



## Under the mirror of the sleeping water: Poussin's Narcissus

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*Examined in conjunction with a close reading of Ovid's Metamorphoses, Nicolas Poussin's four paintings on the preoccupying theme of Narcissus and Echo reflect a developing aesthetic interpretation of its textual source. Poussin's reflective vision supports a radical reappraisal of the enigmatic myth at the heart of psychoanalytic theory and practice, in which Narcissus is construed as a far more object-related figure that seeks the formative, affirmative mirroring of the other. This in turn encourages a more versatile conceptualization of narcissistic disturbance, in which an etiologically heterogeneous constellation of issues stems from a variety of disturbances in the myriad dynamic and developmental aspects of mirroring and attunement: the narcissisms.*

**Keywords:** Narcissus, Echo, Ovid, Nicholas Poussin, Sigmund Freud, Herbert Rosenfeld, *the metamorphoses*, narcissism, mirroring, metamorphosis

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand  
Henceforward in thy shadow...  
And when I sue God for myself, He hears that name of thine,  
And sees within my eyes, the tears of two

(Elizabeth Barrett Browning)<sup>1</sup>

### Looking for Narcissus

No myth, apart from the Oedipus myth, has captured the interest of psychoanalysts quite like the myth of Narcissus and Echo. Psychoanalysts have regularly interrogated the relationship of this ancient myth to psychoanalytic theory, beginning with Freud's concepts of primary and secondary narcissism (e.g. Arlow 1961; Bergmann, 1984; Dufresne, 1996; Henseler, 1991; Lichtenstein, 1964; Spotnitz and Resnikoff, 1954; Stolorow, 1975), for although Freud (1917) asserted that the "condition in which the ego retains the libido is called by us 'narcissism,' in reference to the Greek legend of the youth Narcissus who was in love with his own reflection" (p. 139), he neither explicated the myth that "resides in the center of the psychoanalytic edifice" (Bergman, 1984, p. 402), nor did he exploit "the myth itself for the

<sup>1</sup>From *Sonnet VI, Sonnets from the Portuguese* (Browning, 1850, p. 13).

understanding of narcissism” (p. 394). Some of these efforts have been frustrating: when Dufresne (1996) “returned to the ancient authors in the hope of discovering why and how Narcissus had become ‘narcissistic’... I was surprised to find that there was very little” (p. 497).

Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 BCE–17 CE) is largely credited with structuring the ancient Greek myth of Narcissus in his epic masterwork, the *Metamorphoses*, an unparalleled elaboration of the protean changes of life (Tutter, 2011). In particular, it was his innovation to combine the previously separate myths of Narcissus and Echo. Like Shakespeare, Ovid is a most acute psychologist but, unlike Shakespeare, his work remains relatively unmined by the psychoanalytic literature. Freud barely cites him, and for the most part psychoanalysts have followed suit – except, of course, for the brief tale of Narcissus. In contrast, for two millennia the *Metamorphoses* has been the authoritative sourcebook of metamorphic myth, a template for countless creative interpretations by the many poets and artists drawn to its iconic themes, including Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), a painter whose success was in no small part secured by his canvases on Ovidian themes. There was another reason for Poussin’s fame: perhaps no other painter has looked into the Ovidian canon as deeply and as perceptively as Ovid looked into the soul of man.

The myth of Echo and Narcissus was a particularly preoccupying subject for Poussin, who painted it at least four, and possibly six or more times.<sup>2</sup> Of the four extant canvases on the theme, three date from his first years in Rome, where the native Frenchman settled; he would return to the subject for the last time three decades later. In Ovid’s telling, Leiriope, worried about the longevity of her beautiful son Narcissus, consults the blind oracle Tiresias, who tells her that he will live a long life so long as he does not “know” himself. As a young man, Narcissus “turned down all comers, for “in his yielding beauty / was such inflexibility and pride / that no young man or woman ever moved him” (Met III.455–457). One day, he is separated from his hunting companions; he rejects the advances of the nymph Echo, and instead falls in love with his reflection in a still pool of water. Stricken with grief and frustrated by his unattainable love, and seeing (“knowing”) that it is in fact himself, he dies, and is transformed into the flower that bears his name, while Echo, similarly bereaved, turns into stone.

Much as the concept of ‘narcissism’ has generated a spectrum of explanatory theories, so has the myth of Narcissus and Echo invited many different aesthetic interpretations. In conjunction with a close reading of Ovid’s narration, I will argue that Poussin’s successive canvases on the theme reflect the artist’s increasing appreciation of its textual source, and a deepening interpretation of the myth that dovetails with certain critical junctures in the development of psychoanalytic theories of narcissism. Knit together, these threads support a radical reappraisal of the enigmatic myth at the heart of psychoanalytic theory and practice: in specific, I will argue that Narcissus is more accurately understood as a far more object-related figure that seeks the affir-

<sup>2</sup>At least one lost painting of Narcissus is documented (Felibien, 1685, p. 399). A painting by Spierinks (Blunt, 1962, p. 490), who copied many of Poussin’s paintings, may represent another (Timothy Standring, personal communication).

mative mirroring of the other, as opposed to his usual construal as vain, grandiose, disinterested in others and auto-erotically fixated – and that this latter characterization describes another person altogether.

### From Pompeii to Poussin

Like any expatriate artist newly arrived in Rome in the 1620s, Poussin set about painting the popular classical, biblical, and historical themes preferred by local connoisseurs – genres that would prove his *métier*. Among his earliest canvases is his first known Narcissus, c. 1626–1627, in which a youthful man, surprised by his reflection in a pool of water, halts in mid-stride (Figure 1). True to Ovid, who explains that Narcissus was hunting, Poussin paints him holding a spear. His physique is manly enough, but the sweetness of his sensitively inclined head and the delicacy of his opened right hand, signaling his wonderment, convey a subtle femininity. This, too, suits the pubescent figure described in the text, who “at sixteen seemed to be both / boy and man,” and was desired by “many boys and women” (Met III.453–455).<sup>3</sup>

Ovid explains that one of the many suitors that Narcissus turned away chose to retaliate, appealing to the gods: “‘May he himself love as I have loved him,’ / he said, ‘without obtaining his beloved,’ / and Nemesis answered his prayer” (III.521–523). Poussin has Cupid put this prayer into play, making aim with arrow and bow; thus in his eyes, as in the poet’s, Narcissus’ vanity was not to blame for his deadly captivation with his own reflection. Rather than self-love, the crime of which he was guilty was *the failure to love an other*, and the curse levied by Nemesis represented a grimly ironic, predetermined act of vengeance – instigated by a man, ordained by a woman, and, on Poussin’s canvas, executed by a baby.

Yet not all here refers to the text. Narcissus’ unique striding posture is not specified in Book III of the *Metamorphoses*, in which he sees his reflection in a pool from a semi-recumbent position beside it. Nor does Ovid implicate or even mention Cupid, while Echo, whose centrality in Ovid will soon be apparent, is nowhere to be seen. On the other hand, Poussin’s early rendition of a solo Narcissus remains well within traditional aesthetic conventions in place as early as 63 AD, the year Mount Vesuvius buried Pompeii; the number of uncovered frescos of Narcissus, both with and without Echo, attests to the wild popularity of the theme (Figure 2, upper left and right). One oft-copied painting (a Pompeiian pin-up?) shows a relaxed Narcissus, alone with his spear, contemplating his reflection (Figure 2, upper left). Cupid was another regular but not requisite visitor, appearing in many frescos in Pompeii as he does in Poussin’s first Narcissus (e.g. Figure 2, upper right).

However, despite her frequent presence in Pompeii, Echo was not retained in visual representations of the Narcissus theme over the next millennium and a half. By the Renaissance, the unaccompanied Narcissus was the norm, exemplified by Boltraffio’s famous portrayal (Figure 2, lower left). And Poussin may have modeled his first Narcissus’ tousled, leaning head after

