(O)wning a Life
Desire, Mourning, and Acceptance in Psychoanalysis[1]

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I. Introduction

As psychoanalysts, we concern ourselves primarily with neurosis, but often the inevitable challenges of living also become a subject of analysis, especially during phases in which a patient may work through, or temporarily rise above, neurotic entanglements, and face broader realities. In this paper, I explore three interrelated processes in coming to terms with one's total personal circumstances: 1) the continual mourning of omnipotence, 2) dream-work alpha, and 3) awakening to one's own personal mortality. I also propose that they might be grouped together into a higher unity which I term (O)wning a life.

When Freud wrote that the goal of analysis is to transform "hysterical misery into everyday common unhappiness" (1895, p. 306), he implied that one of its aims is to replace the neurotic suffering that results from *not* facing reality with whatever common suffering may be involved in facing reality. Later, in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), Freud characterized the inevitable sources of reality-based suffering as follows:

> We are threatened with suffering from three directions: from our own body, which is doomed to decay and dissolution and which cannot even do without pain and anxiety as warning signals; from the external world, which may rage against us with overwhelming and merciless forces of destruction; and finally, from our relations to other men. (Freud, 1930, p. 76)

1. This paper has been presented in many iterations but never published

As psychoanalysts, we concern ourselves, of course, primarily with 'neurotic misery', but very often the suffering of 'everyday common unhappiness' also becomes a subject of analysis. This essay is an attempt to conceptualize analytic work during these periods and what *its* aim might be. I will propose that emerging into clearings of everyday common unhappiness involves relinquishing omnipotent longings and coming to better terms with the dependence, vulnerability, and powerlessness that are an inescapable bequest of being human, dealing with others, and dealing with the external circumstances into which one has been born. I have come to think of this process as involving three intertwined dimensions which I will explore: 1) mourning, 2) dream-work alpha, and 3) awakening to personal mortality. Taken together, I term the aggregate of these processes '(O)wning a life'. The term is born of the conjunction between Bion's highly abstract concept of O (1965,1970) and the more experience-near sensibility of colloquialisms such as 'owning up', 'taking ownership of', 'making it your own' and so on. The term offers a shorthand way of referring to a complex ever- evolving process that is fundamental to psychic growth during analysis, after termination, and throughout the lifespan.

II. Caveat

Based on experience presenting and discussing these ideas with colleagues in a variety of professional settings, I have found it useful to offer several caveats before going on. First, in introducing the concept of '(O)wning a life', my intention is not to introduce an entirely new type of mental activity, but instead to establish a category in which processes usually discussed as separate phenomena can be grouped together into a higher unity (cf. Lear, 2009, p. 1306). Second, I acknowledge that a distinction between

neurotic misery and everyday unhappiness, though conceptually useful for discussion, does not conform to the actual complexity of mental life. As Freud concluded: "…a normal ego of this sort is, like normality in general, an ideal fiction…" (Freud, 1937, p. 235). Third, in the spirit of critical pluralism (Strenger, 1997), I will make use of concepts from a variety of theories possibly employing or extending them in a personal manner which may not be entirely familiar to the adherents of the schools from which they are drawn. Finally, I acknowledge that my focus here is primarily on the *intrapsychic* aspects of the '(O)wning' process, but this should not be taken as minimizing the importance of the dyadic, two-person, interpersonal, relational, transference-countertransference factors which can potentiate the process. These I hope to elaborate in more detail in a later contribution.

III. Omnipotence, 'O', and (O)wning a Life

I will use the term 'omnipotence' to refer to the wish, demand, sense, illusion and/or phantasy that one can have all, be all, and control all. A continuous working-through of the desire for omnipotence is central to the process I am terming (O)wning a life. It could be said that the most fundamental blow to omnipotence in the human condition is the fact that the child is born into the world 'without informed consent'. Fortunately, as Winnicott (1958, 1965, 1971) has described, if things go well-enough, this does not begin to dawn on the child until later. In the meantime, the illusion of omnipotence made possible by primary maternal preoccupation (1956) and the holding environment (1960) forms a protective barrier allowing the establishment of a necessary foundation for adult life. Out of this foundation emerges the capacity to creatively generate personal meaningfulness in the transitional space (1953) bridging objectivity and subjectivity.

Overtime, the growing child gradually encounters the harder edges of reality beyond the soft fabric of illusion, thereby beginning a lifelong process of coming to terms with the totality of 'what is', or, as Bion (1965, 1970) designates it, O.

