Letting the Cattiness Out of the Bag: Envy and the Triumph of the Therapeutic

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To begin, two contrasting images. The first appears in an oil painting entitled *Monomanie de l’envie* (Obsessive Envy) by the nineteenth-century French artist Theodore Géricault.1 The portrait shows the bust of an elderly woman, clad in a heavy greenish-black coat and dull scarlet dress. Her wispy gray hair peeks out from under a bonnet which might once have been snowy white, but is now yellowed with age. Splotches of slate blue, brown, and olive drab mottle her

1See Lorenz Eitner, *Géricault* (New York: Orbis, 1983). Of the ten paintings in the series on the insane, only five can be definitively identified today. In addition to the woman suffering from obsessive envy, the others include a kleptomaniac, a kidnapper, a compulsive gambler, and a man suffering from delusions of military command.

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Envy, once a deadly sin, has now become an emotional problem or even a surprising good. Pastoral caregivers will need to reacquaint people with their moral failure when they cannot rejoice with those who rejoice.
skin. Her forehead wrinkles in puzzlement or distrust. Her eyes, an opaque brown, the right one slightly narrower than the left, squint uncomfortably at the world around her. At first glance, she might simply be some nosy neighbor who spends her days peering from behind closed curtains with avid disapproval at the carryings-on of passersby. Yet, a closer look discloses something vaguely unsettling about the thrusting forward of her head, the unhealthiness of her skin tone, the wariness in her eyes.

In fact, the woman in this portrait is an inmate of the Salpêtrière, the Paris hospital to which female mental patients are confined in the early days of the nineteenth century. During the final years of his life (1821-1824), just before his tragic death from a spinal tumor at the age of thirty-three, Géricault is supposed to have completed a series of ten such portraits of people suffering from various insane delusions. His choice of subject matter is admittedly unusual; so, too, is his approach. He renders his models with sympathy rather than sensationalism, treating them as complex individuals rather than grotesque stereotypes. In fact, he omits any identifying details from the background of the portraits, forgoing the temptation to set those who pose for him against a scene of bedlam and thereby make an obvious point of their insanity. Whether the woman portrayed in the *Monomanie de l’envie* sits in front of a rough institutional wall or a rich velvet backdrop, we really cannot tell: all we see is darkness, deep shadows out of which her face emerges vulnerably into the light. With subtleties of brushstroke and color, Géricault manages to convey his subject’s inner torment. Her demeanor, encapsulated in her aggressive crouch, is simultaneously combative and defeated. She is both victimizer and victim; she arouses both our suspicion and our pity.

Our second image is far less complex. Appearing on the cover of a *Newsweek* magazine during the week of 5 July 1999, it shows the bust of an attractive, thirty-to-fortyish man, drawn in comic-strip fashion, looking a little like Clark Kent or Rex Morgan, M.D. Peach-colored, pointillist dots render his uniform flesh tone; blue dots color the irises of his eyes. With his wavy brown hair neatly styled, he is conventionally dressed for success: blue suit, white shirt, dark tie. Yet, worry lines mark his forehead, too; his eyebrows, like thick caterpillar squiggles, connote alarm. Radii of shock and dismay encircle his head, like rays around a cartoon light bulb. A thought balloon hovers above his head. Captioned “The Whine of ’99,” it reads in bold capitals: “EVERYONE’S GETTING RICH BUT ME!” A vintage whine, distilled from a late-millennial bumper crop of sour grapes, this lament carries its own undertones of envy—if not “monomaniacal,” at least plagued with deep misgivings.

So, a question occurs to me: Could we transpose these opening images? Could *Newsweek* have run on its cover Géricault’s portrait of the Envious Woman, with the words “Everybody’s getting rich but me” emerging from her pursed lips? Even if we could correct for the anachronism in her attire; even if we could correct for the fact that she is presumably mad and the rest of us envy-crazed whiners pre-
sumably sane, I suspect the answer would still be a decisive no. Géricault’s portrait makes the attitudes of covetousness and resentment look far too unattractive for our comfort. We would rather trivialize them into a cartoon.

