

## Pathological Narcissism in an Eight-Year-Old Boy: An Example of Bellak's TAT and CAT Diagnostic System

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Narcissistic pathology is difficult to assess in psychological testing of children and adults. Contemporary psychoanalytic diagnosis is based on Freud's (1915) metapsychological points of view and A. Freud's (1965) developmental profile, as in Schafer's (1954) Rorschach approach and Bellak's (1986) system for the Thematic Apperception Test and Children's Apperception Test. Bellak (1986) provided an analysis of the relation of the ego (self-concept characteristics of the main hero, conception of the world, interpersonal object relations, defense mechanisms, and 12 ego functions), id (thematic analysis, needs, anxieties, and significant conflicts), and superego. A case example of narcissistic pathology in a young child's Children's Apperception Test demonstrates this method of psychoanalytic diagnosis.

Neurotic conditions have been extensively studied in the projective test literature. The past decade has witnessed a revival of psychoanalytic studies of Rorschach test characteristics of patients with the preoedipal condition of borderline pathology (Chabert, 1987; Kwawer, H. Lerner, P. Lerner, & Sugarman, 1980; H. Lerner, 1988; P. Lerner, 1991; Pfefferbaum, Mullins, Rhoades, & McLaughlin, 1987).

During the same period, a lively international literature on thematic test analysis of preoedipal conditions has also been flourishing. In the United States, the fourth edition of Bellak's (1986) *The TAT, CAT, and SAT in Clinical Use* included three new chapters coauthored with Abrams on object relations, borderline and narcissistic conditions, and neuropsychological di-

mensions, which address the use of thematic tests in the assessment of patients who do not show the typical characteristics of neurotic conditions. Other studies of preoedipal disorders are those of Rogoff (1985), Rosoff (1988), and Sutcliffe (1989) in the United States; Rauchfleisch (1989, 1991), Seifert (1984), and Revers and Allesch (1985) in Germany and Austria; Silva (1982, 1985) in Portugal; Ávila Espada (1985, 1986, 1990) in Spain; Si Moussi (1990) in Algeria; and, most notably, Brelet (1981, 1983, 1986, 1987, 1988), Shentoub (1981, 1986, 1987), and Shentoub et al. (1990) in France.

It has frequently been observed that pathological narcissism is difficult to assess on psychological tests. Because individuals with this condition often display a surface level of adjustment, they are rarely referred for psychological testing. However, they tend to have great difficulty forming and maintaining relationships and little empathy for the needs and feelings of others; they tend to display grandiosity in unrealistic schemes, exaggerated self-regard, constant demands for attention, inordinate idealization of certain hero figures, and intense envy of others. When feeling rejected or even mildly criticized, they may express extreme, almost paranoid anger, often referred to as *exquisite narcissistic vulnerability*. They often express a sense of entitlement and emotional aloofness, as if "splendidly isolated" from the ordinary world of other people. The borderline patient typically shows more signs of impulsivity, extreme mood swings, and indicators of fragmentation in storytelling style and content on his or her Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) and Children's Apperception Test (CAT) protocols, whereas the narcissistic patient is often better organized and more stable.

Brelet (1986, pp. 91–118; 1987) provided good examples of TAT responses from narcissistic individuals; they tend to portray themselves as heroes on a grand theatrical stage putting on a one-man show without the need of a director or anyone else, which masks underlying feelings of defectiveness, insecurity, and loneliness. In Shentoub et al. (1990, pp. 161–173), Brelet, Benfredj, Emmanuelli, and Peruchon presented a full-length TAT protocol of a narcissistic man whose omnipotence, affectualization, and idealization are but a thin veil for feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, and anonymity.

Writers on pathological narcissism (Bach, 1985; Grunberger, 1979, 1989; O. Kernberg, 1975, 1976, 1980; Kohut, 1971, 1977, 1984; Modell, 1976; Volkan, 1976, 1979) are in agreement that this condition has its origins in the earliest years of childhood, such as growing up in a family that pushes the child into a premature self-sufficiency; overvalues the child as special; or fails genuinely to relate to the child's normal needs for love, understanding, and support. A growing literature of clinical case studies of children with pathological narcissism (Berberich, 1988; Beren, 1992; Bleiberg, 1984, 1988; Egan & P. Kernberg, 1984; P. Kernberg, 1989; Ornstein, 1981) is establishing this disorder as a valid primary diagnosis in childhood. But to date, there have not been any projective testing case studies of such children. This article presents

the CAT protocol of an 8-year-old boy with narcissistic pathology and demonstrates the approach of Bellak (1986) in making this assessment.

