. In a sense, she saw me as providing a frame that perfectly harmonized with her story. In the more primitive, aggressive state, Miss A believed in fantasy that / sadistically encased *her* within *my* story, erasing her own individual experience and value; then she turned the tables, encasing me in a nightmarish story in which I felt my fate to hang utterly on hers.

The fantasy that her own experience was encased within the mind of an imagining parent served several important functions for Miss A Casting me in the role of the imagining, encasing parent, Miss A felt a heightened sense of *& frame*, a sense that she was firmly held within my thoughts. In describing a mirror perversion in a psychotic woman, **Malcolm (1970)** ascribes a similar function to her patient's perversion: the mirror provided a heightened sense of a frame, which guaranteed the patient's sense of a cohesive self and warded off psychotic disintegration, but did not provide other, more transformative kinds of containment.

At the same time, the fantasy of an encasing imaginer emphasized the *barrier* between the mind of the imagining parent and the child's experience that was held within it. Miss A cast me as an imagining parent who factually knew about her more primitive and angry experiences, but was impermeable to them. And in her own daily experience outside the analysis, Miss A, identifying herself with such a framing, impermeable imaginer, both knew and did not know about the more primitive angry aspects of her own experience. Thus, the fantasy of the encasing imaginer, in both its

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interpersonal and its internalized versions, protected an outer shell of higher-level relatedness and meaning, as well as a more positive version of the imagining parent, from a more primitive molten core of rage embedded within it.

Revenge and Shame

The intensity of the avenger's wish to be seen and known by the imagining parent makes him particularly vulnerable to the experience of shame. Shame, the sense of being worthless or bad in the eyes of oneself and others, might be seen as the painful affect that arises from constructing a tie in fantasy to an imagining parent who is felt to be absent, disconnected, or overtly rejecting. The split within the figures of imaginer and imagined that is central to the dynamics of the avenger protects the avenger from shame by protecting the fantasy of a tie to a more steady and attentive imaginer. However, this split also gives rise to a more elaborated and terrifying fantasy of the uninterested, inattentive imaginer—the imago of the sadistic, encasing imaginer—and to the more terrifying fantasy of being deliberately humiliated by the imaginer, an experience that **Lansky (in press)** aptly calls "paranoid shame."

We can see both kinds of shame and the relation between them in my countertransferences to Miss A. During the period when Miss A avenged herself upon me with her dramatic lie, I felt overwhelmed by a terrifying feeling of paranoid shame, linked to the fantasy that Miss A would deliberately and publicly expose me as worthless. Looking back after my intense countertransference reaction, I realized that, over the long period of Miss As analysis, I had warded off signals that might have led to more ordinary, less intense and paranoid shame

fantasies. With most patients, I go through times when I feel real doubts that I am helpful or effective—times when I am painfully aware of not living up to my ego ideal as an analyst. With Miss A, I became aware that these self-doubts had been uniquely absent, warded off by my exceptionally good and steady feeling about my work with her—a feeling that

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I would now connect with my identification with the split-off figure of the higher-level, more positive imaginer.[2]

Revenge and Narcissism

Miss A's shift from the fantasy of being sadistically encased inside the mind of the imaginer to the fantasy of herself sadistically encasing the imaginer within her own mind may be seen as an example of destructive or malignant narcissism, and our understanding of the dynamics of revenge deepens our understanding of this regressive state. **Rosenfeld (1971)** and **Kernberg (1984)** describe the narcissist's potential to shift, under conditions of severe aggression, from an identification with an omnipotent good object —for Kernberg, the pathological grandiose self—to an identification with a powerful bad object, a mode of functioning in which hatred and power are idealized, and helplessness and the wish to love and depend are projected onto the object.

The shifting fantasies of encasement that we see in the avenger suggest that the shift from positive to destructive narcissism involves a movement through a sequence of fantasies: in the positive narcissistic configuration, the fantasy is one of being encased by an idealized object; under conditions of heightened aggression, the fantasy of being encased by a sadistic imaginer becomes dominant; and, finally, the shift to malignant or destructive narcissism occurs with the reversal of the sadistic object relation and the identification of the self with the sadistic imaginer.

