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SWALLOWED UP BY TERROR: THE IMAGE OF BIRDS IN VIRGINIA WOOLF AND  
ECHOING IMAGES OF TERROR IN THE INTERNAL WORLD OF PATIENTS:  
DISSOCIATED LINKS TO CHILDHOOD

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ABSTRACT

This study integrates Virginia Woolf's biography with her terror of losing her fragile self in compulsive merger with another, with her imagery of birds flocking together in a merger of terror and terrified impulse. Then two clinical case examples of profound childhood terror are depicted. The first case has the subjective experience of a child who trembles with terror in the face of a murderous borderline mother. One particular day of terror is seen from the child's perspective, and dream material highlights the unconscious reflections of the terror of being destroyed by maternal poison, with its transference evolutions. The second case is also primal terror at an even earlier source, with a dream of prenatal imagery: the womb that destroys through lack of containment.

Key words: *psychoanalysis, creativity, developmental mourning, terror, preoedipal, symbolic, unthinkable anxieties, Virginia Woolf, creativity*

Shockingly, we are aroused into heights of anxiety by Virginia Woolf's image of birds flocking together in a mass of terror in her book, *The Waves*. We are reminded of Hitchcock's movie *The Birds*, which displays its own form of Nightmare Terror. We can relate this to an infant's perspective, an infant who has been cut off from her mother's being, as well as from her breasts, at 10 weeks old, which had been the fate of Woolf. We can relate this to the bullying attacks in the nursery from vicious siblings, to whom little Ginny was forced to submit as the smallest. We can relate it to two sexual assaults from two older brothers, one being as early as six years old, after a bout of whooping cough left her more intensely vulnerable than ever. We can relate this to the early death of a cold narcissistic mother, followed by the death of an older sister a year later. We can relate this to a father's inability to compensate for the primal mother, despite his maternal nurturance at a symbolic level, when Virginia became old enough to read. The father held her as the mother never could, but it was too late for the primal devastation in the psyche, where dissociation and splitting fragmented her, which then was defended against by

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cravings to regress to primal merger. But every time the urge to merge appeared, the primal dissociation took over, rebelling against the loss of any separate identity in a regressive merger.

In *The Waves*, Virginia Woolf struggles with this primal level conflict between merger and dissociation in the image of the birds. The metaphorical image of frantic, and thus monstrous Birds, encapsulates the essence of Woolf's primal conflict, which is perpetually propelled outward through the overwhelming affect of "terror," a terror that cannot be contained. D. W. Winnicott (1965) captures this terror driven phenomenon in the phrase "the unthinkable anxieties," which we can experience as a combination of abandonment anxiety and annihilation terror (currently called "panic attacks"). The image of the birds in Woolf's *The Waves* speaks to all of this (quoted by Kelly, 1973, p. 164):

In the garden the birds that had sung erratically and spasmodically in the dawn in that tree, on that bush, now sung together in chorus, shrill and sharp; now together, as if conscious of companionship, now alone as if to the pale blue sky. They swerved, all in one flight, when the black cat moved among the bushes, when the cook threw cinders in the ash heap and started them. Fear was in their song, and apprehension of pain, and joy to be snatched quickly now at this instant.

In Woolf's writing in general, and in *The Waves* in particular, the characters cannot come together, to connect and to interact. Her human beings are like her *birds*. They are each isolated in monologues of subjective experience. The terror of this isolation and alienation causes a craving to come together in a primal merger, since they can't come together in interaction or intersubjectivity, due to their lack of separate identities. Just as seen in the image of the birds, compulsive merger is reactive, rather than related. There is no separate and yet authentic self, since the self in all of Woolf's characters has not yet gone through successful self integration and separation individuation, nor has this self entered Klein's (XXXX) self-integrated depressive position. So the Self, just like the Birds, remain phobic and paranoid. Virginia Woolf's Self is just a fragile fragment of individual perception that is perpetually challenged and threatened by the craving to merge to overcome isolation. But in merging together to avoid alienation, there is only a communal terror as seen in this image of the Birds. All of Woolf's Birds lack any individual compass. They are manically driven to flock together in terror. Woolf's alienated creatures do not respond to one another. They react only in a primal terror that propels them into a craving for merger. However, collective terror, as in the *Birds*, is no solace.