I. THE TRIVIALIZATION OF ENVY

Indeed, this is precisely what we have done over the past hundred and fifty years in this country. Roughly a generation after Géricault’s artistic career in France, as the United States embarked on its shift from an economy of production to an economy of consumption, envy began receiving a pop-culture makeover. Today, we see the results regularly on our television screens. Whereas this corrosive passion was once scorned as the second most debilitating of the seven deadly sins, situated between pride and rage in confessors’ manuals and cautionary works (like Dante’s *Purgatorio* or Chaucer’s *Parson’s Tale*), today it struts forward as the focus of media hype: “Buy Brand X, and you’ll be the envy of all your friends!” Some marketing executives have even decided to capitalize on this new acceptability by naming their products after the former sin: “Pen Envy” is now a brand of upscale writing implements; “Gucci Envy” is an expensive perfume. With the hawkers and hucksters dunning away at us—and, I might add, the ministers and moralists strangely silent—we have come to act as if stirring up rivalries and setting our cap at our neighbors’ goods were legitimate gambits in the game of success.

We have, in short, let the cattiness out of the bag. Gossip, backbiting, and slander—all offshoots of envy, once serious enough to make it onto the Apostle Paul’s list of “works of the flesh” that could even keep us from inheriting the kingdom of heaven (Gal 5 and 1 Cor 6)—now receive scant attention from our pulpits, while at the same time one other predilection from those same lists has become the subject of denominational near-obsession. Self-professed, practicing homosexuals, we will not ordain; but unrepentant, persistent enviers? We shrug our shoulders. We think to ourselves: What’s the harm?

Once upon a time, however, our ethical teachers saw the harm as acute. In all the standard definitions (from Plato and Aristotle through Augustine and Thomas Aquinas), envy comprises two equally dangerous dynamics: sadness at the good fortune of another, and happiness at the other’s misfortune. Thus, classically understood, envy encompasses both the distress we feel when a rival succeeds in some way in which we have not but would very much like to, and the malicious glee we feel when that rival gets the comeuppance that we have uncharitably hoped he or she had coming. Directly counter to Paul’s exhortation to Christian love, envy rejoices with those who weep and weeps with those who rejoice (see Rom 12:18). In Gregory the Great’s enumeration of the offspring of this deadly sin, he points out that envy gives rise not only to malice and misery, but also to rumor-mongering, gossip, and hate.
II. THE TRIUMPH OF THE THERAPEUTIC

How, then, have we come to take this pernicious set of affects and attitudes so lightly? While the emergence of a high-powered advertising industry has contributed significantly to envy’s cosmetic transformation, the “triumph of the commercial” cannot take sole blame for our diminishing ethical concern. The “triumph of the therapeutic” has had a major role to play as well. Yet, in saying this, I must be careful: because not all therapies are “triumphalist.” The important question, therefore, is what differentiates sober and salutary therapy—particularly where envy is concerned—from more facile and trivializing stand-ins.

Interestingly enough, Géricault’s Monomanie de l’envie stands at a watershed moment in the emergence of psychological therapy as we know it today. Géricault painted his portraits of the insane in collaboration with his friend Etienne-Jean Georget, a young psychiatrist (“alienist” would be the correct nineteenth-century term) interested in the scientific study of mental disorders. Georget may, in fact, have commissioned the portraits as a means of exploring the physiognomic features of various psychological conditions. A mere two generations before him, the emotionally ill had been kept in literal bondage, chained several to a bed in unsanitary wards more like prisons than places of healing. Georget, in contrast, advocated treating the disturbed as patients rather than prisoners, attending to what the psychiatric literature of the period called “moral therapy”—a comprehensive treatment involving medical attention, to be sure, but also exercise, work, entertainment, and social involvement rather than shackled isolation. In the methods of both the “alienist” and the artist we thus find a complexity of understanding: in their own ways, both Georget and Géricault approach the “monomaniacally envious” woman with manifest sympathy, yet without minimizing the seriousness of her condition.