This model also suggests that the patients who are most prone to shift over from positive to destructive narcissism are those for whom the split fantasy of imaginer and imagined, characteristic of narcissistic patients, involves an idealized, imagining object that is felt to be an encasing one. From a technical standpoint, the sequence of fantasy that I describe offers an additional point of entry to the analysis of destructive narcissistic states, through the interpretation

[2] **Gottlieb (2004)** has described the role of such chronic countertransferences in impeding the analyst's work with the vengeful patient and the need for these attitudes to shift in order for the analysis to succeed.

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of the patient's fantasy of being sadistically encased and controlled by the analyst's thinking.

Two Literary Examples of Revenge

“The Cask cf Amontillado”

The theme of encasement is a frequent one in the literature of revenge. Poe's **(1846)** story “The Cask of Amontillado” is the classic example of this and demonstrates the dynamics that I have described. The narrator/ avenger begins the story by saying that he has borne many *injuries* at the hands of his friend, Fortunato, as best he could, but turned to revenge when injury became *insult.* That is, the fantasy of revenge took shape when the avenger crystallized the fantasy that Fortunato had deliberately humiliated him. (The exact nature of the insult remains unspecified.) That the narrator unconsciously felt this insult as a sadistic encasement is evident in the detailed reversal of his experience that he inflicts upon Fortunato: he avenges himself by playing upon Fortunato's narcissism—his snobbish expertise about wine—in order to lure him into an enclosure where the avenger walls him up alive.

Poe's story also hints at the poignant relationship between the narcissist's wish for affirmation and his vulnerability to feeling forgotten and sadistically encased. The avenger might be seen as someone who must draw very close to his object in order to feel understood and contained, either because of the object's felt impenetrability or distance, or because of the avenger's own wish for an unattainable sense of union. The strong pull of his wish leads the avenger to tailor himself to the limitations of the object's imagination; and this in turn leads to the exclusion of some aspects of the self and to the construction of a second sadistic fantasy system of containment. From this perspective, the avenger can be seen as someone who feels himself in constant danger of losing his sense of individual meaning. If he moves too far from his imagining parent, he loses the sense of a containing other who confirms the meaning and significance of his individual experience;

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if he moves too close, he is vulnerable to feeling that his own individual story is drawn into the pull of the imagining other's and is lost or crushed.

Cousin Bette

Balzac's great novel *Cousin Bette* **(1846)** deepens our understanding of the psychology of the chronic avenger. Almost every character in the novel is bent upon revenge in one way or another, and the plot of the novel, with its numerous intricate subplots, is enormously

complicated. However, the story centers on the figure of Bette, a poor spinster relation who schemes more or less successfully to destroy an entire family, the Hulots, in revenge for the Hulots' daughter's appropriation of Wenceslas, a young man whom Bette has taken in and imprisoned in the role of admirer and son.

Balzac's subtle portrait of Bette illustrates many aspects of the personality of someone who becomes obsessed with revenge. Her childhood history is one of deprivation and envy. Less favored by endowment than her beautiful cousin, Adeline, she is trained to do rough work, while Adeline is reared for higher things. As a little girl, Bette vents her anger on Adeline. Later she overtly suppresses her jealousy of her cousin, watching bitterly as Adeline marries the glamorous and wealthy Baron Hulot. Assisted by the very relatives she resents, Bette makes a serious attempt to succeed actively on her own terms as a businesswoman, but her hopes are dashed by the political upheavals of the time. These events, Balzac says, gave Bette "a conviction that she was of little importance in the immense turmoil of men, private interests, and public affairs" (p. 36). She retreats into the role of embittered, eccentric spinster.

The rage and injury that Bette feels when she learns that Wenceslas has fallen in love with Adeline's daughter undo her stable but constricted narcissistic adaptation and kindle a relentless quest for revenge. The torments that Bette wishes her victims to endure mirror the deprivations and indignities that she herself has suffered. They are to be poor and humiliated, betrayed and abandoned

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by the ones they love. Bette's wish for revenge is insatiable and, as revenge often is, self-defeating, as various threads of her expanding plot come into conflict with one another.

In Balzac's novel, as in the case of Miss A, themes of encasement and splitting are prominent. In his descriptions of Bette, Balzac conveys the sense of a deceptive shell that barely contains a molten interior. Bette's rage is depicted as primitive and animalistic. She experiences it as a convulsion that threatens to overwhelm and literally kill her. *Yet*, except at extreme moments, she is able to assume a mask of ingratiation that conceals her rage from others—a concealment that is abetted by their lack of real interest in her.

