

## PETS AND PSYCHOANALYSIS: A CLINICAL CONTRIBUTION

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Anna and Sigmund Freud were both pet owners. And while their respective personal experience with their dogs helped them become aware of what Freud called a “pure love” relationship (Brill, 1943; Heiman, 1956; Levinson, 1969; Rappaport, 1968; Sanford, 1966; Sherick, 1981; Volkan & Kavanaugh, 1978) between a pet and its companion, in the analytic literature, there is a subtle tendency to diminish the importance of human-pet relationships and accent the pathology of pet attachment. In fact, psychoanalytic writing leaves unexplained the quality of shared psychic environment between animals and humans. In this article I investigate some of the fundamentals of that relationship and its adaptive function.

A pet attends to and interacts with its human companion by noncognitive and nondiscursive communication. A pet readily shares the sensorimotor-emotive world of its human companions though its sensory acuity is quite different. It conveys meanings by actions, touches with its body, never matures in a human sense, yet grows old and dies. Pets apprehend and respond to gesture, verbal emotional tone, expressions of emotion, and sense the presence of separation, death, and loss. They often bond to their owners and become emotionally and responsively fixed on their owner/companion through sight, sound, and smell. Historically, pets practically earned their keep and were chosen for particular functions, primarily hunting and guarding. Although complex urbanization and social isolation do limit the choice of a pet, now they are more likely chosen for the satisfaction they may provide for their owners.

Pets are seemingly available for a variety of psychological

need and drives. They may be watched, shown off, touched, fondled, held. Pets can be there when no one else is there, and also can be abused physically, psychologically, or sexually. In addition, a pet may be acquired at any stage of life and impact on their companions' life. Freud's "late in life" acquisition of his Chows is consistent with Blum's (1981) discussion of Freud's need for companionship. Interestingly, Blum, among other Freud scholars, seems ignorant of the Freud family attachment to their dogs.

Pets are also responsive to the psychological, sensate, and nonverbal cues of both adult and child interaction, much as Freud's chow Jo-Fie was responsive to Freud's physical movements (M. Freud, 1958). This sensitivity probably evolved from their inherent sensate awareness, which ensured each breeds' survival and later made them useful as dependent companions. While preverbal children have a readiness to empathically identify with the pet animal (Freud, 1912-1913), pets are also capable of comprehending a limited vocabulary. They learn by recognition or simple association (indirectly shown by Fraiberg, 1969) and develop a conditioned responsiveness to certain words or sounds. However, they are unable to enter a verbal dialogue. With consideration to species and breeding for specific traits, pets usually respond with consistency to affection, aggressively or warily to abuse and punishment, respond to commands, and exhibit a primary form of shame in the presence of their keepers when they are "told" they are "bad." While pets may serve immediate psychological purposes, they also afford opportunity for both children and adults to reobserve and emphatically identify with the animal's normal drive activity and phase-specific wishes and fears. In addition, pets display a variety of "instinctive" and other "need" behavior in relation to their owners and other pets.

In the psychological realm, Spitz (1963), a dog owner, observed that inanimate objects lend themselves well to direct human aggressive discharges since the inanimate does not respond or retaliate. The animate world is more suitable for libidinal discharge, supplying an inexhaustible resource for nondiscursive dialogue. Distinctions between animate and inanimate object choices are significant when considering basic ego development,

the quality of dialogue, and of the development of object relatedness and healthy narcissism.

A pet in a household modifies family interaction patterns, creating animate transferences within a family unit. A pet involves each family member with a shared animate object, serving differing transferences for each person. In addition, the animal itself asserts its influence within a family by seeking to establish a hierarchical order in an attempt to have its basic needs met.

The quality of the pets' interactive aliveness evokes reciprocal nonverbal psychomotor responses and affects, altering identificatory and adaptive processes. While pets may serve adaptation, pet "seeking" may become defensively and rigidly fixed. When fixed it prevents a widening of interest in the animate world, leaving flawed both basic human needs for verbal dialogue and the empathic recognition of the status of others.

