Stein, W.B. (1961). "The Artist of the Beautiful": Narcissus and the Thimble. Am. Imago, 18:35-44.

AMERICAN IMAGO

(1961). American Imago, **18**:35-44

"The Artist of the Beautiful": Narcissus and the Thimble

William Bysshe Stein

> On the basis of clinical evidence we can suppose that para-noiaes are endowed with a fixation at the stage of narcissim, and we can assert that the amount of regression characteristic of paranoia is indicated by the length of the step back from sublimated homosexuality to narcissism.
>
> Freud, *Collected Papers,* Vol. III

Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful" offers almost a clinical explanation of the paranoiac symptoms which characterize an individual's struggle to sublimate homosexual predispositions. The action of the story clearly projects the inability of Owen Warland (here the surname suggests the existence of a psychic conflict) to establish an object-cathexsis during a period of early manhood when the outer world (society) expects a normal consummation of such an attainment. As Hawthorne develops the implications of this inward tension, the hero is exposed to a series of ego-deflating experiences, each of which precipitates a libidinal regression to a point of fixation in early childhood. On each occasion, however, Warland eventually attains control over his pregenital impulses, for his instincts redirect the intransigent ego back into artistic activity. But, ironically, in this deflection of the ego from sexual gratification, he still does not progress beyond the Oedipal stage of psychosexual maturity; the bizarre work of art, which supposedly symbolizes his release from castration anxieties, is a displacement image; as in a dream, it is a distorted form of his unconscious homosexual desires.

In an extraordinary anticipation of Freudian analytical methods, Hawthorne digresses from the present action of the

story to establish the origin of a traumatic fixation in the autoerotic phase of Warland's psychosexual development. Anticipating this affective crisis, he calls attention to the conspicuous nature of the hero's primary narcissism: *"From the time … his little fingers could grasp a penknife,* Owen had been remarkable for a delicate ingenuity, which sometimes produced pretty shapes in wood, … *of flowers and birds,* and sometimes seemed to aim at the hidden mysteries of mechanism." (italics mine) Unless one ignores the patent absurdity of the first phrase, it has to be taken as an unconscious euphemism for pregenital pleasure-seeking. Similarly, the reference to the "flowers [bees] and birds" embraces the secret of sexual intercourse, for, in context, the evasive generalization that follows presages Warland's fathering of a homosexual offspring, his sublimated libido-object. In the next evolution of the protagonist's character, Hawthorne indicates the appearance of the Oedipus complex, describing a trauma that results from an early castration threat: "Being once carried to see a steam-engine, in the expectation that his intuitive comprehension of mechanical principles would be gratified, *he turned pale and grew sick,* as if *something monstrous and unnatural* had been presented to him. *The horror* was partly owing to *the size and terrible energy of the iron laborer."* (italics mine) This fixation, it seems to follow, has to be connected with Warland's obtrusive interest in the sexual intercourse of his parents and with their, no doubt, violent displeasure.

This assumption, at any rate, correlates with Hawthorne's description of the emergence of this repressed experience in the form of a neurotic symptom of secondary narcissism. Occurring in Warland's young manhood, the event is occasioned by a castration threat of his surrogate father, a watchmaker to whom he had been apprenticed by unsympathetic relatives who "saw nothing better to be done" after the apparent death of his parents:

> 'But what is this' cried Peter Hovenden abruptly, taking up a dusty bell glass beneath which appeared a mechanical something, as delicate and minute as the system of a butterfly's

> anatomy. 'What have you here! Owen! Owen! there is a witchcraft in these little chains, and wheels, and paddles. See! *with one pinch of my finger and thumb I am going to* deliver you from all future peril.' (italics mine)

As I will show later, this mysterious contrivance is a desexualized symbol of his mother. This substitution, in a sense, is rendered inevitable because Warland's creative activity is stimulated by a desire to sublimate his repressed homosexuality, a deviation of his childhood fixation. In this neurotic state the superego is sex-negative since there is a marked conflict between the id and the superego. Because the Oedipus complex has not been overcome, the superego, with its prohibitions against incest, discourages the consummation of normal sexual relationships. In effect, Warland's artistic compulsion represents an attempt to compensate for his unconscious feelings of inferiority and impotence. His aspiration to spiritualize machinery (obviously a protest against the genitality of the steam-engine) appeals to his ego-ideal as a greater social achievement than any realized by his sexually mature contemporaries. This is made evident in the hero's uncontrollable denunciation of his surrogate father:

