I: Loewald’s Reformulation: Oedipal parricide as “passionate appropriation:”

In the history of psychoanalysis, Freud’s Oedipus complex has been reinvented several times, for example, by Klein, Fairbairn, Lacan and Kohut. At the heart of Loewald’s (1979) re-conceptualization of the Oedipus complex is the idea that it is the task of each new generation to make use of, destroy and reinvent the creations of the previous generation. Loewald reformulates the Oedipus complex in a way that provides fresh ways of viewing many of the fundamental human tasks entailed in growing up, growing old, and in between the two, managing to make something of one’s own that succeeding generations might make use of to create something unique of their own. Thus, Loewald reinvents Freud’s version of the Oedipus complex; it is my task to re-conceive Loewald’s version of the Oedipus complex in the very act of presenting it. By means of a close reading of Loewald’s 1979 paper, “The waning of the Oedipus complex,” I will demonstrate what it is about the way Loewald thinks that leads me to view that paper as a watershed in the development of psychoanalytic thought.

The sequential nature of writing makes it difficult for Loewald to capture the simultaneity of the elements of the Oedipus complex; I, too, must struggle with this dilemma. I have elected to discuss Loewald’s overlapping ideas in more or less the sequence he presents them, addressing the tension between influence and originality in the succession of generations; the murder of the oedipal parents and the appropriation of their authority; the metamorphic internalization of the child’s experience of the parents which underlies the formation of a self responsible for itself and to itself; and the transitional incestuous object relationship which mediates the dialectical interplay between differentiated and undifferentiated forms of object relatedness.
The opening sentence of Loewald’s paper is a curious one in that it appears to make no reference to the subject that the paper will address: “Many of the views expressed in this paper have been stated previously by others” (p. 384).

Subliminally, a sense of cyclical time is created by the juxtaposition of Loewald’s disclaiming originality and Breuer’s virtually identical statement made almost a century earlier. Loewald, before discussing his ideas concerning the Oedipus complex, is showing them to us in our experience of reading: no generation has the right to claim absolute originality for its creations. And yet, each new generation does contribute something uniquely its own.

Between the lines of Loewald’s text is the idea that it is the fate of the child—as it was the fate of the parents—that what he makes of his own will enter a process that Breuer calls a “passing from personal into general possession.” In other words, what we do manage to create that bears our own mark will become part of the pool of collective knowledge and in so doing we become nameless, but not insignificant ancestors to succeeding generations. Again, in Breuer’s words, “there is always a danger of regarding as a product of one’s own what has already been said by someone else,” an ancestor whose name has been lost to us.

Loewald’s paper goes on to both explore and bring to life this tension between one’s indebtedness to one’s forbears and one’s wish to free oneself from them in the process of becoming a person in one’s own terms. It is this tension between influence and originality that lies at the core of the Oedipus complex as Loewald conceives of it.

Loewald then draws our attention to the way in which Freud, in speaking of the fate of the Oedipus complex, uses forceful language, referring to its “destruction” and its “demolition.” Moreover, Freud insists, “If the ego has... not achieved much more than a repression of the complex, the latter persists in an unconscious state... and will later manifest its pathogenic effect.” This idea provides Loewald the key to his understanding of the fate of the Oedipus complex.

The reader’s head begins to swim at this point as a consequence of the convergence of two interrelated enigmatic ideas: (1) the notion that the Oedipus complex is “demolished” (how are we to understand the idea that some of the most important human experiences are, in health, destroyed?); and, (2) the idea that the demolition of the Oedipus complex is “more than a repression” (whatever that means). The reader, here, and throughout the paper, must do a good deal of thinking for him- or herself in making something of one’s own with the ideas that Loewald is presenting. This, after all, is the task of each new generation vis à vis the creations of its ancestors.
The reader must also attempt to formulate for himself or herself what it means to bring the Oedipus complex to a close, not by repressing it, but by demolishing the thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations and object-related experiences that constitute it. To my mind—and I think that there would be general agreement among psychoanalysts on this point—the psychic registration of a significant experience, whether that registration be conscious or unconscious, is never destroyed. It may be suppressed, repressed, displaced, denied, disowned, dissociated, projected, introjected, split-off, foreclosed and so on, but never destroyed or demolished. No experience can ever “unhappen” psychically. Yet, this is what Freud and Loewald are insisting is the case—at least to a significant degree—in the waning of the Oedipus complex. The unresolved question of what it means to say that the Oedipus complex is demolished generates in the experience of reading Loewald’s paper a tension that is not unlike the experience of living with unresolved, but not repressed, oedipal conflict. It unsettles everything it touches in a vitalizing way.