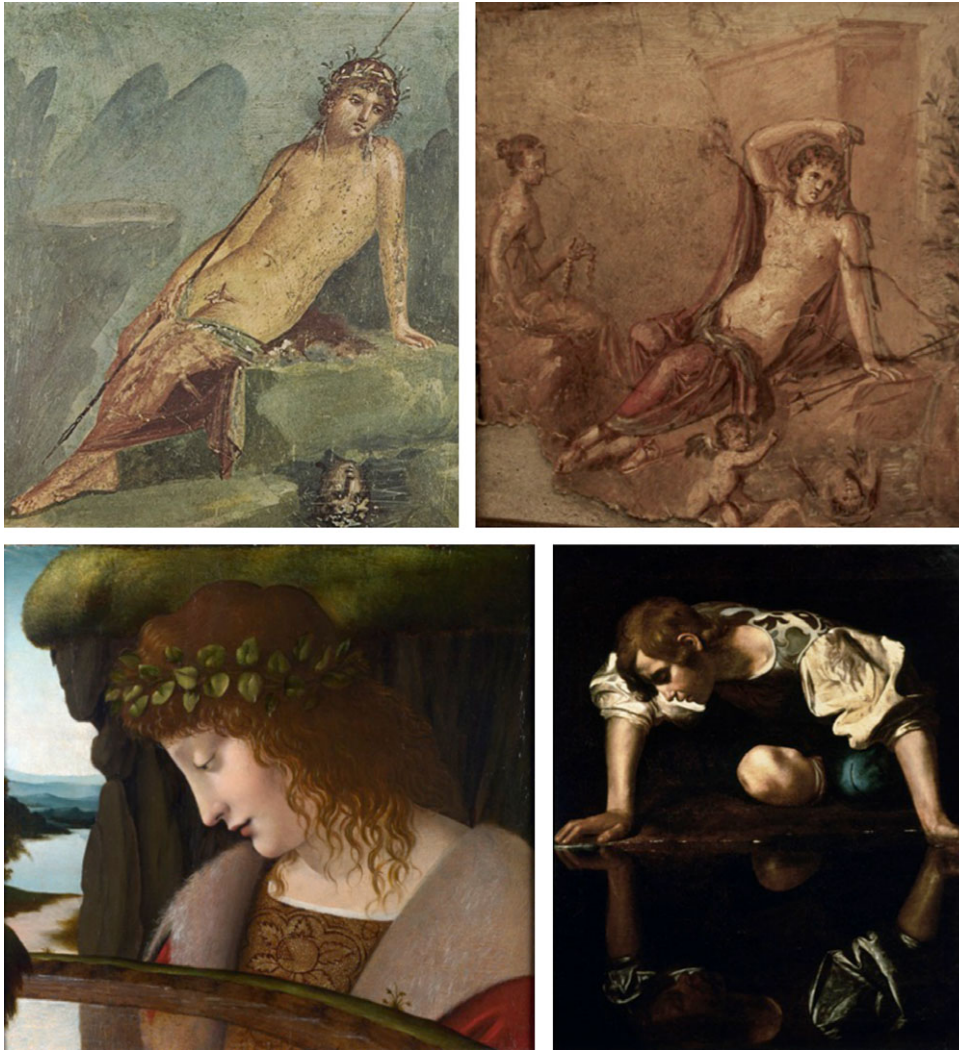
<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise noted, citations are to book and line of the *Metamorphoses*. I have chosen to use Charles Martin’s (Ovid, 2004a) superb translation because of its scrupulous fidelity to the text.



**Fig. 1.** *Narcissus*, Nicholas Poussin, c. 1626–1627, personal collection. Photo, Wikimedia Commons. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Narcisse\\_et\\_Cupidon\\_-\\_Poussin.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Narcisse_et_Cupidon_-_Poussin.jpg)

another solo version, that of the Baroque standard-bearer, Caravaggio, Poussin's predecessor and rival (Figure 2, lower right). Thus, consistent with the efforts of an aspiring novice eager to establish himself in a highly competitive arena (Tutter, 2014), Poussin's first Narcissus is characterized less by fidelity to Ovid's text than to adherence to prevailing artistic convention.





**Fig. 2.** Upper, (left) and Narcissus and Echo (right), Upper, frescoes of Narcissus (left) and Narcissus and Echo (right), recovered from Pompeii, 45-79 CE, Il Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli. Upper left, photo, courtesy Univ. of Texas. <http://www.utexas.edu/courses/larrymyth/images/cadmus/20%20Narcissus%20Pompeii.jpg> Upper right, photocourtesy Playing Futures. <http://www.flickr.com/photos/centralasian/7163842491/> Lower left, *Narcissus*, follower of Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio, c. 1500, The National Gallery, UK. Photo, Wikimedia Commons. [http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/84/Narcissus\\_%28da\\_Vinci%29.jpg](http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/84/Narcissus_%28da_Vinci%29.jpg) Lower right, *Narcissus*, Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, c. 1596, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome. Photo: Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Narcissus-Caravaggio\\_%281594-96%29\\_edited.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Narcissus-Caravaggio_%281594-96%29_edited.jpg)

This tradition – the well-known image of the lone Narcissus lost in his own reflection – may have informed Freud's theorizing about narcissism, and may have also persisted in influencing contemporary thought.

### Freud's Narcissus

In *On narcissism*, Freud (1914) commented that:

The charm of a child lies to a great extent in his narcissism, his self-sufficiency and inaccessibility, just as does the charm of certain animals *which seem not to concern themselves about us*, such as cats and the large beasts of prey.  
(p. 89, emphasis added)

Yet, as many have pointed out, the myth of Narcissus is absent from *On narcissism*: like Poussin's first Narcissus, Freud does not privilege its textual source. He did mention the myth, however briefly, in an earlier paper on Leonardo DaVinci (Freud, 1920), in the context of homosexual object choice:

The boy represses his love for his mother: he puts himself in her place, identifies himself with her, and takes his own person as a model in whose likeness he chooses the new objects of his love . . . What he has in fact done is to slip back to auto-erotism: for the boys whom he now loves as he grows up are after all only *substitutive figures and revivals of himself* [*Ersatzpersonen und Erneuerungen*] in childhood – boys whom he loves *in the way in which his mother loved him* when he was a child. He finds the objects of his love along the path of narcissism, as we say; for Narcissus, according to the Greek legend, was *a youth who preferred his own reflection to everything else and who was changed into the lovely flower of that name*.

(p. 100, emphasis added)

Later in the essay, Freud supposes that, when Leonardo met the Mona Lisa: “[H]e met the woman who awakened his memory of his mother’s happy smile of sensual rapture; and, influenced by this revived memory [*Erweckung*, resurrection or revival] he recovered the stimulus that guided him at the beginning of his artistic endeavours” (p. 134).

Four years hence, in *On narcissism*, Freud postulates that, in secondary narcissism, love for the object is withdrawn and reinvested in the self. Apparently considering a *deux ex machine* the curse that, in Ovid, instills Narcissus with his fateful infatuation (if he was familiar with the text at all), he limits the love of “the narcissist” to “self-love,” at heart, auto-erotic. There is a tension here, between Freud’s “narcissistic love,” in which a person loves others not as *others*, but *as he loves himself* – in his words, “substitutive figures and revivals of himself” [*Ersatzpersonen und Erneuerungen*; in 1914, “substitutes,” *Ersatzpersonen*, p. 90]; and Leonardo’s “revived memory” [*Erweckung*] of a rapturous dyadic love, in which he loves, *but is also loved* – “in the way in which his mother loved him” (1920, p. 100). It is as if Freud preconsciously knows, but cannot *see* that Narcissus’ mirror can serve as a metaphor for Mona Lisa’s smile. Not so Poussin.

### **(Re) enter Echo**

Regarded by Renaissance painters as well as by most psychoanalytic theorists as peripheral to the Narcissus legend, Echo has been a more visible figure in literary and critical inquiry, perhaps because of their greater reliance on textual sources. Likewise, Poussin – a designated ‘*peintre-philosophe*’ – distinguished himself from his peers with his scholarly fastidiousness and

careful study of classical and Renaissance texts. It thus seems only natural that it was Poussin who, in his second painting on the subject – the stunning Louvre *Narcissus and Echo* (c. 1630; Figure 3) – first returned the long absent Echo to the figurative representation of the myth in which Ovid first situated her (Panofsky, 1949). Signaling the progression of Poussin's explication of the text, from now on, Echo would invariably accompany Narcissus on his canvas.

Although the second portrayal of the myth follows the first by only several years, it is very different, illustrating the development of Poussin's mature, radically neo-classical signature style, characterized by a sharply focused, 'dry' handling of paint. His spear set down for the last time, Narcissus collapses in the foreground, spent, the namesake flowers into which he will transform already blooming about his head. It was an unprecedented move to portray Narcissus as dead, or nearly so, in contrast to previous portrayals of youthful beauty that appear blind to their unhappy fate. Newly restored to her "full Ovidian status" (Panofsky, 1949, p. 113), Echo lingers behind; her shadowy figure merges with the rock on which she leans, anticipating her reduction into "voice and bones only; her skeleton/turned, they say, into stone" (III.512–513). A jovial Cupid, who seems quite pleased with himself, may or may not have shot the instrumental arrow, for we see neither quiver nor bow; rather, he carries the torch of love, its eternal flame a cruel rebuke to the fading figures. While Poussin's previous Cupid was a fairly customary embellishment of Ovid's verse, this one alludes to it:



**Fig. 3.** *Narcissus and Echo*, Poussin, c. 1630, Musée de Louvre, Paris. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolas\\_Poussin\\_-\\_Echo\\_and\\_Narcissus\\_-\\_WGA18271.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolas_Poussin_-_Echo_and_Narcissus_-_WGA18271.jpg)



namely, Narcissus' terrible realization that "The spark I kindle / is the torch I carry" (III.601–602). More significantly, rather than just following the narrative, Poussin follows the *text*: in visualizing the "torch of love," he visualizes Ovid's use of literary device, of *metaphor*.

Although in the past "he'd trifled with her," Narcissus refuses to return Echo's affection (III.517). When she spies him alone in the woods, she tries but fails to proposition him, for all she can do is *echo* him, which she does in high comic form: "Narcissus cries, 'Hands off! No hugs! / I'll die before you'll have your way with me!' / 'You'll have your way with me', Echo replied (III.498–505). Juno punished Echo by depriving her of her voice, for helping Jove, Juno's perpetually adulterous husband, to tryst with her fellow nymphs; Echo accomplished this by distracting Juno, Jove's perpetually jealous wife, with "a long recital of idle chatter" (III.471–472). Echo's means of transgression was sacrificed; like Narcissus, the penalty fitted the crime; like Narcissus, she was the victim both of the exquisite agony of frustrated love, and of a violent act of retribution enacted in its name.

