Victims and Trickster


Reviewed by Paul Watsky

“mad Ireland hurt you into poetry”—W. H. Auden, “In Memory of W. B. Yeats”

In her Preface, Tanya Wilkinson discloses, “One day while I was . . . working on an essay about art . . . I got up to answer the phone, . . . a wrong number [and] when I returned to the computer, the outline of *Persephone Returns* was waiting to be typed.” (Wilkinson, p. ix) Wilkinson, a recognized visual artist herself, never specifies how her investigation of art may have catalyzed the structure of this well-written, very useful book about victim psychology and its social context. That her text had such an origin is significant, however, because the argument in *Persephone Returns* much helps to gloss the art forger Eric Hebborn’s strange and provocative memoir of his life as trickster, *Drawn to Trouble*. My pairing of victimhood with a vocation to forge art is less strained than it might seem, for both are constructed identities that derive their liveliness not only from the fictions they create but also from the creativity that goes into making them. Furthermore, the victim motif has a certain relevance to the identities all artists are apt to assume. Because collective social entities usually mistreat their creative minorities, by appropriating and exploiting the latters’ gifts, even while stigmatizing their uniqueness, the roles of artist and victim frequently overlap. Ever since the arts in the western world separated themselves from their tribal and
religious collective roots, thereby becoming suitable vehicles for individual self-enhancement, artists have taken, and carried, an ambivalent relationship to minority status. Individual artists may strive for membership in the elite of the gifted, but they also usually crave universal appreciation. The pursuit of art, unfortunately, produces few outright winners, although for these few the material and emotional rewards—fame, power, and wealth—are great, being the building blocks of upward social mobility for the otherwise disadvantaged artist. More commonly, any missionary endeavors in their own behalf are apt to lead to literal or symbolic martyrdom, linking the artists with victims generally.

Wilkinson’s discussion focuses on how victims happen, behave, and heal. Her socio-psychological analysis of victimization can be summarized as follows: Western culture abhors death and all associated reminders of human vulnerability; so it defends against these realities by encouraging collective denial of mortality and by promoting its members’ identification with the hero archetype. Those who make such an identification, in turn, perceive whatever dilutes their ideal as evil: the heroic citizen posits a just universe which fosters the triumph of the righteous, and such a citizen strives for purity and to purge him or herself of weakness. Consequently “hero-possessed” collectives lead their members to project all sorts of nastiness onto those whose lives are marked by trauma (which offers evidence of vulnerability) or which even simply deviate from the norm. In giving legitimacy to the impulse to ostracize, the consciously emphasized Hero complex activates a reciprocal archetype in the cultural shadow, endowed with equal, if negative, power—the Victim. Wilkinson, who generally adopts a Jungian perspective, argues that a consciousness dominated by either archetype is likely to be blocked in its capacity for differentiation. Although she disagrees with those “victim culture” critics who assume that Victims enact their role with manipulative intent, she is firm that Victimhood only compounds one’s problems within the hero-possessed collective. Far from galvanizing a person to fight abuse and oppression, the Victim persona progressively weakens the individual, preoccupies him or her with its drama, and so invites further rejection by others. Wilkinson expresses skepticism about political empowerment as an overall solution to the problems of victimization, however, because she feels some abuses cannot
be rectified by external restitution, just as they cannot be avenged by retaliation. Tragic reality, again, affronts our heroic stereotypes and inflames people to align with prejudices both for and against victims. To her great credit, Wilkinson declines to side with either faction: “Victims need to take responsibility for their own transformation but are not responsible for their own betrayal.” (Wilkinson, p. 31) Her solution is to present a set of psychological models clarifying the symbolic meaning of maladaptive victim reactions and suggest corrective measures.

The text of her book includes five chapters that use a myth or folk tale—the Rape of Persephone, “Beauty and the Beast,” “The Youth Who Set Out to Learn What Fear Was,” “Manypets,” and “Fitcher’s Bird”—to represent a characteristic style (and root fantasy) of victim behavior—“Victim as Betrayed Innocent, . . . as Redeemer, . . . Seeker, . . . Pariah, . . . and Trickster.” She grounds this archetypal style of argument through the use of composite clinical case histories that illustrate the effects of graduated levels of abuse and psychopathology. When discussing treatment, Wilkinson generally advocates a classically Jungian psychotherapy that will offer few surprises to most readers of this journal, yet which simultaneously informs the general reader seeking to comprehend the attitudinal domain of victimhood. Even clinicians who are not Jungian will benefit from the details Wilkinson provides, her nuanced accounts of client styles and effective interventions. Despite her exclusion of psychiatric DSM-IV clinical terminology, it seems evident that Wilkinson’s representative “victims” suffer from various combinations of post-traumatic stress disorder, disturbances of mood, and personality disorders, all which psychopathologies color the diverse ways that individuals manifest their victimhood.