Bion introduced the concept of O in *Transformations* (1965) and expanded upon it significantly in *Attention and Interpretation* (1970). In teaching Bion, the concept of O tends to get a mixed reception (Rather, 2015). For some, the concept of O seems to designate a subject more appropriate to religious or spiritual discourse, a discourse discouraged within mainstream psychoanalysis since Freud's *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Others have eschewed the concept of O because of its ambiguity as a useful concept in clinical work. Still others react unfavorably to Bion's style of exposition that can be elusive, obscure, at times, exasperating. Bion is a minimalist, a deconstructivist, and something of a provocateur who prefers to evoke rather than explain. In his quest for a language not already saturated with meaning, Bion attempted what he termed a 'Language of Achievement', a language that avoids the pitfalls of certainty and foreclosure (Bion, 1970, p.125). This language, like poetry, is intended to point towards and evokes more expansive thought rather than nailing things down, as we are accustomed to with most psychoanalytic theorists. Consequently, Bion's writing lends itself to different readings (De Biachedi 2005; Civitarese, 2018; Ferro, 2002, 2005, 2018; O'Shaughnessy, 2005; Grotstein, 2006, 2007, 2009a, 2009b; Rather, 2015, 2018), and I would like to clarify my own understanding and use of the concept of O and its relation to other elements in his theoretical model.

First, because the concept of O lends itself to being imbued with spiritual or religious connotations, I would like quote to cite Grotstein's reading of O with which I concur:

> It is not in oeuvre of W. Somerset Maugham's Larry Darrell, who sought" enlightenment" atop the Himalaya's in *The Razor's Edge (*1945). In other words, it is not a blissful "autistic enclave". O is one's reality, without pretence or distortion. This reality can be a symptom, the pain of viewing beautiful autumn leaves, gazing upon the mystique of Mona Lisa de la Giaconda, contemplating the horror of Ypres (for Bion), trying to remember Hiroshima, Nagasaki, Auschwitz, Viet Nam, or Iraq, or resting comfortably beside one's mate trying to contemplate the exquisiteness and ineffability of the moment.
>
> (Grotstein, 2007, p. 128)

Bion seems to have used the term O in two different ways that may be usefully held in dialectical tension. The first use of O refers to all that is real, separate, and independent of the subject's perception of it, ie, absolute objective reality in a Kantian sense. The second use of O refers to the subjective impression made upon the subject by the *impact* of this reality on the subject. Bion uses the term to apply also to both external and internal reality, and thus it refers equally both to the urges of the body and the pressures of the environment impacting us. In short, I understand O to mean: the deepest and most thorough personal emotional impressions that have thus far evolved in each of us in response to the absolute reality which impinges upon us constantly, both from within (i.e., drives, temperament, desire) and from without (the natural world, the interpersonal world, the socio-cultural surround). The useful tension captured here is that objective reality does not change in any essential way, our personal registration of it does indeed transform and evolve and this is a big part of psychoanalysis. While a patient may sometimes say: "What's the use of talking about it? You can't change what has happened", as analysts, we know that, paradoxically, this is both true and not true:

"Experience is not what happens to a man; it is what a man does with what happens to him" (Huxley, 1932, p. 5).

What is the relevance of O for our clinical work? When reality coming our way corresponds with our omnipotent wishes, there is, of course, no conflict, no deficit, no neurosis, and no problem! Though Bion's symbol O signifies *all* aspects of reality that come our way, but most importantly clinically, it signifies those that we have not chosen, would not have chosen, do not want, or disturb us. This includes aspects of internal reality (desires, drives, conflicts) and external reality (limitation, misfortune, culture, trauma). Regarding the process of (O)wning a life, I have often stated in teaching that O is best thought of clinically "as that which I have to accept that I don't want to accept".

O may be further contextualized with reference to Bion's more user-friendly concepts of container-contained and alpha function (1962a, 1962b, 1963, 1965, 1970, 1976). In Bion's model, O pressing in upon the subject is registered as raw experience or beta elements which must be tolerated and contained to be symbolized through alpha function. The transformation of beta elements to alpha elements makes the impact of O available for both conscious and unconscious processing. Bion uses the term 'reverie' to designate the mother's state of receptivity in taking in the infant's raw experience and transforming it into 'alpha' elements that can be re-ingested by the infant in a more tolerable form. This is the prototype of the mind for Bion. Alpha function gradually develops within the maturing personality and constitutes the fundamental relation between container and contained. It allows for emotional tolerance and processing of personal reality as opposed to the evacuation of reality characteristic of psychotic states of mind.

