

N Symington
Narcissism: A New Theory
1993 Karnac

CHAPTER FOUR

The intentionality of the self

I said earlier that the intentional core of the self is able to turn against this object that I have named the *lifegiver*. It is able to repudiate it, to turn its back upon it. In terms of psychoanalytic theorists, we are probably closer here to Fairbairn (1976) than to any other. He said that the ego can say, "I am going to have nothing to do with this object", yet because of the survival instinct it is impossible for the self to repudiate it entirely. If one accepts the idea of the *lifegiver* being the source of emotional life and also the source of biological survival—that the two are linked—then the self can never effect a total repudiation, and so a split takes place, with one part of the self turning against the *lifegiver*. As the *lifegiver* is incorporated into the self, a division and a repudiation of the self's own nature occurs, resulting in an anti-relational position being taken. It is somewhat like a prisoner saying, "I am going to have nothing to do with these prison warders", but having to have something to do with them in order to receive meals and so on, or he will die.

This turning away from the *lifegiver* forms the core of narcissism. Narcissism is not in one part or in another part.

but in the way in which one part of the self relates to the others. It is similar to a situation in which one of you offends me, and I turn away and say to myself, "I won't speak to him again". In fact, I am forced to speak to you, because we keep meeting; so I say to myself, "I'll speak to him, I'll smile at him and be polite, but in my heart I will have nothing to do with him".

The *lifegiver* comes into being through being chosen—a little as friendship comes into being through two people turning towards each other. Colour is perhaps a more useful analogy. As we know, colour is only there when we see it. The eye and the brain convert light waves into colours, the colour blue, for instance, coming into being at a different rate from red, and so on. Colour comes into being through a perceptual action. The option makes the *lifegiver*. The paradox is that it has independent existence and yet does not exist without being opted for.

To return to the situation in which I say, "I will speak to that person, because I must, but in my heart I will have nothing to do with him", this suggests that I can divorce my presented self from my own heart—from what I think, from what I desire. Whenever there is such a divorce, the inner person is exceedingly vulnerable and susceptible. It is therefore very difficult for such a person to persevere in any sort of situation that might reverse the process for them.

When I was in England, I had a patient once whom I saw on the National Health Service. In London the number of psycho-dynamic psychotherapy vacancies in the health service are few, with the result that people who are badly off have great difficulty obtaining that sort of psychotherapy. This patient was referred to the clinic where I was working, and it was quite clear right from the initial interview that she did not like me. However, she said to herself (I think), "I shall have to make the best of it with this man. I am ill, and I am determined to get better." That decision was a healthy step for her and, I believe, the beginning of her repudiation of narcissism. It is significant that she was desperate and that there was a healthy striving in her.

This was in contrast to another occasion, when a woman came to see me and told me of the different psychotherapists whom she had wanted to see, and that they never had a vacancy for her. So I said, "Are you free on Monday?"

"ings at 10 o'clock?" (This was a Friday.) She told me she was, so I said, "How about starting this Monday?" She agreed, but she never turned up. She stayed stuck in the "life is unfair to me" mode. She was attached to the complaint that there was never a psychotherapist who wanted to see her. She had scorned the *lifegiver*, scorned opportunity when it offered itself.

This turning away from the *lifegiver* is a turning against the self. Life is potential for growth. Mystics and spiritual writers say that you either advance or regress—you cannot stand still. You can never say, "Well, now I have arrived at my goal, and I can stay here for the rest of my life". The psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion said that it is a fateful day when someone "settles into middle age". Choice is always confronting the individual.

The origin of the turning away from the lifegiver

The narcissistic person is someone who has turned against the *lifegiver*, and I think this occurs early in infancy. At the very early stage, the mother is the source of food, drink, and shelter to the infant, and the infant is totally dependent upon her. The infant's close bonding with the mother is well described by Frances Tustin (1972). When a separation or disruption occurs, the infant may respond by turning away from the mother and turning in upon itself. What I want to emphasize is that there is an intentional element in the infantile response.

I have discussed this with several people engaged in infant observation at the Tavistock Clinic in London, and they have told me that they are convinced that certain situations occur in early infancy in which the infant has the option to go one way or another; sometimes one path is chosen, sometimes another.