### BELLAK'S DIAGNOSTIC SYSTEM

In Murray's (1943) TAT, an individual is asked to "make up a story" to 19 pictures of individuals in different social situations and to 1 blank card. The set of pictures was developed from paintings, advertisements in popular magazines, and photographs of notable individuals (e.g., Card 1 of child prodigy violinist Yehudi Menuhin), which were redrawn by Samuel Thal and Christiana D. Morgan.

Murray's (1938, 1943) method of scoring identifies (a) a specific set of variables, attitudes, or traits, which he called *needs* for abasement, achievement, aggression, acquisition, autonomy, creation, deference, destruction, dominance, intraggression, nurturance, passivity, and succorance; and (b) forces in the hero's environment, which he believed pressed on the hero, such as affiliation, aggression, dominance, nurturance, lack, loss, or physical injury. This dualistic "need–press" approach provides a way to assess an individual's relationship to the environment, which Murray maintained is independent of psychoanalytic theory. According to Murray (1943, p. 9), "a psychologist can use these variables without subscribing to any particular theory of drives," as Chandler, Shermis, and Lempert (1989) and Schroth (1977, 1979) demonstrated.

By contrast, Bellak came directly to work in Murray's laboratory at Harvard University in the 1940s from studying psychoanalysis during Freud's last years in his native Vienna. The outcome of this work was Bellak's development of variations of the TAT for different age groups, such as (a) the CAT of animal pictures for children aged 4 to 11 years, which also can be usefully added to the assessment of adults (Kitron & Benziman, 1990) and as a prelude to short-term psychotherapy (Abrams, 1992b); (b) the Children's Apperception Test–Human Figures (CAT–H) for older children; (c) the Children's Apperception Test–Supplement (CAT–S) to address life-trauma events; and (d) the Senior Apperception Test (SAT) for elderly people. In addition, he developed his own scoring system (Bellak, 1947) and his textbook (1986), first published in 1954.

Bellak's (1947) scoring system takes one through a sequence of 10 different categories, which lead step-by-step to an integrated summary of the major dimensions of contemporary psychoanalytic diagnosis. As in the Rorschach system of Exner (1986), diagnosis of a patient can be made according to any single dimension. However, the sequence of 10 dimensions taken together provide a multidimensional, comprehensive diagnostic picture according to the diagnostic principles of Freud (1915) and A. Freud (1965).

The first dimension, the *main theme* of each story, is a good example of a self-contained method of analysis consisting of four steps: (a) Summarize the basic plot (descriptive level), (b) note the plot's meaning (interpretive level), (c) note the psychological meaning (diagnostic level), and (d) allow for a more free expansion of the previous three levels (elaborative level). Psychoanalytically, the first level is closer to the more conscious level of the manifest content of the story, whereas the other three levels attempt to get at the story's more underlying unconscious latent content. For the tester, the first three levels represent a more conscious, intellectual approach, whereas the fourth level encourages some free association, as a therapist will do in treatment in the attempt to understand the inner life of a patient. This does not encourage "wild analysis" (Freud, 1910) but is instead a fundamentally empirical approach in that the levels of analysis move from what Bellak (1986, 1993) called an "observation-near" description to a more abstract, "observation-distant" diagnostic interpretation.

The second dimension pertains to the identifying characteristics of the *main hero* of the story (age, sex, vocation, abilities, interests, traits, body and/or self-image), which relate to what Freud (1914) referred to as the "libidinal cathexis of the self-representation" and what Kohut (1971) differentiated into (a) the libidinal level of self-esteem, (b) the level of cohesion of the self, and (c) the level of continuity of the self-representation over time.

The third dimension deals with the *main needs*—the wishes, impulses, and drives—of the hero. These may be directly stated in the story; implied through the introduction of figures, objects, or circumstances not typically expressed in stories to these cards; or implied through omissions of figures, objects, or circumstances in stories to particular cards. This is the realm of unconscious sexual and aggressive feelings, which are also considered in terms of the predominant phase of psychosexual development represented in a story (e.g., oral, anal, phallic, urethral), as in Pine (1960) and Schafer (1954).

The fourth dimension is the overall *conception of the world* in the story, which relates to A. Freud's (1965) concept of "environmental stressors"—that is, basic traumas and life-stress events that influence how the individual views the world. It facilitates a summary of the individual's basic view of the world related to Freud's, Adler's, and Sullivan's concepts of an individual's characterological attitude and style of living.

The fifth dimension is *interpersonal object relations*, the subject's relationship to parental figures, peers, and junior figures. This relates to Freud's concept of the degree to which an individual libidinally cathects the world of other people (Thomas & Dudek, 1985) as well as how these interpersonal relationships are represented as self and object representations or images in the internal world of unconscious fantasy, as developed by the British school of object-relations theory (Abrams, 1991, 1992a; Bellak, 1986, 1993). It is also the dimension of Sullivan's interpersonal theory, which focuses specifically on

the individual's degree of relatedness with other people in the external world.