Broadly speaking, (O)wning a life can be understood as the process of gradually 'alpha-betizing' or digesting the unacceptable so that it is transformed into something more tolerable and acceptable. The process of acceptance itself occurs along a continuum that extends from a sense of submitting to reality resentfully on the one end, to accepting it with equanimity and a sense of ownership on the other. Thus (O)wning a life could be defined as that dimension of alpha function that renders acceptance of O gracefully non-resentful. Said otherwise, (O)wning refers to the process by which our encounter with inner and outer reality is 'subjectified' or given deep personal and subjective acceptable meaning. Optimal subjectification of O involves creating meaning, evolving a sense of conviction in that meaning, taking responsibility for the on-going creation of such meaning, and '(O)wning' it as one's own. I will now discuss three intertwined processes that are subsumed here: 1) mourning, 2) dream-work alpha, and 3) awakening to personal mortality.

IV. (O)wning a Life: The Function of Mourning

The terms 'desire' and 'patient' are intimate companions. While the term 'desire' derives from the Latin 'desiderare' meaning 'to miss' or 'to long for', the term 'patient' derives from the Latin 'pati' meaning 'to suffer'. From this vantage point, problems at the levels of symptom, defense, neurosis, and character may be conceptualized as attempts to manage the vicissitudes of desire.

Accordingly, the analyst's task involves presiding over a process in which the patient comes fully into being as a subject, gradually integrates split aspects of the self, and works through defenses and anxieties accompanying desire, becomes more deeply aware of what is desired, and struggles to distinguish between desires that are attainable and

desires that are unattainable. Ideally, the patient arrives at a better position from which to strive towards that which is attainable, and to come to terms with those that are unattainable.

The uniqueness of the analytic situation, with its conditions of relative neutrality, acceptance, and freedom, is designed to allow desire to unfold. The analyst realizes that the specific contours of each patient's desire will be idiosyncratic and complex, and that conscious desires will be derivatives of primitive and infantile desires which the patient will eventually encounter more directly. Perhaps most importantly, the analyst knows what the patient does not yet want to know and must gradually accept: that not all desires which will be uncovered can be satisfied, and that *the gap between what is desired and what is* must eventually be reckoned with. It is in this gap that mourning claims its central position in the analytic process.

In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Freud (1917) described mourning as a process in which each bit of emotional investment in the object is painfully withdrawn from the desired object in the face of great resistance:

> This opposition can be so intense that a turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless, its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it. (1917, pp. 244-245)

Freud notes that the mourning process applies not only to the loss of actual loved ones, but also to the loss of what he refers to as 'abstractions' which are similarly cathected. Here we might include deeply held ideals and goals, particular representations of self and other, and all manner of expectations, hopes, and wishes. In this sense, the mourning process extends to losses also inherent in the developmental process. In childhood, for example, the child is faced with the growing awareness of separateness in the separation-individuation process and the loss of symbiotic union. In adolescence, loss centers on losing the powerful and idealized parents of childhood and the sense of safety, certainty, and protection which they had offered. In adulthood, loss centers on the growing awareness of limitation and of desires never to be realized, and of course, mortality. Mourning is a life-long process, not a unique event with a beginning and end, but rather a condition of life.

Paranoid Schizoid Pleasure and Depressive Reality

Freud (1911b) conceived of the pleasure principle and reality principle as the fundamental operating systems which regulate mental functioning. The pleasure principle guides primary process and id functioning, and within this domain, desire is to be satisfied fully and unpleasure avoided at all costs. The reality principle is associated with secondary process ego functioning, and within this domain desire may be delayed, renounced, or transformed through sublimation. In short, the patient is more willing to 'pay the costs'. Constellations of defense, symptom, neurosis, and character arise as psychic organizations which strike a balance between the imperatives of each domain. As analytic work progresses, these organizations gradually give way to a deeper encounter with the discrepancy between desire and reality. From this perspective, the analytic

process proceeds according to the demands of the reality principle and against the demands of the pleasure principle.