I want to give an example from the psychotherapy of a child aged eight who was a school phobic and exceedingly delinquent in his behaviour. He would throw water all round the psychotherapy room, destroy any toys that the therapist put out for him, urinate on the floor, try to lift the psychotherapist's skirt, try to break windows to get out of the room, and so on. All the psychotherapist could do was to draw boundaries; there were certain things she would not allow. After about six months in

therapy, shortly before a break, the child took a piece of paper and a pencil and drew a face with two tears coming from the eyes. It was clearly a baby's face, as there were two small teeth in the lower jaw. The picture was drawn with lightning speed, and he then immediately went back to his usual mocking and wrecking behaviour. The psychotherapist understood the picture to be the infant in the child that was sad at the coming parting, which was quickly covered over by a mocking bully. It was the first time the child had done anything as constructive as a drawing, and it was the first time, too, that he had stopped his wrecking behaviour, even for a minute.

In the very next session the boy devised a game in which he invited the psychotherapist to join. In this game he turned the psychotherapist into a shopkeeper and named a couple of objects as being two coins. He wanted to proffer one, but he said that the shopkeeper had said to him that if he gave her all his money, both coins, he would get a reward. This would be rather a risk, he said, because the shopkeeper might be tricking him. He hesitated, then gave both his coins over, looking at the psychotherapist as he handed them to her. He then went back to an area of the room which he referred to as "home". After waiting—another first, he had never before waited or paused—he rolled a big truck full of goods from the shop to his home. The psychotherapist told me that the therapy changed course from that day on and became calmer and more civilized.

The coins that the child proffered seemed to represent an inner giving of himself—a risk, a choice. There was a risk that things might have turned out badly—this was a choice of the *lifegiver*. It had a beneficial outcome in that the boy became calmer and less anxious. The therapy did change, and I think what was dramatized in the game, which had been preceded by the drawing of the baby's sad face, was a foreshadowing of the calmer attitude that prevailed over the next few months. In this way the game functioned as a dream sometimes does.

When we are talking of the inner life of human beings we are talking of something that is unknown. The temporal and spatial categories that apply to the three-dimensional world are inadequate, so we fashion myths to help us towards understanding. Because they are myths, this does not mean that they are untrue—it means that they are analogical in nature.

Myths are our way of talking of a reality that we cannot know directly. The philosopher Immanuel Kant made the distinction between *noumenon* and *phenomenon*. The *noumenon* is the reality that we can never know directly, whereas the *phenomenon* is its manifestation, with which we have contact. If you put a saucepan of water on an electric ring and you see steam rising a few minutes later, you know that the electric ring is hot, without seeing the ring itself.

Human beings have always created myths about origins—cosmogonies. We may smile patronizingly at some of the cosmogonies of primitive peoples, but the big bang theory is also a cosmogony. We need to make sense of the present, to make meaning, and we also need to make sense of our own individual lives. Psychoanalytic developmental theories, in which we posit particular things happening in infancy and their results, are myths. What I am presenting now is a cosmogony to give meaning to the narcissistic condition. In order to draw an analogy with what is happening in the infant, it is useful to raise the story to the level of the adult world, particularly in the area of love relations, and then read it back into childhood. Many great novels can be read in this way.

The myth of Cassius

A young man called Cassius was lost in the outback. He wandered this way and that but was unable to find his way back to human habitation. He feared he would die. Then he came to a fertile glade. Around him he found trees laden with luscious fruit of all kinds, and there was a well with beautiful, clear, bubbling water. So satisfied was he with his surroundings that he gave up the idea of trying to find his way back to civilization. He spent all his days roaming in the glade, sleeping, eating, and drinking. As quickly as he ate the fruit, new ones ripened. Even sexually he was at peace: whenever the sexual urge arose in him, a nymph appeared and fondled him in all the places that gave him pleasure. Then he would fall asleep, and the nymph would vanish. The nymph also ministered to him in other ways. When he longed for music, the nymph would play beautiful

music for him on a variety of instruments. When he wanted literature, the nymph would read to him as he lay back in a cool bower. He passed his days in blissful abandon and believed himself to be the luckiest man in the universe.

When Cassius had been living in the glade for about a year, he woke up one morning with a headache, and the nymph was unable to do anything about it. He began to feel a strange restlessness. He could not understand what it was he wanted. He wandered around the glade, eating fruit, drinking the sparkling water, but he was dissatisfied. Just as he was going to sleep, he realized that he was longing for a friend. He knew the myth of Narcissus, so the next morning he went and looked at himself in the water, but he still felt lonely. He even tried shouting, to hear an echo, but that offered no comfort either. The next day when he woke, he decided that he would walk in a straight line out of the glade, until he found someone. "I am bored with myself," he said. He walked and walked until he came to a broad stream, and on the stream he saw a girl rowing a boat. He called to her and asked her her name.

"My name is Miriam", she called back.

"Please come to me", he called. So she rowed up close to him. "Take me in your boat", he begged. "I want to be your friend."

