

general approach and enabled me eventually to develop the working hypothesis I now employ in the treatment of these patients. This hypothesis is presented in Chapter 13.

The Myths of Narcissus

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It is noteworthy, in view of the fundamental role assigned to narcissism by Freud (1914b), that there exists no detailed analysis of the myth that immortalized the handsome youth Narcissus and provided psychoanalysis with so felicitous a term. Certain essential features of the myth are well known, and these may conveniently serve as initial material for analysis, the more so as they raise problems of considerable importance for investigation.

Narcissus, as will be recalled from the most frequently cited version of the myth, preserved in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (1951), was a youth of extraordinary beauty who fell in love with his image as he leaned over a pool of water. Fascinated by his own reflection, he pined away and died. There appeared in his stead the flower that bears his name.

What is usually emphasized in this touching story is the extreme self-love that Narcissus manifests, the very quality designated by the term *narcissism*. But is self-love the only essential aspect of the myth? Apparently what has been less emphasized is the fact that the death of Narcissus is by self-neglect and that the myth, therefore, is as much concerned with the fate of destructive impulses as with libidinal impulses. Moreover, is the relationship between the youth and the narcissus plant as superficial as the myth would seem to indicate, or is there a more significant tie between the two?

THE YOUTH

The peculiar manner in which Narcissus met his death lends itself more

easily to analysis than do other, more obscure features of the myth. Analysis must explain not only the nature and object of Narcissus' infatuation, but also the circumstances surrounding the manifestations of this infatuation, namely, his gazing into a pool of water and the manner of his death, self-neglect.

Parentage

Concerning his gazing into the pool, there are indications of the solution to the problem in the events that led to the conception of Narcissus. According to Ovid, "the river-god, Cephissus, embraced [Liriope] in his winding stream and ravished [her] while imprisoned in his waters. When her time came the beauteous nymph brought forth a child, whom a nymph might love even as a child, and named him Narcissus (p. 149)."

Evidently the tendency that overcame Narcissus as he looked into the water was determined by the fact that his father had found a desired love object there. Narcissus by identification with Cephissus was predestined to seek the love object in water. Hence, part of the fascination exerted on Narcissus by the image he saw reflected in the pool stemmed from his incestuous strivings, i.e., his yearning for his mother.

Identity of the Loved Object

As to the nature of the image seen by Narcissus, the matter is not as simple as this popular version of the myth would suggest. In other versions, there is no unanimity of opinion on the identity of the figure that so absorbed Narcissus. Whereas Ovid is positive that Narcissus saw his own reflection in the pool, Pausanias (1935) states that

it is utter stupidity to imagine that a man old enough to fall in love was incapable of distinguishing a man from his own reflection. There is another story about Narcissus, less popular indeed than the other, but not without some support. It is said that Narcissus had a twin sister; they were exactly alike in appearance, their hair was the same, they wore similar clothes, and went hunting together. The story goes on that Narcissus fell in love with his sister, and when the girl died, he would go to the spring, knowing that it was his reflection he saw, but in spite of this knowledge, finding some relief for his love imagining that he saw, not his own reflection, but the likeness of his sister (p. 31).

Cause of Death

In the Ovid version, the death of Narcissus is attributed to his unrequited love for his own image. The Pausanias version emphasizes the aspect of mourning. In his grief over the death of his twin sister, Narcissus gazes at his own image in order to find relief from the intense suffering occasioned by the loss of an essential love object.

According to Ovid, then, the loved object is the self. Even in his version, the most highly organized, there is some question whether Narcissus immediately recognized the reflected image as his own. In the other versions, it is stated that he loved someone other than himself. Evidently, the loved object was not completely introjected. Narcissus was mourning the death of an external object with whom he was not completely identified, namely, his twin sister. But it is agreed that his death occurred because of his inability to withdraw his libidinal cathexis from the beloved image sufficiently to seek new object relationships and survive.

Referring to an explanation that he challenges, Pausanias states, "They say that Narcissus looked into the water, and not understanding that he saw his own reflection, unconsciously fell in love with himself . . ." This suggests that the loved object was a male, and that Narcissus was dominated by homosexual impulses that developed during the period when the distinction between self and not-self was relatively absent. If Narcissus actually recognized his own image, he was dominated by primarily narcissistic impulses. If the image represented his twin sister, the attachment to a heterosexual, incestuous object was causing the disturbance. If all three possibilities are accepted, Narcissus unbeknown to himself was driven by impulses for the fusion of both sexes into scopophilic union (primal scene fantasies).