#### LIFE-SAVING ATTACHMENTS

I had the opportunity to observe many adults who formed "life-saving" reciprocating attachments to pets and by so doing achieved a compensatory constant multidetermined relationship. However, the psychic consequences of an enduring libidinal attachment—with its accompanying identifications—required intrapsychic accommodations. With patients, this accommodation both influenced and reappeared in the nondiscursive elements of the regressive analytic transference. One frequent effect was the reappearance in the fantasy and real object-seeking behaviors of elements of the pet relationship. Another effect was in the identifications that formed representation of self and other. Pet attachments and seeming identificatory patterns in certain gifted individuals may also serve as creative outlets in the creation of art and literature. Kipling, who created some most evocative anthropomorphic literature, had significant relationships with animals (Kipling, 1984; Shengold, 1981; Trilling, 1943).

The following analytic cases are illustrative of several compensatory, narcissistic pet attachments and illustrate the multiple functions a pet can serve. Certain clinical material is abbreviated to focus on the animal-human relationship.

Ms. A

Ms. A was a depressed young woman in the midst of a marital breakup. She began an early session with the following associations: "Men like me. I have good hands. I grew up with dogs (making petting motions with her hands). I love to stroke them—feel them *under* my hands." The multiple meanings of her opening statement and concurrent psychomotor discharges later became elaborated. She emerged from a phobic, isolated, and restrictive adolescence with highly charged identity conflicts and ambivalence concerning men. She believed, via projection, that no man could accept or appreciate her.

Ms. A often recalled early latency memories of her depressed mother having severe "temper tantrums." As Ms. A approached, her mother would strike out and chase her into her room. Alone in her room, crying and helpless, Ms. A encouraged the family dogs' natural response to approach and comfort her. She would begin to fondle the male animals and then suddenly hurl them against the wall. Each dog, she anthropomorphically believed, never "forgave her," and later as she approached them, they would circle warily around her.

Ms. A often verbalized her fears of being responsible for anyone, and in particular for either a *dog or a child* of her own. She consciously feared reenacting her own historical pattern of abuse. Within the transference she reproduced sequences of seduction, wariness, and attack, identifying alternately either as her mother's victim or as the aggressor against a comforting object.

Ms. A's behavior on the couch confirmed Greenacre (1958, 1963) and Coltrera's (1979) observation of psychomotor discharge on the occasion of the need for an object while associating on the couch. Ms. A's behavior with her pets, that is, training them to be wary of her and projecting that "they never forgave her," exemplified a conscious and unconscious projective training of her pets. Projective training a pet may also be accomplished by the split-off projected fantasies, behaviors, and fears of their keepers.

She often experienced great horrors of having a child, afraid of what was inside her and afraid that her (cannibalistic)

rage would emerge at anyone dependent upon her. Furthermore, she openly feared her own dependency needs and wishes, and would often physically or verbally attack the real object of her need. Interestingly, these alternating sequences intensified in the analytic transference after she secured and cared for a pet. In this behavior, she duplicated her attacks on the family dogs and her mother's attacks on her. Mr. E (described later) was more ambivalent in object seeking than Ms. A.

*Mr. C*

Following the breakup of a heterosexual love relationship, Mr. C, a passive and acting-out young male patient, rescued a large, mixed-breed male dog from an ASPCA shelter. The name he gave the dog "sounded familiar." A year later, he remembered the name as the same given to a stuffed animal presented to him after his sister was born when he was three years of age. He also associated the live dog's size and demeanor as being like his analyst; large, gruff, and friendly. During a long termination phase his homosexual and separation conflicts appeared in great intensity. During this phase he suggested humorously that he give his son—who was soon to be born—the same name as the dog. He was unaware that he had earlier revealed a fantasy of killing the dog after his son was born. This little "joke" gave testimony to the enduring nature of his aggressive fantasies, foreshadowed conflicts with his unborn son, and forewarned the outbreak of a long negative transference in this phase.