Of course, this woman is an exceptional case. She is haunted by her delusions; we can see as much in her eyes. Not all the envious feelings stirred up in the rest of us by our competitive culture are of equally obsessive proportions. Indeed, beyond this difference in degree, the “monomaniacal” envy of Géricault’s subject may differ from our more garden-variety passions in kind as well: some biochemical pathology, some kink in the neural wiring may be causally responsible for her spiteful ruminations. The rest of us—those of us who are not candidates for the Salpêtrière—have less excuse for our spite, our backbiting, our catty and malicious behaviors. Still, even if medical treatment is not required for our aberrations, we remain fit candidates for “moral therapy”—for serious psychological and pastoral attention. Yet, ironically enough, in the cultural climate of the twenty-first century, we are less likely than ever to get (or, if caregivers, to proffer) fully appropriate assistance for this malaise. Because, alas, during the 175 year since Géricault, sober and salutary approaches to healing have been displaced by the “triumph of the therapeutic,” which reduces envy to a cartoon of its former self.

2On the evolution of psychiatric treatment from pre- to post-revolutionary France, see Margaret Miller, “Géricault’s Paintings of the Insane,” Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 4 (1940/41) 153-155.
Philip Rieff, of course, is the person initially responsible for labeling this trend. In brief, “the triumph of the therapeutic” refers in his analysis to the twentieth-century process by which an “old culture of denial” embedded in (presumably) repressive institutions gave way to a brave new culture of “self-fulfillment”—a culture in which “liberating guides,” often therapists of one stripe or another, vowed to help their clients achieve the goal of “an intensely private sense of well-being.” Where religiously-oriented humanity was “born to be saved,” Rieff writes—and medically-oriented humanity, we might interject, was born to be treated—“psychological man [sic] is born to be pleased.”

Pop-culture responses to envy provide a striking case in point: for example, a recent article in Cosmopolitan, entitled “Envy: Is It Hurting or (Surprise) Helping You?” The author begins: “That do-in-your-best-friend [envy] could do you a world of good. Here’s how your green-eyed monster can deliver the swift kick in the butt you need to go for the gold yourself.” Throughout the article, the competitive spirit is lauded with gusto. Of the moral implications of wanting to “do in” a best friend, we hear nary a peep. Indeed, when it comes to dealing with actual other people and not simply with our own private needs, the extent of the advice is as follows: “Sometimes, even if it’s a little pathetic, just plain avoiding the person who makes us envious really helps.” But the overall aim of the article has nothing to do with community and everything to do with ego. We can transform envy from “malicious” into “delicious”; we can make it “work” for us to make sure we get what we want. After all, what could be more important in this age of the therapeutic than that we feel pleased with our lives? In the aptly revealing words of an MTV special on the once-deadly sins that aired in the summer of 1993, the basic problem with envy is that it “makes you feel bad about yourself.” Period.

A more nuanced but still limited approach to envy appears in the writings of Harvard psychiatrist Robert Coles. He has published a telling article about a client, a young lawyer, who sought therapy in order to unearth reasons for his restlessness, anxiety, and insomnia—and in particular, for a kind of steadily humming hostility that he felt towards the other lawyers who worked at his firm. After weeks of frustrating explorations, Coles began one afternoon—almost randomly, he says—to fill in a lengthening silence by remarking on rivalrous thoughts about colleagues of his own, which occasionally went through his mind. When he paused for a mo-

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4Ibid. For further variations on the theme of envy and the pursuit of self-interest, see Roderick Towley, “Why Do We Want What We Don’t Have,” Cosmopolitan, December 1995, 196: “Uncovering the roots of envy can help a girl get what she lusts after.” Or consider an article by Richard Koonce, a career coach, in the periodical Training and Development 52/5 (1998) 16: “Don’t allow [envy] to incapacitate you or make you feel you’re not worthy or entitled to things. Too many people make the mistake of affirming self-limitation.”
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6The special was produced by Lauren Lazin, and critiqued—aptly enough, as “banal” and “therapized”—by John Leo in “The Seven Video Sins,” U.S. News and World Report, 23 August 1993, 19.
ment, he became aware of the fact that the quality of silence in the room had thickened. He looked over at his client and discovered that he was in tears.