Role of Aggression

The aggression that led to the death of Narcissus was not directed only toward his own ego. Narcissus was universally known to have attracted many suitors, both male and female. He rejected all of them. According to Ovid, "At last one of these scorned youths, lifting up his hands to heaven, prayed: 'So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves.' The goddess, Nemesis, heard his righteous prayer" (p. 153), "righteous" emphasizing the aggressive way that Narcissus rebuffed his suitors after exciting them.

In the Conon version of the myth (Smith, 1904), Narcissus was more than just rejecting; he even invited a suitor he despised to commit suicide! Narcissus sent a sword to this rejected suitor, Amenias. After calling on the gods to avenge him, Amenias slew himself at the doorstep of Narcissus. Later Narcissus, after being tormented "by love of himself and by repentance," killed himself.

In the Probos version (Smith, 1904), which is probably the earliest, the death of Narcissus is not related to his ego attitude toward himself. The youth was killed by a suitor he had rejected.

It is thus possible to arrange the different versions of the myth in a series dealing with the role of aggression in relation to objects. In the simplest version, by Probos, Narcissus is killed by a rejected suitor—a completely external object. As narrated by Conon, Pausanias, and Ovid, the myth becomes more complicated and more highly organized. Paralleling that organization is the fact that the death of Narcissus involved a relationship with an object that was more and more like himself and, finally, was actually his own image.

Ego Structure

In the Conon version, Narcissus destroyed himself because he repented of what he had done to Amenias. In the Pausanias version, Narcissus died because he longed for a sister who was like himself. In the Ovid version, Narcissus died because he could not receive enough self-love from his own image. These versions appear to progressively describe an increasing internalization and assimilation of an external object that passed the judgment of death on Narcissus because of his sexually exciting and yet frustrating and unsympathetically rejecting attitude. What these versions seem to describe is an ego formation produced by a fusion of the images of a sexually excited object (father) and a sexually exciting yet frustrating object (mother) who had a deadly hatred for her ravisher.

That a child from a union of two such persons would be in danger of an early death was suspected by the mother, Lirioppe. In the Ovid version, after giving birth to Narcissus, she approached Tiresias (the seer who foretold the doom of Oedipus) and asked him whether her child would live to a "well-ripened age." The seer replied, "If he ne'er know himself" (p. 149).

Summarizing what seems obvious thus far, it is notable that Narcissus, a handsome youth of marked scopophilic appeal, tended to provoke aggressive impulses in those who sought to have sexual relations with him. The mounting tension released aggression that led eventually to the death of Narcissus. In one version of the myth, his death was caused by an unrelated external object. In others, it was related to his twin sister and, finally, to his preoccupation with his own image. The most popular version was that Narcissus, when he became both the subject and object of his own love, also became the subject and object of his own aggression and died.

IDENTITY OF PERCEPTION

It is well known that there is a tendency in human beings to establish an

identity of perceptions between old and new experiences (Freud, 1900, VII). Did the narcissus plant provide an opportunity for establishing an identity of that nature? Were there any biological properties of the plant that aroused scopophilic impulses and also served to provoke and release libidinal and destructive impulses?

Wieseler (1856) to whom we owe the classic study of the Narcissus myth, believed that it was created in order to explain the origin of the plant. He pointed out, however, that some doubt existed about the flower the ancients had in mind when they referred to the narcissus. (Similarly, the myths reflect some doubt about the identity of the person who provoked the death of Narcissus.) Various plants were mistakenly referred to as narcissuses, the niceties of plant taxonomy being unknown to the Greeks at the time the myths were elaborated.

But it is most probable that the flower designated as narcissus was the Narcissus tazetta. At that time, the Madonna lily (*Lilium candidum*) and the poet's narcissus (*Narcissus poeticus*) may have been roughly classified as narcissuses. This is not at all surprising since both the lilies and narcissuses belong to the same botanical order, the *Liliales*. *Narcissus* is the name of a species to which daffodils and jonquils also belong; *Lilium* is the corresponding name of the species to which the lilies belong. *Lilium*, incidentally, is the Latin term, the Greek name for the same species being *Lirion*. Hence, Lirioppe, the name of Narcissus' mother.