For Mr. C, an observable pathway evolved in his object-seeking behavior. The path traversed the inadequate gift of a stuffed animal at a time of rivalry and separation, a rescued live animal pet that embodied characteristics of his analyst and himself, a fuller human relationship with a woman, and being a father with his own child.

Both Mr. C and Ms. A suffered preconstancy disturbances with depressive consequences. These early development traumas had consequences through all later significant developmental organizing events. This was the case with Ms. A and Mr. C. Ms. A's mother was cyclically depressed, while Mr. C was raised by housekeepers. Ms. A's analysis never progressed beyond her ac-

quisition of a pet, as severe paranoid anxieties prevented her remaining in analysis (Blum, 1981). Her capacity to form caring attachments seemed to halt at this acquisition of a pet. For Mr. C, the anticipation of being a father reawakened his long-denied anger and murderous rage at being abandoned.

*Ms. D*

At the inauguration of Ms. D's psychoanalysis, she had multiple problems of self-esteem regulation accompanied by affective mood swings. She was manifestly afraid of nurturing or caring for anyone. Constantly alert to evidence of being deprived, she believed she had some unnamable irreversible defect that magically caused these deprivations. Initially, in the transference and in her other relationships, she expected criticism, to be shamed, and to be told what she experienced, and she felt that she had no status to anyone. Her dog and two cats frequently appeared in a variety of her early associations. On one occasion she accepted the following interpretation: "Sometimes you're like a dog that approaches me, happy with his tail wagging, and hears, 'What did you do wrong?' and cowers, when, in reality, I haven't said anything." "When I cower," she replied, "I also pee." While others might interpret a defense against aggressive wishes, the intervening associations supported an interpretation of her repetitive character stance based on preoedipal and oedipal trust problems. This transference theme became a central element in working through her object-seeking behaviors, phobias, and included her inhibited strivings and problems in distinguishing inside from outside.

*Mr. E*

Mr. E was born to a climacteric mother, who already had two adolescent sons. Ignored as a toddler while his parents attended to the adolescent demands of his siblings, he would seek out the family bulldog under the kitchen table for physical contact. Family stories recounted his aggressive physical play with the dog, biting the dog, and sharing his food with the dog. He said, "when he went, so did I." While Mr. E had no memory of

these events, he maintained a memory of the dog's smell and the "feel of its skin." About the age of five, the dog was given away because it had become "too much" for his mother to care for. He identified with the dog that he would become "too much" to be cared for. During latency, his mother had become depressed following the marriage of his two brothers, and Mr. E spent much time alone in his backyard. He recalled watching stray cats and creating elaborate fantasies in which he was their leader and had special powers to communicate with them. He watched the birth of cat litters, provided food to the nursing mother cats, and brought abandoned kittens and dogs home. However, his mother never accepted the "new" animals with whom he readily identified and wished to rescue.<sup>1</sup>

At eight, as a kitten was cornered by some children, with magical conviction Mr. E reached a hand into the cul-de-sac to rescue it, only to be severely bitten. He suffered a profound deflation of his omnipotent fantasies and great social humiliation. While later waiting for antirabies shots with other bite victims, he empathized with the animals and stoically accepted the painful injections. He comforted himself by an elaborating a new fantasy of becoming a veterinarian. This fantasy maintained some of his healthy grandiosity and the continued preference for animals as peers, while rebuffing his mother's behavior. He also frequently fantasized about owning a kennel and living tranquilly among animals. These fantasies easily returned thirty years later as a response to narcissistic hurt and disappointment.

Within the transference, he took an exceedingly long time to trust the analyst. Mr. E's sensitivity to both nonverbal and object-seeking behavior in adults contributed to a characterological wariness, vulnerability to tone of voice and hidden meanings in verbal comments, and ambiguities in his own language. Once trust was partial in treatment he became an episodically loyal, though often an angry or silent companion.