The sixth, seventh, and eighth dimensions are based on identifying drive-defense constellations expressed in a story in terms of specific *conflicts*, *nature of anxieties*, and *main defenses* against conflicts, anxieties, and fears. The main questions are with what is the individual struggling and how is the individual attempting to cope with these struggles. The ninth dimension addresses *super-ego functioning* in terms of its appropriateness, severity, consistency, leniency, superego interference, and presence of delayed gratification of impulses.

The tenth dimension deals with *integration of the ego* in terms of three levels of story outcome, as in the story outcome scale in Abrams (1977) and Sutton-Smith et al. (1981), and the presence and adequacy of 12 ego functions: reality testing, judgment, sense of reality, regulation and control of affects and impulses, object relations, thought processes, adaptive regression in the service of the ego, defensive functioning, stimulus barrier, autonomous ego functioning, synthetic functioning, and mastery-competence. As mentioned earlier, each of Bellak's dimensions may suffice as a separate system of thematic test analysis; this has been particularly demonstrated for the assessment of ego functions by Bellak (1986, 1988, 1993); Bellak, Hurvich, and Gediman (1973); Bellak and Goldsmith (1984); and Morval (1977).

Increasingly, psychologists employ the same basic set of 10 cards for both males and females (Cards 1, 2, 3BM, 4, 6BM, 7GF, 8BM, 9GF, 10, and 13MF), which facilitates the same type of standardized sequential analysis as in the Rorschach (Bellak, 1986; Brelet, 1986; Shentoub et al., 1990). When administering thematic tests, it is important to make every effort to obtain a full narrative in response to each picture by continuing to ask what happens next and by asking for an ending to the story so that the protocol may reach more of the richness and depth of dream narratives. Some psychologists simply ask for a description of each card and then for associations to different aspects of the card, as if doing a Rorschach inquiry. However, the approach recommended here makes the protocol easier to score and closer to the individual's "life narrative."

Bellak's diagnostic system resembles Schafer's (1948, 1954) in the sense that both approaches are solidly grounded in psychoanalytic theory and have remained the primary methods of psychoanalytic diagnosis for the TAT and Rorschach test, respectively, for over 4 decades in the United States and abroad. The dimensions of Bellak's (1947) psychoanalytic diagnostic system were later expressed in developmental terms by A. Freud's (1965, p. 138) "developmental, metapsychological profile," Rangell's (1965) attempt at a comprehensive psychoanalytic nosology, and Bolland and Sandler's (1965) exposition of the Hampstead Psychoanalytic Index. Anna Freud's developmental profile represents the highest level of contemporary psychoanalytic diagnosis and is most useful in pointing to areas the patient and clinician tend to leave out due to repression, countertransference, and other limitations.

Simpler and more straightforward, Bellak's approach is also useful in the analysis of other forms of fantasy narratives, such as dreams, play narratives of children in treatment, and short stories (Bellak, 1963; 1986, chap. 9).

#### CAT PROTOCOL

The narcissistic characteristics in the following CAT protocol might easily have escaped diagnostic attention given this boy's superb performance in school and in sports, his handsome appearance, and his appealing manner of relating to adults. However, his teachers and parents reported that he often lacks a fundamental sensitivity to other people's feelings. If someone else is upset, for example, he appears cold and indifferent. On the other hand, he is oversensitive about himself and throws temper tantrums when receiving anything less than perfect grades, when disciplined or criticized, or when told he cannot have something he desires. At such times, he is extremely disrespectful of others, insulting them and saying he wants them totally out of his life, perhaps externalizing onto others aspects of his own degraded self-image.

As in the Greek myth of Narcissus, the parents reported that most people who meet this boy immediately fall in love with him due to his good looks, seemingly outgoing and friendly personality, lively vitality, and sense of humor, but they can understand neither his temper outbursts nor his apparent lack of feeling for them and others. Many temper outbursts result from taking on difficult and demanding chores at home and in school, which makes him believe he is working harder to do well than anyone else and so is entitled only to be appreciated and praised. If he is then asked to do one more thing on a bad day, he may suddenly yell and scream, flaring up as if this were unbearable stress. Moreover, his overresponsible and unforgiving moral perfectionism toward himself often makes him so intolerant of others who let him down that he may refuse to play or talk with them ever again. This "narcissistic rage" (Kohut, 1972) contributes to him not having even one close friend.

The method of analysis of the CAT is to first score each story for all 10 categories on Bellak's (1947) Short Form. A final tabulation of all scores is then done on the last page of this form, which is presented in Table 1 (the full three-page analysis of the case is available from the author).

