The Many Meanings of Play

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Play and Theater in Child Psychoanalysis

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The role of elaborate imaginary play in the therapeutic process of child psychoanalysis has been described by many authors. In this chapter, we develop a descriptive model that can serve as a way to understand one aspect of the therapeutic process and how it relates to the symbolic life of the child and the child's life as he or she actually lives it.

In child analysis using dramatic play with oedipal and prelatency children, we sometimes see a three-part process—the construction, the exploration, and the integration of a *conceptual world*. This process tends to unfold over a number of months (or even years) and usually begins only some time after the initial phase of an analysis. These conceptual worlds are an example of Winnicott's (1971) "third area" of cultural experience— contained neither within the world of inner reality nor in the actual world in which the child lives. If there is a developmental line that leads from the type of solitary imaginary play with dollhouses and small figures to fully fleshed-out enactments of adult theater (Freud, 1908), the transitional phenomenon of "cosmogonic play" lies closer to the theater than to the solitary-play end of the spectrum.

Cosmogonic play can be conceived of as a type or mode of playing that occurs in child psychoanalysis. In cosmogonic play there is continuity across sessions and a narrative of sorts, implying a world of meanings, values, and experiences that are shared by the child and the analyst. It usually involves the assumption of roles by both the analyst and the analysand. As an activity that engages two people, it uses the communicative style and ways of presentation and representation of a constructed, shared reality that can be characterized as histrionic. For these reasons, cosmogonic play can be said to be a type of *dramatic* play. The metaphor of dramatic play and the language of the theater more generally are highly compatible with psychoanalysis. The theater provides the analyst with a range of concepts used to understand the transference and countertransference. In the

interpretation of the transference we speak of the assumption of different roles; the theater also provides metaphors of masking and disguise. The processes underlying dramatic play in analysis (including cosmogonic play) appear to be developmental precursors to the processes underlying the creation of theater. It is thus convenient to apply terms and ideas from the adult theater to children's dramatic play, even if the relation has not been adequately explored. This is supported by the long tradition in psychoanalysis of using ideas, terms, and metaphors derived from the theater, such as the unfolding of process and plot, foreshadowing, text and subtext, dialogue, and character.

Yet dramatic play as it is used in child analysis is the cocreation of the analyst and the analysand, only one of whom has reached a level of symbolic functioning and has the intellectual capacity to understand "the idea of the theater." During the period of prelatency, the child lacks a conceptual appreciation of the theater, even as the line between reality and fantasy is often blurred. Although one of the key formulations of psychoanalysis, the Oedipus complex, is based on theater, Freud himself did not look to see if the child's understanding of the drama was the same as the adult's—he did not see children in analysis. Although the adult analyst may have a sophisticated understanding of the structures underlying play and the features it shares with theater, it is not clear what the child's own understanding of the dramaturgy of dramatic play is. A careful examination of a certain type of dramatic play, what we call cosmogonic play, the exploration of a conceptual world, can provide some clues. It will also help answer some questions of how this dramatic play can be therapeutic in effect and why it seems to be particularly effective for children between the ages of four and nine.

Cosmogonic play takes place in a location, the analyst's office, that exists as both an objective and an experiential space. A photograph would show that a child analyst's office is often cluttered with material and physical things. Yet, from the child's point of view, the office has the potentiality to be an empty space, like a theatrical stage (Brook, 1968). Despite its limitations in size—the analyst's office was about eight by ten feet—it can allow for any type of imaginary activity to be created, for the conceptual worlds that are created in the analysis of children exist in a potential space (Winnicott, 1971) that, like the theater, is only partially bounded or affected by the constraints of normal space and time (Loewald, 1987).

The construction of a conceptual world within a potential space involves the type of activity that Freud (1908) referred to as building castles in the air (p. 145). Cosmogonic play begins with laying out the groundwork— establishing a rapport between the child analyst and the child, and letting the child express his thoughts and desires in literal and metaphorical speech and action. As the analyst watches the child at play and as they play together, the analyst is learning or developing a type of symbolic language in which she can communicate with the child. For a child who possesses a rich fantasy life, this symbolic language might already exist in a fully developed form. The analyst will then have to learn how to translate her own ideas into types of expressions that are already familiar to the child. For a child whose symbolic life is more impoverished, the groundwork to the construction of a conceptual world might involve the development of forms and structures that can be used as building blocks for the architectonics of the world.

The analyst recognizes important, vital, and recurrent themes that emerge in this part of the process. If she acts upon them and encourages their coalescence into a single, conceptual space, a coherent world can eventually be constructed out of this material, which has consistency and meaning for the child. The creation of a conceptual world does not occur in a single session. It can come in fits and starts and may take months before it is fully realized.

The analyst must be sensitive to what the child has to say and what he does. She must be particularly aware of the repeated themes and motifs that come up across sessions. It is important that the analyst not try to impose her own point of view on the child at this time. Her task is to be observant and to lead the activity and discussion into territory that is not inimical to the child. The world that is constructed must be a familiar place, and although not always comfortable, it must always be recognized as the child's own creation. As Winnicott (1971) states, "Analysts need to beware lest they create a feeling of confidence and an intermediate area in which play can take place and then inject into this area or inflate it with interpretations which in effect are from their own creative imagination" (p. 120).

One of the challenges for the analyst is not to be guided too heavily by experience acquired through past analytic cases. A conceptual world, no matter how similar it might appear to another child's, in order to be effective is constructed in a way that is unique to a particular child. It is a

product of his imagination. The analyst must allow for this particularity, indeed encourage it, for only through the child's full and total involvement will the therapy have positive results. The three-part process we describe here is thus not prescriptive; it is descriptive of what emerges for certain children when standard psychoanalytic technique is patiently and tactfully employed.