Ovid's marriage of the myths of Narcissus and Echo is additionally fortuitous, as their commonalities are symbolized and reinforced by their attributes: as many have pointed out, an echo is a *mirror of sound*; conversely, the mirror is a *visual echo*. The two are thus inextricably linked, symbolically and thematically reflecting each other, in Ovid's verse as well as on Poussin's canvas, for the painter represents their dynamic reciprocity in *Narcissus and Echo* via their postural mirroring and their similar positioning on stone. Thus Poussin's deepening respect for Ovid's text is revealed via the formal representation of literary device, metaphorical allusion to mirroring, and the accuracy of visual narration – in particular, the reintroduction of Echo. An important art-historical, precedent, he began an enduring trend: it soon became commonplace to see Narcissus reunited with Echo.

### The context broadens

Poussin's third portrayal of Narcissus and Echo is found in the 1631 *Realm of Flora*, and their similar positioning on stone two of the diverse figures that, in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, transform into flowers, and gather around the dancing goddess Flora, who initiates and oversees the floral metamorphoses (Figure 4).<sup>4</sup> The novel grouping of these myths draws attention to themes they hold in common: the dangers of denied desire (Tutter, 2014). For example, Apollo in his chariot loved Clytie, directly behind Narcissus, until he left her for a new plaything; mad with jealousy, Clytie engineered the death of her unwitting rival. Shielding her eyes in Poussin's painting, she looks toward the elusive sun god as she awaits her transformation into a sunflower, subsisting "on no more than dew and teardrops, / in motion only when she turned her face / to keep it always fixed upon her god" (IV.364–366). Clytie's fixed gaze parallels Narcissus' unshakeable "insatiate stare," similarly broken neither by "his hunger nor his need for rest"

<sup>4</sup>In addition to Narcissus and Echo, these figures include Ajax, Clytie, Hyacinthus, Adonis, and the lovers, Crocus and Smilax. See (Tutter, 2014) for a discussion of the individual myths of *Realm of Flora*.





**Fig. 4.** *Realm of Flora*, Poussin, 1631, Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Dresden. Photo: Wikimedia Commons, Google Art Project. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolas\\_Poussin\\_-\\_The\\_Empire\\_of\\_Flora\\_%281631%29\\_-\\_Google\\_Art\\_Project.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nicolas_Poussin_-_The_Empire_of_Flora_%281631%29_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg)

(III.564–567). By literally overlapping these two figures, Poussin seals their connection: both succumb to the fatal gaze of unrequited longing.

*Realm of Flora* tells of other stories of frustrated longing that end with catastrophe, marked by the triadic or frankly oedipal dynamics that Clytie exemplifies. The (barely) dyadic Narcissus and Echo stand out in this collection – an incongruity heightened by their apparent privilege, as indicated by their center foregrounding and adornment with Flora’s drifting rose petals. Indeed, Poussin grants Echo more weight in *Realm of Flora* than in her previous portrait – equal weight with Narcissus, in fact – even though she is the only figure that neither transforms, nor transforms others, into a flower. He further reinforces her importance by her joining with Narcissus around the brimming urn bearing his fated reflection; mirroring him more emphatically than in her previous rendering, she adds a powerful physical dimension to her acoustic mirroring. Does Poussin use Clytie’s intimate proximity, obscured by Narcissus, to suggest a covert dynamic, a “backstory” to this dyad? He leaves some clues to unpack.

By the time Poussin painted *Realm of Flora* in 1631, he had become a most faithful interpreter of the poet. Yet in this canvas, Narcissus discovers his reflection not in the pool of water that Ovid specifies, and which Poussin pictured in previous renderings, but in a man-made vessel – a Renaissance trope (see Boltraffio’s *Narcissus* [Figure 2]). He must have considered

this unusual departure from Ovid necessary, especially since a reflective pool is already present in the canvas, on the left. Winner (1996) identifies the overflowing vessel as an *echeia*, a resonating bronze vase used to amplify sound in ancient Greek theatres (derived from the same root as ‘echo’: ηχη, *eche*, ‘sound’), and contends that this element serves as a representation of Echo. However, it must be noted that, when filled with water, the *echeia*, Echo’s symbol, is also a *mirror*, Narcissus’ symbol: it thus becomes a linking, consolidating signifier, the meaningful pivot around which Poussin visualizes their binding connection. In his hands, the *echeia* implicates the irrefutable presence – the ‘echo’ of the other in the construction of Narcissus’ reflection.

### A cup of salt tears

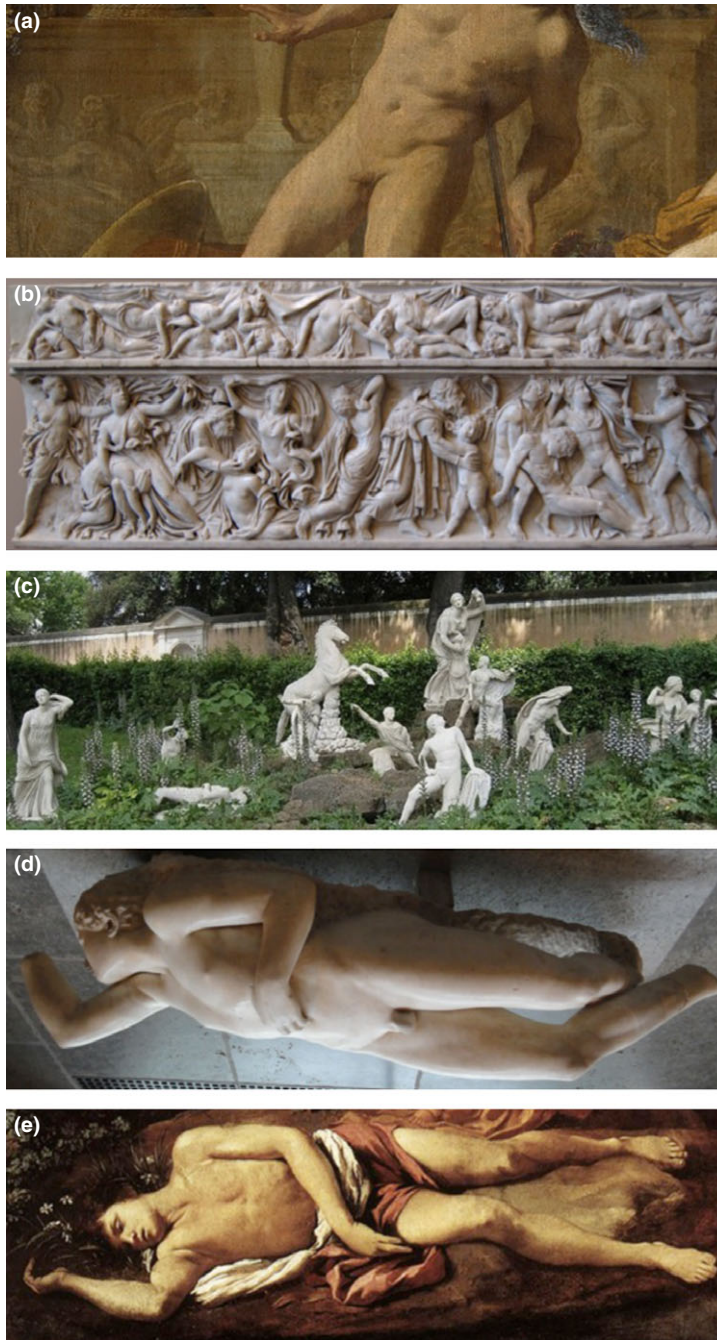
*Realm of Flora* also links the Narcissus myth to another myth from the *Metamorphoses* – one which involves transformation not into flowers, but, like Echo’s bones, into stone. Barker (2004) distinguishes a reference to the story of Niobe and her children, the Niobids – the iconographic raised, bent arm – in the bas-relief on the stone sarcophagus at left (Figure 5, top). Let us revisit this myth.

In Ovid, the prideful Queen Niobe enraged the goddess Latona by refusing her demand for worship, insisting that it is *she*, not Latona, who should be venerated for her riches and superior fecundity, having borne seven daughters and seven sons to Latona’s scant two. She should have known better than to blaspheme the goddess, as those scant two were Apollo and Diana, who swiftly avenged their mother’s honor by slaughtering Niobe’s prized offspring with their bows and arrows, while Niobe herself was turned to stone. “Rigid in her grief” (VI.434), she was condemned to mourn forever.

A favorite theme in *cinquecento* sarcophagi (Figure 5, second from top), Niobe iconography became even more familiar in 1583, when the celebrated Uffizi sculpture group of Niobe and her massacred children was unearthed in Rome and subsequently displayed at the Villa Medici (Figure 5, third from top). Poussin recruited Niobe’s characteristic raised arm in other canvases, including, fittingly, *The Massacre of the Innocents* (Bätschmann, 1999; Unglaub, 2006), as well as the second *Narcissus and Echo* (Figure 3), in which both subjects assume the iconic posture. As Bätschmann (1999) points out, the similarity between Narcissus and one of the slain Niobids extends to the stone plinth on which they both rest (Figure 5, lower two images).<sup>5</sup> Additional examples of the raised arm are found in *Realm of Flora*, including Clytie, protecting her eyes from Apollo’s splendor; Niobe, it seems, is all around them.

Indeed, the cliff-side at the left in *Realm of Flora* contains another covert reference to Niobe: it replicates the profile of the ‘Weeping Rock,’ a rock formation atop Mount Sipylus (Turkey), fancied by the ancients to represent the petrified incarnation of the mourning Niobe (Tutter, 2014). When

<sup>5</sup>By painting Narcissus on a stone, Poussin also alludes to Ovid’s description: “transfixed, suspended like a figure carved/from marble” (III.538–539) – foretelling Narcissus’ future transformation, and, more obliquely, Echo’s (Barolsky 1998).