The reality principle and pleasure principle are implicit in the concepts of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions (Klein, 1935, 1940, 1946, 1957). The paranoid schizoid position and its phantasy of omnipotence may be viewed as a particular way of organizing and dealing with reality at the behest of pleasure principle dynamics. It is based upon psychic maneuvers to circumvent reality and maintain an illusion of omnipotence. Experiences itself is organized through splitting along the lines of pleasure and unpleasure. That which is gratifying and pleasurable is organized as "good", while that which is frustrating and brings unpleasure is organized as "bad". Splitting and projective identification are, among other things, attacks on reality, insofar as they aim at holding onto pleasure and banishing unpleasure through a phantasy of splitting and evacuation of intolerable pieces of reality.

Depressive position functioning arises as the reality principle is more established with relation to the object. The growing infant mind integrates the two mothers who are, in reality, one. In addition to the anxieties over destruction and reparation so closely attended to by Kleinians, this position also involves great loss which brings mourning for a more ideal object in its wake. A more complex object arises which is no longer a narcissistic extension of one's subjective desire. It has a subjectivity and desire of its own, and accordingly meets some needs and not others. The psychic jukebox switches from "I can't get no satisfaction" to "You can't always get what you want". But, alas, this change in the play list is not permanent! These are termed 'positions' rather than 'stages', for good reason. Development does not result in conclusive movement from

one to the other, but rather a continual oscillation between them which leads to a spiraling evolution of psychic acceptance.

Reality (O) as an Existential Object

The oscillation of desire and mourning may be considered as an aspect of the existential edge of analytic experience. At various points along the 'ideal' analytic path, and perhaps particularly toward the end phase, the analysand is well into depressive position-reality principle functioning regarding the primary objects. This means that failures, disappointments and grievances have been worked through with a degree of forgiveness (Siassi, 2008), and that the mourning for more ideal and gratifying objects is well underway. What were before felt as needs and demands have been "shrunk" down to the level of wishes and preferences. Furthermore, as neurotic organization gives way, the analysand recognizes the missed opportunities of the past and mourns the lost time which cannot be regained. As a result, he or she is better able to experience vitality, creativity, and satisfaction in both love and work, while also accepting that love and work do not necessarily bring everything that is desired. The analysand may begin to have an experience of a new world, a world much less tainted by projections from the internal world. It is in this newly transformed world that a clearer awareness of the fundamental mysteries of human existence may arise.

While mainstream psychoanalytic schools formulate neurotic misery in the language of drive, ego, object, and self, the existential perspective gets its name from the prime importance it attributes to anxieties arising from the givens of existence. In reviewing the work of existentialist philosophers, as well as therapists such as Binswanger (1963), Frankel (1959), and May (1983), Yalom (1980, 2005, 2008, 2017), characterizes the

ultimate concerns of the existential perspective as death, freedom, meaninglessness, and isolation. To these, I would add the sense of smallness, uncertainty, and vulnerability that accompanies the dissolution of omnipotence. As analytic patients work through their neurotic entanglements, they tend to emerge at the cusp of such ultimate concerns.

I believe we might conceptualize existential reality itself as an 'object' toward which each of us as subjects may have paranoid-schizoid or depressive position relations. I am using the term 'reality' here specially to designate all of that which is felt to exist independently of one's needs and control. It includes all that we feel we have not created, but rather are subject to. It appears indifferent to our welfare, sometimes occurring in harmony with it and sometimes in opposition to it. We may call it luck or fate or randomness. From the standpoint of paranoid-schizoid functioning, reality consists of two distinct parts: one which is feared and hated because it does not gratify desire, and one which is loved and idealized when it does fulfill desire. In depressive position functioning by contrast, reality is felt to be an integrated 'other', beyond one's control, possessed of both good and bad aspects. While Klein focused on depressive anxieties concerning damage and reparation, Rosenfeld (1971, 1975, 1987) emphasized the anxieties emerging within the matrix of dependence on the whole object which exists beyond one's control. Thus, in relationship to reality as a depressive object, the subject is faced with the dissolution of omnipotence and an awareness of the fundamental human condition of smallness, helplessness, and vulnerability. The desire to escape this condition, and the mourning which results from realizing the impossibility of this desire, create the tensions of the psychoanalytic process.

While we are aware of paranoid schizoid splitting in terms of its obvious troubles and disadvantages, we must also recognize that it secretly offers the greatest of hopes.

Implicit is the assumption that an ideal, gratifying, and fair world is just around the corner if one can just play one's cards right. Even if the world is hellish now, at least there is a heavenly realm out there somewhere. In this way, the paranoid schizoid sufferer, and by that, I mean all of us at times, is a closet optimist.