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Woolf's characters "never engage in direct emotional communication, which connects individual selves. Rather each character observes the other. The only way they do come together is through their primal fears, which is conveyed through Woolf's imagery of fantastic Birds. For Woolf, birds frequently serve to represent people's souls. This is how, according to Woolf, people can often find unity in a collective symbiotic vulnerability." (Kavaler-Adler, 1996/ 2014, pp. 145-146.)

The merging together in a collective symbiotic vulnerability is counteracted by the compulsion to detach and dissociate, which promotes alienation. One of Woolf's characters in her novel, *The Waves*, represents Woolf's artist self--among her many dissociated Selves that are displayed in this work. The part of herself that can have artistic vision is called Bernard. Bernard can have artistic vision, but he is portrayed as a desperate man, who can only ward off a tremendous compulsion to merge with others, which then profoundly threatens his identity, when he can open to a moment of artistic vision.

And Bernard's vision dies so quickly that another vision must be imminently created for Bernard's being to revive. Revived vision is the only hope, because when Bernard walks down a street and sees the male friend he is going to meet, he is overwhelmed by a tidal wave of terror, as he feels he is losing himself in the identity of the other. He feels that he is literally becoming his friend as he walks towards him. Without artist vision — which may only last a moment and be extinguished — Bernard would be subject to the only other alternative to the monster compulsion of merger. He would be compelled to dissociate by deadening and numbing out one's internal being!! As the author, Virginia Woolf's only other alternative to this primitive and primal compulsion to merge is the threatening death of dissociation—the numbing out of his entire internal being.

Virginia Woolf's Rhoda is the character in "the Waves" who portrays the consequence of dissociation. Rhoda bangs her feet on the bedpost at night to wake herself from numbness, to try and feel alive, but in the end--just like Woolf herself--Rhoda suicides.

***Patients' Terror: A Story Of The Child Who Was Forced To Eat Her Pet Chickens Killed By The Mother***

It is difficult to fathom the intense level of terror experienced by a child with a wildly raging, out of control borderline mother, yet we experience this terror through sitting with our patients. Being in the room with our patients, when they again fear engulfment and attack from

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us, as analysts, we feel it. When they are overwhelmed by the terrors of the past that can emerge, and which frequently cause dissociation before the actual memories can emerge, we feel it. We feel all this as we sit behind the couch, communing in depth, with our patients. In ongoing psychoanalysis, and in psychoanalytic psychotherapy, we do hear the memories as conceptualization and symbolization become possible. Then our patients move into the free expression of primary and primitive abandonment depression affects of rage, and then into grief and mourning.

Carol's memories emerged, along with dreams that reveal the horrors of her child situation within her internal world. In one dream, she was in a large mansion/brownstone where she was falling down from a high floor, down (through the Alice in Wonderland rabbit hole), down onto a marble white floor on the bottom of the mansion. On the way down, she tries to grab onto wood banisters on the staircases that are at all the floor levels, but each banister breaks as she grabs onto it, and she smashes down into the cold marble floor at the bottom of all the floor levels.

As Carol associated to this dream, I interpreted her internal self dilemma, which had caused her to withdraw her inner self, and to operate through a false intellectual self. Without connection to an affectively alive Self, Carol could not connect with others. This stunted her psychological and emotional growth. Carol was very stuck! But underneath her False Self was the terror that threatened to swallow her up. Some of my interpretations of this dream were that she was grabbing onto wooden stair banisters that seemed to represent the very unavailable and detached narcissistic father. He provided the mansion with his financial and business abilities, but at home he was useless as a father. She tried grabbing onto him in a desperate attempt to survive in a household run by an enraged and cold borderline mother. Carol's father let her down every time, as vividly portrayed by his wooden part object character in the dream. He was too brittle, weak, and unrelated to hold her as she tried to grab onto him. Consequently, she was forced to smash against the rock hard marble exterior of the cold primal mother, who lay like a baron and indifferent part object at the bottom of her fall. The mother was cold, and hard, and indifferent to the point of murder. She was also the raging cold wind that sent the patient's Child Self flying downwards to her death—the opposite of Peter Pan's children being able to fly (the

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opposite unconscious archetype). The theme of murder by rage, and by indifference to the point of abandonment, pervaded the atmosphere in this dream, as in many others.