Wilkinson builds upon the work of many psychological writers besides Jung—Robert Hopcke, Marija Gimbutas, Judith Herman, Alice Miller, Marie-Louise Von Franz, and the feminist Jungian analyst Sylvia Perera of The Scapegoat Complex. Wilkinson can be specific in helpful ways about the phenomena of victimhood that these other writers present, for example by breaking down into subtypes what Perera renders as a pair of (overinclusive) complementary victim roles, the immolated and the banished, which correspond in Perera’s analysis to the two goats of the ancient Hebrew social puri-
ification rite:

. . . Commonly in the scapegoat-identified individual there is a sense of being both chosen one and victim. The victim is felt as an identity with the holocausted aspect of the complex, the pre-ego. But there is also, to compensate this, a feeling of omnipotence—a sense of being the sin-carrier, dedicated to carrying guilt for necessary collective shadow qualities, thus one chosen and unusually strong. As one young woman, described by her mother to the therapist as the cause of all family problems, put it: “I was sacrificed by my mother to Jehovah because she couldn’t stand up for herself. But I am stronger and I can bear it.” (Sylvia Perera. *The Scapegoat Complex, Toward a Mythology of Shadow and Guilt*. Toronto, Inner City Books, 1986, pp. 50–51)

Wilkinson, in turn, employs her chosen mythic and folk tale material to amplify and structure a better-organized and more penetrating exploration of victim dynamics. Her approach with the Persephone story—utilizing an array of characters to exemplify the range of social postures and psychological reactions abused persons may adopt—well characterizes Wilkinson’s archetypal analysis of individual suffering:

An identification with Zeus’s attitude [regarding Persephone’s abduction] produces a tendency to cling to the orderliness of the split in Self and world, to rationalize the loss and to forget the Child for the sake of the status quo. The adult who clings to this identification is bound to find a way to minimize both his own and everyone else’s pain of betrayal, to maintain the fantasy of invulnerability and complete control that characterizes the hero persona. Rationalization and simple avoidance must be used regularly to maintain this stance.

Later in the same paragraph we read,

An identification with Hades builds on the victim’s identification with the aggressor which is an unacknowledged descent into the unconscious, a flight from the vulnerability of the betrayed child to the rigid perceived strength of the betrayer. In this persona the individual often feels heroic but is seen by others as a force of violent chaos, a self-justifying victimizer engaged in an unconscious replication of abuse.

This typology of what could be called victimhood through the gods reaches its apotheosis in what was probably the Greeks’
own favorite myth of the victim, the Abduction (by Hades) of Persephone, which really produced a dual victim—Persephone herself and her mother Demeter, who was plunged into mourning for the lost Child. Wilkinson, noting the continuing power of this linkage of victim roles for women, sees even further ramifications of victim possibility in this myth:

Once the betrayed innocent identifies with Demeter, acknowledging the reality of the loss and remembering the lost Child, there are still three potential psychological pitfalls, three possible victim personae. The first is that the victim may plunge into deep primordial mourning and never emerge. The refusal to accept normal human comforts and reconnect to life may take many forms, though the most dramatic are life-threatening anorexia and bulimia. This victim identity is an endless rumination on the pain of the injury and the irretrievable nature of the loss. Every situation and relationship is infused with the drama of grief. The second potential pitfall... lies in a resistance to anger and assertion. The desire to retain a super-nice, good-mommy persona and to avoid any possible resemblance, through aggression, to an abuser, leaves the passage to the Underworld of the unconscious closed... Finally there is a danger in plunging into wrath and becoming addicted to it. Unfortunately, certain kinds of political activism seem to encourage this identification, portraying the search for a good-enough solution as a capitulation. (Wilkinson, pp. 40–42)