Having introduced these thoughts and questions regarding the demolition of the Oedipus complex, Loewald proceeds to broaden the traditional conception of the oedipal murder. He uses the Webster’s Dictionary definition of parricide: “One who murders a person to whom he stands in a specially sacred relation, as a father, mother, or other near relative, or (in a wider sense) a ruler. Sometimes, one guilty of treason.” In the act of parricide, Loewald observes,

It is a parental authority that is murdered; by that, whatever is sacred about the bond between child and parent is violated. If we take etymology as a guide, it is bringing forth, nourishing, providing for, and protecting of the child by the parents that constitute their parenthood, authority (authorship), and render sacred the child’s ties with the parents. Parricide is a crime against the sanctity of such a bond.

Parricide involves a revolt against parental authority and parental claims to authorship of the child. That revolt involves not a ceremonious passing of the baton from one generation to the next, but a murder in which a sacred bond is severed. The child’s breaking of the sacred bond to the parents does not represent a fearful response to the threat of bodily mutilation (castration), but a passionate assertion of what Loewald calls the “active urge for emancipation” from the parents.

In the oedipal battle, Loewald tells us, “opponents are required.” A relative absence of genuine parental authority leaves the child with little to appropriate. Moreover, when the parents’ authority has not been established, the child’s fantasies lack brakes—that is, the secure knowledge that his or her fantasies will not be allowed to be played out in reality. When parental authority does not provide for the brakes on fantasy, the fantasied murder of those one loves and depends upon is too frightening to endure. Under such pathological circumstances, the child, in an effort to defend him- or herself against the danger of the actual murder of the parents, represses (buries alive) murderous impulses and enforces that
repression by adopting a harshly punitive stance toward these feelings. In health, paradoxically, the felt presence of parental authority makes it possible for the child to safely murder the parents psychically (a fantasy that need not be repressed). Oedipal parricide does not require repression because it is ultimately a loving act, what Loewald calls a “passionate appropriation of what is experienced as loveable and admirable in parents.” In a sense, the fantasied death of one’s oedipal parents is “collateral damage” in the child’s struggle for independence and individuation. Killing one’s parents is not an end in itself.

II. Diminishment: Giving way to the next generation:

For Loewald, the Oedipus complex is at its core a face-off between the generations, a life-and-death battle for autonomy, authority and responsibility. In this struggle, parents are “actively rejected, fought against, and destroyed, to varying degrees.” Difficulty arises not from parricidal fantasies per se, but from an inability to safely commit parricide, to sever one’s oedipal ties to one’s parents. The following brief clinical account illustrates a form of difficulty encountered in the oedipal appropriation of parental authority:

Several years into his analysis, Mr. N told me the following dream: “I was checking in at the front desk of a hotel late at night. The man behind the desk told me that all the rooms were booked. I said that I had heard that hotels keep a few rooms open in case someone shows up in the middle of the night. I thought, but did not say to him, that those rooms are meant for important people. I knew that I was not an important person. At the other end of the long desk, an older woman who was checking in, said in a commanding voice, ‘He’s with me—he’ll share my room.’ I didn’t want to share a room with her. The thought was repellant. I felt as if I couldn’t get a breath of air and tried to find a way out of the hotel, but I couldn’t find an exit.”

Mr. N said that he felt extremely embarrassed by the dream and had considered not mentioning it to me. He told me that even though we had often talked about his feeling that his parents had had no psychological room in themselves for him as a child, he was horrified in the dream by the woman (who seemed like his mother) offering to have him share her room, and, by implication, her bed, with him.

I said to Mr. N that the embarrassment he felt in response to the dream may stem not only from his feeling horrified by the idea of sleeping with his mother, but also from seeing himself as a perennial child who lacks the authority to claim a place of his own among adults—a boy who will never become a man.
By contrast, an experience in the analysis of a man in his mid-twenties captures something of the experience of a healthy oedipal succession of generations:

A medical student near the end of his analysis with me began affectionately to refer to me as “a geezer” after it had become apparent that I knew very little of the developments in psychopharmacology that had occurred in the previous twenty-five years. I was reminded of my own first analysis, which began while I was a medical student. My analyst occasionally referred to himself as an “old buck” in response to my competitiveness with him regarding what I was learning about current developments in psychoanalysis. I remembered having been surprised by his seemingly calm acceptance of his place in the “over-the-hill” generation of analysts and of my place in the new (and, I believed, far more dynamic) generation.

