

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### The adult world

*"The presence of a noble nature, generous in its wishes, ardent in its charity, changes the lights for us: we begin to see things again in their larger, quieter masses, and to believe that we too can be seen and judged in the wholeness of our character"*

George Eliot

**“W**hen I grow up I want to be a ‘dult’” was how one small six-year-old described his life’s ambition. In the mind of the latency child there exists a distinct and centrally important “world” in relation to which he defines and organizes his own: that of the “grown-ups”. At the age of seven, or even eleven, it is impossible to imagine that the “grown-ups” are themselves still struggling with what being a “dult” means; that throughout their lives many of them remain significantly engaged in the process of “growing up”. And yet that ongoing engagement is a necessary one, for the belief that maturity has been attained may be a seriously infantile delusion. What is an adult identity? How are we to define maturity? Bion (1961)

suggested we should not "assume too easily that the label on the box is a good description of the contents" (p. 37). The fact that somebody superficially looks grown-up (whether by attaining the age of twenty-one, servicing a mortgage, wearing a white coat or a pin-striped suit, or rearing children) may have little to do with the childish or infantile states which underlie the socially defining exterior. The burden of inauthenticity is often immense. Many would share Margaret Atwood's sense that as an adult she was "in disguise".

Over the years psychoanalysts have defined maturity in a number of ways. Freud thought about it in terms of being able to work and to love; Klein, as an increased capacity to live in the depressive position; Bion, as being able to go on developing. Just as much Romantic poetry was preoccupied with how to become a poet, so Bion (1970) saw his many years as a psychoanalyst as a process of learning how to become one. He concerned himself with how to further an individual's endeavour to move from knowing about reality to becoming real (pp. 26–40).

When it comes to notions of adulthood and maturity it makes more sense than ever to think in terms of states of mind and not of stages of development. For we again find ourselves faced with the necessity of making distinctions, ones which are similar to those discussed in relation to infancy, and indeed to all subsequent phases and stages. The difference between maturity and immaturity hinges not on the fact of chronological years but on a person's capacity to bear intense emotional states; on the extent to which it is possible to think about, and reflect on, psychic pain as a consequence of having found, and sustained, a relationship with external and internal figures who are able so to do.

The contrasting response is to adopt all sorts of means to avoid engaging with painful matters. Those means often seem more exciting and compelling than their alternatives. And in many ways it is easier to define maturity in terms of what it is not, than to find a way of expressing the contrapuntal intricacies of anguish and joy, action and thought, fire and calm which underlie the capacity fully to engage with experience. Wisdom would seem to be more to do with living and feeling than with acquiring knowledge. It is not a case of believing oneself to have grown out of infantile impulses and longings, but rather one of knowing and understanding those

undeveloped aspects of the self and, as a consequence, being alert to their potential effects, particularly their destructiveness. Keats's "Soul-making" emphasis in the experience of life belongs to the capacity to tolerate the perception that "the World is full of Misery and Heartbreak, Pain, Sickness and oppression" (*Letters*, p. 95). It lies in the capacity to engage with internal conflict, beginning with the explorations and gropings of foetal life. In a world of Circumstances, he writes to his brother and sister-in-law, it is the Heart which is "the teat from which the Mind or intelligence sucks its identity" (*Letters*, p. 250). The distinction between learning about things and learning from experience was never more clearly put.

Although the strands which run through these pages have, for the sake of clarity, been broadly chronological, between them they have been making up a picture of different states of mind, whether infantile, latency, adolescent or adult, states that constantly shift and oscillate in relation to one another, whatever the age under discussion. In adulthood all those various strands are no less present, though some may be better concealed, and others may have become so much part of the personality that they begin to be described as "how someone is". Klein writes with great clarity about the way in which the so-called "adult world" is permeated by the infantile. The question is not so much how to get rid of those states as how to accommodate them within the personality, and to reduce their potentially destructive effects, both on the self and on others. Central to the adult state is the capacity to recognize and to integrate the other aspects of the self without excessive disruption of the psychic equilibrium; to integrate them rather than to seek to disown them by ridding the self of them and projecting them elsewhere. As Klein (1959) put it: "we are [in certain states in mind] inclined to attribute to other people—in a sense, to put into them—some of our own emotions and thoughts; and it is obvious that it will depend on how balanced or how persecuted we are whether this projection is of a friendly or hostile nature" (p. 252).

A sense of mature adulthood may be achieved, at least some of the time, not by disclaiming, ignoring or enacting whatever infantile impulse may arise, but by recognizing such impulses for what they are and managing them appropriately; not by eliminating the playful, adventurous, even tempestuous parts of the self, but by finding some measure of balance and integration for them. This has

been the task for the growing personality all along but, like each previous age, adulthood has its own special character, a central part of which is engagement with the outside world of work, of community and of society at large; with responsibilities and freedoms hitherto scarcely tried or tested. It is at this point in life that it becomes particularly tempting to mistake a sense of status for a sense of identity, though the danger may long have threatened. The thoughtful adult will still be struggling with the familiar adolescent imperative to try to move "from resemblance to identity", but the world of Circumstances does not make that easy for anyone at the age with which we are now concerned. In a society organized around status and hierarchy, one which "knows the price of everything and the value of nothing" (Wilde, 1891), there is a cruel and insistent pressure to conform to the dominant ethos. Such conformity may, however, be at the expense of the individual. If so, the achievement of having a sense of one's own personality is swiftly traduced. Its rival and enemy is the culture of "personalities".