The second part of the therapeutic process involves the exploration of this constructed imaginary world. The motifs that emerge in the first phase of the therapeutic process form the conceptual skeleton that holds together the imaginary world. In the construction of the conceptual world, the analyst acts largely as a tactful facilitator—helping the child express relevant concerns. Her role differs little from that of an adult's analyst. Once inside the conceptual world, however, the analyst is no longer simply a silent observer—she becomes an actor. She must be actively complicit in maintaining the world and also focus her attentions on trying to change it. Within the field of play that exists between analyst and analysand, the analyst is not a neutral object—she has a charge. That charge involves her in the process of trying both to observe and to liberate the way the child feels and acts; it also entails an analytically guided facilitation of the child's interests and affects as the child elaborates and modifies the nature of the conceptual world he and the analyst are constructing. Thus, even while the analyst and the child are exploring the conceptual world they have created, its topography and geography are changing around them.

If the world that was constructed in the first part of the process is in fact consistent and meaningful to the child, it will prove to be resilient and have great continuity as well. Both the child and the analyst will be able to enter into it without hesitancy from the very beginning of the analytic hour, if they so desire. The use of props is helpful in maintaining this consistency and continuity.

As in the work of Melanie Klein and later Anna Freud at the Hampstead Clinic, each child in analysis in the cases described below had his own drawer, a small container where many of the important properties used in the child's play were stored. The material objects stored in such drawers can have many functions, but there seem to be three that are particularly relevant to cosmogonic play. First, the props, although not always necessary, can help activate the world. Like props and scenery in the theater, they serve to provide a graphic description of the place of action (Bogatyrev, 1938). Second, the props are used and take part in the action of the play. They serve to

support dramatic action as well as open up possible avenues for play. Third, these particular objects are a way of making the world more particular and meaningful for the child. While the world is undergoing change, the objects anchor the conceptual world and give it stability and continuity.

We will later return to a fuller discussion of the theory that may help account for the therapeutic action of cosmogonic play, exemplified by observations during the analyses of four children. As we present these descriptions, it is important to remember that we are abstracting only one mode of play from among the many that were used by each child in analysis.

Clinical Material

The four cases described below have some common features. All were children of academic or professional families of at least moderate means. The first three children were diagnosed as having learning disabilities. The fourth child, although quite bright, was also described by his teachers as learning-disabled because of his extreme behavioral problems.

The four children entered analysis between the ages of four and six and terminated between the ages of seven and nine, having been seen for two to four years. In the course of each of the analyses, a conceptual world was constructed, explored, changed, and then either destroyed or pested. The nature and valence of the transference changed, but it changed within the overall construct of the world.

Finally, all four cases could be called successful—the children seem to have benefited from the analyses. They were at greater ease with themselves and others, showed improvement in their academic performances, and found more pleasure and satisfaction in their experiences of both the world of inner reality and the actual world in which they lived.

Case 1: Tommy

Tommy, a glassy-eyed, seemingly emotionally detached six-year-old, was in first grade when he entered treatment. He was recommended for therapy because of the emotional distance he showed as much as for his difficulties in learning. Tommy was a second-born child. His parents, both

academics with advanced degrees, were very attached and close to his older brother, Michael, who was outgoing and successful. But they were perplexed by Tommy and saddened by his lack of academic success. They observed that he was not learning and was not outgoing like Michael, but they could not understand why.

It became evident in the first phase of treatment that Tommy was a profoundly sad and troubled child. His parents had no sense of what he was experiencing. To the best of their knowledge, they thought that Tommy was well cared for, and they truly believed that they were doing as much as they could for him. Tommy had been in day care since he was a small child. He never showed any separation anxiety in parting from his parents; neither was he ever aggressive in his manner. He was quiet and showed no expression of affect whatsoever when he was left by his parents at day care early in the morning and when he was picked up in the evening. Yet the experience was very stressful for Tommy. What was hardest was the disorientation in his sense of time. He could not understand how long he would be left alone at day care, when his parents would return, and so on. The days seemed to go on and on endlessly. He was adrift in an ocean of time, helpless, with no safe harbor within sight.

Tommy's dramatic play developed around this very metaphor. In the conceptual world they created, Tommy and the analyst were two sailors on a ship at sea. It was a stormy sea with many dangers—hidden rocks, sea monsters, pirates. He was a crewman, and she was "Matey," his buddy. In their dramatic play, Tommy spoke to Matey in an (assumed) British accent—and she answered him in turn with the best imitation of a British accent she could muster. Sometimes he assigned to the analyst the role of captain; at other times he treated her as an equal. Occasionally, Tommy himself became the ship's commanding officer.

In the early sessions of the exploration of this conceptual world, shipwrecks were common. The sea was tempestuous, and it seemed impossible to control where the ship would go. The maps and charts that Tommy constructed, with the encouragement and aid of Matey, were of great importance. He depicted the sea's geography, the position of dangerous rocks, monsters, and pirates, and the whereabouts of safe harbors and ports of call. These charts were quickly drawn with crayon, pen, or marker on plain white paper and were carefully stored in his private drawer from session to session.

They did not seem to be objects prized in and of themselves, but rather seemed to be useful for the exploration of Tommy's conceptual world. He frequently revised them or even redrew them from scratch. The topography of the sea was always changing, and one needed to have an accurate representation of it.

The other important device was a single-lensed telescope, which in the dramatic play was represented by putting one's two hands together and holding them up to one's eye. In their play, the child and Matey would stand on the deck of the ship or on top of cliffs (chairs and couches) and try to focus the lens to see what lay about them. This imaginary device was elevated by the analyst, with the consent and complicity of Tommy, to a level of critical importance in the development of the conceptual world. It was used as a way of assessing one's current situation and to understand what lay ahead. With the careful, assiduous employment of this powerful instrument for observation, one could safely navigate the treacherous seas and reach a safe harbor.