Duplicated Properties

To what extent are the botanical features of the plant represented in the myth? Wiesler mentioned some such properties but omitted others that appear to be more important. Four features of the plant that are duplicated in the myth are the following:

1. The plant has an affinity for water; it grows along the banks of pools and springs. In the myth, Lirioppe was raped in a stream; Cephissus, father of Narcissus, was a river god, and Narcissus leaned over a pool when he was overcome with passion. Incidentally, the flowers of *Narcissus tazetta*, characteristically bend over (*decline* is the botanical term) as they grow from their slender stalks, thus suggesting the youth inclining over the water.
2. While the narcissus plant is capable of both sexual and asexual reproduction, the asexual mode is the more obvious, the bulbs simply reproducing other bulbs. The sexual mode of reproduction by pollination is not so self-evident and was unknown to the Greeks. In the myth, Narcissus eschews all attempts at sexual intimacy. It may be said that Narcissus, in dying, reproduced in an asexual fashion the plant that bears his name.

3. The plant is poisonous. Numerous authorities have attested to its toxicity. According to Burbridge and Baker (1875), for example, "the odour of *Tazetta* and *N. poeticus* in close rooms has proved extremely disagreeable, if not actually injurious to delicate persons, many of whom are extremely sensitive to the effects of perfumes. All parts of the plant are narcotic and highly poisonous." Bowles (1934) states that the crystals found in the sap of narcissus bulb scales "are responsible for the irritation of the skin known as Lily rash among those who pick the flowers for market. Some people are more liable to be affected by it than others, but it is always dangerous to allow the juice to get into a cut or abrasion of the skin." Pliny mentioned that *Narcissus jonquillis*, or at least what moderns have identified as this plant, is an emetic. Current scientific literature is replete with evidence of the toxic effects of an ingestion of narcissus bulbs. Macht (1933) reported cases of poisoning that resulted from eating *Narcissus tazetta* bulbs, which were mistaken for onions. According to Kobert (1906), cows, pigs, and dogs have died after eating the plant. Aply summing up the literature on the subject, Cook and Loudon (1952) discuss the chemistry of the bulbs and trace the relevant scientific research.

The various versions of the myth leave no doubt that Narcissus was dangerous to those who tried to become intimate with him. Tiresias made this amply clear in predicting that the youth would even endanger himself if he got to know himself. His very name connotes danger, being derived from the Greek root *Narke* (stupor, lethargy), which is also found in English words conveying toxicity, such as *narcotic* and *narcolepsy*. Indeed Pliny, who denied that the narcissus received its name from the youth, thought that it was derived directly from *Narke* because of the plant's toxic effects.

4. The beauty of the plant is duplicated in the myth. Even today the narcissus flower with its pure white petals fascinates many who see it, so it is not surprising that the youth whose name is associated with the flower is depicted as unusually beautiful. Moreover, it is not implausible to link the emphasis on scopophilia in the myth with the visual attraction of the narcissus plant. The fact that both plant and myth utilize the same sensory sphere as a medium of pleasure is a significant duplication.

The myth ends with the search for the remains of Narcissus and the discovery of the flower on the spot where he pined away. In conveying the idea that the flower preserves the memory of the youth, mythographers apparently reversed the actual sequence of events. The duplication of the significant characteristics of the flower in the personality of Narcissus leads to the con-

clusion that the flower preceded, and is personified in the youth. The myth actually anthropomorphizes the flower.

DIVERGENT PERSONALITIES OF THE NARRATORS

Psychological needs are characterized by specific structures in each individual, with some impulses playing a more central role than others. From time to time there may be changes in these structures; but certain patterns persist, and these define the personality. Each of the four recorded versions of the myth investigated bears the imprint of the patterns of the narrator's psychological needs interacting with the properties of the narcissus plant. In other words, the different versions reflect the variable influence of these properties on divergent personality structures.

All of the versions are, in our view, the product of fantasies about the flower. The particular fantasies that each narrator wove about it, like those stimulated by the ambiguous structure of the Rorschach ink blot, give some indication of his psychological makeup.

