

“WHEN FRIENDS FALL OUT”:
DEVELOPMENTAL
INTERFERENCE WITH THE
FUNCTION OF SOME
IMAGINARY COMPANIONS

RONALD M. BENSON, M.D.
DAVID B. PRYOR, PH.D.

“Even the death of friends will inspire us as much as their lives.”
—Thoreau: *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849)

“Never trust a friend who deserts you in a pinch.”
—Aesop: *The Two Fellows and a Bear*

ANYONE WHO HAS OBSERVED CHILDREN, even cursorily, as a parent, parent surrogate, professional “child expert” or otherwise, must be impressed with the fickleness they exhibit in their peer relationships. Yet, when a firmer relationship is established and then suddenly abandoned, the adult observer usually looks for some “real” slight or, in other words, some external (from the child’s viewpoint) interpersonal conflict between the involved children. For this reason, it was surprising to us to have the opportunity to know two children whose very “best friends,” although imaginary, were abandoned suddenly and relatively completely for reasons which at first glance were certainly not apparent and seemed trivial, in view of the intensity of the relationship. After all, how could a companion entirely of a child’s own creation and under his complete control possibly afford him some slight or create the conditions of interpersonal conflict that would lead to an abandonment of the attachment? Additionally, in both instances, the abandonment of these imaginary friendships was abrupt. It was too sudden to be accounted for by advancing development of the child’s psychic organization with the resulting diminishing need for the imaginary companion, as, for example, might be the fate of a transitional object (Winnicott, 1953).

In this paper we will focus on a developmental role played by these two particular imaginary companions and on the external interventions which interfered with that developmental role. We

From the Child Psychoanalytic Study Program and the Psychotherapy Clinic, Department of Psychiatry, University of Michigan Medical Center. The authors wish to thank Dr. Dale Boesky for his helpful comments in the preparation of this paper.

will then attempt to relate the developmental aspects of these mental phenomena to the transitional zone of experience (Winnicott, 1953) and to the child's narcissistic development.

Lynn and Nosey

Lynn and her imaginary friend Nosey came to our attention through a personal association with her family. Because of the cooperation of Lynn, her parents, and her grandparents, we were able to learn retrospectively about her former imaginary friend, the events leading up to the relationship, its sudden ending, and the events following its termination. Our material was obtained when Lynn was 16 years old by means of separate interviews with her, her mother, and her grandparents and by inspection of her baby book, which chronicled her earliest years.

Lynn is the oldest child in a sibship of three. She has a sister 17 months her junior and another sister two years younger still whose birth occurred shortly after Nosey made his appearance.

Lynn's earliest development was not remarkable. At the age of seven months she received a stuffed dog for Christmas and by her tenth month she and the dog were inseparable. Notations in her baby book attest to the close relationship between Lynn and her stuffed dog. Even in family photographs she is never without him. We conclude from this that the dog was a typical transitional object (Winnicott, 1953; Busch et al., 1973).

Lynn's imaginary friend, Nosey, came into existence some time between 36 and 40 months, when Lynn's mother was pregnant with her third child. The family is vague about the fate of the stuffed dog that preceded Nosey, but it seems that, although it was not entirely given up, it was of greatly diminished importance while Nosey was Lynn's companion.

The stuffed dog seems to have had many parallels to Nosey and to have been a model for him. He (she attributes maleness to Nosey) was a dog that walked on his hind legs, was very furry, black and white in color, with floppy ears. He always wore a skirt which, in Lynn's description, was a combination of an apron and a skirt. He held a mop or a broom in his hands. He was four or five feet tall. Lynn recalls that he was very real to her, but she never actually saw him. She said, "I would go to where he was in my mind to see him."

On family outings, Lynn and her mother would share in the fantasy, at least to the extent of packing some special things for Nosey in Lynn's toy bag. Lynn remembered that Nosey had a friend, a cat, who also stood on his hind legs, but she never saw him either. Nosey and his place in the family were thus fairly typical for an imaginary companion (Nagera, 1969). The family readily accepted him, helped Lynn pack clothes for him, and didn't confront Lynn with the fact of his imaginary nature.