As Wilkinson puts it, with ironic force, “The myth of Persephone tells us that even a Goddess cannot completely undo what is done. Innocence cannot be recreated, but, once betrayed, must be transmuted into something else.” (Wilkinson, p. 42)

All the maladaptive stances Wilkinson describes above have in common a rejection of compromise—with reality, with life, with others, with oneself. They presume a unitary, absolute, unambiguous version of victimized reality, sustainable only by the victim’s refusal to engage with the complex actuality of existence and its fateful dynamics. If such people are to develop psychologically they must recognize and accept the opposites of victim and perpetrator, lost one and mourner, rather than project one or the other pole of such pairs onto the environment. For instance:
Once the ego becomes aware of the part of Self that is trapped in the Underworld, abandoned in the unconscious through denial and rationalization, it can begin Demeter’s journey: allowing the deep grief, then reconnecting to wholesome relationships that acknowledge and comfort the grief, followed by increased awareness of the nature of the loss, then wrath and, finally, acceptance of the good-enough resolution of betrayal. . . . Persephone’s rite of passage is resolved through an incorporation of the liminal state into her new identity as Queen of the Underworld. Her new identity is a liminal one, one that confuses customary categories, and thus her image and her story become a gateway for the initiation of others. The liminal tolerance for ambiguity allows us to hold the opposite truths of the hero ideal and the victim ideal without beating or demonizing. (Wilkinson, pp. 44–45)

Wilkinson takes us through a sequence of fairy-tale amplified case examples which confirm that the more severely someone has been abused, the more bizarre and crippling the person’s reactive patterns will be. Low self-esteem and perfectionism characterize “Sula,” the Persephone-like daughter of narcissistic-seeming and intermittently neglectful parents. Masochistic self-sacrifice epitomizes “Jane,” the “Beauty” child of “Beast,” an alcoholic father. An inability to maintain lasting relationships is the pattern for “Daryl,” archetypally the “youth who set out to learn what fear was,” but personally described as the oldest son of devastatingly invalidating parents (his “mother had told him that infants were disgusting and boring” and he contemptuously terminated his therapy because he became disillusioned). Intense sadomasochistic fantasies flood “Mike,” the “Manypels” son of an incestuous mother and violent father. Self-defeating tricksterism combines with bulimia and insomnia in “Riane,” who resembles that doomed bride of the Bluebeard-style wizard Fitcher who was driven to turn the tables on her fiancé; in her real-life history, Riane had been her mother’s favorite, exempt in a household where the other siblings were assaulted by that parent’s sadistic animus.

Commenting on her final two case histories, where tricksterism dominates the clinical picture, Wilkinson notes the artistic proclivities of the clients, and observes that “domestic violence is at the heart of the history of every trickster with whom I have worked. The trickster develops an approach to life in which he or she is both provocateur and nemesis to
perpetrators of abuse.” (Wilkinson, p. 153) This is the formulation that helps to clarify Drawn to Trouble, Confessions of a Master Forger, the odd memoir of Eric Hebborn, that The New York Times called a “willful, unpleasant book” (Holland Cotter. “A Fake’s Progress,” The New York Times, Book Review Section, July 25, 1993, p. 11), principally because of its tone, which is by turns off-puttingly jokey, inflated, self-pitying, preachy, and always morally obtuse. For those interested in the technical and aesthetic aspects of forgery, or can take pleasure learning how cerebral types of crime are pulled off, and for students of the interface between creativity and deviant behavior, Hebborn’s book transcends its irritating features.

Hebborn’s story interests me because it exemplifies a concept implicit throughout Wilkinson’s book, that childhood abuse tends to short circuit character development and also individuation. The consequence in Hebborn’s case is that what might have been mild, phase-appropriate acting out in a bright, energetic child turns toxic and becomes entrenched. John Gedo, a Freudian who has written extensively on the psychological dimension of artistic creativity, has described this phenomenon:

The pathological end of the creative spectrum is occupied by the activities of impostors—a difficult field, requiring originality of a high order, but one in which public recognition is entirely contingent on ultimate failure.