After scoring the CAT, there are several methods of reporting the results: (a) An integrative summary of this and other tests may be given in general terms, such as "projective testing shows underlying feelings of inferiority"; (b) a summary description of the results of the CAT can be given, as in the concluding section of this article; or (c) the more detailed analysis illustrated here can be given, in which each story is followed by an interpretative comment and an overall CAT summary is provided at the end. Because there is not enough space to provide an analysis of all 10 categories for each story, the

TABLE 1  
CAT Summary of Scores

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1. Main theme: Most repeated theme is of incompetent buffoon (Stories 2, 3, 5, 8, 10?).
  2. Self-functioning of main hero: Main heroes are mostly male children (1, 2, 7, 8, 10), only one child is female (9). They are mostly ineffectual, wimpy, and overwhelmed (1, 2, 7, 9, 10), except in three stories of super-assertive child figures (5, 6, 8).
  3. Main needs and drives of hero:
    - a. Behavioral needs in story: Oral needs (1, 4, 7, 9). Need to succeed and win (1, 2, 8?). Phallic oedipal drive (3, 5?, 6, 10).
    - b. Introductions: Grandiose circumstance (1, 3). Famous person (5, 8). Threatening, critical father (5, 6, 9).
    - c. Omissions: Parent figure (5, 6, 10). Child figure (3). Critical incident or spanking (8, 10).
  4. Conception of the world: Unproductive and threatening (2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9). Overdemanding, uncaring, overly critical (5, 6, 9). Nurturing (4).
  5. Interpersonal object relations:
    - a. Parent figures: Father figures seen mostly as *immature, incompetent, boastful buffoons* (3, 5, 8, 9, 10). Suddenly aggressively threatening figures (5, 6, 7). Overly demanding or critical figures (1, 8). Mother figures seen as *nurturing* (1, 4), *shadowy* (1), *protective* (8), *critical* (8), *immature and self-centered* (10).
    - b. Peers: Peers seen as *passive* (5), *undifferentiated or acting in parallel* (1), *compliant, withdrawn* (1), *overwhelmed* (7, 9, 10), or *triumphant* (7).
    - c. Junior figures: None mentioned.
  6. Significant conflicts: Narcissistic, oral deprivation, competence conflict (1, 2, 8, 9, 10). Success neurosis conflict (1, 2, 3, 8). Conflict over aggressive impulses (5, 6, 7).
  7. Nature of fears, insecurities, and anxieties: Of physical harm (3, 5, 6, 7, 10?). Of being overwhelmed and helpless (1, 2, 3, 7). Of deprivation (4?, 6, 9). Of disapproval and criticism (8).
  8. Main defense and coping mechanisms: Regression (2, 3, 8, 10). Compliance (1, 7). Splitting (1, 2). Identification with aggressor (5, 8). Verbal assertiveness coping mechanism (6, 8). Oral incorporation (7, 9). Blocking (1, 10). Magical thinking (4, 5). Acting out (6, 10). Denial by minimalization (6). Displacement (10). Passive aggressive acting out (10). Avoidance/withdrawal (1). Dependent call for help (4).
  9. Superego functioning: Severe superego in terms of severe retaliation and immediacy of response (2, 3, 5, 7). Superego interference (6, 8?, 9). Appropriate (8, 10).
  10. Integration of the ego:
    - a. Story outcome: No attempt to mediate conflict (3, 10). Failed attempt to mediate conflict (1, 2, 6, 7, 9). Successful mediation of conflict (4, 5, 8). Appropriate plot (2, 5, 6). Stereotyped plot (4, 7). Original plot (1, 3?, 8, 9, 10?).
    - b. Ego functions: Perception, judgment, memory, and reality-testing related to description of card are quite good. Synthetic function, adaptive regression in the service of the ego, and use of language are also quite good. Good fluency, originality of stories, humor, and overall logical organization of stories. However, control of drives, sense of reality, mastery-competence, defensive functions, and object relations are in neurotic and narcissistic range.
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interpretive comment after each story will have to be limited to demonstrating only two or three of Bellak's categories.

Card 1

Sometime, in a little cabin, there are three birds eating their breakfast and a big, big shadow of a hen. (And then?) And then Babe Ruth came along and asked them if they'd pinch run for him in the World Series. And they said, "Yes." And then it was the World Series and they were pinch running. But they didn't know how to do it. And they got out. (Is that the end?) Yes.

*Comment.* His opening communication seems to be that he feels that his own family home is not fully adequate ("a little cabin") and that there is a lack of genuine, object-related contact with others (suggested by referring to the larger figure as a "shadow of a hen," rather than the real mother chicken feeding her children that most children his age tend to see on this card). An hypothesis is that he may experience his own mother as "shadowy," rather than as a real, concrete object with whom he can realistically interact. Beginning the story with "sometime" further suggests a feeling of indefiniteness about his surrounding world, parents, and self.