From all the available sources, we were able to reconstruct the circumstances that led to Lynn's suddenly ending her relationship with Nosey. When Lynn was about four years old she and her family were visiting her grandparents. By this time Nosey had been Lynn's constant companion for about a year, and his accompanying the family on such outings was a routine occurrence, accepted by them all—including the grandparents.

One day during this particular visit, Lynn was about to go for a ride with her grandfather. As they backed out of the garage, Grandfather suggested to Lynn that she have Nosey close the garage door. She agreeably did as he asked. Unbeknownst to her, Grandfather activated a remote-control mechanism in his car. Lynn's eyes widened in amazement as she watched the door really close. About two weeks later, after the family had returned home, mother became aware that Lynn no longer was playing with Nosey. When she inquired about this, Lynn told her that Nosey was gone. He had remained at her grandparents to "open and close the door. Grandmother and grandfather needed Nosey for the garage." From this point onward, Nosey was never again Lynn's companion.

Although Lynn's grandfather clearly described how surprised she seemed when the door actually closed, Lynn herself described the incident to us as if it were an ordinary occurrence. Her recollection was that she was going for a ride with her grandfather, that she asked Nosey to close the door, and "he did," she said matter-of-factly. She said she left him on the garage steps sweeping. She added, "I was sure that Nosey could open and close the garage door." She thought a moment and continued, "He wasn't alone, he had his friend the cat with him."

When we asked her what feelings she recalled about losing Nosey as a companion, she said with some hesitancy, "I don't think I was upset, I don't remember crying. It seemed natural that he

found a place where he was needed." Finally she added, "It's a very friendly memory. It's not unpleasant, not upsetting."

There is clear agreement in the family, and in Lynn's recollection herself, that the stuffed dog became more important for her again after Nosey went, although the exact time relationship is unclear. The stuffed animal remained her active companion until she was nine. She took it everywhere, ate with it, and showed no particular inclinations to give it up. When she was nine, the dog was in tatters with its stuffing coming out. Lynn had some allergies, and mother felt that it was wise to interfere with this relationship. She told Lynn to stop carrying it about with her and that she was too old to use such a toy. Lynn put the dog in a silver department store box and stored it in her closet.

Although she no longer carried it with her, she did visit it regularly. She says now that "she would talk with *him* and take him out to give him fresh air." She would dress him in his dress, she said. Then she stopped herself and said, "It must have been her." She continued, "I would put all the coins with my (Lynn's) birth date under her pillow."

This stuffed dog still remains in a box in Lynn's closet. When one of us spoke with her about her friend Nosey and about the stuffed animal, she was very pleased to show the dog, but commented with some surprise, "I never realized how tattered it was," as if it were the first time she had really seen the object for what it really was.

Additionally, it should be noted that either on her seventh or eighth birthday, Lynn's mother gave her a new dog, identical to the first. Lynn wouldn't accept it, feeling that it would not have been loyal to the other one, and, we think, further confirming the transitional nature of the toy (Busch et al., 1973).

Simon and Ronzar

Simon was a 14-year-old boy whose father was a career non-commissioned officer in the United States military service. They were living in a foreign country when the school psychologist, concerned about what he felt was Simon's apparently excessive reliance on an imaginary friend, referred him to a psychiatrist at the military hospital.

There, Simon told the psychiatrist that for several years he had been communicating telepathically with an extraterrestrial creature. The creature's name was Ronzar, and frequently Simon thought that he was given advice, helped with his homework, and even on occasion transported mentally to other planets by this creature. According to the psychiatrist who saw him at that time, Simon had demonstrated no other "severe emotional symptoms." He didn't appear significantly anxious or depressed, and the psychiatrist made special note that there was no self-destructive ideation. There had been no history of assaultive or self-destructive behavior, nor had there been any problems with impulse control. The psychiatrist noted that he felt that there were no apparent family problems or school difficulties. In fact, at school the patient had done extremely well in some subjects, receiving A's and even A+'s in science and math. Simon felt that this had been due to the help of his alien friend, Ronzar. He had never had any problems with discipline in school, and there was no evidence of any antisocial behavior. According to his teachers, he had not been withdrawn or isolated and appeared to have developed adequate peer relationships. Simon admitted, and his teachers confirmed, that he often discussed his imaginary companion with his friends at school, and this had been accepted by his peers without ridicule.