The issue of imposture is of major significance for the understanding of creativity because of the frequency with which persons destined for major creative achievement but temporarily deprived of positive feedback experience a period of imposture before they hit their stride in their ultimate discipline. . . . Imposture is creative activity in the realm of establishing one’s identity. (John Gedo, The Artist and the Emotional World. New York, Columbia University Press, 1996, p. 4)

Gedo considers imposture a defensive strategy that enables people with fragile egos to tolerate the stressful pursuit of validation. They take an “as-if” approach, being both themselves and not, until they get past the “temporary [deprivation] of positive feedback.” But how does this dynamic play out if the person truly has been victimized, severely and chronically, from early childhood?
By his fourth paragraph Hebborn is detailing the domestic violence perpetrated by his mother, a woman subject to “fits of violent temper”:

She was . . . large . . . and carried a good punch . . . Of all her children I was the one she liked best . . . My ears were those she liked to box the best, my bottom was the preferred target for an affectionate kick. But what she really loved about me most was the way I would endearingly cringe and cower when she cornered me for a session of hair pulling and I, moved to tears by her brand of maternal care, let out the most delicious howls. (Hebborn, p. 14)

It should be no surprise that familial abuse produces a sense of alienation in its victims—here felt in the inappropriate humor—because it sends the message that they are fundamentally bad, or at least far worse than the average, i.e., non-abused, person who seems not to attract this punishment. Paradoxically whatever goodness, strength, or talent they possess, if not mirrored by the social environment, further contributes to their identity confusion and alienation. This is the drama of the abused gifted child. Obviously the environments of creative individuals vary widely, from those where literary, musical, and artistic achievement are modeled consistently—such as the Huxleys, Bachs, and Picassos—to families like the Hebborns, where ignorance, neglect, and hostility are all-pervasive. The creative child from an environment like this may have great trouble integrating and reconciling a discovery of creative vocation late on with the core of negative identity that is established so early. Eric Hebborn describes an encounter with his mother when he was five, after having made his first drawing at “infant school.” Already his instinct told him to hide it from her.

“What the ‘ell is this?”

“What I done at school.”

“You bleedin’ little liar you never drawed it that good, I’ll learn yer to come ome ere wiv yer bleedin’ lies; take that for a start.” (Hebborn, p. 16)

Having produced that drawing nevertheless gave Hebborn such a positive feeling that even his mother’s reaction failed to make him relinquish the new activity. “I am quite certain that my satisfaction with my study of an owl . . . was infinitely greater than Michelangelo’s on the completion of the Sistine
Chapel.” (Hebborn, p. 15)

When he was eight, Hebborn discovered that a burnt match sharpened with sandpaper could be a good drawing pen. The headmaster of his school noticed these creative tools in Hebborn’s desk, assumed he was a fire starter, and caned him. Here is how Hebborn reacted:

Far from being persuaded . . . not to play with fire, I resolved that at the next opportunity I would commit the crime for which I had peremptorily been punished . . . . I made my way unseen to the cloakroom, which I knew contained sacks of wastepaper awaiting collection. I carefully hung some of the sacks among the caps and satchels, bags and coats. I also emptied sacks, scattering the contents about the floor, and began to ignite as much as I could by dropping lighted matches. Mr. Percy’s disciplinary action vindicated at last, I retired to the doorway to view the spectacle . . . . That caning hurt more than my hands. And yet I did not want to be merely malevolent. I wanted to have the fire’s finer qualities too—to be noble, just, courageous. (Hebborn, pp. 25–26)

This theme (sustained and developed throughout his book) of the victim retaliating against his abusers in a defiantly perverse posture is quite reminiscent of Wilkinson’s “Riane.” Hebborn will go on to justify his career in forgery by presenting himself as a righteous scourge of the many exploitative dealers he goes on to find in the art world.

But back to his initial induced flirtation with fire setting: Hebborn, quickly found out, was brutally punished by his mother: “To begin the lesson she lit several matches, each of which she stubbed out on my flesh.” (Hebborn, p. 23) Worse, she abandoned him. After the courts sent him to a reformatory for one year, he never saw her again. Evidently, he never trusted a woman with his body again. Early in his incarceration, as another boy undressed in front of him, Hebborn now realized he was attracted to males. Soon, however, the idolized, slightly older companion sexually attacked the nine-year-old Hebborn, and then apologized. Perhaps because affection of any kind had so rarely been offered to him Hebborn’s reaction was extremely mild: “Although I loved him still, I somehow loved him less.” (Hebborn, p. 30) Hebborn interestingly describes himself as never having doubted his sexual orientation, one obvious blessing in that he was spared
the torment of uncertainty and guilt, but, even so, his sexuality served to make him feel set even further apart from the majority culture, increasing his alienation and the choice of a negative identity, that is, an identity founded on negation. (See Erik H. Erikson, Identity: Youth and Crisis, New York, W. W. Norton, 1968, pp. 172-176, for a discussion of “the choice of the negative identity.”)