With depressive position functioning, the outlook is much more sobering. The primary advantage is greater freedom from the persecutory sense that something terrible is about to happen if one doesn't stay on the defensive. However, the cost is that reality no longer appears to offer the limitless possibilities of heaven. Gone is the hope for a life of undiluted goodness, pleasure, and satisfaction. Gone is the possibility of omnipotent control. Which of us cannot easily recall protesting "It's not fair?" The loss of this desired ideal world is indeed 'depressive' and requires mourning. However, insofar as desire is an insistent spring welling up from the id, its source is inexhaustible, and the work of acceptance is always in process.

The Enigmatic Process of Acceptance

Kübler-Ross (1969) has charted the mourner's voyage from denial, through the channels of anger, bargaining, and depression, and onward to the shores of acceptance. The dissolution of omnipotence with the ascendance of depressive-position and reality principle functioning brings the analysand increasingly to this end-stage of mourning: the acceptance of what is. Mourning is the work of accepting the unacceptable. But what do we understand about the process when we talk about acceptance? As is often the case, psychoanalysis has more to say about what impedes acceptance than what allows it to take place. How does one accept the unacceptable? Although each of us may observe retrospectively that we have done so at times, we have little idea how to convey to

someone else how to do so. Freud's concept of the gradual decathexis of libido at the behest of the reality principle is perhaps as close as we will come to an explanatory account of mourning and acceptance, but it is far from being experience-near. Colloquial wisdom suggests that "time heals all wounds" and we experience this as more or less true. But how does it happen? The process of acceptance is inherently enigmatic. What are the psychoanalytic prototypes of acceptance as a final stage of mourning human omnipotence? Should we refer to the acceptance of (m)other as a separate presence? Shall we consider the movement between hatred and gratitude? Should we reflect upon the acceptance of the primal couple or the symbolic order in the matrix of the Oedipus complex? Yes to all of these, of course. But what is clinically remarkable is the wide range of emotional nuance which colors the process of acceptance.

The English language provides a number of terms with a penumbra of shadings to capture these nuances of acceptance. For example, acceptance might entail 'giving up', 'quitting', 'submitting', 'surrendering', 'letting be' or 'letting go'. Acceptance might also be colored by a sense of 'fatalism', 'resentment', 'resignation', 'bitterness', 'cynicism', 'peace of mind', 'contentment', or 'equanimity'. From these few examples, it seems that the process of acceptance occurs along a continuum which extends from a sense of submitting to reality resentfully on one end, to accepting it gracefully with a sense of non-resentful ownership on the other. This latter experience of developing a sense of ownership is essential in accepting the unacceptable without feeling defeated, subjugated, or bitter.

V. (O)wning a Life: The Function of Dream-Work Alpha

Let us turn now to the unconscious dimensions of (O)wning. While the classical ideal in psychoanalysis has been to make the unconscious conscious in order to subject it to reason, more recently there has been recognition of the important and essential value of unconscious processes themselves. Grotstein and Ogden, for example, follow Bion in suggesting that we do our most important cognitive and emotional processing unconsciously through dream-work alpha. Dream-work alpha does not refer to the delimited dreams of REM sleep, but rather to a process of dreaming that is continuous night and day, awake and asleep. It is the unconscious process by which raw emotional experience can be further converted to alpha elements which can then be further worked upon.

Dream-work alpha must be contextualized within the framework of shifting perspectives on the nature of the unrepressed or primary unconscious itself. Freud tended to emphasize a conception of the unconscious as a seething cauldron of instinctual drives that must be tamed and sublimated. More recently, there has been a trend toward also conceptualizing the unconscious as a potential ally, as a source of perception and processing offering a useful second opinion to the conscious mind. This perspective has been articulated, for example, by Bion (1962b, 1963, 1965, 1970), Ferro (1992, 2002), Grotstein (2000, 2008, 2009a, 2009b), Langs (1976, 2005), Matte-Blanco (1975, 1978), Ogden (2003, 2004, 2005) and taken up by Rather (2001) in his idea of collaborating with the 'unconscious other'. In a useful metaphor, Grotstein (personal communication, 2005) points out that it is the opposable thumb operating in concert with the forefinger, which allows us to grasp things (see also Grotstein, 2009a, p. 53). In this sense, the unconscious is may be conceived of as 'opposable' rather than 'oppositional' with regard

to the conscious. In dialectical interaction, conscious and unconscious mentation informs each other by triangulating the object of emotional perception in "binocular vision" (Bion 1965, p.74). Bion went further to propose the concept of a necessary *contact barrier* (1962b), a semi-permeable membrane separating conscious and unconscious processing, but permitting a weaving of conscious and unconscious elements which provide emotional comprehension of depth and resonance. Of particular importance is Bion's idea that the contact barrier serves not only to protect conscious from unconscious processes, but also protects unconscious process from the intrusions of too much reality-based consciousness.