The sense of a separation of exterior and interior, and of a violent action taking place inside, continues in the manner in which Balzac portrays Bette in carrying out her plot: she acts by managing the minds of her victims from the inside, cultivating their malice and inducing them to harm one another. She does not take action openly, and in the eyes of the other characters, maintains her air of subservience and limited possibility. Although her plot requires both scheming and action, these are kept hidden not only from the other characters, but even from the reader of the novel, who is given only occasional glimpses of her active dealings.

The motif of a more civilized mode of action that frames, but is held apart from, a more primitive mode is repeated many times in the structure of the novel, where one subplot is embedded within and linked to another. Significantly, in the overall structure of the novel and in individual scenes, Balzac embeds Bette's story within Adeline's. The novel, which centers on Bette, begins and ends with the story of Adeline.

The novel opens in the aftermath of a series of events involving the Hulot family: Baron Hulot has stolen the mistress of another man, Crevel, and squandered all the family's money on her. Crevel has sought revenge, interfering with the marriage of the Hulots' daughter, Hortense, by informing her suitor of the Hulot family's terrible financial circumstances. Now he wishes to avenge himself further by seducing Adeline, Hulot's wife, offering her a

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business transaction whereby, in exchange for her sexual favors, he will make good Hulot's financial losses, thus enabling the daughter to marry. The action of the novel begins as Crevel arrives at the Hulot home, intending to make his proposal to Adeline.

The opening scenes of the novel establish the structure of a deepening series of stories, each one embedded within the one before. Balzac leads the reader inward from the street to the interior of the Hulot home as Crevel enters. Bette and Hortense are ushered out of the salon as Crevel comes in, so that his meeting with Adeline can take place. Then, when Crevel's seduction fails, the scene shifts to the interior garden where Bette and the daughter, Hortense, are speaking of Wenceslas. Finally, Balzac moves still further inward to explore Bette's history and character.

The walls of the house and the garden within symbolically hold apart the nested stories. Outside the house lies Hulot's life with his mistresses and Crevel. In the middle layer of the house's public rooms resides the triangular Crevel-Hulot-Adeline subplot, and, deeper still, in the garden is found the more primitive Bette-Hortense-Wenceslas plot. At the same time, Crevel's entry into the Hulot home sets in motion a series of events that reverberates inward, connecting the stories. Crevel brings with him into the Hulot home, and into Adeline's awareness, the catastrophe that Baron Hulot has brought upon the family. In turn, Adeline's refusal of Crevel's proposal fatally damages Hortense's marriage plans and, by forcing Hortense to cast a wider net to find a husband, triggers the Bette-Hortense-Wenceslas plot.

Balzac uses the linked characters of Adeline and Bette as foils to one another, each representing an opposite mode of managing anger and injury. Adeline is depicted as utterly without rancor, unswerving in her loyalty to the husband who repeatedly betrays her. Bette is presented as venomous and vengeful, without a grain of compassion for those who have caused her harm. In effect, the two figures, Adeline and Bette, may be seen as split aspects of a single character. The narrative structure of the novel, in which one woman's story is embedded within, yet held apart from, the other's may be seen as a reflection of the complex relationship between

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two systems of fantasy in the person for whom revenge becomes important.

Taking the Adeline character as primary, we may see the formation of the Bette character as a way of managing anger by splitting it off and holding it deep within the self. From this perspective, the opening scenes of the novel depict in a symbolic manner Adeline's reaction to the news that her husband has betrayed her. Balzac makes Crevel the intermediary in this betrayal; Hulot, Adeline's husband, is kept outside the scene. Nevertheless, Adeline's anger and shock are too intense to be contained within her rigidly held attitude of forgiveness. Hence she casts these feelings inward, into another story deep inside that is felt as separate from her own. Here they come alive in the venomous figure of Bette.