During his late teens Heborn entered a liaison with a fellow art student, with whom he remained for fourteen years.

... We were soon involved in an emotionally intense affair. And as I could not take him back to my lodgings and he could not take me to his home, we found ourselves making love were we could. Once we were spotlighted with our trousers down outside a row of garages. The torch-bearing policeman unaccountably but fortunately, mistook us for a boy and a girl, otherwise we would have been in serious trouble. Homosexuality was against the law, even for consenting adults.

Two friends of ours, Sam and Jerry, aged nineteen and twenty-three respectively, were reported by their neighbours to the police, who raided their flat and took away their bed sheets to be examined for traces of sperm. The couple were eventually convicted. Jerry was sent to prison. Sam committed suicide! (Heborn, p. 95)

Heborn’s circumstances improved dramatically after his release from Borstal. Placed with affectionate foster parents who lived in Essex, Heborn and the family’s other foster child “joined forces for the purpose of making as much nuisance of ourselves in the neighborhood as possible without [their foster mother] finding out about it. At home we took every care to be models of obedience and helpfulness.” (Heborn, p. 35) Heborn already was learning how to call upon the con man’s tactic of faking good in order to acquire power and maintain love.

By age fourteen, Heborn was leading his class at school in English and Art. He was fortunate in having an excellent teacher, a landscape painter who possessed “enthusiasm and the ability to convey it to others.” (Heborn, p. 39) Heborn seems never to have needed any pushing to work at his art. He was eminently coachable, intelligent, and industrious. His teacher accepted Heborn as a protégé, as did the President of the Maldon Art Club, to which Heborn belonged as
Honorary Member. The next year Hebborn exhibited a painting in a local show. He was beginning to glimpse a larger world, as his account of visiting the Art Club’s president, a Scot, suggests:

After coffee cups had been cleared, Mr. Cuthbertson asked me to show him my self-portrait. He held it close to the porthole and after saying, “It’s nay sa bad”, began to give a constructive criticism of the kind that is as useful as it is rare. He pointed out errors of construction, the coarsely drawn ear, the lack of form given to the hair, and went on to speak of the quality of the paint; that is to say, how the paint had been handled. “It looks as if ye’re a hoosepainter,” he said, referring to the flat uninteresting way I had treated the background. “The trouble is ye’re still a wee laddie and neer seen a bonnie portrait.” This was certainly true. I had never been to a picture gallery, and knew great paintings only from reproductions, which in the forties were unreliable. . . . At this point Mr. Cuthbertson told me of his own training. How as a young man he had studied at the Royal Academy in Scotland, where he won a traveling scholarship to Spain to study his favorite painter, Velazquez, from the originals in the Prado. His method of studying was the time-honoured one of making copies. (Hebborn, pp. 45–46, italics mine)

Pamela Diamand, the great art critic Roger Fry’s daughter, who lived in Hebborn’s vicinity, invited Hebborn to attend the art classes she gave for local children, and there introduced him to the Bloomsbury approach:

In the first lesson each pupil was supplied with a large, round hog’s hair brush, and powder colours to be mixed with water. We were then told to listen to a record of music by Stravinsky and allow the music to sink into the very depths of our being, and then express our feelings about it by giving room for our unconscious minds to expand and overflow through our dripping brushes on the huge rolls of paper spread out on the floor to collect them, this paper having something to do with Monsieur Diamand’s mysterious printing activities. (Hebborn, p. 51)