> 'You are my evil spirit,' answered Owen, *much excited,*—'You and the hard, coarse world! The leaden thoughts *and the despondency* that you fling upon me are my clogs, else I should long ago have achieved the task I was created for.' (italies

mine)

In this reactivation of his childhood trauma, as Hawthorne indicates, Warland relapses "into the state whence he had been emerging," a libido stasis precipitated by the resurgent id in an earlier encounter with an ego-subverting agent, in this instance his rival for the hand of Annie, the blacksmith Robert Danforth. His superego, however, will not permit him to admit that his contempt for Danforth is based upon impotence inferiority. As a consequence, when on this occasion he thinks of the girl, he desexualizes her: "Dearest Annie! thou shouldst give firmness to my heart and hand, and not shake them thus; for if I strive to put the spirit of beauty into form and give it motion, it is for thy

sake alone." Obviously, in contrast with Danforth. he forgets that biologically he is committed to procreate living children, not artistic offspring. It is this knowledge that he desperately resists in his relationship with the virile and brawny blacksmith who exults in his vigorous genitality: "Laughing, … he laid his vast hand beside the delicate one of Owen. 'But what then? I put more main strength into one blow of my sledge hammer than all you have expended since you were a 'prentice. Is not that the truth?'" The response to this derision, in tone, suggests a homosexual's rationalization of his condition, for Warland decries the significance of normal sexuality: "'Very probably,' answered the low and slender voice of Owen. 'Strength is an earthly monster. I make no pretensions to it. *My force,* whatever there may be of it, is altogether spiritual.'" (italics mine) "Force," incidentally, is a word recurrent throughout the story, and, in Hawthorne's mind, it seems to function as the equivalent of Freud's libido. At least this is the impression one receives in its usage. For example, when the blacksmith refers to Warland's unique "force," he obviously has sexual potency in mind: "'No, no, Owen! No child of yours will have iron joints and sinews.'" And as he elaborates this observation, he covertly alludes to what must have been a general knowledge of the hero's homosexuality; certainly the hammer and the anvil combine, symbolically, to figure the act of sexual intercourse: "'Goodnight, Owen, and success, and if you need any assistance, so far as a downright blow of hammer upon anvil will answer the purpose, I'm your man.'"

The shock of this encounter with Danforth's phallic energy discharges the impulse of Owen's sublimation of homosexuality, and he relapses into a state of libidinal inertia: "For a time [he] succumbed to this severe but inevitable test. He spent a few sluggish weeks with his head so continually resting in his hands that the townspeople had scarcely an opportunity to see his countenance." During this interim he undertakes a new program of libidinal economy, a willful effort of the ego to adjust to his environment in terms of conventional ideals. As a consequence, his delusion of

grandeur in regard to a supreme artistic achievement gradually dissipates, and he resumes his vocation as a watchmaker: "Owen now, indeed, applied himself to business *with dogged industry*. It was marvellous to witness *the obtuse gravity* with which he would inspect the wheels of a great … silver watch." (italics mine) The compulsive and rigid character of Warland's concentration here equates with a typical reaction formation. In sublimation the id has a direct connection with reality, in harmony with the ego and the ego ideal, and the emphasis is on the effect of action; in a reaction formation all action is dictated by a tyrannical superego to a rebellious id. And so it is in the story. Whenever Warland successfully sublimates his homosexuality, he wants to work and derives pleasure from it. But in a reactive state, he *must* work. As Wilhelm Reich once put it, he must "robot." But this kind of activity serves to placate Warland's id effectively, and subsequently he rehabilitates his ego-ideal. Hence it is merely a matter of time before he gives up his watchmaking for the pursuit of beauty.