Simon recalled that Ronzar first appeared to him when he was seven years old. He didn't know why it happened then, but he did remember that he had "a girl friend who had left him for another boy," and he thought that was about a month before Ronzar came on the scene. He said that when the creature first appeared to him he considered himself a very lonely young person. The creature has always appeared to be of an advanced civilization, and, at the time of the psychiatric examination referred to above, he was approximately the patient's age.

The psychiatrist was not trained in child work and felt that the wisest thing to do was admit the boy to the hospital. He noted that, at the time of the admission to the psychiatric unit of the military hospital in the foreign country, the boy appeared to be alert, oriented, placid, cooperative and moderately obese. No psychomotor abnormality was apparent, and although he appeared to "perhaps have a flat and restricted affect" it was always

appropriate to content. No overt or disorganizing thought disturbance was noted. The psychiatrist tentatively concluded that Simon had a "well-organized and long standing delusional system with probable auditory hallucinations." The physical examination was entirely within normal limits. The routine medical laboratory work was unremarkable.

The boy was seen in brief psychotherapy while in the hospital. It was suggested to him by the psychiatrist that Ronzar was imaginary, though he perceived him as being real, and that this was owing to some psychological need. The psychiatrist suggested that perhaps the patient found it hard to relate with everyday people. The doctor noticed that Simon seemed to support this, saying that Ronzar had in fact helped him to maintain control of his own feelings whenever he felt angry toward others. He said, "I don't know what I'd do without Ronzar. I don't know how I would handle my hate."

As part of his treatment Simon was asked to chart the number of contacts he had with Ronzar. He kept this chart for about two weeks, noting that the contacts varied between three and six per day.

Then one day, about a month after he was hospitalized and shortly after the interpretation noted above was offered, Simon became very depressed and anxious and said that Ronzar and "Venus" were killed. This was the first reference to Venus in the record. He said he had been told this by another creature, Rayjay. He said that Ronzar and Venus were killed in a meteorite shower. He expressed wishes to kill himself, saying that he didn't think he could live without them. Nevertheless, according to the psychiatrist's notes during the next few days, he began to improve in his relationships with others and to be more outgoing with other patients on the ward. He participated more frequently in patient groups, made relevant comments to other patients, and appeared more active, but it should be noted that this was in the context of an adult psychiatric ward in a military hospital.

About a week after the acute depressive incident occurred, however, "the patient's entire delusional system returned, but with new names and new facts about the alien creature," this latter, again, according to the psychiatrist's notes. Seeing that the patient's "psychosis" was a lingering problem and that he

would need continuing psychotherapy, it was decided that Simon should be returned to the United States for further treatment. The discharge diagnosis was schizophrenic reaction, paranoid type.

About two weeks after that note was written, the patient was returned to the United States with his father and was hospitalized at a military hospital where one of us, serving as a child psychiatrist, was asked to see the boy in consultation.

It was of note that the boy's father, though he had accompanied him back to the United States, was almost totally unavailable for interviewing, managing always to "have orders" which took him away from the hospital. It was learned that the boy's mother had been killed in a car accident when he was ten years old, and the circumstances had been a family secret. There was speculation that she might have been killed while with a paramour. In any event, Simon and his father had not been close over the years, and he had been reared largely by a succession of friends of the family, housekeepers, wives of friends, and the like. At the time of the hospitalization referred to, the father was most concerned about either getting a stateside assignment or returning to a foreign country to continue his military career.