*Ms. B*

Ms. B was a 25-year-old woman who suffered from feelings of inferiority and severe narcissistic vulnerability. Socially self-isolated, she organized much of her life around three cats. She

was the younger of two siblings, of which her older brother was the gender-favored child. She viewed herself as an outsider, someone who always “watched” the interactions in her family, unable to participate safely. Within the regressive recall of the analysis, she cognitively dated historical events with her family pets as an internal calendar, and revealed a profound and constant identification with various animals. For example, on one occasion Ms. B came to a session late, having spent an “hour” staring at a rabbit in a store window. After that incident she described herself as being a “rabbit.” “I peep out of my hole to see if the world is safe.” The meanings of her overdetermined associations revealed the rabbit as a symbol for her agoraphobia; a failure to distinguish inside from outside; her scotophilic defenses and rapprochement conflicts; her tendency to feel “frozen” when overstimulated; fears of motility; and phobic fantasies. “If I see or hear something dangerous, I freeze, don’t move and don’t breathe—just like a rabbit.”

Many successive meanings evolved concerning the rabbit. Among these were felt vulnerabilities to both sexual and aggressive attacks, erotic skin sensitivity and a wish for warmth (she bought a large down comforter shortly after this event), and the obvious vaginal and anal meanings associated with doing it like a rabbit and the rabbit hole.

An example of her internal dating system follows. While associating to a parapraxis regarding the number eight, Ms. B remembered that she opened the door and let her favorite dog out of the house “so he could run away from the family.” She recalled that a kitten was killed that week after her mother backed the car out of the driveway without checking under the wheel. This she used as external proof-positive of her mother’s carelessness and poor judgment. Later her depression took on increased intensity, and she continued mourning the death of her brother in Vietnam. Often when her mourning intensified she would miss sessions. She spent that time alone with her cats at home, silently watching her favorite “deaf” cat move around the apartment “playing with the sun and shadows.” Associations to her deaf cat led to memories of calling out in the night for her mother and no one hearing her.

With these clinical examples, it is possible to offer some general observations about the use of pets for varying psychic purposes. Those patients who suffered less severe developmental disturbance of the precursors of dialogue could transform their aggression into a fantasy of active helping. This was so despite strong anal and oral fixations and defenses. Reaction formation also aided their ability to test out interpretations in the real world and establish a cautiously trusting, though extremely alert, alliance (Coltrera, 1979; Greenacre, 1958, 1963). One example could come from Mr. E's history—specifically, his wish to be a veterinarian. Although he never actually became one, his fantasy allowed a safe outlet for his sensitivity to nonverbal needs and communications while shoring up identificatory patterns. Ms. A (who beat her dogs as a child) could not maintain a tentative alliance, and her tolerance for therapeutic frustration was compromised by depression with strong aggressive and paranoid fantasies, much as Blum (1981) described. The empathic-projective transference linkage with Ms. A was vulnerable to disruption by her paradoxical anger and object neediness. A working treatment alliance was never established Ms. A's early attachment and identification with a pet was pervaded with aggression. It offered no safe haven from her more profound developmental conflicts, which severely affected later object seeking behaviors and her sense of self. The pet relationship could not contain these conflicts, either in her childhood or when she attempted an additional pet relationship as an adult.

## DISCUSSION

From a technical perspective, concern and clarification of the discursive and nondiscursive, inanimate and animate transferences has theoretical and clinical significance (Blum, 1977; Coltrera, 1981). Levels of dialogue and object relatedness are particularly important in the analysis of adult narcissistic defenses in which the importance of the recaptured nonverbal transference is often underestimated or ignored. In the reality of the patient's life, and frequently in the life of some analysts, the presence of a pet gratifies basic needs for an animated relationship. Further-

more, pets may convey their owner's characterological stance to the world, as in the mutual exhibitionistic use of a show dog (Sherick, 1981). They are also effective in dealing with loneliness and separation anxieties, as M. Bonaparte's (1940) chow Topsy, or represent vulnerable, paranoid, or protective aggression by displacement, as in a trained guard dog.