Carol responded with comprehension to my interpretations. Her own cold rage and distancing from me in the transference were subsiding enough for meaningful mutual conversations about her dreams, fantasies, and memories to take place. As we entered the terrain of her internal world terror, behind the mote of her sealed off castle self, we entered a land of fantastic memories. There were the early terrors of her mother as a witch. Carol believed she saw the Witch Mother in the middle of the night from her child's bed. What she actually saw was her mother's robe, swinging on a hanger, in the wind, swinging back and forth. This part object mother projection then became attached to a particular 4 year old memory, within a range of early memories in which her mother's threatening rages became murderous.

At four years old, Carol's mother held her fast on her lap, and demanded that Carol allow her to read her a story. This holding of her, when she was no longer a baby who wanted to be held, was experienced as aversive, suffocating, engulfing, and confining by Carol. Her mother tried to seduce her into staying in her lap by saying she could play with her mother's ear. But Carol was already four, and this was hardly enough incentive to stay fixed on her mother's lap. She did not find her mother's reading to her to be soothing. In fact, she desperately wanted to escape her mother's grasp, the grasp of a mother who was enacting her own needs for a regressive symbiosis with her daughter. Her mother wanted a baby to cuddle with, and could not accept her daughter's autonomy, nor could she accept her daughter's need to be with any other creature but herself. The mother craved an exclusive symbiosis, which alternated with her distancing and attacking rejection of her daughter, when she sought her own autonomy through detachment and self preoccupation. Catastrophe, and even tragedy, was bound to strike from the combustion of her mother's regressive borderline needs for merger, and her own needs for autonomy, and for engagement with the world outside the mother/child sphere.

As the four year old Carol pushed away from her mother's lap, and ran outside to play with the chickens they had in the backyard, who were supposed to be Carol's pets, her mother ran after her in a flurry. Her mother suddenly grabbed the chickens, and put them into a bag to take them across the road to a Butcher to have them butchered. She grabbed Carol by the hand, and pulled her across the road with her, as she ran madly to the Butcher. As Carol felt her hand

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handcuffed in the hand of her mother, and felt her body a prisoner to the direction that her mother grabbed her in, her mother shouted fiercely at her “If you tell anyone about this, I will murder you too, just like I am murdering the chickens!”

Of course Carol was swallowed up with Terror. She feared saying anything. She felt herself to be numb. In her head her mother’s words would echo, attack, and threaten to kill. She would remember her mother’s words each time her mother beat her brother brutally in front of her, or any time her mother chased her with screaming taunts and threats. Later, Carol would race away to the refuge of a bathroom, where she would lock the door against her mother’s entry. She would stand cringing with terror inside the confines of the bathroom, praying the lock would hold against her mother’s murderous threats. For after all, such threats were more than any words to Carol. She had seen her mother in the act of murder, seeing her defenseless chicken pets brutally destroyed--following which her mother cooked them for dinner—somewhat like the witch mother in Hansel and Gretel who tried to murder the children in her oven, so that they could be cooked for her dinner.

When she was four years old, Carol crawled away to hide in her room, after her mother dragged her by her hand, through the streets, on the way back from the butcher. Inside a paper bag, Carol’s mother had the hatcheted pet chickens, in pieces. When dinner time came, Carol’s mother called to the family (her father and brother and she) in a loud, screeching, insistent voice. She particularly persisted in calling Carol to dinner. Obviously, Carol would be more than reluctant to come to the kitchen for dinner, after the scene of the afternoon, with the threat of her mother murdering her as well as her chickens. Finally, Carol was forced to come. She was forced to sit down at the dinner table, where she anticipated the murdered bodies of the chickens would appear, and they did!

She looked over at her always busy father, who had come home from work for dinner. He was detached and sublimely indifferent to anything out of the ordinary going on. He was too removed to talk to, and nobody talked to each other in the family. Her brother also was out of contact, always living in his own world.

When Carol had had a tonsillectomy that same year, at four years old, it was the only time she remembered her father accompanying her anywhere. He actually picked her up and carried her in her four year old body. However, Carol had been tricked into putting on a party

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dress to go to her grandmother's, when the true destination would be the hospital, and would be put on a table for surgery. A mask was put over Carol's head for an anesthetic. She was in shock!! Nobody had prepared her! They had tricked her into thinking she was going to see her grandmother.