In talking with Simon, it turned out that he did still believe that Ronzar and Venus were dead. He described them as very good creatures who had helped him a great deal. Sometimes he said that they appeared to him as spots of light, but mostly he was unable to describe what they looked like. He added that someone new had come to take their place since he had been in transit. The someone new was Courco, pronounced Core-sew. (The spelling and pronunciation were both Simon's own.) It was of note that Courco had some relation with this boy's last name. Courco was female and looked physically very much like a girl friend of Simon's, a minister's daughter he had known a few years previously. Once again, like Ronzar, Courco was very good, took care of him, loved him, and supported him.

Simon believed that he didn't remember much about his mother's death, but said that now he thought she was in heaven. It was only a few moments later that he said that Ronzar and Venus, and now Courco, came from outer space. It was felt that this clearly indicated that these creatures all seemed to represent, at least in

part, the wish for the idealized caretaking and protective functions that might have been fulfilled by his mother. He seemed to correctly perceive his father was more interested in maintaining his career than in the boy's future or progress.

Simon was bright, verbal, introspective, and showed a capacity for rapport which belied his former diagnosis of schizophrenia. He was undoubtedly depressed, and even a minimal amount of attention to his feelings about his mother's death permitted return of overt depressive affects which were not evident most of the time.

Discussion

Nagera (1969) suggests that the imaginary companion "frequently plays a specific positive role in the development of the child . . ." He also says that "what is important is not the content of the fantasy associated with the imaginary companion but the developmental purpose it is designed to fulfill. In this sense it has to be considered part of a developmental process . . ." (p. 166n).

Nagera also describes some of the uses to which the imaginary companion is put by various children. He lists as among its functions that the imaginary companion can be used as a superego auxiliary or as its opposite. He notes its use as a scapegoat. He says that some children use it to prolong their own feelings of omnipotence and control. In this context in particular, he says,

the imaginary companion is a necessary intermediate step before they can transfer at least in certain areas control to their parents while simultaneously accepting limitations of their own previously omnipotent feelings (which now have to be ascribed to the parents). This move from the child's belief in his own omnipotence to a belief in the parents' omnipotence is . . . a slow, gradual and difficult process, the intimate nature of which still escapes us [p. 182].

Nagera goes on to say that the imaginary companion can be an impersonation of the child's primitive ego ideals, ideals that may be beyond his reach. Furthermore, that feelings of loneliness, neglect, and rejection frequently motivate the child to create imaginary companions.

Finally, Nagera points out that in many cases

the child is claiming what is after all a genuine right of his—attention, love, and companionship. For this reason he probably can talk freely about the imaginary companion, a fact that is in sharp contrast with the reluctance of older children to communicate their fantasies which are so jealously guarded precisely because they involve impulses that are conflictual (in a neurotic sense) and objectionable [p. 194].

In conceptualizing the developmental role played by the imaginary companion and, in particular, the part it plays in the move from the child's belief in his own omnipotence to a belief in the parents' omnipotence, we are led to a consideration of the developmental line of the child's narcissism. Kohut (1971) states that, in addition to Freud's classic conception of libidinal development from autoerotism via narcissism to object love, there is another set of developmental phases which leads from autoerotism via narcissism to higher forms and transformations of narcissism.

It is important to note that Kohut defines narcissism

not by the target of the instinctual investment (i.e., whether it is the subject himself or other people), but by the nature or quality of the instinctual charge. The small child, for example, invests other people with narcissistic cathexes and thus experiences them narcissistically, i.e., as self-objects. The expected control over such (self-object) others is then closer to the concept of the control which a grownup expects to have over his own body and mind than to the concept of the control which he expects to have over others [Kohut, 1971, pp. 26-27; also 1966].

Crucial to Kohut's thinking is his concept of "self-object" and the development of a cohesive sense of self. A self-object is something or someone who is subjectively experienced as part of the self. The crucial determinant is that there be a subjective experience of the object as part of the self (i.e., invested with narcissistic cathexis).

Over the course of development and various developmental crises an over-all sense of self evolves, gradually achieving a cohesiveness. The cohesive self is a product of various enduring and

crucial self-objects. In our judgment, these concepts endow traditional notions of psychoanalytic development with a new perspective, that of identifying a separate narcissistic line of development.