**Fig. 5.** From upper to lower: (a) Sarcophagus detail, *Realm of Flora*; (b) Sarcophagus with Niobid theme, c. 160–170 CE, Glyptothek, Munich. Photo: Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagus\\_Niobids\\_Glyptothek\\_Munich\\_345\\_front.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagus_Niobids_Glyptothek_Munich_345_front.jpg) (c) Niobid group, Villa Medici, Rome. Photo, courtesy *ConstantinClaudiu*. <http://www.iseoverde.ro/gradinile-romane-legenda-si-adevar-roma-capitala-si-stapana-lumii/> (d) Dying Niobid, Glyptothek, Munich, image inverted for comparison. Photo: Wikimedia Commons. [http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niobid\\_Glyptothek\\_Munich\\_269\\_n2.jpg](http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Niobid_Glyptothek_Munich_269_n2.jpg); (e) Detail, *Narcissus and Echo* (Figure 3)



wet, its porous limestone “cries”: “set upon the summit of a mountain, / Niobe weeps, and even to this day, / she bathes the marble with her flowing tears” (Met VI.443–445).<sup>6</sup> In *Realm of Flora*, this rocky embodiment illusionistically supplies the fountain below it, which in turn spills over to fill the overflowing *echeia* (Figure 6, right). The *echeia* is thus filled with Niobe’s “flowing tears.”

The association of Narcissus with Niobe is fitting, as she is the more conventionally ‘narcissistic’ figure. Treating her children as the currency of her worth – even boasting that she could afford to lose several, and yet still have enough to surpass Latona’s count – her hubris defied Mantos’ prophesy of Latona’s demand for worship. Forging another link to Narcissus, Mantos was the daughter of the oracle Tiresias, consulted by Narcissus’ mother, Leirioppe – so concerned was she for *her* aggrandized child. The plot thickens when Ovid identifies Leirioppe as a water nymph, and Narcissus’ father as Cephissus, the river god who ravished her in his currents! Leirioppe (also known as Lirioppe) takes her name from the water-loving flower in the same family as the Narcissi; derived from *leiron* [lily], “Leirioppe” literally means “lily face” (Shengold, 1995, p. 25). Amplified by his aquatic ancestry, the conjuring of Narcissus’ reflection in Niobe’s tears suggests that, in Poussin’s eye, this reflected image signifies and summons another face beneath the reflected one, *the mirroring gaze of mother* – who cannot but grieve the loss of her idealized child.<sup>7</sup>

Is it coincidence that another artist offered an uncannily similar angle on Narcissus? Oscar Wilde’s prose poem, *The Disciple* (1894), offers the following gloss:

When Narcissus died the pool of his pleasure changed from a cup of sweet water into a cup of *salt tears*. . . The Oreads . . . cried to the pool and said: “We do not wonder that you should mourn in this manner for Narcissus, so beautiful was he.” “But was Narcissus beautiful?” said the pool. “Who should know that better than you?” answered the Oreads. “Us did he ever pass by, but you he sought for, and would lie on your banks and look down at you, and in the mirror of your waters he would mirror his own beauty.” And the pool answered: “But I loved Narcissus, as he lay on my banks and looked down at me, *in the mirror of his eyes I saw ever my own beauty mirrored*”.

(p. 864, emphasis added)

Equating “the pool” with “a cup of salt tears,” Wilde implies what Leirioppe stood to gain from the son that she could not live without. In his view, it was Narcissus who held a flattering mirror to his mother: like Niobe, it was

<sup>6</sup>See also Homer (2006), *Iliad* XXIV.761–764 and Pausanias (1935), *Description of Greece* I.21.3.

<sup>7</sup>In accord, Henseler (1991) asserts that Narcissus is “reflected in the water of the spring whose nymph is his mother, Leirioppe” (p. 208) and agrees that Narcissus’ love for his image is not self-love, but does not relate Narcissus’ reflection to his mother’s mirroring gaze. Burke (2007) comes closer, limiting the story to one of maternal engulfment: “the water’s reflective surface signifies a mirror, like the one his mother places him in front of, like the one in the iris of her eye . . . she cannot resist laying claim to the child’s body herself” (p. 167).

<sup>8</sup>In accord, Hamilton infers “from Leirioppe’s choice of a name that [her] child represented a strong wish for closeness and even for the birth of a version of herself” (1982, p. 111).





**Fig. 6.** Details, *Realm of Flora* (fig. 4), except for left, second from top, the 'Weeping Rock,' Mt. Sipylus, Turkey. Photo, courtesy Fevzi Gültekin, [http://farm2.static.flickr.com/1346/543630686\\_ebaf180ea1.jpg](http://farm2.static.flickr.com/1346/543630686_ebaf180ea1.jpg) Third and fourth from top: arrows indicate the vertical axis of the two distinct faces in the *echeia*: Narcissus' expected reflection, indicated by the solid arrow, and better visualized when rotated to left; and the reflection of an unseen presence, indicated by the broken arrow, and better visualized when inverted.

*she* who loved her son *as she loved herself*; Narcissus is not as much a ‘narcissist’ as the son of one.<sup>8</sup>

### The alluring avatar of mother

One of the most discussed aspects of Ovid’s text is Narcissus’ prolonged oscillation “between seeing [his] image as self, and seeing it as other” (Janan, 2007, pp. 288–9; also see Bartsch, 2006). Again and again, he seems to finally understand – “*now* I get it! I am that other one! / I’ve finally seen through my own image! / I burn with love for – me!” (III.599–601) – but immediately backtracks – “Where are you going? O cruel, / to desert your lover!” (III.619–620). Ovid reinforces this dilemma by repeatedly referring to Narcissus as both subject *and* object, fondly admonishing him, “child, what you seek is nowhere to be found; / your beloved is lost when you avert your eyes” (III.559–560). This powerful line evokes the child who has not yet reached object constancy, whose mother is lost “when he averts his eyes” – a child who looks to his mother as a mirror.

In 1967, Winnicott famously wrote that “the precursor of the mirror is the mother’s face” (p. 110), which gives “back to the baby the baby’s own self” (1967, p. 118). These thoughts were not original, but gave cogent expression to a notion first introduced 20 years before, in Lacan’s (1949) on *The mirror stage as formative of the function of I*. While this early version of the influential essay postulates a later process (the child identifying himself in the mirror) than maternal mirroring, Lacan nonetheless implicates the process of ‘mirroring’ in the development of the self: “The jubilant assumption of his specular image by the child... [exhibits] the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form” (p. 2). These ideas were taken up and developed by others: Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) theorized that the self is formed through the integration of what he termed ‘reflected appraisals,’ and Astley remarked that “the young child can use his mother’s eyes as a mirror: there he sees himself”; he, too, related the development of identity to this “primitive self-observation, *the earliest mirror of self*” (quoted in Elkisch, 1957, p. 240, emphasis added). Beautifully mirroring Narcissus’ evolving process of self-discovery, Erikson wrote in 1959 that the “roots” of identity formation “go back all the way to the first self-recognition: in the baby’s earliest exchange of smiles there is something of a *self-realization coupled with a mutual recognition*” (1959, p. 133 fn, emphasis original). Lichtenstein (1964) clearly articulates that the mother “reflects back to the child a configuration of its own presence”; anticipating Laplanche (1997), he further asserts that “the magnification and reduplication (echo)” of her “narcissistic libidinous mirroring” imbue this reflection with the mother’s “unconscious needs with regard to the child” (pp. 53–4). The presence of “*echo*” and “*mirroring*” in these last few words signals at the very least a preconscious association to the myth of Narcissus and Echo. So, too, does Kohut (1971) evoke the myth in his description of the “mirror transference,” in which “the analyst is the well-delimited target of the patient’s demands that he reflect, *echo*, approve, and admire his exhibitionism and greatness” (p. 270, emphasis).

The association of mirroring and the self remained very much in the air; Mahler (1967) addresses the mother's mirroring role in her work on individuation, and Lacan (1968), no doubt informed by these developments, states in his revision of the mirror-stage essay that the mother's image is the nucleus of the developing self-image (see also Kernberg, 2007). From a different perspective, Schafer (1968) hypothesizes that maternal mirroring symbolizes and initiates reflective self-representation, the development of a theory of mind, dovetailing with Bion's (1962) emphasis on the role of the mother's 'reverie' in the evolution of the child's thinking mind. Target and Fonagy (1996) take this further, theorizing that the "discovery and recognition of the self in the eye of the other" is essential to the development of mentalization (p. 461).

Other writers anticipate darker aspects of maternal mirroring. In Bonaparte's (1946) elegant analysis of myths of lakes and ponds, the eerie silence of still water evokes "the death-aspect of the mother-deities": here lies "the unforgettable smile of the mother," "whose countenance treacherous death borrows," and who "seems, under the mirror of the sleeping water, to call the children who have remained under her fascination" (pp. 28–30). Shengold construes an analogously sinister maternal imago in his discussion of the Narcissus myth, positing that the pool of water "symbolizes birth and the mother; its surface is a mirror and its depths are the medium for symbiotic entrapment" (1974, p. 98). And Dufresne (1996) intimates a "disturbing premonition of an aquatic mother! Had Narcissus ever seen anything but death in the eyes of his mother?" (p. 498; see also Burke, 2007). Demonstrating its inherent pluripotentiality, MacDougall (1980) and Bergmann (1984) interpret the Narcissus myth quite differently, as invoking a non-responsive mother.