“How deeply ashamed of himself [this person] felt as he began to speak of envy,” Coles writes: envy of the fancy colleges that his colleagues had attended, in contrast to the small school at which he had studied; envy of the fancy colleges that his colleagues’ wives had attended, when his own wife did not even have a college degree; envy of the elaborate summer homes and extravagant vacations that were topics of his colleagues’ water-cooler conversations, in response to which the young lawyer himself felt so “outclassed.” Coles writes with the utmost sympathy for this man—indeed, for all of us who struggle with such feelings of humiliating inadequacy. His candor and concern are moving. But something in his analysis stops short.

An interesting throw-away line appears toward the end of Coles’s article. He writes: “One afternoon, my lawyer friend wondered aloud at great length about envy: How common is it, and is it ‘wrong—oh, excuse me—is it abnormal?’” In that very re-phrasing of the question, from “wrong” to “abnormal,” we hear echoes of the triumph of the therapeutic. Moral judgments, after all, went by the boards a few generations ago with our vaunted liberation from the “old culture of denial.” Instead, all we now want to know is that we are not drastically different from our neighbors. Coles’s therapeutic response is to assure the client of his normalcy. “Envy is part of our humanity,” he consoles; “And if envy brings the pain of knowing what we lack, [it] can also lead us to reflection...[about] who we really are, and what we really want out of life.”

III. MORALE OR MORALITY?

Well, yes. This is assuredly true—as far as it goes. But what seems sadly missing from Coles’s analysis, as from that of the Cosmopolitan article or the MTV special, is any further discussion of ways in which envy might also actually be “wrong.” After all, even if it is undeniably “part of our humanity,” so are many other things—aggression, for example—that we nevertheless feel the need to keep in check. What we do not hear in Coles, after the initial empathy, is any attempt to note the impact of his client’s envious feelings on the welfare of others. How does the man’s admitted hostility affect the working conditions of his colleagues? How does his acknowledged embarrassment about his wife’s education level affect her, or their marital relationship? From a perspective on envy that has not been trivialized by the “triumph of the therapeutic” and its facile focus on self-fulfillment and private well-being, such community-oriented questions uncover potential injuries to be repented of and rectified. Ultimately, matters of morality—and not merely of morale—are at stake.

Moreover, from a moralist’s perspective, the envy that Coles’s client confesses does not simply testify to a bruised and fragile ego in need of shoring up. Paradoxically, it also professes to an inflated ego in need of humbling. Of course, sensitive
timing is critical, and too quick a move to such humbling is an invitation to pastoral disaster. But at some point in the course of a sober and salutary therapy, would we not need to confront the arrant ingratitude that leaves us pining away after the successes of others while disparaging our own blessings? Even if we are so secular as to think of ourselves as “self-made” people, we still owe a debt of appreciation to the contexts and communities that have contributed to our “making”: the limbs and faculties that facilitate our daily functioning; the gifts and opportunities that have helped us on our way; the people who have supported or cared for or challenged us. What a metaphorical slap in the face it is to all these benefits to keep enviously wishing we could be in someone else’s place instead! And how much more of an appreciative, humbling debt do we owe if our orienting framework acknowledges a sacred mystery that surrounds our living, out of which we emerge and to which return, from whose graces our very being is a gift? The triumph of the therapeutic minimizes this indebtedness. The loss is significant.

These, then, are the conclusive points at which theology and therapy both could and should come together in a fully salutary response to envy: recovering the lost theme of gratitude for those gifts that are distinctively and incomparably ours, setting us free to celebrate those gifts that belong to our neighbors instead; recovering the neglected awareness that covetousness and resentment and even petty gossip are not legitimate gambits in the game of success, but serious violations of the law of love. In the final analysis, the problem with such attitudes and actions is not simply that they “make us feel bad about ourselves”—although, assuredly, they do. Far more significantly, from a Christian pastoral perspective, they also stand in the way of our weeping with those who weep and rejoicing with those who rejoice, even as they keep us from loving the very Source of our being with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. The therapist who does not have access to such deep moral and theological categories of analysis lacks critically important tools for addressing the malaise of envy at its corrosive core. Once we have let the cattiness out of the bag, unless we supplement a “therapeutic” focus on self-esteem with more sober “moral therapy” from the wisdom of the past, we cannot hope to mend the shredded fabric of our personal and corporate lives. ✫