II

Hawthorne's uncanny intuitions into the nature of the Oedipus complex are illustrated in Warland's artistic goal. His aspiration to spiritualize machinery reflects the determination of the superego to desexualize the meaning of copulation (the repressed memory of intercourse symbolized in the steam engine). The compulsive attachment to his mother is thereby relieved of incest guilt, and at the same time his castration anxiety is mitigated. But the original goal of Warland's libido still retains its unconscious cathexis upon the mother. The drive has not changed; it has merely turned back upon the ego. This psychic phenomenon is objectified in the crucial meeting between Warland and Annie Hovenden.

The girl, apparently uncertain about the man whom she loves, appears in his shop with the request, "'Will you mend this poor thimble of mine!'" However one interprets this tendentious gesture, it cannot be detached from a test of genitality. Indeed, Hawthorne deliberately associates the

incident with the phallic energy of the blacksmith: "'Anything for your sake, Anne,' said Owen Warland,—'anything, even were it to work at Robert Danforth's forge.' "But when she hands him the thimble his thought immediately reverts to his artistic enterprise. He thinks of her in terms of a doting mother, not a woman to be loved sexually:

> And then the thought stole into his mind that this young girl possessed the gift to comprehend him better than all the world besides. And what a help and a strength would it be to him in his lonely toil if he could gain the sympathy of the only being whom he loved!

As he indicates a moment later, he expects her to act as a buffer against the harassments of his environment: “‘You, I know, would hear it with reverence [his artistic project] that I must not expect from the harsh, material world.” But Anne is not willing to accept this innocuous role, and she playfully attempts to dissuade him from his infatuation with the “delicately wrought” invention. As Hawthorne seems to have stressed throughout the action of the story, all the actions of the characters have subsumed sexual connotation. In this instance, Anne implies that she is concerned only with his sexual potency:

> Anne had but given the slightest possible touch, with the point of a needle, to the same minute portion of complicated machinery which had been more than once mentioned, when the artist seized her by the wrist with a force that made her scream aloud. She was affrighted at the convulsion of intense rage and anguish that writhed across his features. The next instant he let his head sink upon his hands.

Here Warland's id and superego simultaneously free themselves from inhibition, and both strike out in sadistic aggression at a frustration on two different levels of sexual reality, the genital and the Oedipal. Both are aimed at the outside world which conspires against their gratification. And once again Warland relapses into a libido stasis, unequal to the challenges of the masculinity symbolized in the phallus and the thimble (the vagina).

Hawthorne's description of this regression points towards

a libidinal disturbance on the lowest level of Warland's psychosexual development. At least he depicts the hero under the spell of the infantile pleasure-principle, rediscovering the pregenital delight of the oral appetite: “He looked at the world through the golden medium of wine, and contemplated the visions that bubbled up around the brim of the glass, and that peopled the air with shapes of pleasant madness, which so soon grow ghostly and forlorn.” Even as the last phrase suggests, Warland's superego has been rigidly conditioned by the proscriptions of its middle-class social milieu; therefore he cannot long indulge his secondary narcissism without exciting shame-guilt anxieties. Hence, under the goading influence of his importunate ego-ideal, which offers a convenient displacement of his homosexual drives, he redirects the libido into compensatory artistic activity.

Hawthorne also views the hero's terminal paranoiac libidinal stasis as a regression to oral pleasures. On this occasion Warland collapses under the shock of the news of Annie's marriage to the phallic Danforth. Thereupon he relieves the rebellious id by interminable chatter, for “he was apt to discourse at wearisome length of marvels of mechanism that he had read about in books, but which he had learned to consider absolutely fabulous.” Here the rejection of the artistic goal of his ego-ideal is a crucial symptom, and Hawthorne goes out of his way to emphasize the affective consequences upon his personality. In the most mechanical and conspicuous symbolism, he calls attention to Warland's inordinate infantilism:

> His thin cheeks became round; his delicate little hand, so spiritually fashioned to achieve fairy task-work, grew plumper than the hand of a thriving infant. His aspect had a childishness such as might have indueed a stranger to pat him on the head— pausing, however, in the act, *to wonder what manner of child was here.* (italies mine)

But as before, the superego revitalizes itself, motivating him to return to his artistic endeavors. But without going into the details of this recovery, Hawthorne simply states that at last

Warland succeeds in “creating the beautiful.”