Similarly, Matte-Blanco (1940, 1975, 1988, see also Rayner, 1995) has proposed that conscious mentation (secondary process) and unconscious mentation (primary process) operate according to two opposable logical systems. Conscious mentation tends towards the logic of *asymmetry*, that is, it organizes experience with great attention to difference. By contrast, unconscious mentation tends towards the logic of *symmetry,* that is, it organizes experience with great attention to similarity. It is symmetrical logic, Matte-Blanco suggests, which underlies the characteristics of the unconscious described by Freud (1915d): absence of mutual contradiction and negation, displacement, condensation, timelessness, and replacement of external reality by internal reality. He proposes that a graduated barrier between operating systems maintains the integrity of both systems at the extremes, while allowing unconscious processes to enrich conscious processes in the intermediate realms where they flow together in what he refers to as infinitive sets. As Matte-Blanco elegantly suggests: "A dam represents a protection against flood, but is also useful for purposes of irrigation" (1940, quoted in Rayner, 1995, p. 174). The concept of dialectical interaction implies that a final, ideal integration of

conscious and unconscious is neither possible, nor desirable, but rather that ever-evolving forms of integration are necessary to develop a more comprehensive picture with ever-increasing depth of field.

To integrate these disparate ideas, I am suggesting that (O)wning a life is also carried out unconsciously through dream-work alpha. I propose that in dream-work alpha, the unconscious logic of symmetry takes both beta elements and pre-existing alpha elements and furthers works upon them by associating to them what is already familiar and acceptable to the dreamer. In this sense, the dreamer begins to unconsciously transform what was impersonal and unacceptable, into something personally meaningful and acceptable. Through the function of symmetrical logic, dream-work alpha allows an accretion of relevant personal associations to collect around what is as yet not fully digested. In this way dream-work alpha imprints a unique, personal, and subjective stamp on the objective, thereby transforming indifferent, impersonal, unacceptable O into a unique personal narrative. To speak metaphorically, dream-work alpha is analogous to the process by which a pure note from the written page in music is brought to life by being constituted within the rich harmonic overtones characteristic of the particular, unique instrument that plays it. Thus, the subjectivity of unconscious processing, in particular the unconscious arranging of associated symmetrical overtones, is composed through the unconscious logic of symmetry. Dream-work alpha works at digesting Ultimate Reality by creating an Absolute *Personal* Truth about Ultimate Reality which can be incorporated and worked with. Contrasting these ideas to Freudian dream theory (Freud, 1900), we could say that a dream (when dreaming is understood as the accretion of all that is relevant through the logic of symmetry) is not so much a disguise, (though it certainly may be usefully unpacked) as it is an attempt to think through and process

reality within the symmetrical operating principles of the unconscious. This model does not so much contradict as extend and broaden Freud's wish-fulfillment hypothesis. The fundamental wish is to maintain a semblance of omnipotence by 're-booting' the objective into the subjective, maintaining elements of both in a 'truthful fiction'. In my view, the point of view articulated here does not necessarily contradict with but rather extends Freud's wish-fulfillment hypothesis. The fundamental wish here would be to make it the objective mine through subjectifying it into truthful fiction. This represents the timeworn concept of a compromise formation between reality and pleasure, helplessness and omnipotence.

VI. (O)wning a Life: Awakening to One's Personal Mortality

In 'The Theme of the Three Caskets', Freud (1913b) attempted to analyze the meaning of a man 'choosing' the third of three women (the three caskets in *The Merchant of Venice***,** the three daughters in *King Lear*, and the three goddesses in Greek myth, Judgment of Paris). Freud proposed that beneath the manifest content of 'choosing' was a struggle with accepting the 'lack of choice' in human existence. He hypothesized that the escape into a magical world where reality could be overcome was gradually undermined as we began to comprehend the existence of natural laws indifferent to our existence. The ultimate reality, Freud notes, is the inevitability of death. In 1915, Freud wrote more about death

> To anyone who listened to us we were of course prepared to maintain that death was the necessary outcome of life, that everyone owes nature a death and must expect to pay the debt—in short, that death was natural, undeniable and unavoidable. In reality,