It is this new perspective that we hope will clarify some issues raised in these two cases. While clearly both cases raise many fascinating questions because of the object qualities of the imaginary companions, we will focus here on the narcissistic value of the imaginary companion, in the hope of answering what we feel is the central question raised by both cases, that is, why does such a minimal intervention as is found in both instances lead to the subject's giving up such a highly valued mental construct as an imaginary companion? In the first case, the intervention was simply the grandfather's asking that the garage door be closed, followed by that event actually taking place, and in the second the psychiatrist with whom no very strong relationship had been formed suggested that the imaginary companion might be used in the place of more problematical relations with "real," nonimaginary persons in Simon's environment.

We suggest that the essential issue in each situation is that the companion was taken out of the imaginary realm. In the first case the grandfather did something that is quite commonly done with regard to imaginary companions. That is, he talked about the companion as if it were real. Frequently a plate has to be set at table for an imaginary companion, or, as in the case of Nōsey himself, special things were taken along for him in the toy bag. Such behavior by adults toward the imaginary companion is very ordinary and apparently does not interfere with the imaginary companion's existence. However, on the particular occasion described above, when grandfather asked the imaginary companion (by asking Lynn) to close the garage door, Lynn got a "real response"; the door closed. Lynn, not knowing about remote-control appliances, must have concluded that the companion had actually performed this action. To her, this must have meant that the imaginary companion had become exceptionally reified, that it had a real impact in a real world—that is, in the world of objects apart from the narcissistic world of her own making. She spontaneously reported her feeling that he was needed by her grandparents in their garage. Also it seemed natural to her that he "found a place where he was needed." In other words, Nōsey developed purposes

and capabilities of his own, quite apart from the developmental purpose he played in Lynn's psychic economy. In this sense he was no longer (from the point of view of her psychic reality) a "self-object," but, in fact, a representation of the object world experienced as any object representation would be and cathected with object libido. Then, as opposed to an object in the "transitional zone,"¹ Nosey no longer served to provide Lynn with active control over certain threats to her narcissistic needs.² Nor could his function be internalized yet, presumably because of Lynn's lack of developmental readiness.

It seems obvious to us from the material that the function of Nosey in Lynn's psychic economy was to protect her from the full impact of a number of narcissistic rebuffs and potential narcissistic injuries. The imaginary companion appeared at the time that her mother was pregnant with another child, with all the themes of loss and decreased attention and demands for increasing self-reliance this might have meant for a little girl of three, particularly one who had previously experienced the birth of a sibling. In addition, Nosey was always characterized as male, and one can as-

¹ In Winnicott's well-known paper (1953) on the transitional object and the transitional zone of experience, he particularly notes that the transitional zone is "an area which is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it all exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related" (p. 90). Both Kohut and Tolpin (Kohut, 1971; Tolpin, 1971) relate the transitional zone experience and the transitional object to Kohut's concept of the self-object (Kohut, 1971, p. 33).

For example, Tolpin says, "The transitional object is thus heir to a part of the infant's original narcissism that was preserved when it is assigned to the idealized parent imago—the metapsychological basis for its unique role in mental development and for its distinction from the 'pacifier'" (p. 324). In Tolpin's conceptualization, the transitional object represents those soothing aspects of mother which are cathected with narcissistic libido and experienced as part of the psychic structure of the subject. She noted (p. 330) that when optimal (minute) loss occurs, an inherent intrapsychic process transmutes actual functions carried out by human object into regulating psychic activity.