Martha Harris was particularly aware of the complexity of the relationship between the individual and institutional and societal groupings. Gnomically she wrote, "It is difficult enough to become the person one is without positive encouragement from the establishment towards conformity and deception" (1981, 1987, p. 327). She described the tension between "man as a social animal dependent upon, and with obligations to, society; and man as a developing individual with a mind that grows through introjecting experiences of himself in the world, impelled to think in order to retain internally relationships with needed and valued objects in their absence" (p. 322).

The nature of the struggle involved at this adult stage will depend on the patterns of engagement, or defence, which have been developing from the first. These patterns are now tested with particular severity and the extent to which they have become ingrained make the possibility of functioning in a different mode all the harder, especially if there have been early traumas and setbacks. For some, early difficulties may be constantly re-experienced and repeated in one form or another. For some they may be denied. And for some it may have been possible to understand those difficulties, to integrate them into the personality, and to move on.

The problems and pitfalls of the whole project of growing up are

beautifully described in seven-year-old Carol's story, dictated to her mother who, when asked "how do I grow up mummy?" had invited her daughter to relate her own thoughts on the matter:

There was once a little girl and she wanted to grow up but she didn't know how. She tried putting on high heels but that didn't work. She just tripped down the stairs. She tried eating but that didn't work. That just made her have a tummy ache. She tried putting on make-up but that didn't work either.

And then she saw her grandma and she said:

"How do I grow up?"

"Have you tried waiting?" asked her grandma.

"No", said the little girl.

She waited and waited and waited. And when she grew up she wanted to be little again because when you are little you get all the nice things.

In its delightfully simple terms Carol's story is suggestive of a number of important and complex insights. She knew, whether consciously or unconsciously, that imitating the adult world did not constitute "growing up". It may be that she was already acquainted with some "grown-ups" who suffered precisely this illusion. They thought that looking like a grown-up was tantamount to being one. She described both a projective kind of identification (getting into someone else's shoes) and an adhesive or second-skin type: the desire to feel psychically held together by physically holding, or sticking, onto something (perhaps the make-up). Carol had a sense that growth cannot be forced, "by eating more", for example. Development occurs in its own way in relation to its own conditions, certainly unevenly. Allowing a child to develop in relation to what is properly within his or her compass, rather than to what is required by the exigencies of others' expectations, is often an uncomfortable test of adults' aspirations and capacities for restraint. It involves waiting on the part of both parent and child. Time, different degrees of time, is required, as Carol rightly pointed out, to discover how to make one's own way and to encourage others to make theirs.

Carol had also realized that the impulse to shun the pains of adult responsibility forever threatens. She had the intimation that being grown-up is hard, and that the lure toward " . . .

remains great. It was, perhaps, "nice" to be pseudo-grown-up and, in "dressing up", to imitate the adult world. It was "nice" to be able to divide the world into goodies and baddies; to believe that your parents knew all the answers or, when parents didn't come up to scratch, that you were an orphan, and that you were really the long-lost son or daughter of the King and Queen of the world; or that by thinking something you could make it so; or that bad deeds need not have bad consequences because there's always someone there to make things better. "Nice" things involve not only sweets and birthday parties, but being made a fuss of, being forgiven. Carol intuitively knew that these "childish" things were quite different from the difficulty of acquiring a sense of self-esteem and a capacity to embark on the hard road to genuine self-forgiveness: quite different from having continually to engage with "Reality's dark dream".<sup>1</sup>

The "dressing up", the day-dreaming, the fantasies or treats all belong to a desirable, even a necessary, part of a child's world—they are a way of negotiating some kind of place both in the culture which is temporarily theirs and in that to come. They are an essential part of the continuous testing of internal and external reality which needs to go on during childhood. Carol was, in effect, commenting on the distinction between the time when such involvements express those relationships (both fantasied and real) which appropriately belong to a child's world, and those which, less appropriately, may continue to be lived-out in what is supposed to be an adult's world.

Perhaps few children will have shared Carol's good fortune in having available a thinking mother who could enable her daughter also to think, or a kindly grandmother who offered the wisdom of her years. For those who have little opportunity in childhood to sort out and bear, somewhat at least, the experience of being one of the "little ones" and not yet one of the "big ones", properly becoming an adult will be all the harder. For having an adult sense of identity involves the capacity to make a differentiation between role and function. To be grown-up "in role" only, is brought about by the sorts of projective and imitative modes which Carol described—ones belonging to the happy-ever-after picture of adult life which imbues romantic fantasies at whatever age. But intuitively Carol knew better. There is a suggestion in her story of the realization that allowing time for growing up, without leaping prematurely into

what superficially *looks* grown-up, may have something to do with a particular quality of learning: the realization that learning concerns the internalizing of adult functions; the knowledge that those functions may be burdensome as well as desirable. The truthfulness of that perception has a certain beauty to it.