The final scene of the story is concerned with the protagonist's visit to the home of Annie and her husband. He appears to tender them a long belated wedding present, his beautiful creation that is allegedly “nature's ideal butterfly.” Thus it would seem at this point that Hawthorne implies the hero's successful sublimation of his repressed homosexuality. But this is not so, for the inspiration behind this contrivance has to be taken into consideration. On the occasion of each of his libidinal disruptions, the recovery of his ego stability is preceded by a long and rapt contemplation of butterflies in flight. At first glance this strange voyeurism is essentially innocuous, perhaps even poetic. Yet this preoccupation with flying reveals an unconscious desire for genital potency, for the butterfly is a familiar image of the winged phallus. But since his Oedipal fixation operates to preclude such fulfillment, he hangs in psychic abeyance between auto-eroticism and object love. And under the compulsion of an unrelenting superego, he is driven to the kind of compensatory behavior that offers both it and the id some kind of gratification.

But the artificial butterfly also comments directly upon his repressed homosexuality. As the goal of his ego-ideal during the whole course of the narrative action, it stands diametrically opposed to the steam engine, the traumatic agent of his castration anxiety. By extension, the insect is the measuring rod of Warland's psychosexual maturity on the level of his Oedipal complex. Since he has not gone through the evolution of the castration complex, he has never given up the desire for the phallus in his sexual object. Therefore in re-enacting the role of his mother he wants to love some one like himself, some one with male genitals. In this case the butterfly fulfills this function. While it seems to be the vehicle of his sublimation, it is actually a homosexual object which serves both to placate the sex-negative superego and the compensatory impulses.

Ample proof that the artistic mechanism is a symbol of paranoiac narcissism is found in his statement to the girl

upon the presentation of his masterpiece:

> ‘Annie, it is for your bridal gift that I have wrought this spiritualized machinery, this harmony of motion, this mystery of beauty. It comes late, indeed; but it is as we go onward in life when objects begin to lose their freshness of hue and our souls their delicacy of perception that the spirit of beauty is most needed. I,—forgive me, Annie,—if you know how to value this gift, it can never come too late.’

Beginning with the lie about the purpose of his creation (his ego-ideal), Warland proceeds to transform object libido into narcissistic libido. In the ineffable splendor that he claims for the butterfly, the inflation of his ego approaches the dimensions of a delusion of grandeur; in the implicit contempt that underlies his counsel to the young matron, the elevation of his ascetic standards marks, in the words of Freud, “the step back from sublimated homosexuality to narcissism.” In fine, he has apparently regressed to his Oedipal fixation once more. Having lost his libidinal object, he is now at the mercy of the id.

As logical as this inference is, Hawthorne does not permit the reader to hold the opinion with with any confidence, for on the literal level of action he argues that Warland has risen “high enough to achieve the beautiful.” Yet earlier in the story he asserts that the girl would have served as the perfect libido object: “had he found in Annie what he fancied, his lot would have been so rich in beauty that out of its mere redundancy he might have wrought the beautiful into many a worthier type than he had toiled for.” And when one recalls the depreciative contrast between Warland's frailty and Danforth's virility, it has to be concluded that Hawthorne has either lost his narrative focus or has deliberately resorted to romantic obscurantism in order to conceal the homosexual overtones of his theme.

Symbolically, however, Warland is psychically damned. And with Hawthorne's approval, I might add. Annie's infant son, whom Warland has mentally equated with his grandfather Peter Hovenden, crushes the mechanical insect in his hand. This act, of course, repeats the castration gesture

of the old watchmaker, but the artist does not react as he did previously. As a matter of fact, he is smugly indifferent. But this apparent contradiction is easy to explain. In the exaggerated identification with his ego-ideal, *the idea* of the achievement in his consciousness is momentarily strong enough to retard an immediate relapse. He has established a false spiritual superiority over the virile Danforth, the defiled Annie, the earthly child, and the tyrannical father, Peter Hovenden. In effect, his Oedipus complex is in a state of tension suspended between the poles of a harshly sex-negated superego and a forcefully dammed id. As the story ends. then, the final chapter has yet to be written, but the ultimate outcome can be predicted.

Article Citation

Stein, W.B. (1961). “The Artist of the Beautiful”: Narcissus and the Thimble. *Amer. Imago*, 18:35-44