Often, when the sea became stormy and there was danger of a shipwreck, the telescope had a sense of urgency associated with it. The waves washed over the side of the ship. The wind howled. "I can't see anything! The telescope won't focus for me!" cried Matey. "Here, you take it!" she shouted. Tommy "took the telescope," put it up to his eye, and started to focus it. "What can you see? Do you know where we are?" Matey shouted, barely able to make herself heard above the fury of the storm. Fortunately, this time, Tommy saw where they were and was able to guide the ship to safe harbor.

The telescope was interpreted by the analyst within the frame of the conceptual world. Tommy discovered that he had the capacity to see around him. He learned that one of the ways of overcoming the anxiety of being abandoned and having to be alone was to look around him—not to close his eyes and see the world through a glassy-eyed stare, but to see where he was and act upon that knowledge. It is significant that the telescope was represented by a part of the body, specifically the hands. The hands exist close to the border of potential space and the inner world. This allowed for the "telescope" to be internalized with greater ease than if it was represented by a more external, physical object. As Winnicott (1971) has described it, the hand, as it is used to stimulate the oral erotogenic zone and "in quiet union" (p. 1) in infancy, is the first object of the intermediate area.

With time, both Tommy and his Matey became old sea hands. Through their use of charts and especially the employment of the telescope, they eventually memorized the sea lanes. As the world became a more peaceful, friendlier place and the theme of "man against the sea" became less interesting for Tommy, another theme emerged inside of the same conceptual world. Up until this point, the analyst had at the back of her mind the theoretical assumption that the storms, the shipwrecks, the pirates, and so on were an expression of aggression and (denied) hatred, perhaps toward Tommy's older brother, who had his parents' admiration and love. But the material that emerged at this point of the analysis suggested other interpretations.

As the transference deepened, the dramatic play increasingly revolved around the idea of Tommy being marooned on a desert island with Matey. Here the word *Matey* was used by Tommy primarily not as a way of expressing friendliness and the state of being buddies with the analyst. In the context of the transference at this point of the analysis, it meant something more akin to the word *mate*, as *lover*. This suggested that the earlier torrential storms were a representation of the fearful side of the primal scene, and the scenes on the deserted island were a way to express its more affectionate, intimate side. Where previously Tommy metaphorically had to fight off his fears and anxieties, now he was able to express unchallenged affection and closeness, without the rivalry of his older brother or father. As Erikson (1963) states, in his description of the efficacy of play therapy, "The most obvious condition is that the child has the toys and the adult for himself, and that sibling rivalry, parental nagging, or any kind of sudden interruption does not disturb the unfolding of his play intentions, whatever they may be" (p. 222). Tommy now had his Matey (mate-mother-analyst) alone in the privacy of a secret island.

In this phase of Tommy's fantasy world, being marooned on a desert island also was associated with the earlier experience of being alone, isolated, and abandoned. Now, however, even though marooned on a desert island, he no longer experienced the fear of abandonment, for he had his Matey with him. He could never be abandoned again because he had integrated his mother into his own self; he had his claim on her, which had become internalized in his enhanced self-esteem. Tommy would never have to feel completely alone on a metaphorical island in the middle of nowhere; he would always carry around inside of him a representation of his mother as a newfound or rediscovered selfobject (Kohut, 1971). Tommy was at this point ready to pest himself from the

potential space he had occupied with the analyst. The analysis was ready to terminate.

By this time, at age eight and a half, Tommy had shown considerable improvement in school. His glassy-eyed stare had become more focused, and he was showing signs of vitality and interest in life. He also was more outgoing and more readily expressed his emotions. The emotional stress and anxieties he had experienced lifted; he no longer felt disturbed or helpless in being alone. From current communications with Tommy's parents, we have learned that he has met with academic success in high school and now shows promise as a playwright. Tommy has been able to use his rich and creative imagination, which we saw in his conceptual world, and relate his fantasies to a public audience. This supports Freud's (1908) hypothesis that imaginative activity is a continuation of and substitute for the play of childhood.

Case 2: Rob

Rob was also six years old and in first grade when he entered analysis. Like Tommy, Rob was the second-born child of an academic family. His older brother, Peter, was a very successful student and much admired and praised by his parents. But like Tommy, Rob did not meet with academic success and was having troubles in school. Perhaps more serious than his academic problems was his encopresis. Although he was six, he constantly defecated in his pants in the most visible, public situations. Rob was a physically abusive, aggressive child. It was difficult for anyone (teacher, parent, sibling, analyst) to be in the same room with him. But Rob was not only frightening; he was also frightened inside.

Rob was engaged in a love-hate relationship with his mother, who was visited by frequent bouts of depression. His mother was attached to him but was incapacitated in her attempts to care for her son in a consistent way because of her own affective disorder. Rob's father was a kind and well-meaning person, but he did not have an appropriate model from his own upbringing for how to be a father. Despite his best intentions, he was unable to provide the necessary support for Rob. He simply lacked the necessary parenting skills.

Rob was two years old and had not yet been toilet-trained when his parents decided to go on a

vacation. They departed very abruptly, without preparing their children in advance. Rob was left in the care of a female friend of the family who was going through a breakup of her marriage at the time and was in a very emotional state. She attempted to toilet-train Rob in a most aggressive, almost sadistic, manner. The traumatic experience of being abandoned by his parents and its association with feces and bowel control had a profound effect on Rob's development. The giving and withholding of feces became directly related to the way Rob interacted with his mother. Central were issues of control over his body and over the bodies of others. Through the act of defecation, Rob expressed power; he was able to control other people and make them do certain things, such as keeping distant from him because of the smell, cleaning up after him, and so on. Although Rob's encopresis repelled people, at the same time he brought them closer to himself. The feces were a love object, a present for his mother. He would try to hold them in, hold this representation of his mother inside of himself. Even the toilet became invested. When he saw his feces in the bowl, he did not want to flush them down; he wanted to save them.