"Only the shadow of a real event is necessary on which to build the structure of the myth," writes Arlow (1961, p. 379). In Ovid, Narcissus falls in love with "a shadow that he wrongly takes for substance" (*putat esse, quod umbra est*; III.537). Martin (Ovid, 2004a) translates a different and famously cryptic description of Narcissus' reflection – *Ista repercussae, quam cernis, imagines umbra* – as "that image of an image, without substance" (III.561); more literally translated, it reads, "that reflected image that you see is an image of a shadow (ghost)." *Umbra* [shadow, ghost] is also translatable as "a characteristic companion," as in "one's shadow." The ambiguous repetition of the shadow ghost allows, even evokes a ghostly other in Narcissus' reflection, which in his translation, Martin intuits: *that image of an image*. In *Realm of Flora*, Poussin brilliantly visualizes the implied presence of that other by rendering the ghostly image floating in the *echeia* legible as a face in two distinct spatial orientations: one corresponds to the expected reflection of Narcissus, but the other is summoned by an unseen other (Figure 6, left, lower two images). Thus does the painter apprehend the blurred relationship between the unforgettable gaze of mother, and the inchoate embryonic self that it can organize, confirm and cohere—but can also dominate and devour.

Aesthetic transformation negotiates and manages these tensions, and more. In Poussin's *Realm of Flora*, the *echeia* is the synesthetic metaphor

for the resonating, sensate experience of mirroring, and a mother's tears is the matrix in which her child's image and identity are constructed. Over 300 years ago, the artist couched in aesthetic terms that the long overlooked figure of Echo in the myth of Narcissus signals an essential dynamic process: *the echoing amplification of dyadic mirroring*. Poussin's interpretative vision has become more specific, and suggests that, in myth, Narcissus' reflected visage does indeed invoke a 'ghost' – *the revenant of his mother's gaze*. Within these propositions, the halting, dawning recognition of his own self in his reflection composes an allegory of *the discovery of one's identity in "the earliest mirror of self"* (Astley, quoted in Elkisch, 1957, p. 240).

In contrast to Poussin's deepening appreciation of Echo, by *Realm of Flora*, Cupid's role had become practically incidental. The *putto* with a quiver in the far right foreground is busy smelling flowers; his comrades join hands in the dance, the misery around them just part of the circle of life. A far more object-related figure than Freud would construe, Poussin's third Narcissus is spellbound not by Cupid's arrow, but by the elusive mirage of the *other*, the shadow ghost that lingers "under the mirror of the sleeping water" – the enduring, alluring avatar of mother.

### The mirror of Nature

Narcissus never really does give up the idea of the beloved other. All the more remarkable given his notorious aloofness, his last words are directed to him: / "Alas, dear boy, whom I have vainly cherished!" (III.644–645); their repetition by Echo only bolsters the illusion of the other in the water. I wish to stress that no matter how his reflected image is conceptualized, Narcissus' repeated and increasingly desperate refusal to accept his reflected image as his own speaks to *the latent desire for the 'other,'* and refutes the prevailing supposition that his captivation with his reflection reflects 'self-love.' So intense and abject is this desire, he must deny the absence of the other, instilling in this would-be lover a frantic disorientation: Ovid exclaims: "So great is the confusion / in which this lover wanders, lost!" (III.577–578).

Nor must Narcissus' longing inevitably convey entrapment, seduction, or destruction by the (m)other; his dying words – "now in death we two will merge as one" (III.615) – can also speak to a longing for fusion or de-differentiation, or the restoration of a perfectly attuned, mirroring state, such as that enjoyed by infants and achieved in adulthood only transiently during sexual union. An allusion to a such a fantasized, idealizing scenario is found, appropriately enough, in the story of the birth of mankind in Genesis, in a sentence that is itself structured like a mirror: "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them" (Genesis 1:27, *New International Version Study Bible*, 2002).

These considerations are also consistent with Andreas-Salomé's (1921) conceptualization of Narcissus, one rooted in a perceptive reading of the myth: "The Narcissus of legend gazed, not at a man-made mirror, but at the mirror of Nature. Perhaps it was not just himself that he beheld in the mirror, but himself as if he were still All" (p. 9). For Andreas-Salomé, the discovery that one is not "All" is the anxiety-ridden "'primal psychic injury'... 'the incom-



prehensible specular self-exposure to one's own individuation'" (Schultz, 1994, p. 188). Narcissus' resistance to seeing himself in his reflection thus dramatizes the child's tremendous challenge; to accept the reality that mother is *not* me, and is therefore not *mine* – and the resistance to that realization, that "psychic injury."<sup>9</sup> In a Lacanian reading, it is the confrontation with the *objet petit a* (Lacan, 1978). Influenced by Green, Kristeva (1987) contends that it is only in accepting this loss that the child can begin to love the mother as *other*, and establish real object relations – the development of a social being.

Similarly, for Andreas-Salomé, rather than constituting a fixed lack, a dialectic is opened: "a libidinal script that can be read forward as well as backward: the term Libido describes nothing other than this: the hyphenation between achieved individuation and its reference to that which conjugates, joins" (1921, p. 188). Andreas-Salomé understands Narcissus' captivation by his image as a free and dynamic equilibrium struck between self and other, one never completely differentiated from the other. The libidinal reservoir, continually replenished by the other and reinvested in the self, is the source of great creative power: *the echoing amplification of dyadic mirroring*.

### The magical property of a look

The *mythical* transformation of Leiriopé's mirroring gaze into Narcissus's reflection in a pool of water preserves a metaphorical trace of his watery origins – paralleling and recursively symbolizing the *developmental* transformation of mother's mirroring gaze into the identity she reflects back to her child. Linking the gaze to oral incorporative processes, Fenichel (1937) writes that the self- and object-representations that comprise this developing identity are *visual* at their inception, their internalization effected through mutual eye contact: "*the magical property of a look*" (p. 29).

Ovid notes that: "Narcissus at sixteen seemed to be both / boy and man [*puer iuvenisque*]" (III.454–455), but consistently refers to him as a boy [*puer*], not a man. And it is specifically when "drinking" from the pool that "he's overcome by the beauty of the image that he sees" (III.534–535) – a most poetic evocation of the nursing baby riveted by his mother's eyes. Further suggesting an incorporative slant, Ovid refers to Narcissus' gaze as "insatiate" (III.567). Movingly, Narcissus describes another frustration:

when I laughed, why, you laughed too, and often  
I have seen tears on your cheeks when I wept;  
you second all my motions, and the movement  
of your bow-shaped lips suggests that you respond  
with words to mine – although I never hear them!

<sup>9</sup>For the little boy, the realization that mother is not only *not* me, but also *not like* me, presents another loss to metabolize (Lax, 1997). While a fuller discussion of this challenge is beyond the scope of this paper, it has clear ramifications for the interpretation of Narcissus' reflection. Among other possibilities, the male reflection disavows the boy's awareness of his anatomical difference from his mother, while the desire that that difference engenders can be split-off, projected onto another (i.e. Echo), and repudiated.

<sup>10</sup>On the other hand, Ovid had no such difficulty in narrating the myth of Myrrha. She loves her father, Cinyras, and consummates that love, despite being perfectly aware of his identity; in this case, it is Cinyras who is 'blinded' to the identity of his daughter by the dark of night.

Able to mirror him, his reflection cannot, however, *echo* him.<sup>10</sup> Bion (1962) explains that children often need to *not* be mirrored, but rather to have their painful projections taken in, metabolized, and returned to them as something more manageable. And as Anzieu (1979) notes when describing the concept of *l'enveloppe* sonore, this is originally and best achieved by the other's containing voice. Yet to Narcissus' consternation, when he beats his breast in frustration, his mirror image, although stubbornly silent, shows the same bruises—akin to the mother who offers only mirroring, and responds to her child's pain by revealing her own.<sup>11</sup>

Trauma, depression, and other problems can disturb a mother's capacity for reliable mirroring, holding, and secure attachment, interfering with the development of identity. On the other hand, if a child can devour his mother through his eyes, then so can a mother colonize or consume her child's nascent self. Certainly parents like Leiriope and Niobe can overwhelm and imprison their children with their seductivity, projected greed and vicarious mandates—including the demand for their children *to exactly mirror them in return*, and to *not* develop a differentiated sense of self. This can give rise to a whole host of difficulties, including regressive dependency, the tendency to feel overwhelmed, fragmented or fused in intimate relationships; aggressive retaliatory strategies; and the terrible lack of any sense of separate self at all. Even when the other is renounced, for example in what Green (1969) terms 'moral narcissism,' the "trace of the other" remains "in the mirror: "[o]ne does not wipe out the trace of the Other, not even in the desire of the One, because the Other will have taken on the face of the One and will repeat to it unceasingly: 'You must love only me. No one but me deserves to be loved'" (p. 134).

More normatively, the signification and substitution of the mirroring gaze by the mirror image expresses and enacts "the extent to which what is *other* dominates our existence"—"too painful, too terrifying, to be maintained" without regular escape to an omnipotent "fantasy of completeness, of narcissistic selfhood" (Frosh 2002, p. 396, emphasis original). Glasser (1985) postulates a "core complex" resulting from "the infant's intense longing for a condition of satiety and security achieved through fusion with the mother, a state which is expressed by the adult as a longing for 'union, merging,' 'at-one-ness.'" This introduces the prospect of:

complete possession by the mother and thus total annihilation ... One of the reactions to this threat is 'flight', that is, essentially, a narcissistic withdrawal ... a situation of total isolation with its attendant feelings of complete deprivation and abandonment ... [that] prompts longings for complete and indissoluble union with the object ... this aspect of the core complex has the quality of a vicious circle.