² Bach (1971) reports three cases of imaginary companions, in each of which the companion appears to protect the narcissism of the child involved. The imaginary companion seems in each case to compensate for the loss of omnipotent control over reality. In each case the imaginary companion represented some "vital aspect of mastery or competence, a core element of the active spontaneous self" (p. 169). In the first of Bach's cases the final incarnation of Doodoo was a perfect ego ideal, and at that point the need for him disappeared. He became structuralized and was covered by the infantile amnesia. In the other two cases presented by Bach, the outcome was less successful, and the companion could neither be completely integrated nor completely abandoned. To abandon him would lead to a loss of an important aspect of the self, while integrating him was beyond the synthetic capacity of the child at the time. Sperling (1954) also reported an imaginary companion whose function was to protect his creator's narcissism.

sume that the little girl between three and four was experiencing some typical age-appropriate narcissistic concerns about her female state and "lack of a penis."

Undoubtedly, by four when the dramatic event described occurred, she had not yet resolved these conflicts—neither the phallic conflicts, nor the conflict about her relationship to her mother and siblings. For this reason Nosey's functions remained necessary to Lynn's psychic functioning. He represented aspects of herself, such as phallic completeness and self-reliance, that she could not quite achieve or yet renounce without a devastating loss in self-esteem. Again, to internalize Nosey's function at this point would have been impossible because of the significant conflicts, mentioned above, still raging within the child. But if he functioned independently of her intention, then he wasn't a part of her. If that was the case his phallic and competent qualities were a painful confrontation to her and not a satisfying self-reflection. He thus became heir to all the conflicts experienced by Lynn at this phase of her development and which involved all of her object relationships. He was no longer exempt by virtue of his distinction from the object world. A developmental interference took place which greatly interfered, although accidentally, with this fantasy construct so necessary if Lynn's development was to continue unimpeded.³

Nosey had to be abandoned, not only because he wasn't helpful in protecting Lynn's self-esteem, but was in fact a threat to it. Lynn, however, still required some protection from the very painful realization that she felt too small on several levels. Though Nosey had failed her, she did have another "old friend" available to her that could be experienced as part of herself (i.e., a self-object), have the requisite quality of maleness (and femaleness), and could be with her always to love and approve of her as she wished, in contrast to her mother who sometimes had to turn her attention elsewhere.

³ Nagera (1966) defines the developmental interference as whatever disturbs the typical unfolding of development." He says that the term may be reserved to describe those situations that involve gross "external and environmental interferences with certain needs and rights of the child or situations in which unjustified demands are made of the child. The disturbance thus introduced may sometimes affect development in positive ways but usually affects it in negative ways" (p. 28).

Coppollilo (1967) describes a developmental interference with a transitional object and the subsequent effects on ego development.

This "old friend" was her stuffed dog, her transitional object which once again metapsychologically was a self-object and in the transitional zone of experience. This dog seems, in its qualities and in its chronology of use, to play a role similar to that played by Nosey, except that it is more concrete in actuality.

That this more concrete object in the transitional zone of experience was not as satisfactory in terms of the child's development and in terms of protecting her from the threats to her cohesive self-image and self-esteem that she was experiencing at the time can be inferred from the fact that the new object, although not actively used, remained in the closet until she was an adolescent. Lynn's overemphasized and spontaneous comments about the loss of Nosey not being upsetting or sad to her, the slightly saddened affect as she related this, the persistence of the stuffed animal in the closet, all seem to point to its still continuing to play an important role in her mental life. Most probably it still functions unconsciously as a narcissistic extension, that is a self-object in the transitional zone of experience.

The dog may be a precursor to the transmuting internalization by which the self-approving function becomes part of the psychic structure, but at Lynn's age of 16 this is not yet clarified. Her recent recognition of the dog's tattered condition suggests that perhaps he is now part of her object world. This would imply that his function is, in fact, now internalized. However, the loss of Nosey was not the minute and optimal loss referred to by Tolpin (1971). Perhaps some lasting interference has occurred with the internalizing of these reassuring "self-mirroring with approval" functions which Nosey and then the tattered dog accomplished for Lynn. Tolpin refers to these functions as soothing functions when performed by means of the transitional object. We feel that these are functions which protect the self-regard and self-esteem and the sense of cohesive self. They permit the child to give up some aspects of his infantile omnipotence, while maintaining that omnipotence by means of the transitional object and later through the imaginary companion. As the child gets older, however, the needs become somewhat different from those of "soothing." What the child seems to seek from his use of the imaginary companion is an inner sense of perfection and worth. Thus the function of the imaginary companion, rather than being one of soothing, is a kind

of reassuring, reminiscent of the demand made on the mirror in Snow White—"Mirror mirror on the wall, who is the fairest (most perfect) one of all?" We have used the phrase "self-mirroring with approval" here to reflect this particular function of the imaginary companion and presumably other self-objects at this time. It is semantically awkward, but is an attempt to convey verbally the experience that the child requires from this kind of mental construct.