When the ether came and put her to sleep, Carol unconsciously imagined that she was being poisoned. We discovered this in dreams of gaseous fumes coming at her in a canal, asphyxiating her. Carol associated to the threat of toxic asphyxiation in her transference view of myself, her female analyst. She saw me as poisoning her with toxic fumes from my feelings going into her, or from what she imagined to be a disease of the bladder when I went to the bathroom a lot.

Back in the four year old memory of dinner with the killed chickens, Carol barely could conceptualize the memory, because she had felt like passing out from disgust, nausea and profound terror. She also was afraid of unconscious rage, now felt towards her detached and unavailable father and brother. She knew her father was always away or was preoccupied with papers and business. The only exception was when he picked her up to take her to the slaughter of her tonsillectomy by trickery. She had, however, held on to a memory of her brother as an ally who would rescue her, until he came to her after her surgery and said he would bring her ice cream. Fearing being poisoned again, and seeing her brother knew about her surgery, she concluded "He is in on it too!" Then she experienced herself to be totally alone. She looked now, at the dinner table, at her brother and father as aliens. They were the wooden banisters that could not held onto in the face of the terrors of her mother.

The nausea and horror of those elongated moments, a tortured hour at the dinner table, now possessed Carol, as she lay on the couch, and tried to narrate her subjective experience in that memory.

She felt liked vomiting now, because she had been coming out of a numbed out internal state in her psychoanalytic object relations treatment, as she increasingly surrendered her false intellectual self to risk feeling and connection with herself and with myself, her analyst. She could tune into her nauseous state of disgust and distrust now. She generalized her distrust to me as her analyst. She was always distancing from me

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Carol lived in fear of engulfment. She remembered her mother's grasp. She remembered her mother's rages. Most of all, she remembered her mother's murder of her pet chickens. She looked back at her four year old self at the dinner table, and looked through her little girl eyes at the chickens cooked and baked, lying on platters, on the surface of the dining room table. Only she (and her mother) knew who these chickens had been! Her brother and father thought they were just having chicken from the butcher for dinner. What was normal to them was a holocaust of mass murder to her. She knew she too could have been killed, chopped up, and baked, and then laid on a platter to be eaten. In fact, her mother had said that if she said anything to anyone that would be her fate. So she sat silent as her father and brother gobbled up the work of cannibals for dinner.

Like all abused and traumatized children, who are threatened that they will be destroyed if they tell the truth of their abuse to anyone, Carol sat silent. She then spent a life running away from relationships. Sex became a tool to have some kind of connection, but having her emotions sealed off in a numbed out and empty internal world, she ran like hell from the threat of emotional intimacy. Consequently, nobody could get to know her. She was always running! Carol didn't realize until her terror of connection was understood in treatment, that she also was terrified of abandonment, and had an internally clinging child inside her internal world, as well as a distancing and detached child.

The terror of engulfment was the theme of Carol's life. Her identification with the dead, cut up, and baked chickens on the dinner table, only became conscious fully in treatment. With this knowledge, Carol could integrate the traumatized parts of her that had been dissociated. She began to mourn, and to long for relatedness. She began to realize that she was always projecting her clinging side onto others, who became the emotionally needy and clinging mother. She frequently feared, through the transference, that I would cling to her forever, and never let her leave treatment. The analytic situation became the imprisoning lap of her mother. In the end, she thanked me for interpreting her fears of abandonment and loss, along with her fears of engulfment by merger with a poisonous rage mother, so that she was able to distinguish me from her mother, and could stay in treatment, until the job of self integration, and separation-individuation was done (read about the developmental mourning theory in Kavaler-Adler, 1992-2014). She thanked me for not letting her run away! My interpretations had reached her as the

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terror lessened. When she was ready, she took steps to cut down her session times and then to terminate.