While with my medical student analysand, my memory of my analyst’s referring to himself as an old buck struck me as both comic and disturbing—disturbing in that at the time he said it, he was younger than I was at that juncture in the analysis of my patient. I recognized how his acceptance of his place in the succession of generations was currently of great value to me in my efforts not only to accept, but also, in a certain way, to embrace my place as “a geezer” in the analysis of my medical student.

As parents to our children, even as we fight to maintain our parental authority, we allow ourselves to be killed by our children lest we, in Loewald’s words, “diminish them.” In the Oedipus myth, Laius and Jocasta are told by the oracle at Delphi that their son is destined to murder his father. The horror of this prophecy is equivalent in present-day terms to a hospital forewarning each couple as they enter the obstetrics ward that their child who is about to be born will one day murder them. Laius and Jocasta attempt to circumvent such an outcome by killing their child. But they cannot bring themselves to commit the murder by their own hand. They give Oedipus to a shepherd who is told to leave the infant in the forest to die. In so doing, Laius and Jocasta unconsciously collude in their own murder. They create a window of opportunity for their child not only to survive, but also to grow up to murder them.

The dilemma faced by Laius and Jocasta is a dilemma shared not only by all parents, but also by all analysts when we begin analysis with a new patient. In beginning analysis, we as analysts are setting in motion a process in which the patient—if all goes well—will contribute to our dying. For all to go well, we must allow ourselves to be killed by our patients lest “we diminish them,” for example, by treating them as less mature than they are, by giving advice that is not needed, supportive tones of voice that are unwanted, and interpretations that are undermining of the patient’s ability to think reflectively and insightfully for himself. Not to diminish one’s children (and one’s patients) involves not a passive
resignation to aging and death, but an actively loving gesture repeated time and again in which one gives over one’s place in the present generation to take one’s place sadly and proudly among those in the process of becoming ancestors. Resistance to taking one’s place as part of the past generation will not stop the succession of generations, but it will leave a felt absence in the lives of one’s children and grandchildren, an absence where their ancestors might under other circumstances have been a highly valued presence.

Parents may try to protect themselves against giving way to the next generation by behaving as if there is no difference between the generations. For example, when parents do not close bedroom and bathroom doors, or display erotic photographs as “art,” or do not wear clothing at home because “the human body is not a shameful thing,” they are implicitly claiming that there is no generational difference—children and adults are equal. Children, under such circumstances, have no genuine parental objects to kill and only a perverse version of parental authority to appropriate. This leaves the individual a stunted child frozen in time.

Having discussed the central role in the Oedipus complex of the child’s loving murder of his parents, Loewald makes a remarkable statement that sets this paper apart from its psychoanalytic predecessors:

If we do not shrink from blunt language, in our role as children of our parents, by genuine emancipation we do kill something vital in them—not all in one blow and not in all respects, but contributing to their dying.

In the space of a single sentence, the Oedipus complex is radically reconceived. It had been well established by Freud that the Oedipus complex is not simply an intrapsychic event, but a set of living object relationships between the child and his parents. But Loewald does not stop there. For him, the fantasied murder of the parents that is played out in oedipal object relationships contributes to—is part of the process of—the parents’ dying. It is tempting to water down Loewald’s blunt language by saying that “their dying” is a metaphor for parents’ relinquishing their authority over, their authorship of, the life of the child. But Loewald is saying more than that: he is insisting that the living out of the Oedipus complex by children and their parents is part of the emotional process (which is inseparable from bodily processes) by which human beings grow up, grow old and die.

As I read his paper, I find it clarifying to my thinking to “translate” the term superego into terms that are more in keeping with the ideas that Loewald is developing. In place of the word superego, I use the idea of an aspect of the self (derived from appropriated parental authority) that takes the measure of, and takes responsibility for, who one is and how one conducts oneself.
Superego formation involves, for Loewald, an “internalization” of or “identification” with the oedipal parents. Freud, too, repeatedly uses the terms identification, introjection and incorporation to describe the process of superego formation. This brings us to what I consider to be one of the most difficult and most important questions raised by Loewald regarding the Oedipus complex: What does it mean to say that oedipal object relationships are internalized in the process of superego organization? Loewald responds to this question in a very dense passage that leaves a great deal unsaid or merely suggested. I will offer a close reading of this passage in which I include inferences that I have drawn from Loewald’s statements:

“The organization of the superego, as internalization … of oedipal object relations, documents parricide and at the same time is its atonement and metamorphosis: atonement insofar as the superego makes up for and is a restitution of oedipal relationships; metamorphosis insofar as in this restitution oedipal object relations are transmuted into internal, intrapsychic structural relations” (p. 389).