In the conceptual world that Rob constructed, he and the analyst were on a basketball team. Rob was a player and the analyst was his "Coach." In a very controlled way, over and over again, Rob threw a ball into the wastepaper basket in the office, which the analyst thought was only a minor displacement from the major symptom that had brought him to treatment. Rob would consume entire sessions shooting baskets from all sides of this small room. He would try every possible approach, every possible set, every possible style of throwing. It was the Coach's job to provide him with support ("I'm right here with you!") as well as to describe the way he performed. Sometimes the Coach might be assigned the role of teammate; at other times, the Coach would play a competitive game against Rob, and the two would keep up an enthusiastic dialogue about the game.

In no instance, however, did Rob ever openly discuss his encopretic behavior. Frequently, he defecated in his pants during the analytic hour or just before it. But whenever the analyst (or anyone else) asked him if he had just defecated, Rob always denied it. Thus, during the entire analysis, the topic of his encopresis was rarely discussed openly at the literal level.

While in analysis, Rob became interested in swimming—another physical activity. The activity of swimming and the swimming pool in particular became, however, just another way for Rob to

articulate his encopresis. By defecating in the swimming pool, the physical act became even more public and more repellent to the people around him.

Preceding his analytic sessions, he tended to defecate on top of a radiator. This too had the effect of making a normally (semi)concealed act more public. The fumes from his feces would carry through the halls and up and down one or more flights of stairs. The analyst began to understand the association of defecation with swimming and sitting on top of a radiator: both were linked with his mother, symbolized by the pool's water and the radiator's warmth. Thus she received Rob's feces, even as he drove people away from him and re-created the trauma of being abandoned.

In her role as Coach, the analyst more and more came to shape the way Rob behaved. It was the responsibility of Coach to know all the vital statistics. She was always counting, keeping score. Even the statistics from Rob's swimming were part of Coach's business: "9.3 seconds ... 2 for 5 on the free-throw line." Coach, who was expected to keep close track of Rob's physical behavior, became obsessive about it, and Rob himself encouraged this. When she forgot something or made a mistake in her counting, Rob became upset: "The score is 52 to 28! . . . My time was 7.8 seconds."

As he made the identification with Coach, Rob himself became aware of his behavior and all of his physical "statistics." He gradually lost interest in swimming and playing basketball with Coach. His great concern with his physical prowess became less pressing. Ultimately, the statistics became Rob's own concern, and he took pride in being his own manager.

After three years of analysis, Rob's encopresis became more and more infrequent. It reached the point where he no longer defecated in his pants at school, but he occasionally continued this symptom at the analyst's office, a persistent marker of the crystallization of the encopresis within the transference. In the analytic situation and through the fullness of the transference neurosis, Rob was actively aware of the conflicts in trying to control his behavior. Finally, over time, the symptom disappeared from the analyst's office as well. Rob met with more success in school. In recent communications with Rob and his parents, we learned that as an adolescent, Rob again became interested in sports—in a positive, healthy manner, without the obsessive concern for statistics and the control of his body.

Case 3: Benjamin

The conceptual world that Benjamin created was drier and more sterile than those of Tommy and Rob, largely a reflection of his personality and more limited capability for imaginative activity. Benjamin was also younger than Tommy and Rob when he began his analysis. Although only age four, he was already showing signs of having a severe learning disability. His language was impaired, and he had yet to learn his colors. He also had minor motoric problems and was somewhat awkward and clumsy. Benjamin had been seen by a neurologist, who recommended special school placement on the basis of what he felt was an organic impairment in cognitive and motor functions. The exact nature of the disorder was never clearly diagnosed.

Benjamin's father, a professor of education, wondered if Benjamin was perhaps autistic, as he seemed very impaired and lacked basic social skills as well. Yet he also identified with the boy. He himself had been both socially and motorically awkward while growing up. At the time of Benjamin's entering analysis, his mother had recently given birth to a second child. The jealousy aroused by his younger sibling complicated Benjamin's feelings related to his own perceived intellectual and physical deficiencies.

Early in Benjamin's analysis, it became clear to the analyst that his disabilities in learning were caused at least as much by emotional factors as by constitutional determinants. He was a very rigid, anxious boy, constantly feeling and then reliving the experience of stress evoked by the most trivial failures. The analyst thus recommended withdrawing Benjamin from the special school he was attending and asked his parents to consider having him placed in a regular classroom, with the support of an aide. The school seconded this recommendation and the parents agreed.

Compared to the dramatic play of both Tommy and Rob, most of Benjamin's play was on the whole unimaginative and uninteresting. He typically occupied himself by playing with blocks or coloring books. One theme seemed to capture his interest, though, exciting and involving him: the recreation of Benjamin's school, and particularly the student-teacher relationship, in the analyst's office. This was the repeated motif that formed the skeleton of Benjamin's conceptual world.

When that world was first explored, Benjamin cast himself in the role of the stupid student

and the analyst as his demanding, critical teacher. His dramatic play was thus very masochistic; he was constantly being punished for his inability to carry out certain tasks successfully. The difficulties in his learning seemed to be related to how he perceived his "damaged" body, for Benjamin's cognitive impairments and physical deficiencies had become intertwined in a complex web of causality. He could not do something because he was stupid. He was stupid because he was clumsy. And he was clumsy because he could not do something. Thus, his difficulties in the conceptual world of the school were due to more than just a disability in learning; they stemmed from and captured his damaged self.