For example, the fact that self-love and self-absorption were obviously understandable to Ovid, whereas they were so inconceivable to Pausanias that he replaced self-love with the love for a twin sister, suggests that Ovid was the more introverted and complex personality. Again, whether Narcissus was murdered, took his own life, or just pined away (making the involvement of destructive impulses invisible to an observer) suggests that the authors differed in the degree of freedom they could comfortably permit for the expression of aggression toward objects.

SURVIVAL OF OVID'S VERSION

Beauty arouses pleasurable emotions in people and the idea of self-love has a great appeal. In all versions of the myth, Narcissus is presented as a paradigm of male beauty and as a youth who loved himself (or someone he identified with his own image). The pervasiveness of these themes, coupled with the ethical and psychological issues to which they give rise, would explain the survival of the myth. But how does one account for the fact that Ovid's version steadily gained in popularity through time and the other versions became relatively unknown and are rarely referred to today?

Increasing Internalization of Aggression

The ascendancy of the Ovid version seems to parallel the psychological evolution of human beings. Mastery, even adjustment to a life environment that has become more and more complex, has led to the emergence of the

more complex personality of the present era. As we have evolved, for example, social restraint has forced us to become more restrained in discharging our aggression. In the Ovid version of the myth, aggressive impulses are internalized so effectively that their presence is virtually concealed—a psychic phenomenon that is comprehensible and relevant to contemporary life experience.

Infantile Aggression

Children are born without the ability to be directly damaging to others. An infant who is neglected during the early weeks of life can be destructive only to himself. And the most primitive manner of self-destruction, the only one within the grasp of the helpless infant, is self-neglect. That was the suicidal method pursued by Narcissus. Although this self-destructiveness was effectively covered by manifestations of self-love and self-admiration, he actually behaved in a way that could only end in death.

In the personality and fate of the handsome youth whose primitive, helpless self-destructiveness prompted him to stand, motionless, gazing at his own reflection in a pool of water, it is easy to recognize the life cycle of the beautiful, immobile, defenseless, and orally destructive narcissus plant.*

The survival of the version of the myth that deals with the complete intrapsychic internalization of libido and aggression for an object suggests that the internalization of aggression provoked by the beauty of frustrating personalities like Narcissus and his mother has become an increasingly popular pattern of response in human beings.

Implications for Treatment

The psychotherapeutic problem inherent in the myth encompasses more than the presence of excessive self-love—the factor that has been emphasized. Analysis of the myth suggests that it is important to deal with the tendency to idealize beautiful but excessively frustrating objects and to wrap up in a cloak of self-love the destructive impulses provoked by such objects.

*Some elements in the myth invite more speculative interpretations. For example, the death of Narcissus beside a pool of water, his gazing at his own image, and the flower that replaces him suggest that the myth might deal with problems of birth, the attitude a newborn child might have toward his mother's breast and her attitude toward the child. The flower might symbolize the breast whose beauty serves to conceal the poisonous nature of the milk it supplies. However, we have refrained from pursuing the more speculative interpretations and have limited ourselves to ideas that follow directly from the material available.

The Narcissistic Defense

My experience over the past thirty years has implanted the impression that each person has a highly specific threshold for the development of schizophrenia. The height of the threshold seems to be overdetermined. In each case, three mutually interacting factors appear to operate; these are heredity, constitution, and life experience. Understandably, the psychotherapist focuses on the factor which is readily accessible to psychological influence—the effects of life experience.

Most investigators seem to agree that the relationship with the mothering figure during the first few years of life plays a major role in schizophrenia, and that it signifies developmental arrest on—or regression to—the oral level. Studies of the relevant events have, by and large, stressed the traumatizing effects of an inadequate diet of emotional nourishment. Much less recognition has been given to that aspect of the young child's upbringing which seems to me to be even more crucial: namely, what he learns to do with aggressive impulses mobilized in his mental apparatus through exposure to excessive frustration, excessive gratification, or both.

The child who tends to discharge frustration-aggression into his body, for example, is a likely candidate for psychosomatic illness later in life. The highway to depression is paved with frustration-aggression poured characteristically into the superego, which then attacks the ego. If the child does not discharge this impulsivity at all, but lets it accumulate in an emotionally impoverished ego, the corrosive effects of the mobilized frustration-aggression may fragment his ego and push him over the threshold into schizophrenia. This particular pattern of response to unfavorable environmental pressures is what I mean by the narcissistic defense.