In other words, that same process of superego organization constitutes not only an internal record of parricide in the form of an alteration of the psyche of the child, it also constitutes an “atonement” for the murder of the parents. As I understand it, the organization of the superego represents an atonement for parricide in that, at the same moment that the child murders the parents (psychically), he bestows upon them a form of immortality. That is, by incorporating the child’s experience of his parents, albeit, a “transmuted” version of them, into the very structure of who he is as an individual, the child secures the parents a place, a seat of influence, not only in the way the child conducts his life, but also in the way the child’s children conduct their lives, and on and on.

**III: Transmutation and Metamorphosis:**

The “internalization” of the parents in a “transmuted” state constitutes atonement for killing the parents in that this internalization contributes to the child’s becoming like the parents. But, in another sense, it is in the “transmutation” of the parents that lies an even more profound form of atonement. To the extent that the parents have been transformed in the internalization process, the parents have contributed to the creation of a child who is capable of being and becoming unlike them - - that is, capable of becoming a person who is, in certain respects, more than the people who the parents have been capable of being and becoming. What more meaningful atonement can there be for killing one’s parents?

Loewald, in this paper, uses the word metamorphosis only in the sentence being cited and may not have been aware of the full implications of his use of this metaphor. In complete metamorphosis, for example, in the life cycle of the butterfly, inside the cocoon, the tissues of the caterpillar (the larva) break down. A few clusters of cells from the breakdown of the larval tissues constitute the beginning of a new
cellular organization from which adult structures are generated (e.g. wings, eyes, tongue, antennae and body segments).

There is continuity in that the DNA of the caterpillar and that of the butterfly are identical; and there is discontinuity in that there is a vast difference between the morphology and physiology of the external and internal structures of the caterpillar and that of the butterfly. So, too, superego formation, the internalization of oedipal object relations, involves a simultaneity of continuity and radical transformation. The parents (as experienced by the child) are not internalized, any more than a caterpillar sprouts wings. The child’s “internalization” of oedipal object relationships involves a profound transformation of his experience of his parents, analogous to the breakdown of the bodily structure of the caterpillar, before they are restituted in the form of the organization of the child’s more mature psychic structure (superego formation).

In other words, the child’s “internalized” oedipal object relationships (constituting the superego) have their origins in the “DNA” of the parents, i.e. the unconscious psychological make-up of the parents (which in turn “documents” their own oedipal object relationships with their parents). At the same time, despite this powerful transgenerational continuity of oedipal experience, if the child (with the parents’ help) is able to kill his oedipal parents, he creates a psychological clearance in which to enter into libidinal relationships with “novel” (non-incestuous) objects. These novel relationships have a life of their own outside of the terms of the child’s libidinal and aggressive relationships with his or her oedipal parents. In this way, genuinely novel (non-incestuous) relationships with one’s parents and others become possible. (The novel object relationships are colored, but not dominated by, transferences to the oedipal parents.)

In a single summary sentence, which could have been written by no one other than Loewald, the elements of the transformations involved in superego formation (the establishment of an autonomous, responsible self) are brought together: “The self, in its autonomy, is an atonement structure, a structure of reconciliation, and as such a supreme achievement” (p. 394). Incestuous desire is a subsidiary theme in that story.

Loewald opens his discussion of oedipal incestuous wishes by raising the rarely asked, even a bit startling, question: What’s wrong with incest? He responds, “Incestuous object relations are evil, according to received morality, in that they interfere with or destroy that sacred bond … the original oneness, most obvious in the mother-infant dual unity.” Incest involves the intrusion of differentiated libidinal object relatedness into the “sacred” innocence of primary narcissistic unity.