Over time, the conceptual world began to change. Increasingly, Benjamin himself assumed the role of teacher, and the analyst became the stupid student. This change was encouraged by the analyst—she readily and enthusiastically took on the constructed persona. In the context of this transference, the most negative aspects of his own self were projected. "You're always too stupid. I'm giving you too much work. The work is too difficult for you at your age." Benjamin wished to be young again—to be infantilized. His feelings of disability and helplessness as a student brought him back to the world of the helpless, protected, cared-for infant. He wished he could be close to his mother like his little brother. Yet even as Benjamin took on the role of teacher, which allowed him to express the most painful aspects of his self-portrait, he assumed responsibility and command. From this new vantage point, he no longer felt as insecure about his learning disabilities. He was ready to pest himself from the conceptual world he had created.

Another factor that led to the termination of the analysis was Benjamin's involvement in sports. A pediatric neurologist suggested that a good way of building up self-esteem in children with minor motorical handicaps and disabilities was playing soccer. The children would run up and down the field, chasing after the ball, while the parents watched from the side. Minor motorical difficulties could hardly be noticed by the parents, the child's teammates, or the child himself. This proved to be the case when Benjamin joined a soccer team on the recommendation of the analyst. Benjamin's father, who had never played a sport, watched his child with pride. He, too, joined in the activity and became the coach for his son's team. As a result of their mutual involvement in the sport, Benjamin's father no longer identified with his son because of his clumsiness; neither did Benjamin's own identification with his father focus on this aspect of the self. Benjamin came to

internalize the image of his father as coach. This idealized aspect of his parent helped form Benjamin's emerging ego ideal. This, along with the work in the analysis, allowed for the breaking of the complex web of causality that had given rise to his perception of his damaged self.

Case 4: Jason

Jason was five years old and in kindergarten when he started analysis. Although an early reader and able to do complex mathematical calculations in his head, Jason was having difficulties in school, and his teachers felt that he had a learning disability. Indeed, it could be said that Jason did have a learning disability, although he was quite intelligent. When asked to do something in school, Jason typically refused. When he was forced to do his work, very often he arrived at the correct answer, but used an unusual method. Jason's negativeness and aggression were causing major problems at school, both socially and academically. Nobody seemed able to figure him out. He was a very angry child, uncontrollably aggressive and not to be trusted—he could be, and often was, destructive of property and hostile toward the other children in his class as well as toward his teacher. He was simply not containable, and the school was ready to expel him.

Jason's parents were both hardworking, intelligent architects, but they claimed that they had "no idea" why Jason should be behaving so aggressively to everyone around him. This later seemed to be a case of denial, for much of Jason's difficulties were caused by their own marital difficulties.

The contributing factors underlying Jason's behavior were varied and complex. One of the major concerns was his feeling of abandonment. As a preschooler, Jason went to day care while his parents were at work. When he was two years old, shortly after the birth of his younger sister, his father left home unexpectedly, without prior warning. He disappeared for a number of months; no one knew where he was. Although eventually the father did return to the family, Jason's mother became depressed and was an inconsistent care-giver for a time. She later pulled out of her depression and became a devoted mother. But when Jason was six and had been in analysis for about a year, his mother contracted life-threatening myocarditis and was hospitalized for six months in another city, located several hours away (by air) from Jason's hometown.

The sudden, unexplained disappearance of his father, owing to marital problems and his desire to escape the responsibility and stress caused by the birth of his daughter, had made a permanent imprint upon Jason. It was interpreted by him from a depressive position. He felt that his own anger and aggression had caused his father to disappear. The hospitalization of Jason's mother was also interpreted from this position. Again, he was convinced that his own anger had caused his mother to go away to another city. At the same time, his parents made the projective identification of their own anxieties and insecurities upon Jason: "We don't know why Jason is behaving like this." Their denial of anxiety and its projection upon Jason allowed them to be calm, even while Jason himself was becoming more and more distraught.

In the conceptual world, the analyst and Jason were in business together. The analyst's office became a business office. The physical properties were quite extensive—stationery, documents, models for development and marketing. Sometimes the analyst and Jason were coworkers; at other times Jason assumed the role of boss and the analyst was his subordinate. He would tell his employee what to do, fantasize about all his "great ideas" for a "new product," and so on. At certain moments the analyst assumed the role of a high-ranking executive, while Jason was an employee of the company. As an executive, the analyst was expected to point out the important "issues" and could discuss Jason's past "business failures." The conceptual world did not have a playful quality to it—its tone was very serious. Jason would get angry if the analyst was slow to respond: "Come on! What are you doing there?"

The nature of the product changed over time. During the course of the analysis, a number of different products were discussed, modeled, and toyed with. Not many products panned out; few seemed to have any real commercial capabilities. One product in particular, however, seemed to have serious economic possibilities—a phone-watch. "It will become absolutely necessary for every executive to own one," Jason, the businessman, said. "With a phone-watch, you can know where the most important people are all the time." For Jason, that most important person whom he occasionally referred to, by way of example, was his mother.

Although he seemed tough and aggressive, Jason was actually very sensitive. He was constantly worrying about the possibility of his parents disappearing, how his own actions might cause this,

and what he should do to prevent it from happening. In order to cope with this anxiety, he put some protective space between himself and his parents, the people closest to him and most linked to his anxiety concerning abandonment. Rather than passively accepting his parents' disappearances, Jason became defensively aggressive and angry. The rage he felt at his parents for his father's disappearance and his mother's depression and hospitalization was eventually generalized to include nearly everyone.

Similarly, Jason's early maturity (he appeared very adultlike both in and outside of the conceptual world he constructed) had a defensive function. In other ways, however, Jason remained very infantile. His bed was covered with stuffed animals and he could not sleep without a light on. His apparent maturity was thus part of Jason's false self (Winnicott, 1971), constructed to distance himself from the insecurities of being a child and dependent on adults.