In disregarding chronology and thinking metapsychologically, in terms, that is, of pervasive states of mind, it is possible to recognize the infantile structures which are present in the adult, and the adult structures which are present in the infant, if only momentarily. Broad differentiations between the two will be similar to those between the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions. In designating maturity as an increased capacity to live in the depressive position, Klein was stressing the importance of the infantile structures giving way to a more generous and integrated set of mental attitudes. The infantile states are propelled mostly by the vital need for protection against psychic collapse, in the face of powerfully conflicting internal forces.

By contrast, the depressive position, as we have seen, involves the capacity to experience the other as genuinely other: that is, as an "other" who has independent needs and priorities; and the capacity to suffer grief and concern for damage felt to have been inflicted on that other by anxiety-driven greed and tyrannical demands. It involves carrying the burdens of being grown-up as well as claiming the rights and privileges. It involves being able to experience gratitude for care received, being able to spare, to repair. Ultimately, perhaps, it involves the capacity to identify with parental concern, a concern which will include a preparedness to take up the particular responsibility entailed, whether or not in relation to actual babies. It involves a shift from a narcissistic frame of mind to one that is able properly to take others into account. Such a shift is related to the capacity, and the opportunity, at least some of the time, to take in figures who can function as benign inner resources.

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The following account by a young mother offers a vivid description of a situation in which the ever-shifting relationship between infantile states and adult capacities is particularly clear:

I was driving home with Carl [two years old] and Lucy [fourteen

months]. We'd spent the day with friends in Luton. Fifteen minutes from home they started arguing and within seconds it had escalated into full-scale war. They hit, they shouted, they called for me to get involved. I could feel my exhaustion growing and my rage building up. I completely lost control. I slammed on the brakes and started banging on the steering wheel and shouting at them to go away and to shut up, and to leave me alone. Awful shocked silence followed. Then someone started stroking me and Carl said, "It's all right Mummy, it's all right". That precipitated me straight back into adulthood and motherhood. I feel so guilty at the moments when I become the child and sort of force them to parent me.<sup>2</sup>

The internal capacities which Carl, in a crisis, was able to draw on are observable in even younger children. One baby can wait for a feed, sparing the stressed mother, another may scream, first with frustration and then, perhaps, with fear. Yet another will withdraw into his own world, trying to find comfort in his bodily sensations, or perhaps in sensuous attachments to material objects. But in this example one can see with particular clarity how little Carl was able, temporarily, to encourage his harassed mother with precisely those enlivening reassurances with which he had himself clearly been sustained on so many previous occasions.

Eighteen-month-old Peter displayed a similarly mature capacity for care and concern for his mother; a readiness to spare her his own neediness when perceiving her distress, and to offer her his thoughtful attention. On this particular occasion Peter had been looked after all day by his aunt, while his mother was at work. His mother was unusually late home and in the last hour or so Peter had turned anxiously and expectantly towards any sound which might signal her return. When she came in she was clearly upset and in a state of some excitement. It turned out that she had just had a row with a neighbour who had been very abusive to her.

Usually Peter was rather clingy when his mother came home, but on this occasion, although running after her to keep her in sight while she hung up her coat, he then sat quietly on the floor and listened while she recounted the incident to her sister. His mother noticed Peter's quietness and picked up a book, as if to read to him. But she was immediately distracted by what had happened and continued animatedly talking. She told her sister that she should have stayed at

home that day, since she still had an awful cold. At this point Peter got up. He went to fetch his medical kit and handed it to his mother. While she held the little plastic container he got out the stethoscope and first of all put it to his own ears. Then he gestured to his mother to wear the stethoscope herself. She put it on and made as if to listen to Peter's chest. But he shook his head firmly and pointed to her own chest. Realizing that this was an attempt to look after *her*, his mother smiled and lovingly gathered him into her arms.

This identification on Peter and Carl's part with a capacity to bear frustration and to care, cheer and encourage in the face of hardship goes to the heart of the adult sense of identity. It derives from the kind of introjective identification already described, one with internal, benign and supportive, parental figures. This was certainly Freud's view and has been extensively elaborated ever since. The work of the Oedipal process, at whatever age one locates its inception, is, as we have seen, to do with relinquishing the libidinal attachment to external parents, whether in love or in hate, taking them into the internal world, and identifying with them there, where they will be experienced as mixed figures, being both loving and encouraging, and also censorious and punitive. Which of the two it will be depends on the degree of persecution with which the parents have already been experienced by the child, as well as on their actual qualities. It should again be noticed that at the heart of the Oedipal constellation lies the capacity to allow for growth through relinquishment. The sense of separateness, so intrinsic to an adult state of mind, is premised on the experience of loss, or fear of loss, being felt to be bearable, to be painful but not catastrophic. Whether that experience turns out to be painful or catastrophic depends on how separation and loss have been experienced and endured from the first; on how secure, or fragile, internal resources are felt to be.

