Richard Cory's Suicide: A Psychoanalyst's View

Jerome Kavka
RICHARD CORY'S SUICIDE: A PSYCHOANALYST'S VIEW*

By Jerome Kavka

What prompts me, as a psychoanalyst, to interpret Robinson's famous poem, "Richard Cory," is the intriguing thesis of Charles A. Sweet, Jr. that the poem is a depiction of an oedipal conflict with the suicide a realization of regicidal wishes. While psychologically plausible, Sweet's theory is not sufficiently capacious to account for Cory's disastrous deed or his highly unusual personality.

According to Sweet, Cory comes down town as a "Promethean figure bringing the word of the necessity of human communication for survival." The townspeople are passive and have erected a silent barrier around themselves; they fail to "approach him, much less respond to him." Cory's suicide is not the result of "inner emptiness," or "an absolute commitment to despair" or because he was "sick." Rather, "through their own mental prejudices and unfounded exaggerations the people, like eagles, claw at Prometheus so that the chains of inhumanity imprison him forever; it matters not that it is Cory who pulls the trigger since the people have pointed a weapon at his temple."

Sweet views the poem as "not a painting of a gentleman, but a portrait of the porrtalteer." The tale is filtered through the mind of the narrator who betrays no emotion over Cory's death; nay, even more, "there is a certain satisfaction in the narrator's voice." Where once the narrator looked up at Cory's "crown" he now looks down at simply "his head." We are, says Sweet, presented "with a case of regicide; the townspeople with some degree of consciousness have extinguished the light." Sweet concludes, "the poem serves as an indictment of those who

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1 Charles A. Sweet, Jr., "A Re-Examination of 'Richard Cory'," Colby Library Quarterly, IX (September 1972), pp. 579-582.
study at a distance, of those who fail to get a feel of their subject and of those who let petty personal emotions deprive themselves of human companionship."

Because the poem deals with such manifestly clinical behavior, it begs for psychological assessment; Sweet’s thesis is appealing and viable. Indeed, careful study of the poem’s structure confirms Sweet’s proposition that the perspective is from the viewpoint of the observer, a townsman, rather than from the view of the observed, Cory. However, if demise was expected of Cory, why are the townsmen stunned, or more accurately, why is the reader surprised? Furthermore, Cory himself is hardly Promethean since his conclusion is destruction rather than regeneration and rescue. To my mind, we must look to the pre-oedipal, or pre-genital, aspects of character development, and in particular, to the vicissitudes of narcissism in the development of the personality for the meaning of Cory’s failure.

Melanie Klein’s emphasis on the pre-genital roots of destructive envy which she ascribes to the influence of the death instinct approaches somewhat more closely a kind of theoretical sophistication required to explain Richard Cory and his puzzling suicide. Kohut even more exquisitely explains individuals like Cory and the sudden fragmentations to which they are heir in his metapsychological theories of the failure of self-cohesion.

Before further theoretical elaborations, however, let us look at Cory from another view.

NARCISSUS SELF-DESTRUCTS

In the first stanza,

Whenever Richard Cory went down town,
We people on the pavement looked at him:
He was a gentleman from sole to crown,
Clean favored, and imperially slim.

Robinson describes the loftiness of Cory’s character, his act of

condescension—coming down to the ordinary people with the metaphoric implication that the gravity-bound are looking up at the exalted figure. Robinson even uses the adjective, imperial, to impress us with the grandiose image of the subject. In the second stanza,

And he was always quietly arrayed,
And he was always human when he talked;
But still he fluttered pulses when he said,
"Good-morning," and he glittered when he walked.

Robinson gives us a highly charged contrapuntal theme—the intense contrast between Cory’s regal self-image and Cory as the restrained communicator who patronizingly bestows favors upon his lowly brethren, the townspeople. I do not sense the open sort of communication toward the people suggested by Sweet but rather a reluctant gracefulness. It may be Robinson’s successful registration of this quality in Cory which convinced Sweet that the townspeople were hostile to Cory. One gets the impression of exquisite impulse control in Cory but with an admixture of anxiety as if there were something synthetic or fragile about the psychic regulation in this fictional individual. The observer is assured, almost apologetically, that the object of scrutiny is human, like himself. Yet, the quality of Cory’s communication, while formally correct, arouses anxiety in the recipient—fluttered pulses—whose attention remains fixed as if in a trance on the narcissistic posture of the object—he glittered. This fascination, to my mind, resembles the experience of watching narcissistic creatures, like cats.

In the third stanza,

And he was rich—yes, richer than a king—
And admirably schooled in every grace;
In fine, we thought that he was everything
To make us wish that we were in his place.

Robinson is accurately describing a grandiose individual, isolated by his fantastic greatness from his neighbors; in the past as a child probably raised as somebody special by his family and who unconsciously regarded himself as superior and dif-
ferent. Still, he fascinates—the observer’s idealization peaks to the point of conscious emulation with an undertone of envy.