Grandiosity enters in his introduction of the legendary baseball player, Babe Ruth, who asks the child-figure chickens to substitute run for him. This is a grandiose wish for the little child figures to be able to do what a big baseball hero does. Even more so, he has them run instead of Babe Ruth doing the running. Defensively, this suggests an omnipotent denial of the reality limitations of what a child can and cannot do. However, when it comes to the World Series, he reasserts reality testing by saying that the chicks did not know how to pinch run for Babe Ruth, so they got out. Getting out suggests a wish to withdraw from his father's unrealistic expectations of him.

Following Bellak's first scoring dimension, the descriptive level is that three creatures are eating breakfast. Abruptly, a famous person is introduced and asks if the child figures would substitute for him in an athletic activity. The youngsters agree to do so but fail at it. The interpretive level is that even when this child is engaged in a routine activity, he may doubt he can do it with ordinary competence. Hence he abruptly leaves reality and enters into a fantasy. The nucleus of the fantasy is that a famous athlete asks the heroes to perform for him, but the heroes do not know how to do it and fail. The interpretation is that when asked to perform a difficult feat, he fails. Beren (1992) and P. Kernberg (1989) similarly report narcissistic children quickly giving up attempting tasks they feel they cannot do with outstanding success. The diagnostic level is that this boy seems to fantasize very easily, specifically of being a great athlete by virtue of being picked out by a famous person for an athletic feat. But when he actually attempts the feat in fantasy, he fails. This suggests a wish to be made great by the paternal figure, a tendency toward fantasizing, and a feeling of inadequacy. The elaborative level might be that this seems to be a boy given to a great deal of grandiose fantasizing, the nature of which may often interfere with his relation to reality, and that this wishful fantasy life is an attempt to defend against a



narrow self-esteem. Though narcissistic issues appear to be predominant, the story may also express a higher, oedipal-level "success neurosis" based on ambivalence over wishes to replace his father.

Card 2

Once in the woods, three bears were having a big tug-of-war and it was two against one. It seemed as if the person who only has two was winning. Although, the person, the two bears, did fall in the mud. And that ended it. (Who were they, the different bears? What were they like?) Two very wimpy bears. They're all men bears.

*Comment.* Some difficulty in object-related interaction may be suggested by the vagueness in this story about the different animals in the picture. The phrase "the person who only has two was winning" suggests a lack of self-object differentiation and a wish to merge symbiotically with another; in this case the picture shows a child with a parent figure on one side of the rope. When asked to identify the bears, he says the two are "very wimpy bears" and adds that "they're all men bears." This may suggest an image of his father as "wimpy" and point again to underlying feelings of inadequacy expressed in the first story of the little chicks who blow their first big chance to participate in the World Series. Here, the bears end up falling in the mud, suggesting anal regression. The story also shows an ego structure breakdown in the regressive use of language in an otherwise highly intelligent and articulate child, which may represent an anxiety reaction to the aggressive family struggle depicted on this card.

Card 3

Once in a house, there was a mouse hole and there was a chair with an old lion in it smoking his pipe in front of the TV watching the World Series in 1986 (laughs). (And then?) Then he smokes his pipe so much that he starts to cough, and he can't see the baseball game. So he falls to the floor, saying, "Hmm. This smells" (laughs).

*Comment.* This protocol was administered in June 1989, 3 years after the New York Mets had won the World Series in 1986. Usually, the card brings out the interaction of the little mouse looking at and interacting with the lion. In his story, he perseverates on the theme of baseball's World Series, which has now come into two of his first three stories. The fact that the mouse is not mentioned and that the lion is watching TV may continue to express the sense that this boy feels himself to be an invisible onlooker on the sidelines of the world of others rather than a true, object-related participant. It may also suggest that he does not experience much active interaction with his father. Primitive splitting is suggested by the juxtaposition of the World Series theme with that of an old man who smokes, cannot see the TV, and ends by regressively falling on the floor. The defense mechanism of reversal of affect is indicated by the boy laughing as he says that the old lion falls to the floor. So far, a distinct dynamic is his inner sense of low self-esteem and inability to do things successfully, against which he tries to defend with omnipotent grandiose denial, reversal of affect, anal regression, and avoidance in keeping a distance from true emotional involvement with

others. The fact that he diminishes the lion into a ridiculous figure, when most children see it as the powerful “King of the Jungle,” suggests that he may see his father and himself as awkward, regressive individuals.

Card 4

God, this is hard. Once there were three kangaroos. One on her tricycle, one Mom bouncing, and one kangaroo in the Mom’s pouch, and it looks as though they’re going on a picnic and here comes a house with its fire going and trees. (Anything happen?) They’re going to eat their picnic food.