The distinction between different kinds of identification in determining prevailing states of mind, and the importance of the possible reasons for those identifications, is well caught in a few short extracts from an infant observation:

Charlie (sixteen months) walked steadily across the room. He found a little plastic figure of a man wearing a three-cornered hat. He took the hat off and fixed it on again. Looking at me [the observer] he said

the hat that he had taken off into his mouth. He soon took it out again, with a serious expression on his face. He dropped the hat and picked up his mother's ruler from the table [his mother teaches Maths in a secondary school]. Holding the ruler he walked into the living room where his brother Frank (three years old) was watching television. Frank mumbled "naughty baby" in a slightly superior tone, and went on watching his programme. Charlie sought out his mother in the kitchen. "Careful with that ruler", she said "you'll have an accident". She suggested that he put it safely back on the table; which he did.

Later on both boys were tussling on their mother's lap, fighting each other for space. As Charlie definitively possessed the field by managing to get his arm round his mother's neck and to oust his brother, Frank got down, boldly announcing that he was going in search of his hat. While he was away Charlie and his mum enjoyed an intimate few moments, playing and singing "Row, row, row your boat" in perfect accord and well within Frank's earshot.

Frank returned with a fireman's hat on his head. With an air of importance he climbed onto his plastic bicycle. His mum said admiringly, "Oh good. We shall need a fireman because we might have a flood. The washing machine is full and I can't open the door. If there is a flood I shall definitely have to call for a fireman". (There was a shared implication that the machine was stuck because Charlie had fiddled with the buttons.) Frank looked pleased and important.

Without wishing to infer too much from these details it could, nonetheless, be suggested that when Charlie put the small hat in his mouth, removed it and immediately took up his mother's ruler, he was indicating that he had taken in something of his mother's authority and her concerned function of safeguarding him from swallowing something which could harm him. He immediately took up an object which might be said to represent this authority of which, in this sequence, he seemed not only to be aware, but also, momentarily, to be able to exercise on his own behalf. (This is in stark contrast to a rather older and very disturbed child who, in his therapy sessions, would characteristically brandish a ruler above his head shouting "I am the ruler", apparently believing himself actually to be so.)

Frank, already predisposed to put down his little brother ("naughty baby"), dealt with his own sense of exclusion from the mother/baby relationship by becoming the helpful, rescuing, big-boy-for-mummy (perhaps even daddy-for-mummy); at the ready in case of danger. Sensitively his mother realized that Frank's big-boy-self needed confirmation in this instance, and she supported his bid for status. One can see how, if Frank's little-boy-self had had to yield too consistently to his brother's baby demands, this uniform-wearing, slightly grandiose version of Frank-the-rescuer could become a fixed and defensive role, one that might protect his more needy self from exclusion or marginalization, but at a cost. It could also be that enough confirmation of his big-boy-self would enable him to acquire a sense of self-respect, rather than of superiority. One can see the danger in Frank's case that, if too often his sense of self required him to be big, when, in fact, he needed to be little, his real and fragile experience of who he was could become subsumed under the outer trappings of status and superiority. Here we can clearly see the subtle, moment by moment, shifts in the brothers' negotiation of their infant/adult selves as they responded to the ever-changing experience of intimacy and exclusion.

The difference between traits or roles, and functions is the difference between an infantile search for the "secrets" of being a "grown-up", in relation to external descriptive categories or characteristics, and the mysterious process of identifying with inner functions. This latter process belongs to the realm of psychic reality. It establishes the basis of character. The relationship between "secrets" and "mysteries" and their associated meanings has long preoccupied artists and creative writers. As a mode of denying anxiety and of avoiding painful experience, the desire to discover secrets rather than to seek out, to explore and endure the mysteries is a fundamental aspect of human nature.<sup>3</sup>

Such questions become more insistent than ever in adulthood. Now that the individual is technically "grown-up" the issue of what being a "man" or a "woman" really means has to be confronted. It is an issue which is as pressing for adults as the problem of sexual identity is for adolescents. There may, for example, be pseudo-mature identifications with masculine or feminine traits without any notion of what genuine manliness or womanliness might feel like or mean; or, indeed, without any notion of what all the possible

positions between the two, or which combine the two, might mean.

The gender aspect of a sense of identity is particularly hard to determine with any precision since it is so often obscured by the various armours of social code and stereotype which denote gender difference in line with obvious physiological distinctions. A further confusion occurs when the terms "masculinity" or "femininity" are invoked with any certainty. Freud (1933) was in no doubt about the hazards of such an approach. His view was that "what constitutes masculinity and femininity is an unknown characteristic which anatomy cannot lay hold of" (p. 114).