In the case of Simon we feel that a similar process occurred. Simon was seen infrequently by the psychiatrist while in the hospital, and for short periods of time. It is thus unlikely that the psychiatrist himself achieved a strong object meaning to the boy. On the other hand, Simon was brought to the hospital because of his thoughts about Ronzar. In addition, the psychiatrist focused his interest and many of his comments while he was with Simon on the subject of Ronzar. This focus, then, served to place a meaning upon Ronzar which was not the one dictated by Simon's development.

When the psychiatrist suggested to Simon that Ronzar served a real purpose, that is, to protect Simon from the potential vulnerability of relationships with people in the real world, he gave Ronzar a further existence and purpose in the world of objects, apart from the function of protecting Simon's narcissism. It seems very clear from the chronology of Ronzar's development that this creature, as did all the subsequent ones Simon created, seemed to provide at least in part those idealized care-taking and protective functions which might have been performed by an ideal mother and which clearly had not yet been internalized and made part of Simon's own mental structures. Ronzar's functions were experienced by Simon as an aspect of the self and under his complete domination and control (i.e., cathected with narcissistic libido), even though we would re-emphasize that this boy had no difficulty in distinguishing self- and object representations. This was an area of narcissistic development that had not yet reached maturity, presumably interfered with by the death of his mother and perhaps by the erratic rearing he had had. What Simon required from Ronzar was the kind of mirroring just described.

The psychiatrist, however, did not interpret that these were self-approving functions that Ronzar played for Simon, which pro-

tected his self-esteem and self-regard, but rather made an interpretation implying that Ronzar had a function in reference to Simon's object-directed drives. In other words, it made Ronzar also into a "real object" rather than in the transitional zone or a self-object, and the developmental purpose was again frustrated. By becoming part of the object world, Ronzar assumed all the conflictual aspects of other objects. He therefore became unsuitable to fulfill the narcissistic purpose so necessary to Simon's psychic economy, leaving Simon temporarily unable to cope, with an overwhelming loss of self-esteem, the feeling that he was uncared for by an omnipotent (self) object because he was too insignificant or worthless.⁴

As in the first case, the interference with the child's own creation resulted in a more concrete representative taking over the functions of protecting the narcissism of the subject.

Simon's description of Courco was much more anthropomorphized than that of Ronzar and seemed by the association with the boy's name to represent aspects of himself but also to evoke memories of a female friend who had performed her duty as a self-object for him (such descriptions of her as he offered were in terms of his good feelings while with her).

Clearly the problems with current parenting which Simon experienced continued to assault his self-esteem and self-worth, making the task of internalizing those soothing, approving, mirroring functions to be part of his own psychic structure very difficult and problematic. Also, the nomadic life he led made the transition from imaginary companions to, for example, a peer group or gang as a source of support of narcissistic development very difficult or impossible.

It is our position that the imaginary companion plays a role very much like the transitional object in development. Both are

⁴ Whether Ronzar represented a delusional creation as well as an imaginary companion is beyond the scope of this paper. We have chosen to consider him essentially as the latter, since clearly the creature's function was to preserve the forward course of development, not to maintain a pathologically safe (fixated) position. Also, the ease with which Simon discussed Ronzar and the acceptance by adolescent peers speaks, we believe, to the creature's meeting a developmental need, in contrast to resolving conflict through relinquishing of either reality testing or object relations (cf. Nagera, 1969, p. 94). All of Simon's imaginary objects occupied a very special place and were not pervasive in all aspects of his life. It was highly questionable whether he truly believed in their physical and spatial existence, but their importance to him and the value he placed on the benefits they brought to him were unquestionable.

essentially steps in the developmental line of the subject's narcissism (cf. Kohut, 1971).