The phone-watch Jason designed was a way to express his fear of abandonment and his desires and their underlying motives for wanting to be in touch with his parents. The internalization of the phone-watch and the process of identification that took place in the third part of the analytic process allowed Jason to cope with the insecurities aroused by his experience of being separated from his parents. This separation was both physical, as when his father left when he was two years old or when he was dropped off at day care, and emotional, as in the distance he experienced between himself and his mother when she was depressed. With the identification and internalization of his "product" and the conceptual world he created, Jason became less aggressive and troublesome; the school no longer was threatening to expel him.

Although the phone-watch was clearly the most interesting and relevant product for Jason, it was not the last "idea for a product" that he toyed with in his conceptual world. Just before termination, when Jason was eight years old, he was discussing the possibilities of a paper airplane mail-order business: "We could sell do-it-yourself kits, parts, paint. If a part broke, you could send away for it and it would arrive in two days."

The paper airplane mail-order business was a way of dealing with separation and the termination of the analysis. He showed some anxiety at the prospect of termination and the resultant

separation from the analyst. The positive transference caused him to want to hold on to the analyst, not let her disappear. Jason offered all kinds of incentives to his business partner for not dissolving their partnership. He proposed promoting certain airline companies in their model business; then he and his business partner would "definitely" get free tickets on real airplanes—they could go any place they wanted together. The business showed an associative connection between Jason's memory of his mother's hospitalization and his fantasies concerning the analyst after the analysis terminated. Just as he had taken an airplane when he visited his mother while she was hospitalized, he could visit his analyst any time he wanted, even after the analysis ended, if he had free airplane tickets.

It was a difficult termination. The conceptual world had not been destroyed, although it had changed. Jason was no longer as aggressive; the collaboration was not as one-sided. In the end, Jason reluctantly agreed to make the analyst a "consultant," whom he could call upon in times of need. He agreed that he could manage the day-to-day affairs of the business on his own. Both Jason and the analyst were thus able to pest themselves from their business partnership and the conceptual world they had created between them.

Discussion

In psychoanalytic work with children, the conceptual world that is created by the child and the analyst has some continuity, reflecting the stability within the multiple determinants of the child's personality as well as his neurotic and developmental disturbances and defenses; yet, simultaneous with its exploration, the parameters of this potential space are also potentially and actually undergoing change. Changes within the conceptual world reflect and advance the therapeutic action of the psychoanalytic work and are due, in large part, to the charge of the analyst within the field of dramatic play. At the front of the analyst's mind, she is fully engaged in the conceptual world and partaking in the construction and exploration of this world in collaboration with the child. At the back of her mind, though, she is guided by a theory of therapeutic action—she has constructed or is in the process of constructing a theory concerning the child's instinctual life, self-esteem, ego functions, and so on, which guides her actions in a particular direction. Yet even if the analyst could possibly know what was best for the child and how the conceptual world "ought" to be changed, the

process of change can happen only through discourse; both the analyst and the analysand must "agree" to the new condition before the conceptual world can actually be any different. Otherwise, the conceptual world of the analysis can be invaded by the same demands for acting as if or as a false self that might have led the child into difficulties in the first place.

Changes in the conceptual worlds must have some degree of continuity and consistency with the conditions and rules of the already constructed world. They build upon the symbols and structures that are in place. The changes cannot be too radically discontinuous with the past or they might result in their nonacceptance by, or resistance from, the child, or in the disruption or cessation of the play episode, or perhaps in compliance and further reinforcement with the child's compliant false self.

These changes may not be (and usually are not) literally discussed by the analyst and the child. They tend to happen at the preconscious or the implicit level. They involve a certain amount of trust between analyst and analysand and heavily depend upon the analyst's tact. If trust is absent, as when a negative transference holds sway, change may become a source of contention. For example, suppose the analyst wishes to introduce a new theme or area of activity. To explore the child's hatred for his brother, whom he coldly placed in a prison several weeks ago, she might say, "We've taken our rocket ship to the moon so many times before. What do you feel about going to the planet Mars and seeing if your little brother is still being held prisoner by the Martians?" If the child is trusting and the analyst is tuned in—that is, the transference is positive enough to sustain the anxiety aroused by the child's cruel fantasies concerning his brother—he will accept the introduction of this material, a change in the topography of the conceptual world he is cocreating: "Sure! Let's go to Mars! I'm not afraid of the Martians. Warp drive 72!" If the relationship lacks trust, if the transference has a more negative valence, or if the introduction of the theme is too frightening or discordant with the child's tolerance for such an exploration, then the child is likely to be resistant to any change, no matter how small. The child might say, "But we don't have enough fuel," or simply, "But this rocket ship doesn't go to Mars. It only goes to the moon," or even, "Shut up. You're talking too much." If the analyst then goes on to insist on the change, it might result in the cessation of the sequence. The valence and intensity of the transference are thus determinative factors in the ease of the give-and-take of change within a conceptual world.

One of the ways the analyst can change the nature of the conceptual world is through the use of interpretation. As Melanie Klein (1961) states, "It is important that the analyst should be able to convey to the child the meaning of his phantasies—whether they are deeply repressed or nearer consciousness—and to verbalize them" (p. 47). Interpretation can go on at a number of different levels with reference to the conceptual world. The analyst can make an interpretation within the parameters of the conceptual world itself, without disrupting its continuity. For example, an overly aggressive child and the analyst are playing with toy cars. The child moves her car quickly, without paying attention, running over blocks and other toys. The analyst might interpret this behavior in a way that allows for direct continuity with the play, within the frame of the conceptual world or play episode: "Wow! You're going so fast! I can't keep up with you!" Or the interpretation can take place outside of the frame of play: "I wonder why you're going so fast. You do it when you get excited." This type of interpretation, however, runs the risk of disrupting the play altogether (Ritvo, 1978). Or the analyst might remain within the general frame of play but step outside of the specific play episode or conceptual world to give her interpretation. One strategy that is often used here is including some sort of a linguistic sign or marker—for example, "I'll bet you in a million years that you never thought about ..."