Any stereotype will clearly run counter to a person's efforts to be himself or herself. Although conventional stereotypes are slowly being dismantled to the point where it is possible to speak of "nurturing fathers" or "career mothers", an air of judgement from one source or another is seldom far away, whether based on ignorance, insecurity, or, perhaps, envy. Contemporary elaborations of Klein's theories of splitting and projective identification, together with Bick's notion of second-skin functioning, enable us to have considerable understanding of the ways in which someone may get locked within a personality which is based on pseudo-mature identifications with adult patterns of life, at the expense of the courage to withstand counterfeit emotions and to hold out for the difference between imitation and reality, between seeming to be and actually being. This is often particularly the case where there are anxieties about gender identity.

As we have seen (Chapter 4), the kind of adhesive identification which gives rise to a second-skin, or "as-if", way of functioning tends to select the social appearance of things as a focus of cohesion and integration. A person is drawn towards attitudes which are based on the imitation of surface attributes and behaviour. He is in danger of becoming a slave to fashion rather than a servant of principle. These identifications are caught up with primarily narcissistic concerns. They are very different, as we have seen, from the kind of identification in which the functional capacities of the loved one are taken in and assimilated as valued and trusted resources, ones which can be made use of by the growing personality. In adulthood a clear and unconfused sense of gender identity may be regarded as the foundation of a properly separated capacity to love and to work. It is this link between a coherent sense

of a sexual self and the nature of introjective processes that must now be considered at some length.<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to separate the findings of psychoanalytic research into the individual mind from the cultural context in which the structure of the personality arises. When we speak of masculinity and femininity we are using terms which are largely a matter of sociological interest. In describing something as typically "male" or "female" we are adopting the language of cultural stereotypes, of externally visible qualities—a kind of armour of convention, to be associated primarily with defensive character formation.

When it comes to the concepts male:female, or masculine:feminine it is, as Meltzer (1973) suggests, necessary to clear the field of a certain type of semantic debris:

We must set aside all historic, cultural or personal bias that would wish to appropriate specific traits of character or qualities of mind and fasten them preferentially to one or the other side of this dichotomy. Maleness and femaleness are highly complex concepts, differently faceted in meaning for different individuals and not to be bound to statistical ideas of normality, acculturation or adaptation. The meaning in the mind of each person is far more personal ... [p. 115]

Individual concepts of maleness and femaleness will inevitably be inflected by social experience. Yet there remains a fundamental distinction between external traits and internal functions. An adult sense of identity is manifest in a person's capacity to understand and perform those internal functions. A strong sense of identity grows out of such a capacity, and a false or confused sense grows out of a narcissistic identification with roles rather than with genuine qualities. The uncertainty does not relate to issues of whether something seems to be predominantly male or female. It is not about bisexuality or ambisexuality. It stems, rather, from the danger of having recourse to simulating behaviour which is based merely in the superficial attributes of, for example, motherliness and femininity, or of fatherliness and masculinity; in the secrets to be plundered; the romance of princes and princesses; the myth of "happy ever after". This kind of behaviour, orientated as it is to the external world, contrasts with a person's struggle towards what may be called gender capacities. These capacities develop through

the complicated process of a particular aspect of introjective identification, one which has its foundations in the infant's relationship with the internal figures who perform genuine parental functions for him.

An extended example may help to clarify the complex relationships between these different kinds of identification as they bear on the distinction between role and function in the case of one young woman, Laura. Beginning therapy was a particularly courageous decision for her. It was an unusual thing to do for someone from her social background and she had constantly to fight against the lure towards social and familial conformity, which was felt to offer so much calmer a life. When first referred for treatment Laura was thirty-four, a teacher of children with severe learning disabilities. She came from a working-class, immigrant background in Scotland. She was seeking help for states of confusion, for an inability to think, for depression and general unhappiness. She had been married to her second husband for six years and longed for a baby, but had been unable to conceive. She was distressed and preoccupied by this fact, though it was not the main reason for seeking help.

Laura was the first child of hard-working and ambitious parents. They had started a shop, working night and day while Laura was an infant. They had, it seemed, had little time for their baby. Laura had memories of being, as she described it, put in a box underneath the counter. She had felt neglected and unhappy as a child. She remembered often being looked after by neighbours; feeling wretched at school; suffering a sense of persecution over fears of her own wickedness. She hated her teachers and always came bottom of the class. One year she had a teacher whom she liked and by whom she felt understood. She came top. Far from the praise for which she had so earnestly hoped, she was cruelly berated: why did she not always achieve, since she was clearly so capable?