Like Virginia Woolf, Carol had the terror that if she ever spoke about her abuse, she would be in jeopardy. Virginia Woolf could only remember the father who nurtured her, not the brothers who had molested her. She enacted her shame with a narcissistic defense of contempt, but the primal lack of a mother underlay the whole childhood scenario of loss and abuse. She became manic to avoid the suicidal despair. Underneath, she felt like a cooked chicken, just as Carol did. However, Virginia Woolf's writing gave her a voice for a disguised view of her violent internal world, and its engulfing terror of horror. Murderous impulses and suicidal impulses were always weaved into the imagery of her writing. The lack of an internal warm mother, who could support her through symbiosis, and then through separation-individuation, haunted Woolf, as did her own enraged internal reactions to this lack. Analogously, Carol was haunted by both an absent and overly tyrannizing mother.

### ***The Mother with a Womb That Could Not Hold the Child***

Amy came into psychoanalytic object relations treatment after being in a monthly four hour group I ran for 20 years, which she was in for about five years. Towards the end of her participation in the monthly meditation, mourning, and therapy group, she had been forming a transference that led to the following occurrence. She looked into my eyes from several seats away in the group circle, and I was there to receive her gaze, and to look back at her with a clear presence and contact. She immediately had a powerful psycho-physical response. She felt a visceral integration take place inside her body, where she had formerly experienced a primal level "somatic dissociation." The words "somatic dissociation" were her own, and so was her interpretation of what had dramatically taken place for her. She said that whenever she had looked into her mother's eyes she had seen cold hatred or total vapid emptiness. She experienced an acute moment of internal healing--the moment of looking into my eyes--because she had surprisingly seen the light of contact and connection within my reciprocal gaze at her, as I received her gaze. The effect penetrated through her whole body. This led to Amy requesting to see me for individual psychotherapy several months after she graduated from the group.

When Amy came for individual treatment, she recalled that her sensory awareness of splitting within her body-self, which she had discovered could be called "somatic dissociation,"

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could never be felt or understood by a former psychoanalyst, with whom she had been in three times a week treatment for 9 years. During the time with that male analyst she had had many dreams that vividly portrayed the devastation of a potential “true self” (Winnicott, 1955), or “real self” (Masterson, 1981), within her internal world. The first dream she reported was that of a large pink animal, who was cut down the middle, revealing the spilling out of the womb territory of the body. Her associations were to her own split psyche that manifested, in part, in body visceral and somatic form. However, I extended the interpretation to seeing the animal with the womb spilling out as the persona of her mother, in the primitive animal form that Amy experienced her within her internal world of part object fantasies. I commented that Amy’s mother may never have been able to contain her psychically, even before her birth, when she was in her mother’s womb. Amy emphatically agreed that this rang true for her! We then began to journey through other dreams, memories, and fantasies that characterized a fundamental state of experiential terror that had been with her since her earliest childhood. The primal split in her psyche, enacted in her body by “somatic dissociation,” had manifested in a profound terror about the threat of imminent psychic death, as she originally had no differentiated and separate self from her older sister, who had merged with her, and had controlled and tyrannized her throughout their childhood. Her sister would descend into suicidal and psychotic behavior whenever Amy had any moment of attention from her mother, or from anyone in the family.

Certain dreams that captured her state of terror, included one of being in a large dark room, sealed off from the world with ceiling high curtains. The sealed off pitch black dark room represented the sealed off and unborn potential self, which had to split away from a monumentally detached mother, and from a vicious and psychotically persecutory sister. However, the nightmare horrors of Amy’s dream recollection extended beyond being sealed off in a dark, imprisoned emptiness. She also remembered that at the top of the very high dark, and drawn curtains, sat heads without bodies, from which blood oozed out from the bottom of the heads, in the neck area. The implication was that several people had been beheaded, and their heads had been perched up, high above, on the curtains, resembling a crucifixion cross. Who had been crucified? Amy’s associations were to various personas within herself. But she was also aware that the murderous aggression within herself, also existed in a split off form, where she herself could be the sadistic beheading executioner, as such violent murderous rage was

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acted out in her internal world, and had been dissociated from her conscious and victimized masochistic self, and from her unborn potential loving and related Self.