Several significant issues concerning the psychic effects of object inconstancy and pet attachment are evident in the clinical examples. I shall try to clarify some of them. Identification as a psychic process is part of the *deus ex machina*. Bonding and attachment of young infants, upon which physical survival and the earliest identifications are dependent, are not completely understood (Brody, 1981). Aside from prosurvival reflexes, the average expectable environment supplies a variety of body senses, smell, tactile sensations, visual auditory and skin stimulation, and rhythmic utterances. How disturbances of early attachment reappear in analytic regressions varies along dimensions of basic trust and emergent sensitivities. Mr. E avoided a severe childhood depression in his nonverbal, empathic resonating relationship with his trusting pet, first as a real companion, then as a fantasy object, and later in pet replacements. As a preoedipal residue he maintained an olfactory memory of his first dog that he could consciously evoke. He also reported that when playing with his current dog he intuitively acted in ways he saw other dogs act. This is understandable as a consciously organized "object beckoning by imitation." He explained that he would growl and lean on his dog while on all fours, biting the dog's neck, and the dog would respond in kind. "I do it so well, my dog thinks I'm a dog . . . other dogs play with him that way. I must have learned that (behavior) pretty early. I always remember doing it. I also bark very well."

Collaborative evidence of empathic imitation of animals is available from a nonanalytic source. In the movie *Greystoke*, which follows closely E. R. Burrough's first Tarzan books, the traumatically orphaned boy-child survives because of his uncanny ability to (empathically) imitate. He learns to imitate his adopting ape parents and other animals—to "speak their language." Imitation plays a profound role in identification. Acting in the special sense of mimicry and simple forms of imperson-

ation happen frequently in development and vary from trying out behaviors to a highly developed skill of impersonation. The importance of both scopophilic and auditory drives and the need to reverse these in exhibitionism both play an important role in the lives of the artist (Jacobson, 1971c). They also have a function in the survival theme of feral myths (Trilling, 1943). Mr. E's ability to mimic dogs surely underscores this dynamic but places its origin in the service of early nonverbal identification and object seeking behavior. Tarzan's imitative ability and its use in *his* identificatory processes with animals, while part of the analytic attachment bond, seemingly illustrates its object seeking function with children. Mr. E's alertness to distinctions between imitation and realness in the voices and behavior of others, acute during states of negative transference, was related to his early sense of empathic failure. He eventually identified with both the analyst and the analysis and tolerated an analytic solution to his early depression. This slowly evolved with his ability to verbalize his acute sensitivity to his own mood and physical state.

Ms. B revealed many profound early disturbances, among them ones of motility, smell, tactile sensation, skin temperature, and visual and auditory sensations. Unlike Mr E, her "reaching out for object contact" and family romance was directed and reciprocated in part by her brother. With his death, she was unable to mourn because of a profound identificatory crisis. Instead she sought by magic to substitute her erotic fantasies and attachment to her brother by becoming him, for herself and her family. For Mr E, his compensatory identificatory object, the beloved dog, was traumatically lost. For both Mr. E and Ms. B silent watching and silent alertness were recognizable self and transference states in the analyses. Also, Ms. B, when severely depressed, sought the silent visual company of her pet cats, as she had as a child. When narcissistically hurt, both turned their interest to the world of animals and away from human interaction and words.

All preconstancy traumas do not lead to the extreme paranoid and aggressive transference development recently described by Blum (1981). Obviously, the appearance of restorative animate attachments to a pet served certain people in a variety of verbal and nonverbal manners. Some general observations re-

garding the psychic function of the pet relationship follow. When the pet became the regular target of aggression and other destructive acts, as with Ms. A, the course of treatment was similar to that described by Blum (1981). Unchanneled aggression, psychic vulnerability, and severe basic trust issues predominated.