She described her mother as elegant and bejewelled, but rather cold and distant; her father as temperamental and erratic, affectionate but liable to sexual intrusiveness. Laura's dreams were generally persecutory, often taking the form of animals, devils or malign spirits breaking into her flat/house/room and terrifying her. Her main devil was a figure called Mr Business. He had originated in childhood and continued to "visit" her as some kind of terrifying

presence. Her mother's second baby, a boy, was born when Laura was five. He was an asthmatic and bronchitic child who "got all the care". Laura recalled a memory, dating from this period, of cutting all images of herself from family photographs. She could not bear to be "seen" in the projected images of "happy-family" groups when she had never felt "seen" as an individual in the lived-experience of her actual family.

Soon after the birth of her mother's third child, Laura, herself then aged fifteen, became pregnant. She was sent to London, alone, for an abortion. When she was eighteen she left home to work abroad for several years. On return, she trained as a teacher and married a fellow student. The marriage failed after only a few months. Several years later she married again, this time to a young man, John, whom she had known as a child. The relationship was, on the whole, harmonious, but Laura was often critical of it, feeling that it was "not very grown-up". She thought of herself as excessively "clingy", aware that what slight adult capacities the two of them had tended to collapse under the more infantile pressure between them to compete for being the baby—particularly in the area of financial incompetence. Laura and John's potential for any joint capacities for undertaking properly parental functions and responsibilities remained a sensitive and unproven area.

In the therapy setting it rapidly became clear that as soon as she became anxious, Laura would lose her capacity to think, to remember, or to dream. She tended to develop florid psychosomatic symptoms—excema, bronchitis, gastric troubles. She would have minor car accidents. Her bag would be stolen. She would become caught up in a variety of self-destructive acts which caused havoc in her emotional life, in her professional world and in her practical economy. Striking discrepancies would arise between her role as a competent "professional" woman, and a baby-self which often felt lost in a welter of confusion and unmet need. It was these discrepancies which brought her into therapy. She sought to relinquish her tendency to try to "act the part" of a grown woman, desiring instead genuinely to become one. In the course of therapy a shift began to occur from her attachment to the external, descriptive categories of womanliness and motherliness, to an understanding of the internal meaning of being a woman and being a mother.

Though dissimilar in many ways, Laura reminded her therapist

of Dorothea at the beginning of *Middlemarch*—dedicated to good works, childlike in her “when I grow up I want to be good” attitude to life, and finding, in her intimate relationships, mainly “vague, labyrinthine extensions of herself”. The changes that slowly took place were not wholly unlike the central developmental thrust of the novel. For Laura, like Dorothea, began to recognize and endure the pain of genuine separateness. The internal shift that was required was that from a narcissistic identification with an idealized internal aspect of herself to a more separated and other-related way of experiencing intimacy, with all the anguish that that entailed.

The following account draws on one thread only of the multi-layered fabric of the therapeutic work with Laura—a thread which offered much insight into the complex area under discussion. An early dream revealed a profoundly damaged internal world, and provided a clue to Laura’s personal and professional problems of identity, to her impulse to care “in role” for the mutilated and disintegrated parts of herself, a role which seemed, at that time, to hold little hope for creative capacities from which something more genuine and lively could emerge.

This early dream described Laura

walking into a dark tunnel in a local hospital, the walls of which were red and moist. She was leading a mentally and physically disabled child by the hand. They entered the innermost chamber which was filled with mutilated bodies—mainly of babies and children; parts of bodies, piled in unspecified heaps.

The images reminded her of the Holocaust. The dream represented for Laura a chamber of her own mind in which untold harm had been wreaked, leaving a legacy of guilt about damage done and a certainty of reciprocal damage to be visited upon her and on the inside of her body in particular. This state of mind seemed, by association, to link closely to the psychic reality of the abortion nearly twenty years earlier. It also linked to the emotional determinants of that first pregnancy, lodged as they seem to have been, in envious rage at her mother’s continuing fertility, in jealousy at the arrival of a baby sibling, and in a desire to compete and to triumph.

In the months which followed this early dream there were a number of others which confirmed this picture of a putrid, festering

internal space, dreams in which pregnancy turned out to be simulated—the abdominal swelling being faeces rather than foetus. In one dream,

worms were breaking through the membrane of her skin, wriggling out of minute orifices in her shoulders or chest.

In another,

apples were being dissected to reveal a mass of rotting seeds, from which fled the grim Reaper of Death.

Two-dimensional images would appear of menacing and caricatured puppet figures.

Common-sense tells us that early abortion may be followed by infertility and that that infertility does not appear to have an organic or physiological basis. What these dreams seem to illustrate is something of what the internal meaning of the abortion may have been for Laura and why, as a consequence, she may not have been able to conceive. Certainly she felt herself to be responsible for being “barren”, a sense of responsibility that was based in very early anxieties about sin and about her own intrinsic “badness”. What is of interest here is the emotional meaning for her of this sense of badness and its impact upon her, both physically and psychically.