With such violence within one's internal world, how could one not live in a perpetual state of Terror? Jackals were seen as cannibalistic executioners in another dream, and the decayed body being eaten by the Jackals was recognized by Amy as her own Self, with her mother and sister being seen as the voracious imbibing animal entities, munching away at her flesh. Recalling these dreams, and relating them to her inability to contain her own inner being, as her mother once could not contain her, brought back a memory. The memory was of waking up one morning in such a state of Terror that she was sure her hair must have turned white during the night, and she was haunted by one nightmare experience of vicious intrusion. Other nightmares portrayed the vicious, indifferent abandonment repeatedly. One of the nightmares was of being drawn towards a dark skeleton that was a large looming Grim Reaper figure. She actually saw the Grim Reaper coming for her. She experienced an imminent sense of impending doom, as annihilation terror trumped any fear of mere death and decay. She would not just die! She would be wiped out and "disappeared," as if she never existed! Thomas Ogden's (1986) distinction between nihilation (annihilation) and death is critically seen here. To fear death is to already be in Klein's Depressive Position where one is at a symbolic level, so that death allows for consciousness of one's connections with others. In death, we know we have been symbolically internalized in those who have loved us. Also, in the Depressive Position anticipation of dying, there is an awareness of one's own symbolic contributions to society at large. On the other hand, in the Paranoid-Schizoid position "Nihilation" terror one has no symbolic links to others in dying. Instead one's whole identify is "disappeared," without a trace of an individually defined being, or any trace of being sustained on earth in a symbolic form.

Amy's terror of the Grim Reaper was clearly an articulation of the Nihilation terror cited by Thomas Ogden. She was terrified of being wiped out by death, as she was wiped out of existence in her family, throughout her childhood. Any sign of her existing and getting the slightest attention was reacted to by her sister with psychotic and suicidal acting out, to win back the attention that the sister seemed to assume was rightfully hers, and only hers.

The inability to contain one's Interior World life can be seen in Amy. However, Amy's ability to sit with her dissociated and yet internal chaos, emptiness, and rage, along with my

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emotionally alive presence, allowed her to reach a higher level developmental journey.

Eventually she could feel the deep felt grief laden sadness of primal object loss (the mother she never had). She softened, and bit by bit surrendered to a new love relationship. She continually felt grievous disappointment with her boyfriend, and perpetually had thoughts of leaving him with each disappointment. But each time she went through this, I would help her remember the powerful love that he had brought to her, and she began to integrate her love with her hate, as she felt the deep grief laden affects of mourning.

***Terror then became transformed into sustained relatedness within her Internal World, which could then become relatedness with others in the External World. Some Theory***

D. W. Winnicott (1965) was the first to speak about the “unthinkable anxieties.” Those with preoedipal character disorders experience these primal terrors, those that were provoked and dissociated, before the capacity for expressing terror in language was possible. Melanie Klein, the other founding parent of Object Relations theory, along with Ronald Fairbairn, spoke of a primitive superego that could act out relentless torture perpetuated on the psyche. Wilfred Bion (1967), a follower of Klein, who was also analyzed by Klein, spoke of the perpetual “attacks on linking” that took place in the internal world psyche of those who turned back their murderous rage aggression back on their own fragile beings. So in the Attacks on Linking, one’s mind attacks itself in a relentless manner, that cuts off links between one thought and another, between conscious thought and unconscious thought, and between thoughts and primitive level affects that have never been realized at a symbolic level of Self formation. Herbert Rosenfield added to this with his view of whole mafia gang formations in the internal world, which would capture the psyche of the individual, and could prevent any movement towards the relationship of the person with those in the outside world. The terror then becomes the massive possession of a primitive mother, dragging her child back into a regressive symbiosis, from which no relationship with others is allowed. But the mother has already been fragmented into pieces, so that the mother’s pull of the psyche, back into a regressive symbiosis, is manifested in dreams and fantasies as a Mafia gang murdering any part of the self that escapes possession by the orally incorporating mother. This gang is the sadistic side of the splitting and fragmentation process. The “gang” mirrors and merges with the “bird-like” flock of terrified victim self fragments. Amy’s level of terror, which now could begin to be symbolized, conjures up a similar primitive vortex of wild self fragments. The self fragments whirl around in a St. Vitus Dance frenzy (see “the dance of

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the red shoes,” Kavaler-Adler 1996/2014) that might be analogous to Virginia Woolf’s and Hitchcock’s “Birds.” My own view of the symbolized terror can be seen in my writings on the demon lover complex (Kavaler-Adler, 1993/2013, 1996/2014, 2006).

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