Within this framework, the ascendancy of the Bette figure within the novel could be seen to represent the regressive shift to a more primitive and aggressive mode of operations that takes place, under the impact of narcissistic injury, in rigid characters such as Adeline's—the dynamic that underlies Rosen's **(2004)** “falling in hate.” Within this regressive system of fantasy—the world seen through Bette's eyes—the narrative structure in which Bette's story is both embedded in Adeline's and held apart from it takes on a different set of meanings. The sense that her own story is both circumscribed by her cousin's and unrecognized now reflects Bette's subjective experience of helplessness and insignificance, an experience that she sets out to reverse with her vengeful scheming. The framing fantasy that her story is embedded within Adeline's also gives a sense of causality to Bette's experience of injury: there is a perpetrator; she has not simply been swept along by unrelated events. Balzac emphasizes the importance of this aspect of the fantasy for Bette by indicating that, although her suspicions are correctly triggered by Hortense's behavior, it is Adeline whom she blames.

The image of Adeline's story as encasing Bette's but held apart from it also reflects the configuration of an imagining parent and imagined child that we saw in the example of Miss A. Here we would see Adeline as a part of the self that is identified with the figure

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of a distant, unknowing parent, and Bette as a part that is identified with a child whose emotional experience must be kept secret. Balzac's description of the two characters supports this reading: in order to manage her feelings, he says, Adeline has “closed her eyes and shut her ears” (p. 30). And Bette's need to tailor herself to others has precluded her ever putting her sense of injury into words. As Balzac describes it, she “was so dependent on everyone that she seemed condemned to absolute silence” (p. 39).

This split within the self representation of the avenger between a compliant aspect of self and a resentful, vengeful aspect is in accord with Wurmser's **(2000)** description of the split self representation that is dictated by a rigid, condemning superego. However, my focus on the avenger's split fantasy of imaginer and imagined brings to our attention the complex nature of each side of the split self representation and the way that each side of the self is tied to a figure of the imagining parent, which is felt to be essential to the self's survival and continuing sense of meaning.

Although it would be simplistic to read a great work of literature as pathography **(Spitz 1988)**, markers of such distancing from primitive aggression and the distortions of the object world that are a consequence of it can be seen in Balzac's relation to the characters of his novel. Although the author's rendering of the character of Bette is subtle and compelling, the reader always feels at a distance from her. She is drawn as a monster, and ultimately her implacable hatred is felt to be inexplicable. We are not given access to her train of thought as we are with other central characters in Balzac's work. These others, such as Rastignac **(Balzac 1835)**, and Sechard and de Rubempre **(Balzac 1843)**, clearly reflect facets of the author's own history and character. *Yet* the early history of Cousin Bette also transparently resembles Balzac's own: sent away from home at birth, Balzac lived in a succession of families and schools, while his younger siblings were reared by his parents. Balzac was not permitted to return home to live until he had a nervous breakdown at school at age seventeen.

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In his letters, Balzac wrote of his terrible sense of rejection with a sensibility that we recognize as modern. Yet contrary to the manifest facts of the family circumstances, Balzac blamed his extrusion exclusively on his mother, whom he described as monstrous, ascribing to his father only the best wishes for his eldest son, and even apocryphally ascribing to the father a history of securing for his son the patent of nobility that Balzac himself fraudulently assumed **(Zweig 1946)**.

If the monstrous, enslaving quality that Balzac ascribed to his mother may be seen (as Balzac wrote that it is) in the figure of Bette, many aspects of his father's character and history may be found in the figure of Baron Hulot. Ultimately, it is Hulot's utterly self-centered pursuit of adultery that sets in motion the outer plot of revenge—and, even after Bette's death, causes the death of Adeline. Yet it is for the erring baron rather than the crushed Bette that Balzac solicits the reader's sympathy.

The Fading of the Wish for Revenge

How can the story of revenge be resolved? With clinical and literary examples, I have tried to depict the way the fantasy of a sadistic, crushing imaginer emerges in response to painful experiences in which the sense of self and the linked sense of an imagining audience are disrupted. As I have shown, the figure of the sadistic imaginer is actually the dark side of a split fantasy: the fantasy of a destructive imagining parent and a crushed self serves to protect an idealized fantasy of the imagining parent and the imagined self. At the same time, the fantasy of the sadistic imaginer itself serves to represent the experience of disrupted meaning. The fantasy of revenge involves a further permutation of this fantasy, in which the injured self identifies with the figure of the sadistic imaginer, forcing his experience of injury and rage upon the imaginer who is felt to have betrayed him.