Eventually, if the analysis has proceeded reasonably well, the third part of the process will be reached—gaining a distance from the constructed world as the process of synthesis and reincorporation of the imaginary world takes place through the child's identification with the attitudes of the analyst. This world is no longer the same as it was when the explorations by the analyst and the analysand began. By her very presence, as much as by her actions and interpretations, the analyst fosters, facilitates, and enables the child to change the nature of this world in order to give adaptive strategies and bring a new psychological repertoire of defenses and ways of understanding and perceiving to the child. Through incorporating the now changed conceptual world and the process of identification with its contents, the child is able to move ahead in his development, unburdened by infantile shame and anxieties that interfere with autonomous ego functions. The therapeutic modification of the child's emerging conceptual world is thus similar to the interpretation of the transference in adult analysis, which results in the waning of the Oedipus complex and allows for the achievement of a new sense of self as an autonomous person

and other internal, post-oedipal achievements.

The achievement of the phase of development that is latency may indicate that the child's development is enough on track that the analysis can terminate. These children may still have problems, like any other child, but with hard-won integration of the conceptual world and the termination of analysis, the way they think and feel and the way they understand and experience the world can be considered on course or comparable to their peers. They are able to participate more fully and adaptively in a shared world of experience with the people around them. The child's development beyond the conceptual world constructed in analysis is thus concurrent with the actual world becoming a more interesting and pleasurable place to live in.

The move toward latency and the abandonment of the created conceptual world are parallel to the putting aside of the transitional object. Just as the material symbol of the union of mother and child can eventually be discarded as the symbol is internalized and becomes integrated, so a conceptual world can outlive its function and no longer be necessary after a certain point. One may still return to a transitional object or a conceptual world with fond nostalgia, but if development is to move ahead, the child must pest himself from it at some point. The three phases of cosmogonic play — the construction, the exploration, and the integration of a therapeutically modified conceptual world in child analysis—are thus consistent with Freud's (1908) three-part model for the structure of fantasy, daydreaming, and creative writing. Freud proposed that activities of imaginative creation draw upon three periods of time: past, present, and future—the three periods of our ideation. So, too, with conceptual worlds. The world is constructed out of the memories of past experience and builds upon the particular styles of play the child has developed in the past. This activity is performed in the present and is related to the circumstances of the child's inner reality and the world in which he lives. It carries with it the idea of wish fulfillment (a frequent undercurrent in the many episodes of dramatic play), but more profoundly the integration of conceptual worlds effecting a new internalized sense of self for the future life of the child. This is similar to Solnit's (1987) formulation that play in the service of recollection can lead to mastery.

These varied aspects of the therapeutic process that is facilitated by the creation and integration of therapeutic worlds were seen, from differing perspectives, in the analytic processes of

the four ego-impaired boys.

Jason's difficulty in termination was due in part to the nature of the space he created and its relation to the rest of his life. The conceptual world was not marginalized as "child's play." Jason was serious; what he was doing was in many ways real to him. In the conceptual world of business that Jason created, he was honing his skills as a businessman, rehearsing for his future occupation and engaging in activities that were important and real to him. With the absolutely serious determination that only a young child can have, he once actually requested "development funds" from his parents to support the "research" and "test-marketing" of the phone-watch. This request apparently caused a minor crisis in the family. His parents had no idea how they should respond. They did not know if Jason was "only playing" or whether his request for money was serious and real. They felt that they could not make the decision for themselves and came to the analyst for consultation. Jason's conceptual world was not far removed from the real world in which he lived.

This is among the primary reasons we feel that conceptual worlds are closer to adult theater than to children's solitary imaginary play. As Freud (1908) states, the opposite of children's play is reality; this hardly seems to be the case in a number of the conceptual worlds we have described. The child does not necessarily distinguish the conceptual world from reality. This, we believe, is a sign not of pathology but of the overflowing of creativity. Like theater, conceptual worlds exist in a potential space that is often precariously close to the borders of reality. Stanislavsky (1963) recognized the affinity between life and art; avant-garde theater since Pirandello has exploited this closeness, playing on the edge of reality and fantasy.

The space that a conceptual world occupies can be conceived of as a liminal space, betwixt and between (Turner, 1967, 1969), or as a transitional space—neither entirely within the inner world nor bounded by the constraints of reality and the external world (Winnicott, 1971). As a type of transitional space, it is not governed by the rules of reality or fantasy and is a part of neither of them and both of them at the same time. Some conceptual worlds, such as Jason's, seem to be very close to the border of reality. Others, such as Tommy's, are much more distal. Still others, such as Rob's and Benjamin's, seem to be approximately intermediate in distance between the child's inner reality and the world in which he or she lives. In any case, a conceptual world is not subject to reality testing, for

that would involve resolving the paradox that is essential to the definition of any transitional phenomenon. A conceptual world, an intermediate area of experience, provides relief from the strain of relating inner and outer realities. To subject it to reality testing, to make clear the distinction between apperception and perception, would mean the loss of the value of this paradoxical space (Winnicott, 1971).

Freud (1908) expresses the dialectic between reality and fantasy in the intermediate area of experience in his discussion of play. "Might we not say that every child at play behaves like a creative writer, in that he creates a world of his own, or, rather, re-arranges the things of his world in a new way which pleases him?" (p. 143f.). That is the paradox of transitional phenomena: a potential space both is created by the child and is based on things (and objects) that are already present and waiting to be "rearranged," created, or to become the object of the child's cathexis (Winnicott, 1971).