At fifteen, Hebborn began three years at the Chelmsford Art School. The faculty believed Hebborn’s gift was for painting, not emphasized there, so they sent him on to the Walthamstow Art School, where again he encountered an instructor he highly respected. Hebborn continued to excel in his studies and had his pick of post-graduate programs. Passing up the
Royal College of Art and the Slade school, where, because they offered academic credentials, Hebborn would have remained eligible for continuing grant money, he chose romance over practicality—the Royal Academy, domain of “Gainsborough, Reynolds, Turner, and Constable.” (Hebborn, p. 76) Hebborn, though initially impoverished, obtained ample recognition at the Royal Academy too—numerous prizes, including the silver medal for painting: “Sir Henry Rushbury told me that my picture had been greatly praised by Augustus John.” (Hebborn, p. 105) Ultimately he won the Academy’s Rome Scholarship, “which would allow me to spend two years studying in Italy.” (Hebborn, p. 106) Before the Scholarship materialized, however, Hebborn accepted a job offer from a “picture restorer” seeking apprentices among the art students. The legitimate side of the restorer’s business served as a front for forgery. The boss was routinely supplying art dealers with pieces faked for periods, and by specific artists if so desired. Hebborn writes that at first the practice of forgery made him uneasy, especially because he already had a criminal record: “Well, I’m worried. . . . I don’t want to get in trouble with the law? ‘The Law?’ said Mr. Aczel incredulously. . . . ‘What’s the law got to do with it?’” (Hebborn, p. 118) Hebborn depicts himself as Oliver Twist to this man’s Fagin. Throughout the book he is always succumbing to the propositions or assaults from older, established, and presumably wiser individuals who take advantage of his innocence. So Hebborn, always a ready student, progresses: “I began little by little, to develop my abilities and improve my knowledge of the materials and methods of the Old Masters until I would one day be able to ‘restore’ a whole painting—from nothing at all.” (Hebborn, p. 115)

At this point in his text a kind of psychic split develops. Hebborn begins to rationalize forgery, initially by suggesting that everyone benefits when alteration improves old bad paintings. Most frequently his tone combines defensive truculence with ironic, bitter humor:

Should a painting be unsaleable because it represented an ugly woman, the ugly woman would become a pretty young girl. If it represented a saleable young man contemplating an unsaleable skull, the offending skull was changed into a brimming glass of wine, or some other object with commercially viable associations. A cat added to the foreground guaranteed the sale of the dullest
landscape. Dogs and horses enlivened otherwise unsaleable pastures. Balloons floated into commercially deficient skies at once became immensely important (i.e., expensive) documents in the history of aviation. (Hebborn, p. 117)

Observing the “restoration” trade convinced Hebborn that one “need . . . have no scruples in dealing with the unscrupulous.” (Hebborn, p. 142) Later in his career, however, he set standards for himself:

1. Never sell to a person who was not a recognised expert, or acting on expert advice.

2. Never ask a higher price than a similar work in my own style would fetch unless the higher price was established by the buyer.

3. Never make a description or attribution unless a recognised expert had been consulted; in which case the description or attribution would in reality be that expert’s and not mine.

4. Never hit an expert with his acumen down. (It would not, for instance, be fair play to force an expert into a hasty decision over a boozy lunch.)

5. Never bribe or in any way pay an expert for his opinion.

6. Never question an expert’s opinion unless in conflict with equally expert opinion. (Hebborn, p. 211)


Delightful duality, sometimes known as diabolical duplicity, is a glorious game. It is played like this. The experts know you for an ignoramus of the first order. They buy from you a work of art which in your ignorance you have failed to recognise for the master work it is and attribute it to a famous artist. You later hear others prattling with
ridiculous deference both about the work of art (which of course you have made) and the clever expert who discovered it; while treating you with indifference or even scorn. So you take the skin off human foibles, and examine them at your impish hidden ease. A game for sly rogues indeed. (Hebborn, p. 218)

In his literary role, Hebborn frequently practices a trickster’s duplicity by alternately indicting himself, as when he says he does not “pretend to be white,” admitting to “endlessly wicked deceptions,” (Hebborn, p. 156) and then on the next page categorically denying wrongdoing: “... in those days ... a part of me still shared the popular myopic view that copies and fakes are somehow unethical.” (Hebborn, p. 218)

Sadly, Hebborn utterly lacks confidence that his talent could ever yield him legitimate status. Honors reassure him far less than the occasional setbacks, which confirm his low expectations of any sustained benevolence from the art collective for honest efforts. Readiness to feel like a despised, hunted animal surely reflects victim psychology, as does the tricksterish self-deception. An oddity of Hebborn’s book is his use, in the Prologue, of a seemingly transparent parable about a victimized artist, Vincent Van Blank, which in the Epilogue he disavows as an allegory of himself. “Van Blank,” which alludes to Van Gogh, Hebborn’s first favorite artist, is a “genius,” and, by turning to forgery, wreaks “revenge on the ignorant people who governed the art world.” Like Hebborn, he is “tracked down” after a “determined journalist” notices a careless mistake. Hebborn’s denials that he thought himself “a misunderstood genius,” or that “the world ... owe[s] me a living” (Hebborn, p. 379) are totally unconvincing.