In other words, we view incest as evil because, in incest, differentiated, object-related sexual desire is directed toward the very same person (and the very same body) with whom an undifferentiated
bond (which we hold sacred) existed and continues to exist. Thus, for Loewald, incest is felt to be wrong, not primarily because it represents a challenge to the father’s authority and claim to the mother, or because it denies the difference between the generations, but because it destroys the barrier between a fused form of mother-child relatedness (primary identification) and a differentiated object relatedness with the same person.

The overturning of the barrier between primary identification and object cathexis is a matter of the greatest importance, not only because the individual’s emerging sexuality is shaped by the way the parents and children handle incestuous desire. Perhaps even more importantly, the individual’s capacity for healthy object relatedness of every sort—his capacity to establish a generative dialectic of separateness from, and union with, other people—depends upon the living integrity of that barrier.

Parricide is a manifestation of the oedipal child’s drive to become an autonomous individual; incestuous wishes and fantasies represent the concurrent need on the part of the oedipal child for unity with the mother. From this vantage point, “The incestuous [oedipal] object thus is an intermediate, ambiguous entity, neither a full-fledged libidinal objectum [differentiated object] nor an unequivocal identificatum [undifferentiated object]” (p. 397). The incestuous oedipal relationship persists as an ongoing aspect of the Oedipus complex which mediates the tension between the urge for autonomy and responsibility and the healthy pull toward unity (for example, as an aspect of falling in love, empathy, sexuality, caregiving, and so on).

By understanding the oedipal incestuous object relationship as constituting an intermediate position between undifferentiated and differentiated object relatedness, Loewald is not simply amplifying a psychoanalytic conception of pre-oedipal development. He is suggesting something more. The Oedipus complex is not only a set of differentiated object relationships that comprise “the neurotic core” (p. 400) of the personality. The Oedipus complex “contains … in its very core” (p. 399) a more archaic set of object relationships that constitutes the “psychotic core” (p. 400) of the personality. From the latter, the earliest forms of healthy separation-individuation emerge.

Thus, the Oedipus complex is the emotional crucible in which the entirety of the personality is forged as the oedipal configuration is reworked and reorganized on increasingly more mature planes throughout the individual’s life. Loewald, not one to claim originality for his ideas, states that while Freud “acknowledged the fact [that the Oedipus complex centrally involves undifferentiated object relations] long ago” (p. 399), this aspect of the Oedipus complex is “more [important] than was realized by Freud” (p. 399). This more primitive aspect of the Oedipus complex is not outgrown; rather, it takes its place as “a deep layer of advanced mentality” (p. 402).
Before concluding this part of the discussion, I will revisit an idea that remains unresolved. At the outset of the paper, Loewald (with Freud) insisted that in health the Oedipus complex is “demolished.” Loewald, in the course of the paper, modifies that idea:

In the abstract, as the organization of this structure [the autonomous self] proceeds, the Oedipus complex would be destroyed as a constellation of object relations or their fantasy representations. But, in the words of Ariel in Shakespeare’s Tempest, nothing fades, “but doth suffer a sea-change into something rich and strange” (p. 394).

In other words, the Oedipus complex is not destroyed, but is continually in the process of being transformed into “something rich and strange,” that is, into a multitude of evolving forever-problematic aspects of the human condition which constitute what Loewald calls “the troubling but rewarding richness of life.” The reader may wonder why Loewald does not say so from the beginning instead of invoking the clearly untenable idea that experience can be destroyed. I believe that Loewald begins with the more absolute and dramatic language because there is a truth to it of which he does not want the reader to lose sight: to the degree that one succeeds in murdering one’s parents psychically and atones for that parricide in a way that contributes to the formation of an autonomous self, one is released from the emotional confines of the Oedipus complex. The Oedipus complex is destroyed to the extent that oedipal relationships with one’s parents no longer constitute the conscious and unconscious emotional world within which the individual lives as a perennial, dependent child.

The paper closes as it began with a comment addressing writing itself as opposed to the subject matter that has been taken up:

I am aware that, perhaps confusingly, I have shifted perspectives several times in my presentation. I hope that the composite picture I have tried to sketch in this fashion has not become too blurred by my approach (p. 404).

The words, “shift[ing] perspectives,” to my ear, describe a style of writing and thinking that is always in the process of being revised, and a style of reading that is as critically questioning as it is receptive to the ideas being presented. What more suitable ending can one imagine for a paper that addresses the ways in which one generation leaves its mark on the next, and yet fosters in its descendents the exercise of their right and responsibility to become authors of their own ideas and ways of conducting themselves?