Our data suggests that in the developmental line of narcissism, the transitional object precedes the imaginary companion but can be returned to if the more abstract fantasy-construct suffers interference. Both function to permit the self to develop to the point where object love (as opposed to relations with a self-object) becomes tolerable and safe and is no threat to the integrity of the self (cf. Kohut, 1971, p. 50). For this to occur, the soothing, protecting functions which are the observable functions of the transitional object and the imaginary companion must provide a transitional sort of mental structure which must become part of the child's own structure through transmuting internalization (cf. Tolpin, 1971).

In this fashion the imaginary companion and the transitional object serve to protect the development of the self representation. At the same time as narcissistic development is occurring, the mother and other significant persons in the child's environment are in the process of being increasingly differentiated into objects and cathected with object libido, then increasingly drawn into conflict. For this reason these objects at times, particularly the mother, are unsuitable to protect the child from narcissistic injury because the mother cannot be counted upon, as can the transitional object and the imaginary companion, to always respond to the child by soothing, mirroring, and reflecting the child's sense of perfection. In a psychic way these constructs of the child are used for a developmental purpose; the purpose is accomplished, the functions that they fulfill are internalized, and then they lose their importance. We speculate that there is a series of such narcissistic "guardians" involved in the developmental line of narcissism. We think that, as maturation occurs, these guardians can be increasingly more abstract and serve multiple developmental, adaptive, and defensive purposes. The latency peer group, the adolescent gang, adult fantasy, and adult work could all function similarly from this point of view. Looking at it another way, the typical imaginary companion (and presumably these other constructs as well) are healthy detours through fantasy, promoting growth. Although these aids to maintaining self-esteem become more syntonically to reality as development proceeds, as, for example, adult work and accom-

plishment compared to the imaginary companion, we think there may be a lifelong need for such narcissistic guardians.

Increasingly, therapists are faced with disorders not characterized by neurotic symptoms but by disorders in the maintenance of the cohesive self (Kohut, 1971). We hope that this contribution has offered another step toward the understanding of the developmental aspects of what Winnicott has so brilliantly described and what Kohut has so magnificently, through reconstructive work with adults, placed in a metapsychological framework.

Summary

Two cases are presented of children who abruptly gave up their imaginary companions after adults in their environment ascribed a meaning to these companions which differed from the child's needs. We focus on a developmental role played by these children's imaginary companions and on the external interventions which interfered with that developmental role. We emphasize the imaginary companion's role in the developmental line of the children's narcissism and relate it to similar functions of the typical transitional object.

REFERENCES

- Bach, S. (1971), Notes on some imaginary companions. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 26:159-171. New York: Quadrangle.
- Busch, F., Nagera, H., McKnight, M., & Pezzarossi, G. (1973), Primary transitional objects. *J. Amer. Acad. Child Psychiat.*, 12:193-214.
- Coppolillo, H. P. (1967), Maturational aspects of the transitional phenomenon. *Internat. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 48:237-246.
- Kohut, H. (1966), Forms and Transformations of Narcissism. *This Journal*, 14:243-272.
- (1971), *The Analysis of the Self*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Nagera, H. (1966), *Early Childhood Disturbances, the Infantile Neurosis and the Adult Disturbances*. New York: International Universities Press.
- (1969), The Imaginary Companion. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 24:165-196. New York: International Universities Press.
- Sperling, O. E. (1954), An imaginary companion representing a prestage of the superego. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 9:252-258.
- Tolpin, M. (1971), On the beginnings of a cohesive self. *The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 26:316-352. New York: Quadrangle.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1953), Transitional objects and transitional phenomena. *Internat. J. Psycho-Anal.*, 34:89-97.

Submitted: December 19, 1972
 Children's Psychiatric Hospital
 Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104