Comparing the young Hebborn’s work with that of Pietro Della Vecchia (1605–1678), Aczel declares he has “never come across a painter with such an ability for working [in] the style of another artist” (Hebborn, p. 124); and offers to take Hebborn into full partnership as a forger. Hebborn declines, not from scrupulousness but because he hopes to go to Rome. He uses his remaining time with Aczel to ferret out such trade secrets as how to harden oil paint within days, a process which under natural conditions takes approximately forty years. He still lacks sufficient confidence in himself to attempt duping the cognoscenti until he gets a further boost, this time from an experienced woman art dealer:
Among the pictures on the crowded walls of the hallway was a watercolour of my own that I had given ... as a gift. One evening, while we were sitting sipping sherry among the piles of old black and white prints which Marie was colouring in a forceful style all of her own, she mentioned that I might be amused to know that my drawing was now a valuable old English watercolour. When I asked how that could possibly be she explained that a certain authority on the subject had seen it and came to the conclusion that it was by David Cox (1783–1859). We laughed and wondered how the expert could possibly have deceived himself, when the drawing was on modern paper and clearly inscribed: “For Louis and Marie with best wishes, from Eric.” Obviously he had not taken the drawing off the wall and had been misled by the hall’s poor light, but even so Marie was impressed, and suggested that I might try putting some of my work (unsigned of course) into a sale of English watercolours. When I pointed out that unless the drawings I made were catalogued by the same expert who had turned the watercolour in the hallway into a Cox, the modern paper might tend to lower the price. Marie made no comment, she simply handed me a portfolio of old paper. (Hebborn, p. 148)

With this maternal encouragement, Hebborn eventually comes to rate himself as a peer of the Old Masters he so diligently aped:

The next time my ... “Pinelli” is catalogued, I imagine the entry will be rather more succinct: “Forgery by Eric Hebborn of a drawing by Bartolomeo Pinelli.” This will not, however, be a fair or even accurate description, and the new catalogue entry should read: “original drawing by Eric Hebborn in the manner of Bartolomeo Pinelli.” (Hebborn, pp. 160–161)

The author’s unabashedness, though staggering, can be seductive—for instance, when he quotes Vasari’s life of Michelangelo to use as epigraph for the chapter describing the glory days of his own career: Michelangelo “also copied drawings of the old masters so perfectly that his copies could not be distinguished from the originals, since he smoked and tinted the paper to give it an appearance of age. He was often able to keep the originals and return his copies in their stead.” (Hebborn, p. 273) One can see Hebborn’s point including this bit of shadowy art history. Who, after all, would not rather own
a forgery by Michelangelo than an older work by the artist he
imitated?

As a result of Hebborn’s rhetorical efforts, the line be-
tween artist and trickster begins to blur. Hebborn certainly
viewed and seemed to experience his forgeries as creative
endeavors:

To make the first marks of a new Old Master, knowing
that one tiny slip could cost you a small fortune in wasted
materials, is a nerve-wracking experience and it was not
until I had sipped a tot of brandy and drawn a few lines
in Breughel’s manner on a scrap of note paper that the
stage fright vanished and the connection between the
conscious and the subconscious was unblocked. Oblivious
of my actual surroundings, I found myself sitting on a
stone in front of the ruins of the so-called temples of
Venus and Diana at Baia on a bright clear morning over
300 years ago. Time was halted. Hours must have passed
but it was as if I had breathed the drawing into existence
in a moment. (Hebborn, p. 217)