It is clear that cosmogonic play, as an imaginative activity that borders on reality, has the potential to be of therapeutic value. We do not believe, however, that the simple construction of this world by the analyst and the child is in itself of real use. Although imaginary play may be useful in temporarily relieving stress, anxiety, and aggressive and sexual drives and impulses (Klein, 1976), the acting out of fantasies does not seem to be therapeutic in itself, as if it achieved a catharsis. What is critical in therapy using conceptual worlds (or any type of play) is the analyst's intervention, her charge within the field of the constructed world, and the direction in which she enables the child to be aware of choices leading to a conceptual world that better prepares the child for progressive development. The child identifies with this therapeutically modified world and the interpretations the analyst has made concerning the things that go on in it. These become internalized, leading to new modes of representation, symbolic processes, and other abilities. (See, for a related discussion of play, myth making, and therapy, Vandenberg, 1986.)

It is not accidental that the construction and integration of conceptual worlds seem to have so much therapeutic value for children at the particular age of Tommy, Rob, Benjamin, and Jason. As Moran (1987) notes, play can help facilitate emerging ego functions. Among these are increasing self-reflection, monitoring, and the ability to choose among alternatives. It is just these abilities that

are practiced when a conceptual world is constructed and explored with the analyst. "The child's play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experiment and planning" (Erikson, 1963, p. 222).

Through identification with the contributions of the analyst to the conceptual world, the child is able to internalize skills that allow him to move forward in his symbolic and cognitive development. The child learns about secondary process thinking, including the orderliness of relations, coherence of plot lines, causality, abstraction, and the value of attention and concentration through the mutual activity of exploring a shared world. He also learns about the expression and modulation of strong positive and negative feelings. Thus, the therapeutic benefit of the dramatic play and its analysis lies in both the interpretation of defenses and in the mobilization of intellectual abilities. Here, again, cosmogonic play can be seen to be related to the creative, imaginative activities of adults as well as to children's play, as described by Anna Freud (1965). It is a form of mental activity that takes its roots in primary process modes of experiencing while moving the individual forward developmentally through the creative activity of bringing into existence higher levels of representation. This play modality thus exemplifies how the process of sublimation functions in the enhancement of development.

For example, in the case of Tommy, through the construction of the telescope in the conceptual world, he learned the value of paying attention and looking around him. The act of seeing was not only a mechanism of defense against his anxiety and fear of abandonment; it was a way for him to further his own values and ambitions. It opened up a world of experience to him, let him attain academic competence, and allowed for the blossoming of his developmental capacities. In the construction and exploration of the conceptual world, he also learned about sharing, mutuality, and trust.

For defensive, anxious children like Tommy, before a conceptual world can be constructed it is necessary to bridge the interpersonal gulf between the child's self and the object (the analyst). "Dependence is maximal. The potential space happens only *in relation to a feeling of confidence* on the part of the baby [or child], that is, confidence related to the dependability of the mother-figure or environmental elements, confidence being the evidence of dependability that is becoming

introjected" (Winnicott, 1971, p. 118). Thus, by the time in the analysis that a conceptual world can be explored, the child is already on the road toward becoming well adapted and socially adept. As Winnicott describes it, "The potential space . . . depends on experience which leads to trust. It can be looked upon as sacred to the individual in that it is here that the individual experiences creative living" (p. 121). An analysis of an emotionally disturbed child that has progressed to the point where the exploration of a conceptual world is possible can have a successful termination. For the construction of a conceptual world necessarily involves breaking down the neurotic or infantile defenses that prevent the child from experiencing mutuality and establishing a transferential relation based on trust.

It seems then that the construction of a conceptual world involves a genuine transferential relationship with the analyst. The transference and the countertransference in such play can be related to the assumption of a role by an actor in the theater. We see a complex dialectic in the relation of the self to the character portrayed. As Stanislavsky (1963) describes it, in order to play Romeo's love, "you recall your life, you transfer your emotions to your role. This passion, "*love*," you analyze into its component moments of logical action. All of them together constitute *love*. . . . To all the stages in the unfolding of emotions there will be corresponding logical sequences. Along these stages you will step into your role, because you took from your own life everything that concerns love and you transfer it to your role. These are not merely *bits of Romeo*, they are *bits of yourself*" (p. 111). But theater is not a solitary activity; it takes place through different levels of collaboration—the director with the actors, actors with actors, the director with the designers, the actors with the audience, and so on. All these people are involved in the activity of the creation of an imaginary world, involving both the suspension and the heightening of reality, as in the constructed conceptual worlds.

Children who have created conceptual worlds during their analyses may retain a vivid memory and appreciation of these creations years after the termination of their treatment. After having been out of analysis for a number of years, the child might unexpectedly ask, "Do you remember when . . . ?" and then launch into a long description of her experience of this world at a level of understanding that shows surprising appreciation for its symbols and metaphors. Although much of the material is, of course, later repressed, it is obvious that through the building, exploration,

and integration of therapeutically modified conceptual worlds the child is manipulating certain symbolic materials in a sophisticated way, materials that, like Rob's aversion to talking about his encopresis, could not be discussed at a literal level. Much of the analyst's own self, the way she thinks and feels, also becomes internalized by analytic patients. Her influence may still be apparent in the children ten years or longer after the termination of the analysis. In coconstructing a conceptual world, she has provided some of the basis for the individual's progressive ego development; she has shared a part of her own self.

Thus, we see that cosmogonic play facilitates emerging ego functions, provides a model for creative imagination and secondary process thinking, and is a way to effect therapeutic change. This type of dramatic play has a strong relation to reality and influences the development of symbolic functions used in the world that the child lives in. To the extent that a conceptual world is an intermediate area that is the coconstruction of the analyst and the child, both have a shared dramaturgy and engage in a process of genuine collaboration.

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Notes

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