(p. 408)

<sup>11</sup>The water's mute mirroring recalls the mythical water creatures typified by Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid* and Dvořák's *Rusalka* ("Water-nymph"), who seek to become human so as to love a man – but then, like Echo, lose the ability to speak. *Rusalka* typifies such water creatures who cause the death of the man they love, and then, again like Echo, dematerialize.

Searles (1960) observes that the “yearning to become nonhuman” often reflects the wish “to regress phylogenetically, to ‘return’ symbolically to the nonhuman state... in order to get a fresh start in the struggle to achieve individuation” (p. 250). I will argue that this wish may also screen the wish to regress *developmentally*, which opposes the “struggle to achieve individuation,” and defends against its attendant threats of alienation and abandonment. In accord, Lichtenstein (1963) adds that “fear of abandonment and painful separateness” can also “enhance the yearning for metamorphosis, the flight from human identity” (p. 214). Thus in fantasy, and, I suggest, in myth, metamorphosis metaphorically crystallizes Glasser’s (1985) ‘vicious circle’: the push for autonomy and individuation, and the opposing pull of regressive longings.

### A textual metamorphosis

Books III and IV of the *Metamorphoses* comprise Ovid’s rendering of the ancient myths of the founding of Thebes. Several authors (e.g. Loewenstein, 1984) have pointed out that these stories depart from their traditional sequence, and that the story of Narcissus, which has no place at all in the Theban myths, is told in the place normally occupied by the important story of Oedipus and the House of Laius. “Even more surprisingly,” comment Gildenhard and Zissos (2000), Ovid “does not make up for this peculiar omission elsewhere in the poem” (p. 130). Underlining this curious textual metamorphosis are myriad correspondences – a veritable “inter-textual extravaganza” (p. 130) – between Ovid’s Narcissus and Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex*, which preceded the *Metamorphoses* by 500 years. One such parallel is the pervasive motif of *sight* as metaphor and means of knowledge and its denial – most notably insight and foresight – as exemplified by Tiresias, the blind seer, who plays critical roles in both texts. Indeed, Book III of the *Metamorphoses* is a virtual atlas of the vicissitudes of mirroring and seeing, the central conceit of its central myth, Echo and Narcissus.<sup>12</sup> Oedipus and Narcissus, who can see, but are tasked to not know, are the opposite of Tiresias, who knows, but cannot see. Despite all the evidence, Oedipus refuses to *see* his mother and father for who they are; searching for Laius’ murderer, he searches for himself (Zachrisson, 2013). Like Oedipus, Narcissus cannot *see* himself in his reflected image; like Oedipus, who symbolically blinds himself to reality by putting out his eyes, he cannot bear the truth.

If seeing is concretely related, through its visual aspect, to mirroring, then, it is also, through its symbolic representation of knowledge, related to *desire*. A consideration of the biblical meaning of knowledge and knowing casts the relationship between Narcissus and Oedipus in a new light: Oedipus does not *see*, but indeed ‘*knows*’ his mother – in the carnal sense of the word. According to Tiresias, Narcissus must not *know* himself in order to

<sup>12</sup>The text of Book III is dense with all manner of semantic and syntactic doublings, opposites, and dualities that both symbolize and enact mirroring. Lowrie (2008) shows that even the chapter as a whole has an overarching chiasmic (mirrored) structure, constructed around the mirroring kernel of Narcissus and Echo.

live (III.449), and indeed he dies when he *sees* himself in his reflection. But if that enchanting visage contains his mother's imago, and he learns of his longing for it, then he *knows* of a specific aspect of himself: he knows of his desire to '*know*' her. Germane here, Narcissus "falls in love with an immaterial hope" (III.536); hinting at the frustrations of the incest taboo and compensatory oral regression, he despairs, "touching is forbidden / but looking isn't: then let me look at you / and feed my wretched frenzy on your image" (III.620–622). If his futile attempt to conjure a flesh-and-blood version of the mirroring mirage is a performative allegory of the child's desperate refusal to acknowledge individuation from mother – the "primary psychic loss," then this allegory may screen another, of the child's desperate refusal to renounce his oedipal love – the original "immaterial hope."<sup>13</sup> By excising the story of King Oedipus and the House of Laius from the history of Thebes and putting the story of Narcissus in its place, Ovid constructs a *literary* screen: a related story of forbidden knowledge occupies Oedipus' customary place, symbolizing and concealing it – just as Narcissus' mirror image symbolizes and conceals his mother's mirroring gaze. Ovid thereby stages the prohibition of knowing: what Tiresias warns of, and what Oedipus enacts, Narcissus conceals: *if Narcissus must not know himself, then we must not know Oedipus*.

The introduction of Echo to the Narcissus myth represents yet another potential screen, a stand-in for the missing mother: after all, she is, like mother, a *mirror* – an auditory mirror. And in a sense she metaphorically *echoes* the aggressively seductive mother, and her reciprocal oedipal desire (Laplanche, 1997). This allows mother's forbidden wishes to be split-off from the longed-for maternal imago, projected onto Echo, and repudiated. How ironic, then, is Narcissus' poignant lament, "touching is forbidden," juxtaposed with his previous rejection of Echo's advances: "Hands off! No hugs!" (III.498).

Perhaps unknowingly, Ovid uses the echo – more specifically, its quality as an incomplete, *partial* reflection – as a metaphor for the symbolic representation of the split-off, part object, a conjecture consistent with Ogle's (2008) Kleinian reading of epic poetry. Dufresne (1996) argues that Narcissus' flight from Echo's desire indicates that narcissism is "not a pure primeval fascination with one's self-image, nor a primary and exclusive cathexis of the ego, but a flight and a regressive withdrawal into oneself before the apprehended desire of the other" (p. 504). I would add, however, that it is not only Echo's desire that Narcissus may flee, but his own, split-off desires and forbidden oedipal strivings, masked and managed by disavowal and by more innocent, regressive longings for fusion.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Spotnitz and Resnikoff (1954) agree: "part of the fascination exerted on Narcissus by the image he saw reflected in the pool stemmed from his incestuous strivings, i.e. his yearning for his mother" (p. 174). See Major (1980) for an alternative framing of the relationship between Narcissus and Oedipus.

<sup>14</sup>Ovid stages just such a fusion in Book IV of the *Metamorphoses*, in which he mingles many of the elements of the Narcissus myth with that of Hermaphroditus, related historically to Narcissus. Hermaphroditus rejects Salmacis' advances while he bathes in her pool. Salmacis – a vain woman who enjoys using her waters as a mirror and who is "terrified" to be left alone (IV.465) – prays to the gods to never let them part; melded together, Hermaphroditus reverses her repudiation and achieves a regressive androgyny – he is feminized, but does not die. Of note, Book III is replete with other references to gender blurring and fusion.





**Fig. 7.** *Birth of Bacchus*, Poussin, 1657, The Fogg Museum, Harvard Museums of Art, Cambridge (catalogued as *The Infant Bacchus Entrusted to the Nymphs*); Photo, Imaging Department, © President and Fellows of Harvard College, used with permission.

Perhaps now the lessons of *Realm of Flora* are more clear. The figure of Narcissus conceals all but a glimpse of the overtly oedipal drama personified by Clytie. Similarly, the dual reflection intimates the lure of oedipal love, screened by the lure of mother's mirroring, while at the same time it visualizes the conjuring of Narcissus' identity within that mirroring. Mirroring his posture, Echo presents the brimming *echeia* to her beloved, gazing adoringly at him – perhaps as a lover would, perhaps as a mother would. If there is any treachery in the fate she proffers him, she pays a heavy price. Her robes are blue, Poussin's sign for water nymphs, reminding us that Narcissus, son of a water nymph and river god, was conceived – violently – in a stream. And by positioning the *echeia* and its ambiguous reflection between her legs, Poussin intimates that the site of his death is the site of his birth.<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Birth of Bacchus and the wrath of Juno***

Poussin's fourth and last known portrayal of Narcissus follows *Realm of Flora* by a quarter of a century. Finished in 1657, *Birth of Bacchus* juxta-

<sup>15</sup>Dvořák's *Rusalka* is a remarkable example of an enduring narrative fusion of the Narcissus and Oedipus myths. The Prince understands that the mysterious, silent Rusalka is an "apparition"; "a vision that will vanish"; "nothing but an echo," and betrays her, by falling in love with a "real" woman capable of "real" passion – one who can *speak* to him. At the close of the Metropolitan Opera production of *Rusalka*, the Prince is killed by the cursed Rusalka's lethal kiss, and lies dead, like Narcissus, by the pool of water that enchanted him.

poses Narcissus and Echo with the presentation of the newborn Bacchus to the nymphs who raise him – two seemingly unrelated myths that are, however, nearly proximal in Book III of the *Metamorphoses* (Figure 7).

Attention is immediately drawn to the central group. The red-garbed Mercury carrying the infant Bacchus verifies his boy's paternity, pointing upward to his father Jove, known by the eagle roosting on his sumptuous celestial bed (Figure 7, upper right). Jove has reason to rest: he has just 'given birth' to his son! After Juno learned that her errant husband impregnated the mortal Semele, the enraged goddess tricks Semele into insisting that Jove prove his divinity by "showing such almighty splendor / as when he is received by Lady Juno" (III.336–337). He reluctantly obeys; whilst Semele was "incinerated by Jove's gift," Bacchus was rescued, "torn out of her womb unfinished" (III:399–400) and sewn into his father's thigh, where he gestated to maturity; hence his description as being "doubly born."