We therefore have to ask, how good actually was Hebborn as
an artist? Not Michelangelo, not even close, but certainly
gifted. According to Charles Hope, writing in the New York
Review of Books, Hebborn was successful for a variety of rea-
sons, including good research and counterfeiting technique,
the unrigorous connoisseurship of his dupes, and being “re-
markably skillful.” (Charles Hope. “Michelangelo, True or
John Rowlands, who came to review a London show of works
under Hebborn’s own name, rated him as “good technically,
... reasonably good at capturing a likeness, ... excellent with
the pen but much less good with his use of washes, ... a flashy
draughtsman [able] to produce the swagger article.” On the
other hand, he finds Hebborn lacking “a remarkably original
artistic personality,” and concludes his “true talent is as a
pasticheur, a worker in other men’s styles.” (“True or False?
Eric Hebborn’s Originals,” Apollo, Vol. 136, no. 370, Decem-
ber, 1992, p. 405)

Perhaps it is in this regard that we can see how Hebborn
suffers from his identification with what Tanya Wilkinson calls
the victim archetype. He experiences and defines himself
principally by being in opposition. When one encounters
oneself primarily through what one is not, through one’s
alienation, one is unable to answer from the inside the question of what one is. A possible strategy then might be to adopt provisional identities based on admired (and safely dead) role models.

I also found Hebborn’s written self-portrait to exemplify the symbolic association between the puer and senex that Hillman first pointed out to us. (‘Senex and Puer; An Aspect of the Historical Present,’ in James Hillman, ed., Puer Papers. Dallas, Spring Publications, 1979) In the following passage his evidently genuine love of art is overlain by an intellectually conservative, pompously articulated rejection of modernism:

... I believe that the neurotic, desperately extrovert and egocentric works of art that characterize our century provide an admirably clear indication of the mental and spiritual disorders of our time, but, as art, leave much to be desired. ... Ultimately, I judge a work of art by the extent it moves me, and the depth of the emotion it moves me to. For instance, some artists like Rowlandson and Ghezzi amuse me, and as I like being amused, and they do it very well, I think of them as excellent. Other artists, such as the Tiepolos, do not exactly amuse me, but they invariably please me, delighting me by their inventions, exotic trimmings and novel viewpoints. So I count these painters too as wonderfully good. A few painters, however, and Titian is among them, can move me to tears. Their pictures touch the chords of my deepest emotions and these painters are the ones that I regard as the very greatest. (Hebborn, pp. 177-178)

Yet Hebborn manifests anima development too. He sustained long-standing love relationships, and, outside the sphere of forgery, seems to have been a warm friend: “His greatest qualities were generosity, loyalty and — against all evidence— honesty. ... He was always a giver. And he regarded debt as a matter of honour. ...” (Barry Cole in The Independent, January 13, 1996, p. 14) In relation to himself Hebborn displayed a broad self-destructive streak, manifested by excessive drinking, and an unconscious drive for recognition so strong it contributed to his unmasking. He was careless at times with his deceptions: “It is much easier to fake a collector’s mark than it is to fake a drawing; one merely has to take a photograph of an original and give it to a professional seal cutter. ... But ... I would sometimes ... draw collectors’
marks freehand in watercolor just for the fun of it, and their sheer decorative value.” (Hebborn, p. 260) From childhood on, Hebborn’s appetite for money was robust, and despite earning substantial amounts from forgery, he seems never to have had enough: “my high standard of living was burning holes in my pockets.” (Hebborn, p. 280) Eventually he got found out because, impatient to generate cash, he used the same paper for works by two artists of different schools. He claims that, undeterred, he continued manufacturing forgeries, but now had to distribute his fakes surreptitiously. On January 13, 1996, Hebborn’s London Times obituary reported, “His death [at 62] was, like his life, mysterious and melodramatic. He was found in his studio in Romé collapsed with severe head injuries, and later died from them.” (p. 23) He ended as he began, a victim.

Eric Hebborn’s story demonstrates what artistic talent alone can and cannot do for a person. It can free one from demographic limitations, build bridges to compatible peers, provide enormous aesthetic pleasure and intellectual diversion, and establish a basis for self-esteem. In these ways it may be highly therapeutic. What it cannot necessarily accomplish totally of itself is to rectify the self-defeating tendencies of thought, emotion, and behavior that stem from early misunderstanding and frank abuse of that same talent. When the core of an artist’s identity is encompassed by the victim archetype, the sort of rehabilitative approach Wilkinson advocates seems essential, because the person’s very integrity, and even the art itself, is at stake.