Finally, in the last stanza,

So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.

the observer, uncomfortably resigned to his simpler life with its limitations and deprivations of which he complains, remains hopeful of some ultimate realization of an idealized life. And while all is temporarily and externally undisturbed, there is a sharp and stunning end to the idealized figure by an act of self destruction.

At the beginning of the poem, Cory’s formality and regal mannerisms are somewhat out of place with the milieu and in this contrast one begins to sense an ultimate clash. Sweet interprets the consequences of the encounter as due to relentless group hostility to a human communicant who is unappreciated by his fellows. Cory’s suicide, a response to group pressure, becomes regicide in his forced oedipal interpretation. Sweet does not explain the meaning of the unique form of the demise—suicide.

SUICIDE, NOT REGICIDE

I see the awesome, God-like figure of Cory, apparently unrelated to family, peers, or the work-a-day world, as Cory’s self-projection onto the observers rather than simply their own idealization of Cory. In describing the act of descent, Robinson subtly implies the beginnings of a major drop in self-esteem—this, to me, makes the suicide itself more meaningful as a deeply private and more complex act than as simply the consequence of a regicidal struggle. The end is not hoped for, as suggested by Sweet, since the reaction of the group is neither triumphant or depressed but rather stunned and dumbfounded—more of a sense of emptiness and lack of meaningfulness—hardly consistent with what Sweet would like to see as communication in the best sense.
That Cory was not suffering the usual ‘slings and arrows’ of common men, tersely described by Robinson as “the bread,” “the light,” and the “curse,” suggests that not only did Cory die in a way that is strange to ordinary mortals, but that he had lived extraordinarily. He lacked a natural closeness to others from whom he felt different and probably superior.

The loner described by Robinson is a narcissist. The poem is then a compressed portrait of an insecure man with compensatory grand notions about himself, regal delusions if you will, and neither his life or death are to be judged by ordinary standards. At best, he maintained a highly vulnerable degree of mental balance, sufficient to prevent fragmentation until the last day.

Robinson even alludes to etiological factors in this brief character sketch. The intense royal schooling is not simply a benefit of material wealth, but a form of mental grandeur which we know can be secured even by a poor child who is emotionally spoilt, so to speak; one who therefore fails to significantly outgrow the natural megalomania of infancy and whose ultimate maturational adaptation to reality is thus prevented.

The important irony alluded to by Robinson is therefore a psychological one; the ordinary mortal caught up in the process of his own envy may not appreciate the narcissist’s envy of those ordinary souls who are able to work and wait and curse while they tolerate the deprivations of reality, i.e. going without the meat, which the narcissist cannot tolerate.

What Robinson has succeeded in teaching is that it is not the patricidal struggle of the grown Oedipus that is paramount but rather the failure of the young Oedipus to emerge from his restrictive infantile grandiosity which ties him to the mother in a life and death struggle and which prevents the assumption of a respected self in a social world of peers. Those, like the townspeople who are, despite their complaints, fortunate enough to have emerged from the stifling womb, could very well demonstrate hostility to the one who holds himself special. In that
case we do not have the later patricidal conflict of Oedipus toward the king but something more nearly resembling King Laius’ infanticidal actions toward the newborn Oedipus.

SUICIDE AS REMOVING THE FLAW

By means of the complex process of poetic compression, the consummate artist, E. A. Robinson, unintentionally achieved a portrait of a not uncommon characterological mental disorder— one that is mysteriously suspended in that ‘borderline’ area between neurosis and psychosis and which has been described by the psychoanalyst, Kohut,4 as a Narcissistic Personality Disorder. Such individuals are difficult to change even in long and sensitively conducted psychotherapies because of strong fixation in early development resulting in severe pathology of the self-esteem systems. These character fixations are actuated by unempathic caretakers in early life who fail to provide that optimal blend of indulgence and frustration as would permit the vulnerable infantile grandiosity to yield in favor of increasing maturation and mastery of reality.

In later life, when the environment fails to yield expected emotional supplies, such persons are victims of personality fragmentation and intense rages, sometimes leading to self-destruction. They differ from neurotic depressives in that the suicidal acts are not the consequence of a massive identification with a hated frustrating object but rather because of the need to remove a flaw in their own self-esteem. In this sense, they resemble the truly psychotic individual who had withdrawn his emotional investment in the outside world entirely, yet they differ in that such withdrawals are temporary and can be restored more easily by an empathic response from the environment. Their suicides have a deeply private meaning as the reflection of a purely intrapsychic struggle rather than a social meaning involving a highly advanced psychological conflict with recognized others as is true in the average neurotic depression.

The critic Franchere points to Cory's private, inner problem: "What private sense of failure, what personal recognition of his own inadequacy, or what secret unfulfilled longing drove Cory to suicide Robinson does not say; ... the reader is left with a sharp sense of emptiness, of a life wasted, of failure—and of Cory's hidden agony."