The faeces/foetus dream was associated, in content, with a married couple, friends of Laura and John, for whom abundant fertility seemed linked to the capacity to nurture and to provide, both financially and emotionally. This couple were thought to be able to offer parental resources of a kind which Laura still felt unable to find in herself or in her relationship with John. She felt childish and inadequate when with them, tending to slip into what she described as a “babyish” stance whenever they were around. This sense of incapacity was again suggested in a dream which followed a few weeks later, one in which, for the first time,

Laura actually gave birth to a baby. But the baby had no eyes, just yellow sockets with long, grey lashes. She showed the baby to her mother, insisting that she be allowed to keep it this time, despite the damage. She then went through a painful process of delivering the afterbirth. This turned out to consist of a series of contraceptive

devices and, finally, of the baby's liver and kidneys which Laura wrapped in cling-film and threw away.

The evidence of Laura's continued unreadiness, in her inner world, to bear and suckle a baby was clear. Internally, the adult structure of her personality was still very shaky. But there was a striking indication of the potential for change. At the end of this particular session Laura realized that the baby's eyelashes in the dream were identical with those of her husband. For the first time, the existence of a partner/father was introduced into her dream world. In response, she also felt able to tell her therapist of two miscarriages which had occurred soon after her abortion. She thus imparted to a now trusted person evidence of promiscuous behaviour which she had never revealed before. In so doing she took steps towards the possibility of depending on a mother/therapist who could understand and tolerate these profoundly contradictory and destructive aspects of herself. There were still internal "contraceptive devices" which opposed her more conscious desire for motherhood.

Many subsequent dreams, and much of the transference relationship, focused on the central importance of Laura's trying to find ways of being a "grown-up" lady, of her searching for the secrets. The sense seemed to be, "maybe it's the clothes? the make-up? the nails? the eyes?" As she dwelt, in her sessions, on her dull, dreary and confused self-conception, it was possible to observe, again and again, how these projections and imitations let her down and misled her; how the romance dissolved into the monotony of her daily struggles, into the pain of her monthly disappointments.

As long as her notion of being a grown-up woman depended on these kinds of identification, Laura herself was stuck. The therapy also felt stuck. Two painful external occurrences combined to alter things. Partly as a consequence of a change in her relationship with John, Laura did, in fact, become pregnant. But she lost the baby after a few weeks. She was told by the consultant that the foetus was dreadfully deformed and could not possibly have survived (a horrible confirmation of her worst fears). The second event was that it became necessary for her to move abroad because of John's employment. As a consequence she had to terminate her therapy prematurely.

The miscarriage brought in its wake a series of dreams which

were quite different from previous ones. They were dreams which centred on a variety of sexual relationships both with men and with women. The dreams seemed to represent a new kind of struggle, one which involved an effort to try to sort out the internal qualities of the different figures with whom she was identified, rather than to settle for their superficial attributes. Gender became a question not so much of male/female, passive/active, strong/weak, hard/soft, intellectual/intuitive, as of the capacities for feeling which these various identifications carried, and of the ways in which they genuinely served Laura in those bitter days.

The final weeks of therapy were characterized by a leap of insight and an heroic effort to change in the midst of the turbulence of loss. They demonstrated the kind of thrust for development which may often occur in the context of painful separation. Hints of a growing ability to sustain genuine and shared parental concern had already begun to appear. In the penultimate week Laura described a dream which seemed to recapitulate the shifts, from one mental state to another, which had taken place in the course of her therapy. It was as if the dream offered a kind of guided tour of the different chambers of her mind, as she slowly developed and changed. In this "Pilgrim's Progress" dream there was no confusion or persecutory anxiety, but rather the representation of a distinct and unique journey from a destructive basement part of herself to the sunshine and clear air of a thinking-self—a self that could reflect how she *actually* was, her strengths and her limitations, and about how she could yet be.

Laura was in a basement, one which she felt was somehow connected with her mother. The room flooded. Mutilated bits of body floated to the surface. She escaped into the hull of an old-fashioned sailing-ship and underwent a perilous, storm-tossed voyage over cresting waves and deep troughs, bravely charting a dangerous sea. The sea eventually became merged with a frozen, white landscape across which she landsailed. She eventually arrived at a grassy track which led her down between houses, past a place where people were coming and going about their daily business, and thence to a sunny landscape with fields on either side. Here she found a beautiful horse, apparently in need of a rider.

The last part of this long and detailed dream described the horse

and rider being brought together and a suggestion of potential fertility. Laura's suffering over the imminent separation from her therapist not only re-evoked the stormy voyage of the therapy and of her past life, but also seemed to stir in her some hope of being able to be part of a parental couple (horse and rider) with capacities both to care and be cared for.

Here lay the essence of the shift in Laura: to be expressed again in further dreams of the same week. It seemed that, on some level, she had realized that in order genuinely to "feed" a baby one has to be cognizant of the baby parts of oneself, to know that, at times, that baby-self is more powerful than anything else. Becoming a mother, or parent, in the true sense of the word, begins with being able to be one's own independent self, while acknowledging continuing dependence on loved and respected internal resources.

A particularly clear juxtaposition of the unresolved, and yet hopeful, relationship between the different parts of herself occurred in a fragment of a dream remembered from the night before Laura's very last session.