Giving up the wish for revenge requires the avenger to recognize the rage and helplessness that are warded off by an identification

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with the sadistic imaginer, and, equally important, to integrate into his everyday self experience the sense of disrupted self that has kindled the wish for revenge. This integration requires the avenger to alter both the representation of his everyday self and the representation of the imagining parent who is felt to oversee this self representation. This process of integration and redefinition poses problems of different magnitudes for the occasional avenger and for the chronic one.

In ordinary times, the occasional avenger's experience is framed by an unconscious fantasy of an extensive and stable self that is known by a benevolent imagining parent. Traumatic injuries that fall outside ordinary self experience disrupt this stable fantasy of imaginer and imagined and lead to the regressive revival of a split fantasy. Giving up the wish for revenge involves acknowledgment of a transient disruption of self experience and the anger and helplessness that have accompanied this. In effect, the occasional avenger moves from a sense of "this can't be happening to me" to a sense of "this could happen to me," enlarging the map of his ordinary self experience to include the painful possibility of sometimes feeling unheard, unknown, and valueless.

This change in the self representation is matched by a change in the representation of the imagining other, as the magically protective qualities of the imaginer are mourned and the figure of the benevolent imaginer is altered to become one who could countenance the triggering injury. These changes in the representations of imaginer and imagined in turn permit a change in the felt quality of the remembered injury. It can be "forgotten and forgiven" **(Smith 2002)** because it is no longer felt as alien and incomprehensible **(Cavell 2004)**.

For the chronic avenger, daily self experience is framed by a durable split fantasy of imaginer and imagined that has assumed a host of important functions in mental life, particularly in the management of aggression. This split fantasy is complex and well elaborated, and the split occurs not between idealized and very bad versions, but rather between two different, more or less unsatisfactory versions. Each side of the split fantasy contains aspects

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of the imaginer that are essential for the survival of the self. The better, or higher-level, figure is felt to provide a continuing narrative, with the associated capacities to hold a third position and to reflect upon self experience. In addition, the fantasy of an imagining figure that is estranged from primitive aspects of the self acts as a rigid barrier to the awareness of primitive aggression. The lower-level figure, felt to be worse and saturated with aggression, nevertheless contains the capacity for affective relatedness.[3] The joining together of the two split fantasies is felt to threaten the survival of each, and particularly the survival of the higher-level, better fantasy. The fantasy of encasement, with its accompanying sense of the completeness and sequestration of each side, heightens the sense of a deep and irreversible split. The injury that kindles the wish for revenge tends to lead to a defensive reinforcement of the already dominant split that makes its ultimate resolution more difficult.

The injury that kindles the wish for revenge in the chronic avenger acts as a screen for the large reservoir of angry, primitive material that is excluded from the higher-level self. For this reason, the acknowledgment by the injured party, or even by the perpetrator of the injury that has kindled the wish for revenge, recommended by **Akhtar (2002)**, is less effective for the characterologically vengeful than for those who have suffered a single major disaster. The resolution of characterological vengefulness requires not only the recognition of unknown, painful parts of self experience, but also the working through of the underlying fantasy of why those parts of the self must remain unknown to an imagining other and to the self.

In analysis, as in life, vengefulness does not give way easily or all at once. **Steiner (1996)** notes that he is unable to find a piece of clinical material that neatly illustrates the interpretive resolution of a resentful impasse, and speculates that such moments are real but

[3] I have described a related split within the object world of the psychopath, in which each side of a split bad object relation is felt to contain an essential aspect of the self and the object **(LaFarge 1995)**.

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hard to describe. Although vengefulness ebbs and flows in moments, the complex fantasy structure that underlies the wish for revenge is dismantled very slowly in an analysis. And although the analysis of vengefulness involves the interpretation of the destructive part of the fantasy system, and this is the part that appears in bold relief, a great deal of the analytic work must be in the area of the split-off fantasy of the more positive, higher-level imaginer. This working with the more positive figure of the imagining parent (and the figure of the imagined child to which it is linked) is, I think, the process that Lansky (**2001**, **in press**) describes when he writes of the reworking of the ego ideal that is required in order to give up the wish for revenge.