While the artist may vividly describe, he is not obliged to explain. The psychologist will recognize Cory's puzzling conduct as the consequence of regression which proceeds backward to those fixation points in emotional development where there is little differentiation between self and non-self and which implies a blurring between impulse, thought, and action. Such regressions dispose to infantile modes of conduct classified as narcissistic rages, loosely speaking a form of temper tantrum, which often leads to homicidal or suicidal acts.

Cory's apparently meaningless act can be illuminated by Kohut's findings in narcissistic personalities during close psychological examination. In such individuals, suicide was not motivated by specific conflicts but by a break-up of the bodily self which had become an unbearable burden and had to be removed. Kohut found such individuals to be exhibitionistic and shame-prone and driven by their ambitions yet not possessing strong ideals. Kohut comments: "After suffering defeats in the pursuit of their ambitions and exhibitionistic aims, such individuals experience at first searing shame and then often, comparing themselves with a successful rival, intense envy. This state of shame and envy may ultimately be followed by self-destructive impulses. These, too, are to be understood not as attacks of the superego on the ego but as attempts of the suffering ego to do away with the self in order to wipe out the offending, disappointing reality of failure. In other words, the self-destructive impulses are to be understood here not as analogous to the suicidal impulses of the depressed patient but as the

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expression of narcissistic rage.” Kohut concludes, when there is narcissistic vulnerability otherness is an offense, and the enemy is a flaw in a narcissistically perceived reality.

Cory seems to have wanted some kind of emotional approval from the townsman, a sort of benevolent reflection of his grandeur made necessary by a lack of inner self confidence which characterizes the arrogant. The failure to secure such important sustenance threw him into an acute crisis of personal despair. Doyle grasped this breakdown in social relations: “because he has given Richard Cory’s mere act and nothing more, the author has avoided the really difficult questions; an understanding of the character’s action and its relation to society; and the casting of some light on society’s failure to grasp the situation.”

Some narcissists can sustain themselves and avoid suicide by acting as the idealized representation of chronic unfulfilled longings in the common man and thus attain charismatic or even messianic status. Just as the mass lives through the leader, he, in turn, is vitally supported by their idealization. When, however, there are severe rigidities in the narcissistic structure, the capacities for leadership are limited or absent. Since Cory was neither able to join the townsman or lead them, his life became useless.

While Sweet’s theme of regicide does imply a social group process, eliminating the oedipal competitor is rather advanced in terms of psychosexual development. The atmosphere of the poem, however, implies a more subtle struggle than one of competitiveness between Cory and the group.

I suggest that the power of Robinson’s poem lies in its implications of the personal and social limitations of the narciss-
Colby Library Quarterly

nissic personality. What is important about Cory, if he were a real person, is the absence of true relationships with other humans. He was unable to socialize with others as separate and independent beings. A suicidal crisis brought about because of a relative weakness of the ego vis-a-vis the overly strong system of ideals—an attack of the superego on the ego, a condition we know as depression, would have betrayed itself in premonitory signs or symptoms and would have drawn forth a kind of sympathy from the onlooker on the basis of an identification with a kindred soul. The shock effect, therefore, is in itself a diagnostic clue to the exquisitely narcissistic nature of the suicide.

The flaw removed by suicide is alluded to, most subtly, in the opening two words of the last line of the poem: “Went home (italics mine) and put a bullet through his head.” In his psychological study, Morrill perceptively noted Robinson’s association of houses with suicidal despair: “The ‘houses’ in Robinson . . . ruined in various ways: the ‘house’ (self) of Richard Cory was a suicide; . . . In a mythological pattern . . . the house of power in the world contains the seeds of self destruction.”

For the psychoanalyst, the home as flaw would point to empathic deficits in the parental matrix, especially the mother-child unit. The poem itself is tersely suggestive; for further enlightenment about flaws in the mother-child relationship we have to turn to the poet himself.

ROBINSON’S CREATIVE ALTERNATE

C. P. Smith’s biography amply illustrates the frailty of Robinson’s mother and how unresolved narcissistic conflicts destroyed his two brothers in their prime. The frequent allusions in the literature to Robinson’s pessimism suggest that while he was to a significant extent in touch with narcissistic deficits within himself, the solution of his brother was not to be his own. He was determined to maintain his self-cohesion and was able to avoid

the fragmentations experienced by those close to him. Still, he retained his empathy for those who suffered and because of life saving ties of an idealizing nature he was able to synthesize that creative adaptation which, in a sense, was his own therapy.

As Coxe put it: “the issue is one of illusion overcoming the sense of reality. At times illusion is shown as something a character wills and achieves; a state which the person deliberately chooses as preferable to actuality or as providing the only alternative to suicide.”

The poem, “Richard Cory”, was an example of Robinson’s early insight into what fate may have had in store for him but for his capacity to transform his own feelings of specialness into the creative arena where he became enormously useful to others.

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