> however, we were accustomed to behaving as if it were otherwise. We showed an unmistakable tendency to put death on one side, to eliminate it from life. We tried to hush it up……It is indeed impossible to imagine our own death; and whenever we attempt to do so we can perceive that we are in fact still present as spectators. Hence the psycho-analytic school could venture on the assertion that at bottom no one believes in his own death, or, to put the same thing in another way, that in the unconscious every one of us is convinced of his own immortality. (1915, p. 288)

For his part, Freud, having proposed that the unconscious cannot conceive of death, took death anxiety and the awareness of death off the table as a subject of interest. Perhaps, this set a tone for a future of denial within mainstream schools of psychoanalysis (i.e., drive theory, object relations, British middle school, American relational, interpersonal, and self psychology). Even when we discuss the 'death instinct' clinically, we refer to nihilistic and destructive dynamics rather than to actual death or mortality.

Perhaps this will shift with the current demographics of the 'baby boomers' as we observe clinically the impact of aging, diminishing health, and narrowing horizons for certain older patients past their most productive and exploratory lives (i.e., Willock et al, 2007). As my own denial has decreased and my awareness increased, I have begun to see that my patients, both old and young, talk about death far more often than I had allowed myself to notice. It may be dismissed with such comments as "Oh but that's so *morbid*, you must think I'm really depressed to think of such things", but it is there.

Existential therapists who have embraced mainstream psychoanalytic concerns, but have also expanded their sphere of inquiry, would remind us that there are three different sources of anxiety: 1) anxiety about the realistic and objective dangers in life; 2) neurotic anxiety, and: 3) existential anxiety about what are referred to as 'ultimate concerns': freedom, isolation, the

question of meaning, and death. Yalom uses the phrase, 'staring at the sun', to capture the difficulty we have contemplating our own mortality (Yalom, 2008). It could seem that with regard to the 'examined life', psychoanalysis as a whole has 'tri-furcated', leaving questions of transpersonal meaning to the Jungians and questions of personal mortality to the existentialists. Mainstream psychoanalysis has taken neurotic anxiety as its slice of the pie. It has seemed to me that in case conferences, scientific meetings, and supervision, that when concerns about death appear in free association, there is a tendency to interpret it a metaphoric derivative of the more familiar: castration anxiety, separation anxiety, anxiety about the dissolution of the self, and other threatening 'calamities of childhood'. In the end, my impression is that we speak of death and dying mainly when it is traumatic (i.e., extreme and unusual) or when it involves the grief and mourning of survivors, and yet we are mortal, and death is inevitable. To return to Bion for a moment, death is part of O, not only the deaths of others, but our own eventual deaths. The classic Latin phrase, 'memento mori', which is usually translated as 'remember you will die', was often inscribed or depicted symbolically in painting by placing a human skull placed next to a burning candle on the philosopher's desk. Now, the point is *not* to be gloomy or morbid, but, quite the opposite, to awaken us to our full vitality. 'Memento mori' must lead toward 'Carpe diem'.

In a fascinating paper, Parsons (2011), coins the phrase *avant coup'* contrasting it with *après-coup*. Whereas *après-coup* is a process by which present day experience gives new or revised meaning to past experiences, *avant-coup* refers to a process by which the imagined future gives enriched meaning to the present.

> A corresponding and equally essential aspect of being creatively alive is to enrich the present by a continual unconscious reconfiguring of one's availability to the

future. This enlivening of the present will enlarge in turn the potential of one's future life. We might give this capacity the name of avant-coup.

Being fully alive means making use of *après-coup* and *avant-coup* together, in such a way that both origin and extinction can resonate with meaning in one's life today.

Parson's paper concerns itself with what it takes to be creatively and fully alive, very much like the process of (O)wning a life.

Clinical Illustration

NOTE: *In the interest of confidentiality, the following case material has been fictionalized. It is constructed of composites of several patients and multiple real-life scenarios with details altered to ensure anonymity. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental.*

My primary aim in this paper has been to lay out a conceptual framework for considering the process of (O)wning a life, but a brief clinical illustration will be illustrative of the process I am describing. The patient, a man in his early 60's coming to the final phase of a long analysis, had made extraordinary progress in re-integrating and working through the massive projections of his internal life that had created an adult life of interpersonal and professional havoc. Born into unfortunate family, cultural, and historical circumstances, his childhood was one of emotional harshness, physical disability, and chronic environmental upheaval. Internal change brought about by analysis had led to dramatic transformations in his external life, all of which were met with gratitude, but also with a painful mourning of time lost and never to be regained. In the period of the following dream, he was working well with his feelings of anger at the unfairness of having had the bad luck to be born into his circumstances through no fault

of his own. We explored this dream from many angles, but I will recount only the main associative material relevant to my theme in this paper. I will first provide the dream in its entirety, and then the dream with some commentary from our work together