*Comment.* The opening “God, this is hard” suggests further feelings of personal inadequacy, so that he may want to appeal for help to the omnipotent God. The figures in the picture get their oral needs met, in that they are said to “eat their picnic food.” But nothing else is given in response to this card. He is not able to go much beyond a sparse description of the picture, which may again suggest some conflict with his own mother around whether or not he feels he can genuinely interact with her beyond the level of narcissistic need satisfaction of simply getting fed by her. The atypical introduction of a reference to “fire” may suggest a urethral problem, such as bedwetting.

Card 5

Once there was a house with two baby bears sleeping in a bed and the house had three windows, one giant bed, a night table with a lamp on it, and a staircase leading down to the door. (Anything happen next?) Through the night, a mysterious killer comes into their room wanting to kill them. But then the baby says, “I’M SUPERMAN!!!” (He stands up yelling this out.) He chops off the killer’s head, and that was the end of Dan Quayle (laughs).

*Comment.* With this story, he brings in an idea that he may experience the world as suddenly and unpredictably threatening to him, threatening him with total annihilation. He introduces into the quiet scene a dangerous “killer,” and then seems to utilize omnipotent, grandiose denial by having one of the two baby bears jump up and turn into Superman. Superman kills the threatening killer who then turns into Dan Quayle—at the time of this CAT, Vice-President of the United States under George Bush and the butt of many jokes due to some people’s perception that he was inadequate for his job, much less for that of the presidency. This harks back to the first story of the child figures not being able to substitute for Babe Ruth in the World Series and reiterates this boy’s predominant feeling of inadequacy underneath a cover of apparent good looks and seeming competence (which at that time was also one view of Dan Quayle).

This card suggests the primal scene to many children; thus it may be that he first attempts to deal with the stimulus by being excessively descriptive, which Freud (1900, p. 177) discussed as a way to trivialize issues of deeper meaning. But this does not work well given his fear of harm, perhaps due to fear his father will retaliate for a wish to be under the covers in bed with the mother. His grandiose fantasy life takes over again—there is an abrupt loosening of reality. He introduces the mysterious killer, and the baby responds by announcing that

he is Superman, killing the intruder—which suggest further defenses of denial, magical thinking, and identification with the aggressor.

Card 6

Once in a cave there were one big bear and one little bear. There were lots of leaves in there. And suddenly came along a lion trying to rob all their money. So then the boy bear woke up and said, “Hey, you trying to steal my money?” So then the lion said, “Well, you make a good point there. But I still want your money.” So then there was a big fight. But then the lion, he whipped her butt. And that was the end. And then Little Bear said, “What you do to Big Bear?” And then the lion said, “Oh, I just chopped off her butt.”

*Comment.* He begins this story with the omission of the third bear, often characteristic of narcissistically fixated individuals, who tend to see their interpersonal object relations as dyadic (mother–child), in contrast to the triadic (father–mother–child) relations of neurotic level individuals (Beren, 1992; P. Kernberg, 1989). It may also suggest a feeling of being distanced from his father, whom he may then introduce in the figure of the intruding lion that threatens to deprive him by robbing them of their money. The atypical introduction of a threatening lion again suggests a regression around fantasy life disruptively interfering with reality testing.

The boy bear seems to take charge and tell the lion not to steal their money, which represents an attempt to deal with threat with coping mechanisms of verbalization and self-assertion rather than retaliating with an aggression of one’s own. The lion at first acquiesces by saying, “You make a good point there,” but then repeats his threat to take the money. So the mother bear fights with the lion, who ends by beating up and doing away with her. Diagnostically, this child seems to feel basically unprotected from internal and external threats and to see his parents as basically ineffectual. Defensive reversal of affect is seen in the lion responding to the boy bear’s opening verbal confrontation with “You make a good point there,” and denial by minimalization is seen in the lion saying he “just” chopped off the mother bear’s butt.

Alternatively, the story may be considered as an oedipal wish to be alone with the mother, followed by the father’s angry return to reclaim the mother for himself and a fear of castration displaced to the anus of the mother. However, the ineffectiveness of the parents, anal castration, and the outcome of violent deprivation of the mother underlines the predominant regression to and fixation at a preoedipal, narcissistic anal level.

Card 7

Once in a jungle there was a big tiger trying to kill a monkey. There were lots of vines and trees in this jungle and the monkey was trying to escape. But the tiger was too fast and ate up the monkey.

*Comment.* To this card showing a clearly threatening tiger, he can give only a short story where the monkey tries to escape but ends getting eaten up by the tiger. This is further expression of the theme of feeling unprotected in an externally threatening world and a fear of being devoured and annihilated. As an overt

fear may also mask an underlying wish, the fear of being devoured may also represent a wish to merge with and/or be incorporated by the parent. As with Card 2, the direct depiction of aggression in this card may have stimulated a defensive "restriction of ego function" (A. Freud, 1936), indicated by this child providing a very short story when he is able to develop longer stories to cards he finds more benign.

