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## His Magnificent Obsession

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**W**ASHINGTON

It is hard to fathom most obsessions from the outside.

Why did Proust's Swann swoon over the sharp-featured Odette, when he knew he was wasting years of his life longing for a woman "who didn't even appeal to me"?

What made Aschenbach follow a blond boy in "Death in Venice" in such a state of distraction that "he could no longer think of anything except this ceaseless pursuit of the object that so inflamed him"?

Why did Humbert Humbert devour himself over the sulky "Lolita, light of my life, fire of my loins. My sin, my soul"?

Why did the otherwise cool Oscar Wilde wreck his life over the callow Lord Alfred Douglas so that, as he wrote in "De Profundis," "I became the spendthrift of my own genius"?

Why did the whale engender a "special lunacy" in Ahab that "stormed his general sanity, and carried it and turned all its concentrated cannon upon its own mad mark"?

And why can George W. Bush think of nothing but a missile shield? Our president is caught in the grip of an obsession worthy of literature.

W. seemed like a simple man, who did not get ardently aroused over anything except Little League, clearing Texas brush and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

But it turns out that he is darker and more complex than we thought. He is seized by a desire that defies the laws of politics and physics, a hunger that fills him with elation and despair, a thirst for an attainment that seems so close and yet so far.

While we may not understand W.'s urgent, self-destructive craving for his ineffectual missile shield any better than we understand Scarlett's urgent, self-destructive craving for her ineffectual Ashley, we must stand in awe before the purity and grandeur of his obsession. He would rather risk the world being destroyed than slow his race to build something to protect it.

Consider the hurricane of global emotions that W. has whipped up to construct The Defense That Doesn't Work against The Threat That Doesn't Exist.

The White House has signaled China that it's O.K. to build up its nuclear arsenal if it makes China feel better about W.'s Junior Star Wars. And if this leads to China's improving its nuclear warheads and to a renewal of nuclear testing, well, the obsession can justify that. And if this leads to India's and Pakistan's accelerating an arms race, well, the obsession can justify that, too. And if American kids have to go back to duck-and-cover drills, well, same deal. And if W.

squanders \$60 billion that could have been spent on education on technology that doesn't work — because our sophisticated antimissile interceptors can't stop primitive, wobbly missiles from

W. is now at a "Blue Angel" Lola Lola level of obsession, but instead of his blood running fast for Marlene Dietrich, it's running fast for a missile doily.

He has made the Europeans angry and alarmed. He has made Vladimir Putin and Jiang Zemin much closer, and Russia is once more playing the China card. He has driven Russia and Germany closer, a pairing that caused, as his father would say, "a splash" of trouble in the past. The Joint Chiefs of Staff are furious that W. wants to downsize the services and use that money for his missile shield. Colin Powell, who is in no rush to throw weapons into space, has been sidelined in favor of Rummy and Condi and others who feed W.'s ecstatic fantasy.

Because W. has restructured the entire international security system — reviving scary alliances and threats that had faded — we may end up needing a larger military, not a smaller one.

The last time a president became infatuated with Star Wars, the obsession was easier to understand. Ronald Reagan was by temperament a utopian. He believed that the unattainable was attainable. He confused real life with the movies.

But W. — whence his magnificent obsession?

I can only speculate that it's filial, stemming from his fear of repeating his father's fatal mistake of alienating the right wing.

As much as it is reassuring to see the usually disengaged president become so deeply engaged in an issue, the world might be a safer place if W. stuck with his other obsession: demanding that the White House mess offer up three kinds of jelly with its pb&j's.