The Dream:

> *I'm watching calmly, but it's bittersweet. There's a baby on a soft blanket. He has a bandage on one hand. He's busy with a mouth full of food that he's working on, masticating the food and mixing it with his saliva, then and swallowing with a peaceful look on his face. He and I are both watching this wolf, a dog actually. The wolf-dog is happily rolling around in the woods, peeing on trees to mark his territory. There are signs of a fire having swept through, but there's new growth. In the dream it's somehow understood that he's not only marking his territory, but also actually irrigating the trees, making growth happen. At the end, the baby, the wolf-dog, and I are all looking at each other, there is a sense of balance.*

Commentary on the Dream:

> *I'm watching calmly, but it's bittersweet.* [The patient has achieved a degree of equanimity, but loss, mourning, and desire are forever intertwined]. *There's a baby on a soft blanket. It has a bandage on one hand.* [The patient felt that although he had a very 'hard' start in life and had been dealt a 'bad hand', the analysis had nonetheless provided a 'soft landing']. *He's busy with a mouth full of food that he's working on, masticating the food and mixing it with his saliva, then and swallowing with a peaceful look on his face [*The infantile aspect of the patient is continuing to process O, this time being more able to mix it more thoroughly with his own subjectivity to make it digestible]. *He and I are both watching this wolf, a dog actually.* [The patient often termed himself a 'lone wolf'

but punned that he was now ‘do-masticated’.] *The wolf-dog is happily rolling around in the woods, peeing on trees to mark his territory. There are signs of a fire having swept through, but there’s new growth. In the dream it’s somehow understood that he’s not only marking his territory, but also actually irrigating the trees, making growth happen.* [A favorite metaphor of the patient was having been 'burned’ by life and growing up in a barren ‘scorched earth’. He is now more able to reintegrate this and make it his own, by adding something of himself, all of which promoted growth.] *At the end, the baby, the wolf-dog, and I are all looking at each other, there is a sense of balance*. [His association here was to a film called ‘Koyaanisqatsi’ which he felt captured the previous manic quality of his defensive style, and whose title translates as “life out of balance”].

While there is and was much more to be said about this dream, I think that it not only carries out the process I wish to elucidate, but also creatively illustrates the process itself: dream life provides a functional psychological correlate of the physiological processes by which raw foods are modified toward sweetness by mastication as a prelude to being swallowed and used for growth. (O)wning a life through dream-work alpha is a process by which we continually work-through and digest Ultimate Reality O, especially in its more unsavory and traumatic aspects, into something that we can more gracefully accept, contain, and live with.

VII. Concluding Comments

To return to the distinction between neurotic suffering and everyday unhappiness, in this essay I have introduced the concept of ‘(O)wning a life’ to designate the optimal

process and outcome of working-through, a mode of accepting which is neither bitter nor resentful, but rather characterized by a subjective sense of deeply held personal ownership. From time to time, it may even open up a mode of experience in which tranquility and equanimity come not so much from having what one wants, as from wanting what one has. More realistically, however, (O)wning a life is never complete so much as it is forever in process.

The result is a lived experience which is felt to be unique, personal, and, most importantly, acceptable. I believe this state of experience to be similar to what Bion is describing with his idea of 'becoming O' (1970) and what Grotstein has described in his conception of the transcendent position (2000). In these ideal states of mind, desire would be directed at what is, rather than what is not. If we can imagine such a state of being, then the process of (O)wning a life could be conceived of as a progression toward a form of integration that would rise above the dialectic of desire and omnipotence.

In the spirit of the subject I have discussed here, this essay itself represents my own process of (O)wning psychoanalysis as a practice. In my view, psychoanalysis may deliver the analysand to the threshold of concerns about ultimate meanings and purpose, but it has nothing to say about what personal truths may be found or created there. Nonetheless, insofar as it entails mourning infantile desire for omnipotence, perhaps it has something to offer in helping us encounter the mysteries of existence gracefully in the space between certainty and uncertainty which is at the heart of psychoanalysis and at the heart of being human.

**References for this and all other presentations are listed on a separate PDF*