#### Card 8

Once in a house with all monkeys, there was a picture of a monkey. And all the monkeys were sitting on a sofa and on a chair. And one was standing with what looks like an aunt monkey teaching him a lesson and two were drinking tea. And one was wearing a flower in her hair, one was wearing earrings, and the monkey standing looks like he was going outside to play baseball. (What happens next?) Right when he was going outside to play baseball . . . um . . . he ran into . . . George Steinbrenner. So he told George Steinbrenner, "Get lost, or else you're in trouble." So then George Steinbrenner said, "I can play baseball better than you!" So the monkey said, "Oh yeah! What about your stupid Yankees? How do you teach THEM to play?" And then George Steinbrenner says, "You make a good point there. You're right. I do stink." (Is that the end?) Yeah.

*Comment.* After the aggressive content of the last card, he begins to recover with this story by bringing back his developmentally higher level defenses of intellectualization (descriptively listing all the figures and details in the picture), isolation of affect (suggested by speaking of the "picture of a monkey" as if to distance himself from emotional interaction, like the references to "sometime" and "shadow of a hen" in Card 1), reversal of affect (the joking about George Steinbrenner), and identification with the aggressor (because George Steinbrenner first intimidates the child monkey, the child monkey tries to humiliate him).

The introduction of George Steinbrenner suggests that this child attempts to make his father less threatening by making him into a boasting buffoon, who does not turn out to be anything. The beginning descriptive details switch to baseball again with a contest about who can do better in self-deprecating ways, ending with "I do stink." This anal self-image is contrasted with narcissistic, exhibitionistic references to a "picture of a [famous?] monkey," to the celebrity Steinbrenner, and to monkeys wearing "a flower in her hair" and "earrings."

Again the dynamic seems to be a famous individual who is supposed to have a lot of power but whose competence underneath is shaky at best. Card 5 has Vice-President Dan Quayle; this one has George Steinbrenner (at the time of this protocol, the owner of the Yankees baseball team), who has often publicly acted tough and controlling, boisterously firing staff yet infrequently getting his team to perform on a very high level. Developmentally, this child seems not to be able to deal effectively with oedipal rivalry or the age-appropriate latency level of peer competition without constantly regressing to an excess of anal, narcissistic fantasizing.

#### Card 9

Hmm. Once in a house there was a room. Door slightly, I mean with a door opened with windows with curtains, and a mirror, and a night table, and a rabbit

in the bed going to sleep. (Anything happen next?) Um . . . she's going to dream that she's in Rabbit Land hopping, hopping, hopping. But here's a strange part of the story. Suddenly, her boss comes and says, "What you doing here?" Although her boss was a big fat guy, he didn't know how to do anything. He was just a lazy bum. So she just goes hopping along and she runs into an ice cream shop. So she buys ice cream and she tries to eat it. But instead of it melting, it melts her, and that's the end (laughs).

*Comment.* The powerful dynamic of underlying feelings of inadequacy beneath a cover of boastful grandiosity and the theme of the father figure as a buffoon are again repeated in the reference to the lazy bum boss ("although her boss was a big fat guy, he didn't know how to do anything"). Underlying fearfulness is also expressed by the beginning of the door opening while the child rabbit is going to sleep. Though the boss, who seems at first to confront the child rabbit, is ultimately seen as harmless, the child rabbit ends up melting away after eating an ice cream cone. To the earlier hypothesis of an urethral problem from Card 4 could be added that he suffers from nocturnal enuresis due to separation anxiety intensified by being alone at night.

Reversal of affect is again employed to defend against this unfortunate ending of the child rabbit, whose food seems to do her in, which may also express a feeling that his mother and the nurturance she gives to him seem like a good dessert but are ultimately cold and annihilating. The ending suggests an abrupt jump in the thought processes to an unrealistic, extreme regression and a major conflict around primary nurturance.

#### Card 10

Once up in a bathroom (laughs), there was two puppies. One looks like he wanted to go to the bathroom. And the other looks like he wanted to keep the other one from going to the bathroom. So it looks like she wanted to cut his toenail. But it wasn't that, she just had to go to the bathroom, too. (Is that the end?) Yes.

*Comment.* The more common story to this card is of a child dog doing something wrong, such as drinking from the toilet bowl, so the parent dog gives it a spanking. To this scene, he instead omits the spanking parent by making the animals into "two puppies," which represents an attempt at first to deny the punitive side of his mother expressed in previous stories. He may wish to distance himself from the card's scene of spanking, so he changes it to the mother looking as if she wanted to cut his toenail, "but it wasn't that, she just had to go to the bathroom, too." The perception of the mother as punishing (or to him castrating, symbolized by a displacement downward—"to cut his toenail") is then defensively minimized by having her "just" wanting to keep him from going to the bathroom in order that she herself may go.