"But you don't know me", she said.

"Tell me where you live", he pleaded.

"I live a long way from here, in a garden I've constructed all by myself with great effort. I've built a canal from this river to water the garden. Each day I get up and put manure on the desert soil. I dig and I plant seeds, and I harvest the wheat, grind the grains, and make flour. Each day I bake bread. I grow fruit trees. I have made a violin out of the wood of a chestnut tree: I fashioned the strings from hemp soaked in resin. I play the violin after I have tended the garden. Then in the afternoon I sit down at a desk in the little house that I have made, and I write my novel. In the evening I cook myself a meal."

"Let me join you", said Cassius.

"I have worked hard to build my garden", Miriam replied. "I'll only let you come provided you give me a baby."

"I don't mind giving you a baby", said Cassius.

"Then I will tend the baby, and you will have to rise early in the morning, and you will have to fertilize the soil, and you will have to bake the bread, and you will have to play the violin to me while I'm feeding our baby."

"I can do all that", said Cassius breezily.

"One last thing I must tell you", said Miriam. "It's the law of the outback. Once I take you in my boat across the river I shall burn the boat, and you can never return to your glade, and you will have lost it forever."

Cassius frowned at this, and his frown summoned the nymph. "What do you want that for?" asked the nymph. "I can give you all that she can give. When you want music, I give it to you. When you want sex, I provide it. When you want beautiful literature, I read it to you in a tuneful voice. When you want food, it is there in luxurious abundance in the glade."

The nymph led him back around the glade and showed him all that he would lose. The nymph was cunning. "You can have all that she offers without having to leave the glade, without having to cross the river. I'll show you." The nymph then rubbed Cassius' body all over with a perfumed unguent and said, "Now, if you call whatever name you care, the most beautiful companion will come to you."

Cassius thought for a moment. He wanted to call out "Miriam", but the word did not come out as he intended. Instead, it came out as "Marian". Instantly, a beautiful girl appeared who accompanied him everywhere. For a year he lived in the glade with Marian, but then one morning when he awoke he found that she had vanished. Only then did he remember Miriam. He rushed to the river where he had seen her in the boat and called out. Miriam came in her boat, but she said that it was too late. She had found another man and now had a baby. Cassius returned to the glade, went straight to the well, and drowned himself.

An interpretation of the myth

In interpreting the myth, I want to focus on the element of refusal. Why did the nymph have such a hold over Cassius? The temptation is to concentrate upon the erotic paradise that

the nymph offered him. This is important, and I will look at that when I focus on the aspect of narcissism in which the self is taken as its own erotic object. Here I want to return to the principle of what is not done.

Cassius believed that he had everything, but what he did not have was the capacity to give out of his own self. To put it more accurately, he *believed* he did not have this capacity. Had he crossed the river in that boat, he would have had to face the fact that all that he had known previously had been make-believe. Here was someone on the other side of the river who knew much more about the business of generating from within than he did. In order to cross the river and undertake what Miriam had suggested, he would have had to learn from her—be a child, as it were. Such an act of humility was abhorrent to him. He preferred to stay in isolation, so he dreamed up a perfect Marian. One of the dominant notes of narcissism is an absolute hatred of being small, being at the beginning, of opening oneself to someone who can show one something.

The difference between Miriam and Cassius is that Cassius *finds himself* in a paradise, whereas Miriam has constructed her garden out of her own self. Melanie Klein says—I believe correctly—that the object of envy, of that sigh of hatred, is the individual's creativity. Cassius admires the product of Miriam's action, but he hates the intentional activity that is the agent of what she has produced. This hatred is not known. It is hidden in a secret chamber of our being.

There is a good illustration of this in *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 1986), when Vronsky and Anna are in Italy and Vronsky has taken up painting.

After hesitating for some time which style of painting to take up—religious, historical, genre, or realistic—he set to work. He appreciated all the different styles and could find inspiration in any of them, but he could not conceive that it was possible to be ignorant of the different schools of painting and to be inspired directly by what is within the soul, regardless of whether what is painted will belong to any recognized school. And I think that's the key, the rule to it. Since he did not know this, and drew his inspiration not directly from life but indirectly from other painters' interpretations of life, he found inspiration very readily and

easily; and equally readily and easily produced paintings very similar to the particular style he was trying to imitate. [p. 491]

Tolstoy is saying that Vronsky was not inspired directly from within his soul, so while his work might have looked all right, there was a fundamental difference between what he produced and what we might call the genuine, healthy article.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the difficult things about narcissism as a character structure is that the whole of the individual's efforts are geared to hiding the reality of the situation, both from himself and from others. Next, Vronsky finds the painter Mihailov, who does a portrait of Anna. Vronsky then loses interest in his own painting and agrees with his friend Golenishchev, who says that Mihailov was envious of him, a wealthy man of high rank in society, who was able to paint as well as someone who has given his whole life to painting. Tolstoy suggests, however, that the real reason for Vronsky leaving off painting his portrait of Anna was that he envied Mihailov's ability to paint from the soul. That is the heart of it. This ties in with what I have been saying about the *lifegiver*. If the *lifegiver* is opted for then it becomes a principle of action within. It comes into being within the self in the act of being chosen, of being desired.