Jove's "labor" finished, Poussin portrays him as he "put aside / his weighty cares, and, drink in hand, was busy / killing time in repartee with Juno" (III.408–411). The two called in Tiresias to resolve a dispute, which led to the story of the prophecy of Narcissus. While a more complete analysis of *Birth of Bacchus* is beyond the scope of this paper, it is enough to note that, by illustrating the myth of the birth of Bacchus, its textual segue to Narcissus (Juno and Jove), and the myth of Narcissus and Echo (again, from left to right, as if reading a text), Poussin mirrors one of Ovid's crowning achievements: "the subtlety, variety, and often surprising wit of the transitions from one tale to another" (Knox, 2004, p. xix). He also calls attention to the common theme of the painting's two central myths: the jealous wrath of Juno.

Repeatedly humiliated by Jove's undisguised infidelities, Juno took revenge by taking Echo's voice, and the nymphs knew to hide Bacchus' cradle when Juno, not content to kill off his mother, came looking for him (Ovid, *Fasti*, 2004b, p. 103); Book III closes with Bacchus, his mother murdered, causing Agave to murder *her* son. Whereas *Realm of Flora* articulates a narrowing exegesis of the reflected gaze and the relationship of Narcissus and Echo, *Birth of Bacchus* places their myth in the broader narrative context of Book III: infiltrated by Juno's rage, and bookended by *the mutual destruction of mothers and sons*.

Full of envy and hate, and intolerant of difference, Juno is a portrait of Rosenfeld's (1971) destructive narcissism, which draws on Klein's formulation of envy of "the good feeding mother ... for containing everything which the infant wants to possess himself" (p. 172). Rosenfeld explicates the narcissistic need to remain fused with or in omnipotent control of the external object, guarding against awareness of separation and subsequent feelings of dependence and envy:

destructiveness becomes apparent as soon as the omnipotent self-idealization is threatened by contact with an object which is perceived as separate from the self. The patient feels humiliated and defeated by the revelation that it is the external object which, in reality, contains the valuable qualities which he had attributed to his own creative powers.

(1971, pp. 172–3)

In accord, Juno rages when she loses control over Jove, who can birth a child without her, and must obliterate her illegitimate stepson's "good feeding mother." And while Ovid tells us more about Juno, Rosenfeld's vivid vision of destructive narcissism also trenches mothers who, like Niobe and Leiriope, cannot separate from her idealized progeny.

Unlike Juno and Leiriope, Narcissus successfully avoided libidinal attachments and any semblance of dependence – "no young man or woman ever moved him" (III.455–457) – that is, until mesmerized by the elusive mirroring image. Rosenfeld explains that vulnerability is eluded and "the destructive narcissistic state is maintained in power by keeping the libidinal infantile self in a constant dead or dying condition" (p. 174), the "fusion of self and object" defending "against any recognition of separateness" (p. 172). Simultaneously, Narcissus uses both defensive means – deadness and fusion – to kill off his vulnerable "libidinal infantile self," stirred to life by the alluring, mirroring maternal imago: "now in death we two will merge as one" (III.615).

Ovid describes Echo, witnessing Narcissus' death, as "angry [*irata*] and remembering [*memor*]" (Hannan (1992) sources these words to the *Aeneid*, in which Virgil explains the persecution of Aeneas: "because of the *remembering wrath* of the cruel Juno" (p. 565, emphasis added). But in *Birth of Bacchus*, Juno's rage is temporarily tamed; cradled by a cloud and lit by the sun, she kneels respectfully before Jove. There is no overt destruction here, but just as Ovid invokes Echo's remembering anger, so, too, does Juno's presence subtly conjure the intimate violence between man and woman. The antithesis of the brightly lit gods directly above them, Narcissus and Echo are anguished, non-idealized figures wearing the ghastly pallor of death – a dark contrast to *Realm of Flora*, where *they* are the ones basking in the sun's glow. Now, a truly horrifying Narcissus lacks all vanity, lax in death. Transformed into a narcissus flower, he is in one sense reunited with mother, rooted in his vegetal state in the watery realm of Leiriope; in another sense, more explicit here, he has apprehended the abyss, the empty pool. As for Echo, she is a portrait of abject sorrow, melding with the stone on which she rests, the contour of her lovely head and shoulders echoing the distant mountains that resound with her voice. Without substance or agency or even duality, she is lost in an echo chamber that dissolves the difference between 'this is you' and 'this is me,' an empty vessel. She looks wistfully toward Narcissus in her previous two incarnations, but in *Birth of Bacchus*, she turns away from her beloved's corpse, her body language signaling the misattunement stemming from the aggressive primacy of her desire. Meanwhile, the nearby nymphs pay no heed to their misfortune, too happily distracted by birth to take note of death.

### The narcissisms

The metamorphosis of Poussin's Narcissi – from idealized youth to anguished death, from mirroring discovery to lethal consumption – underscores the essential versatility of the myth, a plasticity untapped by theories of narcissism that posit a specific etiological mechanism for a entire range of narcissistic difficulties (Rosenfeld's 'destructive' narcissism (1987) and

Kernberg's (1984) analogous 'malignant' narcissism, important exemptions). Revisiting the myth, and exploring Poussin's evolving interpretation of that myth, encourages a different conceptualization of narcissism, one that argues against an 'average history,' but implicates a etiologically heterogeneous constellation of potential difficulties that relate to disturbances in the myriad dynamic and developmental aspects of mirroring and attunement, and that exist in a spectrum between the pathological and normative: *the narcissisms*. Such a notion would incorporate existing theories of narcissistic disturbance, each clinically relevant in certain situations and not others, while allowing for the development and inclusion of new formulations. It would also allow for the likely possibility that some difficulties with mirroring and attunement are at least in part biologically determined, with obvious developmental ramifications.<sup>16</sup>

I have long been in my own work struck by the depth of empathy and object relations in many people otherwise conventionally classifiable as 'narcissists,' but whose description (let alone explanation) seems absent from the existing literature on narcissism. 'De-classifying' narcissism and considering it as reflecting all sorts of perturbations in dyadic mirroring (many of which are more inevitable than pathological, and including, perhaps especially, the consequences for the children of conventional 'narcissists') would better accommodate the man who feels inauthentic, whose father uses him as an self-aggrandizing mirror, and who maintains a false exterior to protect his father, as well as his fragile sense of separate self; the woman who complains of self-loathing, and realizes that her idealized parents never in fact idealized *her*, but were themselves narcissistic and full of envy; and the man who desperately seeks the one who will replicate the supremely gratifying, unwavering perfection he saw reflected in his mother's eyes.

But, perhaps more importantly, Poussin opens the myth up for a more object-related interpretation of Narcissus, in which his own unattainability is an *identification: symbol* and screen for his love of an unattainable other – whether within a search for dyadic fusion, oedipal consummation, or other circumstances of exclusivity and control. I argue that the concept of primary narcissism must yield to the innate seeking for the other, that which is necessary for the development and also, I suggest, the *maintenance* of the self – the 'You' that precedes, and creates, and is often confused with the 'I'. This sets up a great dilemma, because the 'You' can also be lost, not just in infancy with the great discovery of the self, but throughout life.

This is however the sublime melancholy of our fate, that every You in our world has to turn into an It ... Every You in the world is destined in its essence to become thing or again and again to enter into the thingness... The It is the eternal chrysalis, the You is the eternal butterfly. Only these are not always states that are

<sup>16</sup>This is in accord with Lichtenstein, who as early as 1964 wrote that "the concept of narcissism" implicates "problems transcending the issues of ego-cathexis versus object-cathexis," including issues "of identity confusion, of loss of identity, and of identity maintenance" (p. 52).

<sup>17</sup>Note that this resonates with Edith Jacobson's (1954) formulation of self and object, and their confusion.



clearly separated out, but they are often in profound doubleness indistinguishably intertwined.

(Buber, 1947, p. 29, translation, Leon Wurmser.)<sup>17</sup>

### A flower and a voice

Why did Poussin paint his fourth and final version of Narcissus and Echo, 26 years after the third? He was in his prime compositionally, his themes at times often appearing to be no more than thin justifications for their glorious landscape settings. In Poussin's late, great phase, his figures became smaller, incidental, absorbed into the grand sweep and power of Nature. So, too, did his Narcissus reduce in size and in substance. And yet no one would call the figures in *Birth of Bacchus* token or perfunctory; in their pleasure and pathos, they are immediate and compelling. Perhaps he needed to develop into a painter of heroic landscapes before he could situate the story at the heart of Book III within the grand sweep and power of its text.

In his sensitive consideration, Bull (1998) imagines that Poussin thought of:

his own artistic work as precious and vulnerable like the infant Bacchus... Poussin, who repeatedly portrayed the infancy and nurture of Bacchus, may have found in these themes a way of articulating his concerns about the importance and survival of his own work.

(p. 738)

In parallel, Lowrie (2008) posits that the survival of art is the meta-theme of Book III: "Youth will vanish, leaving behind *a voice and a beautiful flower*, objective correlates of the implied poet and his work ... Death will occur in the end, even as the work of art remains" (pp. 17–18, emphasis added). Surely we can take the next step, and suppose any such concerns for the survival of Poussin's work would have contained underlying concerns for the survival of his *soul*. In contrast to the determinedly reticent Poussin, Ovid does not blush to admit his wish for personal, let alone artistic immortality: not only does he state this aim in the final lines of the *Metamorphoses*, he prophesies its achievement: "my words will be upon the people's, / and if there is truth in poets' prophecies, / then in my fame forever I will live" (XV.1110–112).