In the analysis of Miss A, the qualities of the more positive split-off fantasy of imaginer and imagined came into clear focus only very late in the analysis when we faced the end of our shared imagining. Now, as Miss A spoke about her fantasy of being encased within my body and my mind, and began to ask how she had gotten inside and how she could get out, I was able to link this fantasy to the feeling of smooth, undisrupted listening that I had experienced so strongly throughout most of the analysis. In addition, I was able to begin to think more clearly about the vengeful disruption of a year earlier, when I had felt that my own thinking was so sadistically controlled by Miss A's, and I could now link this experience to Miss A's fantasy.

The analytic work that resulted enabled Miss A to leave the analysis with a sense that she knew herself and that I continued to know and understand her when we were apart. However, the fantasy of the sadistic imaginer and the associated wish for revenge continued to operate as regressive pathways when she encountered disappointment and injury in the years following termination, requiring repeated returns to see me for brief courses of treatment and further working through.

It is possible that the positive, split-off fantasy of imaginer and imagined that was enacted throughout so much of Miss A's analysis, and that formed the background for so much of our work, could only have come into focus as we approached termination.

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However, it also seems possible to me now, looking back several years after the termination of the analysis, that I could have recognized this dominant, enacted fantasy earlier in the analysis if I had paid fuller attention to the scattered moments of confusion that I felt with Miss A throughout our work together. These moments came together for me as a single group only after Miss A's dramatic act of revenge. As I began to reflect on them, I became aware that they were connected to my transient thoughts that Miss A was alien, unknowable, and disturbing. After considerable countertransference analysis, I also became aware that they resonated with thoughts about myself, that I might be equally alien, incapable of being known or of knowing others.

It seems likely to me now that these moments of alienation reflected less toxic and deeply split-off versions of the fantasy of the sadistic imaginer that emerged with such destructive force in Miss A's act of revenge. Earlier attention to them might have permitted me to recognize sooner the split between different aspects of Miss A's experience of telling and being heard, and allowed me to help her begin to explore the defensive functions of her seamless mode of storytelling.

In the end, if the wish for revenge passes at all, it fades away gradually. And, as **Lansky (2001)** observes, revenge is not necessarily succeeded by forgiveness. Rather, the avenger comes to feel less burdened by his rage at his injury and the need to undo it. Another patient described this shift as one from rage to anger. With rage, she had felt as if her whole self was at stake, and her vengefulness proclaimed her right to exist and to have any rights at all. Now, with anger, the feeling was narrower. Less was at stake, and she was able to look at the specific details of her feeling, to change what made her angry in the outside world—or even, by accepting her disappointment, to give up her anger and move on.

Conclusion

My exploration of the wish for revenge has covered a wide territory. I have tried to demonstrate why this is so. Revenge is a far-reaching

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concept. The fantasy of the sadistic imaginer and its mirror image, the fantasy of revenge, are fundamental ways that we represent and manage pain and rage that are felt to intrude on our representation of a continuous self and a benevolent imagining other. In a sense, our representational world might be seen as a kind of topographical map. In our everyday, good-enough experience of self, we inhabit a landmass that is known and ruled by a benevolent imagining despot. Offshore, and outside our usual awareness, lies an uncharted sea of self experience that has been too disruptive to be included and that is felt in fantasy to lie outside the monarchy. Into this sea we cast some aspects of ourselves and our imaginers that properly belong on land, but in its great mass, the sea is one of painful unknownness. We become aware of it when our ordinary sense of value and meaning is disrupted, and as we come to know it, we impose a structure upon it, seeing it as the work of a cruel and disruptive imaginer. The quest for revenge reflects our identification with the cruel despot whom we have constructed.

The fantasy of a sadistic imaginer with whom we identify in the wish for revenge cannot be seen simply as a generic screen that captures the experience of unstructured rage. Although these figures are shaped by universal conflicts, they are highly individual, incorporating memories and fantasies of the imagining figures who have participated in the shaping of our inner worlds. At the same time, it would be incorrect to view the figure of the sadistic imaginer as the direct descendant of the actual early parent, the representation of a historical sadistic imaginer of childhood. Like other representations, the figure of the sadistic imaginer is most usefully seen as a compromise formation, condensing fantasy and memory and serving the purposes of wish and defense. In clinical work, it is particularly important to recognize that this figure is one-half of a split representation, of which the other half is often much less easily discerned. The resolution of the wish for revenge requires us to come to terms not only with injury and rage, but also with our vulnerability to these feelings, and with the powerlessness

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of the good internalized figures who preside over our inner worlds to protect us from them.

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