There were two aspects of herself, ones which were separate, and yet definitely parts of the whole. A line of three moles was positioned vertically above her left breast. These changed into mushrooms—a distasteful, indeed rather disgusting, phenomenon. But at the same time, on her fingers were many rings—beautiful, pale sapphires, almost aquamarine in hue, both blue like the sky and green like the sea.

It was not surprising that Laura's mother turned out to possess a beautiful sapphire ring which she had left to her daughter in her will. This was a legacy which, in dream-language, seemed to represent Laura's growing capacity to internalize, and to possess for herself, some qualities, though as yet pale ones, of genuine beauty and creativity. The presence of these qualities could be said to indicate the beginnings of a benign identification with her mother/therapist, one based on a more positive appreciation of their actual strengths and less on her distorted versions of them. In the course of therapy it had become possible to recognize that Laura's wish to be like her mother, a wish that had been represented in her early dreams of strong, beautiful, accomplished, fertile women, was by no means based on the simple desire enviously to take over those qualities which she felt her mother to have. Nor was it based merely

on the desire to "be" her therapist. Laura's wish was also based on love, and the guilt which she felt came from the attacks which she found herself making on this mother, the one whom she often hated, but to whom, she discovered, she was also devoted. What she had idealized in her mother were characteristics which, in all likelihood, did not belong to the actual person. But it was through that idealization (inseparably linked to hatred and destructiveness) that Laura reduced what good qualities her mother might really have had to offer her into quite superficial ones, ones which Laura had then sought to appropriate in their reduced form. Towards the end of her therapy she was able to begin to admire her mother and to experience her as someone in relation to whom she could feel genuine aspiration, rather than mere emulation of her superficial traits and characteristics.

This new experience was in marked contrast to her earlier preoccupations, with what she had felt to be the cruel, elegant and remote aspects of her mother. It was in contrast too with the presence of the three moles. These moles bore a double connotation. The intrusive getting-in-and-spying-on-the-secrets side of Laura was still there. Above the left breast were the unresolved, poisonous parts of herself which she wished to have "left" with her therapist. But these parts were also ones which she felt "left" with—the dark mushrooms which still threatened to poison and spoil any future beauty or procreativity. These fears of Laura's, as the dream clearly showed, were not yet wholly dispelled.

But there was now a distinctive recognition of those damaging aspects of herself which had become easier to see and could therefore be better thought about. The rings, far from being objects of superficial adornment as they had been in the past, carried with them a different quality of maternal identification, one that was culled from the anguish of loss and of premature separation. These experiences hurt Laura profoundly yet they also helped her towards a capacity for adult mourning, by contrast with the infantile dependency of earlier days. Over the period of the therapy she had become able to take in and to identify with qualities of genuine love and dependence. Laura was discovering in herself real strength and was able to become less reliant on the brittle and counterfeit resilience which stems from narcissistic identifications of the more projective or imitative kind.

The psychoanalytic approach to adulthood, and this central aspect of it, gender identity, resides essentially in the developmental mode of "exploring the mystery". Laura's many attempts at "solving the riddle", or "unearthing the secrets", simply produced more and more objects for identification, ones which ultimately let her down or misled her. In the course of her painful struggles in therapy her infantile search for secrets gave way to a more adult sense of the mysterious process of introjective identification. The "Pilgrim's Progress" dream summed up the way in which her pseudo-maturity, in place from early years, had yielded to a capacity to experience her "storm-tossed" self as the self, too, of a needy infant. This infant-Laura's frozen development, as she "sailed", or perhaps skated, across the surface of life, was eventually able to begin to thaw and, in the pain of her depressive anxiety, to emerge into the light and sunshine of possible future growth.

#### Notes

1. Coleridge, "Dejection: An Ode".
2. Roszika Parker, *Torn in Two*, *op. cit.*
3. I am drawing on the work of Meg Harris Williams who elaborates this distinction in the context of creative writers, "Knowing the mystery: against reductionism", *Encounter*, (1), June 1986.
4. The case material that follows is, in large part, drawn from an article of my own first published in 1989. "Gender identity fifty years on from Freud", *British Journal of Psychotherapy*, Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 381-389.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### "The later years"

"It is never too late to become the person you might have been"

George Eliot

George Eliot's optimistic words seem particularly fitting for the age group in question. "It is never too late ..." This concluding chapter will echo and reiterate the main themes of the book. The tune is essentially the same; only the key is different. Development, at whatever age, is founded in the capacity to go on engaging with the meaning of experience with imagination, courage and integrity. Freud's exhortation that "one must try to learn something from every experience" remains as true in the last part of life as it has ever been.<sup>1</sup>

These pages have traced the extraordinarily complex tangle of threads or forces, internal and external, which bear on one person's capacity to develop and grow psychologically, or bear on another's to put development into abeyance, either arresting creative potential or diverting it to purposes that will run counter to the best interests of the personality as a whole. Turning now to the later