In 1630, Poussin married the woman who nursed him back to health from syphilis, which he only narrowly survived; the next year he painted *Realm of Flora*, a celebration of the triumph of transformative art over adversity and loss (Tutter, 2014). When *Birth of Bacchus* was executed in 1657, he was once more looking mortality in the face: his health was once again failing, in all probability from recurring syphilis; his tremulous hand is painfully evident. We view Mercury's transport of the sleeping baby Bacchus differently when we consider that elemental mercury was the only treatment for syphilis in Poussin's time. Can we not also see *Birth of Bacchus* as something more than an impersonal contemplation of life and

death, sterility and vitality (Blunt, 1967), or a “set of propositions about imitation, authority and desire” (Neer, 2004)? Rather, might the painter also express a wishful fantasy of being transported into health (and, perhaps, fertility) by Mercury? or the hopeful fantasy that when he takes *his* last breath, he will, like Narcissus, be reunited with his mother – that in death lies a second chance at life, like the doubly-born infant Bacchus, re-delivered into the arms of a loving woman?

Nor did the painter who repeatedly painted baby Bacchus and baby Moses have a son of his own, in whom he could see parts of his self survive. Poussin’s last Narcissus might well comprise a brooding, bitter vision of his own, childless future, dying alone while others joyously receive the next generation. And yet the painter left an entire family behind in France. One biographer, Paul Desjardins, looked for, but could find:

no trace in Poussin’s letters of any feeling of obligation toward his parents. He never in later days showed any regret at having left them; transplanted to Rome of his own free will, he lost all desire to return to his home – and even, it would seem, all recollection of it.

(Desjardins, quoted in Gide, 1950[1926], p. 164)

We know little more about this – what promoted Poussin’s apparently wholesale disinheritance of family ties, what relationships he needed to disavow: shades, perhaps, of Narcissus.

Never blessed with a baby to raise, Poussin raised his wife’s two younger brothers, giving one of them (Gaspard) his name and teaching him his craft. Gaspard (Dughet) Poussin became an accomplished painter in his own right but, for wholly unclear reasons, his relationship with his adopted father foundered. It seems that angry Juno, goddess of Romans and childbirth, would refuse this transplanted French-man a son. But Poussin made one for himself, nevertheless.

In a brief aside, Neer (2004) muses that apart from its textual and art-historical references, *Birth of Bacchus* has “everything to do with oedipal desire and fantasy” (p. 269), a “gratification licensed by paternal authority, as the contented, sleeping child is handed off into a fantasy world of maternal sexuality” (p. 279). This acute observation – obvious in retrospect – encourages the notion that Poussin’s exposition of Bacchus’ double birth restates, in a more explicit and visual way, the triadic implications of *Realm of Flora*, and resurrects, through *sight*, the very myth that Ovid suppressed in the text. Like Jove, Poussin delivers a son – *the double birth of Oedipus*.

It would be completely plausible to propose that Poussin, like any other painter of his era, identified with Narcissus, as in the *seicento* art world the mythical figure was not associated with pejorative pathology as he is today, and not even invariably with vanity, but with the role famously assigned by the Renaissance commentator, Leon Battista Alberti (1436): “The inventor of painting, according to the poets, was Narcissus, who was turned into a flower, for, as painting is the flower of all the arts. . . What is painting but the act of embracing by means of art the surface of the pool?” (p. 61). Resonant with Freud’s (1923) later formulation of narcissism as “a kind of sublimation” (p.

30), Alberti's formulation is doubly apt: just as the metamorphic myths transform life's pains and changes into poetic tales of transformation, so do artists transform this poetry into 'flowers' – works of art (Tutter, 2014). The notion that Narcissus, the 'inventor of painting,' is in fact searching for an *other* is in perfect accord with Laplanche's assertion that "[c]ultural activity is an opening out on to the other, an address to the other" (1997, p. 664).

One also hears a distant chord of Alberti's epigram in Schultz's (1994) appreciation of Kristeva and Andreas-Salomé, both of whom look to Narcissus as a creative force that lives:

in all the poets and lovers who speak in metaphors... or 'conveyances of meaning' that muddle the borders between having and being, self and other, subject and object. In the metaphor, 'this is me' and 'this is you' are pleasurably confounded. The metaphor, denoting a relationship, lays no claim to an 'essence,' or 'first' origin.

(p. 192)

In myth, Echo loses corporeal form, and even her language; all she has left is her voice – a ripe allegory of the limits of language. Ovid recovers her, and assigns her a metaphorical function, as an echo of Leiriope. Echo's shadowy figure disappeared from painting – the way Leiriope disappeared from Narcissus' pool, the way Oedipus disappeared from the Theban myths. But, like Ovid before him, Poussin revives Echo's oneiric revenant, reversing her absence and turning her devitalized attribute into a vital symbol for *metaphor* – distilling and condensing in the *echeia* her indissoluble connection with Narcissus, a metaphorical relationship between her voice and his mirror as 'pleasurably confounded' and wonderfully 'muddled' as the relationship between I and You.

In a profound, dimensional metamorphosis of language, metaphor undoes the essential poverty of signifiers – on their own, mere shadows, ghosts, echoes of substance. Alongside poetry and allegory, metaphor revitalizes words with a new order of resonance and depth, undoing their weakness and failures and amplifying their power to conjugate meaning and bridge differences (Wurmser, 2011). It is no wonder that psychoanalytic work so often hinges on metaphor (Ogden, 1997), which, like art and poetry, occupies "a point along the spectrum of dreaming... it is the stuff of analysis" (Civitarese and Ferro, 2013, p. 190). "The poet dies; the poem lives" (Kuhns, 1983, p. 144). Great art further enriches foundational texts, adding to the essential ambiguity that ensures their survival. If, for Alberti, Narcissus is the 'inventor of painting,' then for Poussin, Echo is the *inventor of metaphor*. Honoring Ovid's voice with hers, with this gift, this flower, he ensures for himself a measure of immortality.

## Translations of summary

**Sous le miroir de l'eau dormante – le Narcisse de Poussin.** Étudiés conjointement avec une lecture attentive des *Métamorphoses* d'Ovide, les quatre tableaux de Nicolas Poussin qui sont consacrés au thème obsédant de Narcisse et d'Écho reflètent l'élaboration d'une interprétation esthétique des sources

textuelles. La vision réflexive de Poussin permet une réévaluation radicale du mythe énigmatique, qui est au cœur de la théorie et pratique psychanalytiques, la figure de Narcisse apparaissant bien davantage ici en relation avec l'objet dans une quête qui s'oriente vers le miroir formateur et affirmatif constitué par l'autre. Ceci conduit en retour à une conceptualisation plus polyvalente des troubles narcissiques, qui prend en considération une constellation de questions centrées sur les multiples aspects dynamiques à la fois spéculaires et consonants que revêt le développement : les narcissismes.

**„Unter dem Spiegel des schlafenden Wassers: Poussins Narziss“.** In Verbindung mit einer gründlichen Lektüre von Ovids *Metamorphosen* betrachtet, geben Poussins vier Gemälde von Narziss und Echo die Entwicklung einer ästhetischen Interpretation ihrer Textquelle zu erkennen. Poussins reflektierte Sicht spricht für eine radikale Neubeurteilung des rätselhaften Mythos, der für die Theorie und Praxis der Psychoanalyse von solch zentraler Bedeutung ist. Demnach wäre Narziss in weit höherem Maß objektbezogen, jemand, der nach der prägenden, affirmativen Spiegelung durch den Anderen sucht. Diese Interpretation ermöglicht wiederum eine flexiblere Konzeptualisierung der narzisstischen Störung, die einer Konstellation von Themen, die mit den unzähligen dynamischen und entwicklungspsychologischen Aspekten der Spiegelung und Abstimmung zusammenhängen, Rechnung trägt: dem Narzissmus.

**Sotto lo specchio dell'acqua che dorme: il Narciso di Poussin.** Esaminati contestualmente a un'attenta lettura delle *Metamorfosi* di Ovidio, i quattro dipinti di Nicholas Poussin sul preoccupante tema di Narciso e Eco riflettono lo sviluppo di una interpretazione estetica del testo fonte. La visione riflessiva di Poussin sostiene una radicale riconsiderazione dell'enigmatico mito, che si pone al cuore della teoria e prassi psicoanalitica, in cui Narciso viene visto come una figura di gran lunga capace di relazione oggettuale, che cerca lo sguardo rispecchiante dell'altro, che possa formarlo e affermarlo. Questo, a sua volta, sollecita una concettualizzazione più versatile del disturbo narcisistico, così da dare spazio a una costellazione di questioni che si sviluppano intorno alla miriade di aspetti dinamici ed evolutivi del rispecchiamento e dell'attunement: i narcisismi.

**Bajo el espejo de las aguas durmientes. El Narciso de Poussin.** Examinados simultáneamente con un análisis de texto de las *Metamorfosis* de Ovidio, los cuatro cuadros de Poussin sobre el inquietante tema de Narciso y Eco reflejan una interpretación estética de su fuente literaria en proceso de evolución. La visión reflexiva de Poussin respalda una reevaluación radical del enigmático mito, fundante de la teoría y la práctica psicoanalíticas. Según esta reinterpretación, Narciso constituye una figura mucho más relacionada con los objetos que busca el espejamiento formativo y afirmativo del otro. Esta reevaluación, a su vez, fomenta una conceptualización más versátil del trastorno narcisista que da cabida a una constelación de temas centrados en la miríada de aspectos dinámicos y evolutivos del espejamiento y la sintonía: los narcisismos.

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