SOILING AND THE ANAL-NARCISSISTIC CHARACTER

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"Feces are the child’s first gift," Freud said (1918, p. 73), "the first sacrifice of his affection, a portion of his own body which he is ready to part with, but only for the sake of someone he loves." However, when he does not love, but in fact hates that primary someone, Freud noted, he may not choose to give up his gift, but in fact may cling to it out of spite. He called this second alternate “a narcissistic clinging to anal eroticism” (1917, p. 130). In rereading Freud’s speculations, and those of other classical analysts, I found myself pondering these matters myself, using the same early Freudian language.

Freud was the first to consider the anal character (1908)—or, more specifically, the anal-retentive personality—which results from toilet training in which anal incontinence has been prolonged or in which there have been isolated incidents of enuresis later on. He notes that the three traits of frugality, obstinacy, and orderliness are invariably found in such types. Abraham (1921) and Fenichel (1945) elaborated on this anal type, and anthropological studies by Kardiner (1939) and Gorer (1943) corroborated the theory, showing that cultures in Japan and Tanala, in which early toilet training was emphasized, were cultures in which personal cleanliness, compulsivity, perfectionism, and ritual were also prevalent. However, despite his reference to anal narcissism, Freud did not delineate an anal-narcissistic character type. Rather, he linked anal narcissism to the anal-retentive character.

The urethral character has also been described in the literature. The outstanding personality features of the urethral character are ambition and competitiveness, according to Fenichel (1945), both of which are said to be reactions against shame. Fenichel sees the urethral character as one who has been a bedwetter as a child, and has been inordinately shamed because of it. He grows up to become proud and ambitious in an effort to undo the childhood shame. Fenichel believes that narcissism is more likely
to be attached to urethral than anal personalities, based on more frequent use of shame by parents in punishing bedwetting. However, he does not take up the question of anal incontinence, and the shame that might be associated with it.

The subject of anal incontinence, or encopresis, has been given scant attention by psychoanalysts, whereas enuresis has received much greater attention. Anthony (1957) noted that, "Clinicians on the whole, perhaps out of disgust, prefer neither to treat them [soilers] nor to write about them. The literature, as compared with enuresis is surprisingly scant . . . and superficial" (p. 157).

The first case of soiling was reported by Fowler (1882). In this case a seven-year-old boy had overly ambitious parents who pushed him prematurely into a rigorous toilet-training schedule. The term encopresis was first used by Weissenberg (1926), who in a brief article described several more cases. There have been a sprinkling of papers in the psychoanalytic literature, mostly published in The Psychoanalytic Study of the Child, but only one (Fries and Woolf, 1953) was interested in the effect of soiling on character formation. It considered the effect of soiling on the anal-retentive character but did not posit other anal characters.

Shengold (1988) provides an overview of anality and defense, in which he elaborates on the prominence of anal narcissism during the anal stage. According to Shengold, anal-narcissistic defense represents an idealization which in turn symbolizes a return to the self-absorbed overevaluation of early childhood and "the uniqueness and glory of the limited, sensorily (the halo) and mythically charged contents of one's own garden of Eden" (p. 129). It consists of a "panoply of near-somatic body-ego defenses" that children develop during the anal stage that "act as a kind of emotional and sensory closeable door that serves to control the largely murderous and cannibalistic primal affects derived from the destructive and from the perverse sexual drives of early life" (p. 24).

Sphincter control is an important part of the anal-narcissistic defense, representing a bodily "no." The closing of the sphincter translates into the attitude of devaluation. However, Shengold notes, "devaluation is surfaced over by a disguising, luminescent layer of idealization: the anus becomes 'a halo . . . in the sky'" (p. 126). Like Freud and others, he does not go on to posit an anal-narcissistic character separate from the anal-retentive character or to distinguish between retentiveness and incontinence, or between degrees of soiling.

The theories of Freud, Shengold, and others about the anal phase have been borne out by the observations of Roiphe and Galenson (1981). Based on a two-year observation of 70 infants and their mothers, they noted that anal-zone awareness begins even before toilet training, at about the 12th to