Cassius hates the inner creativity he sees in Miriam and his hatred makes him indecisive. He is beckoned to go across the river, but he cannot do it. There is an instance of this sort of situation in *Anna Karenina* when Levin's brother Koznyshev comes to stay with Levin and Kitty and starts to pay court to Varenka. It is quite clear that he wants to propose to her, and that Varenka wants him to. They are alone, picking mushrooms. The moment has arrived, but he just cannot do it. Something holds him back—a basic refusal.

Consider Cassius as an infant and Miriam as a productive mother or, perhaps more accurately, the *lifegiver*. Cassius admires Miriam. The infant admires his mother's creative capacity, her capacity to generate from inside herself, but beneath the admiration is a bitter envy. Cassius fashions an illusory Miriam—Marian—but Marian is an illusion. Marian is part of Cassius. Cassius submerges his intentional self in the illusory construction, and so he sabotages his intentional self.

He commits self-murder, a psychological suicide. He becomes the admired figure in phantasy. This is the origin of narcissism. There is self-murder in Vronsky's copying, his merging into the tonality of the other.

A quite frequent device, typified in that story of Vronsky, is the denial of what the person actually secretly envies. Things are turned around, and the person generates envy. In this type of situation the person dominated by narcissistic currents generates envy in those around, and then they can identify with that external envy, avoiding experiencing any of the hateful destruction of the self that goes on inside. I once knew a history lecturer who gave very accomplished lectures at university, and when colleagues said to him, "Heavens, you must have worked hard to produce that lecture", he would just say with a nonchalant air, "Oh no, I just thought it out last night while I was in the bath". It was not true, of course, but it stimulated a type of transitory envy that enabled him to get away from what was terribly destructive in himself. This aspect is seen very clearly in Vronsky.

In those tragic pages before Anna commits suicide, all her efforts go into trying to detect whether or not Vronsky loves her, rather than into creative activity that might bring that as a result.

It is this short-cut that I try to bring out in the myth of Cassius, the short-cut of not doing what is necessary in order for the desired outcome actually to happen. One of the most fundamental narcissistic complaints is, "Nobody loves me". People may or may not love someone, but if they do love someone—or if they hate someone, for that matter—it is the result of an action.

At some very early stage in infancy, then, there is this refusal of the *lifegiver*, and the "I" turns and takes its own self as a love object. But, as I said, this is not absolutely correct. For better or worse, the infant self is compelled to opt for the *lifegiver* because of the threat of death, so at the same time a split in the self occurs, and another part repudiates this option. The result of this is that only part of the self has within it the source of action and the source of coherence. How much of the *lifegiver* as a source of action within is actually available will

depend on the degree to which this split has occurred—how much of the self has repudiated the *lifegiver*.

I have implied throughout that there are two kinds of action issuing from the personality, and this also comes out in the myth. One of these occurs when Cassius summons the nymph, and the other when Miriam actually does something—digs a canal, waters the garden, and so on. In one an external agent is summoned to achieve something, in the other the self is actually the agent of the action. One act is manipulative, the other is truly creative. Cassius is manipulative in summoning the nymph. And the most extreme sort of creative action is that described by Graham Greene, writing about Herbert Read. Both modes of action exist in any one person, but they will vary greatly in degree.

I may believe that I have become an analyst when an Institute of Psychoanalysis declares that I am one, or that I have become married because the registrar at the Registry Office declares me married, but this is really magic. There is a by-passing of the personal creative action that has to take place. If I have taken this narcissistic step and have buried myself in the image of another—if I have not got inside me that basic source of action in the psyche, and have turned off from the child in me—then I have put myself into a grandiose self. The grandiose self is extremely vulnerable, and one of its most recognizable features is that if I am insulted, or if something does not go my way, I make a great fuss, because I am a king who has been frustrated.

If this act of refusal has taken place, and, like Vronsky, there is no inspiration from within, how am I going to cope with the crises of life? How am I going to get by? The taking of the self as an erotic object is a substitute way of generating action.