He also defensively reacts to the aggressive content of this card with an ego regression, as earlier noted on Cards 2 and 7, seen here in the lack of parent-child differentiation (making the parent and child animals in the picture into two "puppies") and of sex role identification (changing "he" to "she"). Although some attempt to control and regulate urethral drives is implied by one holding the other back from going to the bathroom, the final communication of the CAT

is that he feels he is in a parent–child competition over basic needs in which the adult’s narcissistic needs come first.

#### CAT SUMMARY

The overall picture is of a child with narcissistic pathology who seems to feel very inadequate, unnurtured, unprotected, and threatened by a cold and hostile world. In such a world, people do not seem to be loving to each other, and he does not appear to feel he can receive any genuine help and care from anyone. Other people threaten, boast, intimidate, and seem to give him unrealistic tasks that he feels totally inadequate attempting, such as Babe Ruth asking the little chickens to pinch run for him in the World Series. In this type of world, everyone—the adult and the child figures—all seem to end up failing, falling in the mud, or melting away like cold ice cream.

As Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) pointed out, the narcissistic individual typically feels cold, isolated, criticized, unloved, incompetent, and highly vulnerable to attack from others. The main defense against these inferiority feelings is to erect an omnipotent grandiose self to use as a cover or “glass bubble” (Volkan, 1979) to splendidly isolate the vulnerable self within, as if there is not any need for anyone else. This child employs fantasized omnipotent figures like Superman, real heroes like Babe Ruth, or real personages like Dan Quayle or George Steinbrenner who have a surface veneer of power and success but do not appear to be genuinely competent and successful. Diagnostically, this compulsive attempt to maintain a higher obsessive–compulsive and latency adaptation masks an underlying narcissistic self-esteem disorder with depressive object-longing and intermittent impulsivity features.

Occasional impulsivity is suggested on the CAT by the theme of a suddenly aggressive intruder (Cards 5 and 6) and bedwetting by references to fire, night fears, and holding back going to the bathroom (Cards 4, 9, and 10, respectively). As often occurs in dream work with patients, fantasy details often provide good questions to ask, as in the suggestion of a bedwetting problem, which was later confirmed during the discussion of the test results with the parents.

Though outgoing, lively, a straight-A student, and very handsome, this boy underneath feels rejected and empty. He tends to picture his parents as ineffectual, unprotecting, and unnurturing. There is little differentiation of other people in his world—people are not distinct individuals with clear identities, but instead are shadowy, vague, and exaggerated characters, who strut about with large and noisy gestures but who basically seem dead inside. This child’s CAT is very similar to the dream of a narcissistically disordered adult described in Kohut (1984, pp. 17–18) in which an individual is inside a cold, icy heart and attempts to appeal to a shadowy figure for help, but to no avail. It is also reminiscent of Shakespeare’s (1925) *Macbeth*, Act V, Scene v: “Life’s

but a walking shadow: a poor player, / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (p. 1068).

### TREATMENT RECOMMENDATIONS

As the intellectually gifted eldest son of two parents who had not done well academically, this boy had been expected from an early age to handle his schoolwork without the parental assistance necessitated by his 6- and 4-year-old sisters, who had learning delays; to take care of his sisters; and to always be the "mature one and set a good example" in any sibling disputes. The father felt overweight and physically awkward and the mother felt unattractive, whereas the boy's sports prowess and strikingly handsome appearance predestined him to fulfill the father's childhood dream to become an agile sports hero and the mother's wish to be the physically attractive center of a crowd of admirers.

Treatment was recommended to help the parents differentiate their own expectations for themselves from those for their son and develop a more realistic and sensitive appreciation for the overwhelming stress he often felt from the idealized, compensatory role he struggled to fulfill for the whole family. Like the wooden Pinocchio, his deepest wish was simply to be a "real, live boy" and to feel secure and accepted enough for who he is in reality in order to be able to engage in learning, sports, and other tasks without having to be so precocious, morally perfect, self-sufficient, and lonely in the process. As Furman (1982) emphasized in "Mothers Have to be There to be Left" and Sloate (1987) in "The Wish to Leave with Love," this boy needed to experience and internalize the solidity and consistency of one who struggles to be there emotionally as he takes separation/individuation steps toward a more flexible and object-related sense of self and other and of one who helps him verbalize his vulnerability and pain as his conflicts become increasingly internalized.

Preliminary outcomes in this ongoing treatment are the father and a younger sister losing weight, the mother becoming more attractive, and the boy becoming happier with peers and a little more tolerant of his "occasional" imperfections. Pathological narcissism is on the way to a healthier narcissism and just might make it over to that other developmental line of object love.

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