The treatment of Ms. B and Ms. D shed further light on the problems of psychic vulnerability and paranoid defenses. For Ms. B the patterns of her identification with the rabbit (and her cats) revealed multidetermined and overdetermined conflicts and wishes arising from the earliest felt maternal failures. Miss B reexperienced her mother and her analyst as a "deaf cat." The following vignette revealed yet another meaning to her deafness. She had persisting complaints about night noise in her next door apartment. Interpretations of primal scene material did not diminish her complaint. Only later after much delicate work it was revealed that her own screams woke her . . . . She was also deaf to her own screams. In her sleep she had become fused with her identification with the aggressor. A similar pattern evolved within Ms. D, who first was subject to her mother's anger, later provoked aggression in her mother, and then beat her pet dogs. For Ms. D, defensive splitting of her object-seeking behaviors, fears of dependency, and repression with externalization of aggression energized her "cowed" and urinating stance.

It is reasonable to ask why Mr. E did not become more vulnerable to his psychic integration problems. Certain individuals, because of drive endowment and creative intelligence, find solutions to faulty and damaging preoedipal relationships. Greenacre's (1971) incisive series of papers on the gifted clarify that some individuals with early problems are able to function creatively and successfully, and gain self-esteem, albeit still precarious, when working. These people usually possess empathic and creative gifts that maintain an instability or openness of self, with all that implies developmentally. Their openness to the environment allows shifting, often multiple, cognitive styles, partial empathic identifications, and the ability to rapidly shift cathexis. Another accessible explanation is that rather than aggressive attacks on animals, a compensatory emotionally resonating relationship with an animal may offer an alternative to depressive reactions. Specifically, an animal-child nonverbal dialogue sup-

plying a warm and warming relationship with a pet refueled his basic wish for object contact.

In each of the cases, examples of the animal-child nonverbal dialogue seem to embody a fusion of overdetermined mood states, drives, and wishes. However, there is a theoretical paradox in our understanding of a pet's psychic influence. The pet is not invented as a transitional object by the child and possesses its own animate qualities. In addition, the multiplicity of a pet's psychic employment suggests that pets enjoy some psychic characteristics and functions of the transitional object. The cognitive-representational category "animal" as an entity, while occurring early developmentally, occurs much later than transitional forms. Is it possible that the love of a pet is the product of fused images from different developmental stages? Is it possible that an animal may serve, as it once has in human history, as an early form of supplementary object? An object that supports a preoedipally weakened emerging sense of self?

Fused images develop, Greenacre (1970) suggests, with intermediate forms of the transitional object. Intermediate forms of object representation or overlapping or layering of images and psychic representations are probably part of normal development. However, it may be that in adults such representations are the results of faulty structuralizing events (Jacobson, 1971b; Roiphe & Galenson, 1973).

#### SUMMARY

I have attempted to clinically demonstrate the varying developmental functions a pet may serve throughout the life cycle. While having a pet often serves as partial repair for preoedipal conflicts, there are many varieties in that form of attachment. The variations of perception of a pet, both in reality and in the analytic literature, seem dependent on unstable and fused psychic representations. These variations range from narcissistic support during conflicts, to shoring up the sense of identity, to providing an object of exclusive identification. The discursive and nondiscursive elements of pet human interaction, when it occurs early, affects the emerging sense of self and the empathic perceptions of self and reality. However, certain individuals

safely assume a nondiscursive empathic attachment to a pet at later stages of life to provide external animate stability and a reciprocating nonverbal relationship.

An understanding of the various psychic uses of a pet is offered based on the concept of intermediate or fused objects, that is, an object available for libidinal and aggressive investments whose properties change with the mood and need of the perceiver.

#### NOTE

1. There was a marked similarity between Mr. E's fantasies and the themes of Kipling's (1984) *The Jungle Boy*.

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