

Another Time

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What would she have gone on to write and by what right do I speak about it? In preparing these words for this session in memory of Pleshette DeArmitt's work, I found myself haunted by that thought and those phrases. She was supposed to have been here with us. Thinking about her present absence at SPEP this year and at every SPEP from now on, no longer can we imagine what, alive, she will have written for this occasion, but rather what she might have written. What she might have written, that is, had she not horribly, cruelly, unfairly, unbearably been taken from us before her time.

Re-reading her work now is especially painful because much—if not all—of her writing is about learning how to mourn. Or, rather, how not to mourn. Everywhere she writes about the impossible distinction between mourning and melancholia and about the ethical limits and political pitfalls of seeking to avoid the fear of loss by seeking consolation in philosophy or art.¹ In essays that now take on an added poignancy, drawing on writings by Sarah Kofman and Jacques Derrida, she calls for a melancholic thinking of both mourning and narcissism that impossibly affirms the pain of death so as to remain in touch with the life of the one who has died. In text after text, she explored the painful double binds of mourning. No love without mourning, no life without death, no relation to the other without narcissism.

Pleshette DeArmitt's book, *The Right to Narcissism: A Case for Im-Possible Self-Love*, is a call to rehabilitate the concept of narcissism by showing that it is an ineluctable structure constitutive of human subjectivity rather than a pathological symptom. The book explores what happens to the very notion of the self once one recognizes that narcissism is a condition of possibility for subjectivity rather than something that happens to a subject who is already constituted. In her probing discussions of Rousseau, Kristeva, and Derrida, she shows how, paradoxically, self-love is not the other to love, but rather that which makes the relation to the other possible.

I have been dwelling in Pleshette's writings over the past several weeks. In my own melancholy, unable to accept the basic, and apparently irrefutable fact that there will be no more of them, I found myself pouring over her texts for traces, spoor, signs, omens, augurs, of her (now impossible) future writings. And, in the process, something strange started to happen. I began to look past the many polished and elegant formulations in the body of her texts and my gaze focused instead on the moments where Pleshette indicated, sometimes by the barest phrase or gesture, what she may have wanted to pursue in the future. I started to see some patterns in the raw and vital questions that she exuberantly announces in footnotes and the still emerging potent insights that lurk in the margins of her reflections on the relationship between narcissism, alterity, and mourning.

Somewhat to my surprise, one of the things I found was that her book (and indeed her entire corpus) is haunted by—and obsessively turns around—a text by Freud that it does not address directly. Freud's "On Narcissism: An Introduction" is everywhere and nowhere in Pleshette's work.² I mean no disrespect to her by observing this. The force of her avoidance of this text is so palpable—and so prevalent—that it becomes an interesting and rigorous reading in its own right.

Pleshette does mention "On Narcissism" on several occasions in *The Right to Narcissism*. But those occasions are mostly either in footnotes, textual asides, or via Julia Kristeva's highly idiosyncratic (and—in my view—inadequate) recapitulation of Freud's argument. Nonetheless, despite the lack of explicit commentary on it, Freud's text on narcissism operates like a secret conduit that connects some of the most powerful insights in her readings of Rousseau, Kristeva, and Derrida to one another. More strangely still, at every point she refers or alludes to Freud's text, a potent latent question blooms, like a flower, like an open wound.

For example, in the middle of a discussion of Kristeva's reading of Freud, she stops to wonder why:

when Freud's Narcissus appears as a "subject," he most frequently appears as a woman (or occasionally as a homosexual, i.e., a feminized man). [...] Whether as subject or object, ego or other, Narcissus, after nearly two thousand years as a pubescent male, undergoes a sex change. This, however, is another story—therefore, we will put aside this curious shift for another time.³

Another time. The footnote that accompanies the (now awful) promise to revisit this question "another time" is three pages long. In that long and impassioned footnote, Pleshette calls attention to the fact that Freud's depiction of the narcissistic woman as self-sufficient in "On Narcissism" appears to contradict his many depictions of woman as "narcissistically wounded" by her lack of a penis in most of his texts about sexuality and

sexual difference. This footnote is closely related to an unpublished paper that she gave at SPEP in 2011 and is clearly the basis for a longer and more sustained future reflection on narcissism and sexual difference in Freud's writings.⁴ As I publicly responded to Pleshette's provocative argument at that SPEP in 2011, I will put aside further reflections about how she may have gone on to develop those ideas for yet another time.

In her reading of Rousseau, Freud's "On Narcissism" pops up somewhat unexpectedly in a footnote to the argument detailing the paradoxical and complex relationship between "*amour de soi*" (self-love) and "*amour-propre*" (self-regard). In that footnote, Pleshette writes, "It is interesting to note that in his seminal essay "On Narcissism," Freud also employs the examples of the child's self-satisfaction and the sick person's self absorption to illustrate the narcissistic disposition."⁵ As the footnote indicates, there are powerful connections to be made between Rousseau and Freud. Although she doesn't pursue the question here, she implicitly suggests that one could compare Rousseau's distinction between "*amour de soi*" (self-love) and "*amour propre*" (self-regard) to Freud's distinction between primary and secondary narcissism. Moreover, because the inaugural argument of Pleshette's book takes off from the claim that Rousseau's inability to establish a clear distinction between these two forms of self-love obliges him to introduce an irreducible alterity into the very constitution of the self, and because she herself alludes, albeit obliquely, to the similarities between the description of narcissism in Rousseau and Freud, one can only mourn the fact that she did not pursue the question of how the alterity that she discovers in Rousseau might have found a fascinating counterpoint in Freud's attempts to differentiate primary and secondary narcissism.

Freud's "On Narcissism" is also highly present and absent in the Kristeva section of the book. In its central chapter, "Reconceiving Freud's Narcissus," Pleshette makes it clear that her explicit aim is to rehabilitate Freud's concept of narcissism by reclaiming that concept *from* Freud. Therefore, instead of looking directly at Freud's text, she chooses to focus her attention on two critical readings of it: Sarah Kofman's feminist critique in *The Enigma of Woman* and Julia Kristeva's feminist/analytical re-writing of the psychic structure of narcissism in *Tales of Love* and *New Maladies of the Soul*. In the chapter called "Reconceiving Freud's Narcissus," Freud's text on narcissism is communicated almost entirely through Kristeva's words and conceptual framework. While this produces a very powerful and moving reading of Kristeva's understanding of primary narcissistic identification as a ternary structure through which "in receiving the other's words, in chewing on and swallowing these sounds, the infant becomes bound to the third in love,"⁶ the chapter is nonetheless haunted by the absence of a more direct and sustained engagement with the vertiginous complexities of Freud's text. Curiously, in "Reconceiving Freud's

Narcissus,” Ovid seems to take the place of Freud. The DeArmitt/Kristeva readings of Ovid’s narcissus replace and displace the missing reading of Freud’s text in ways that are intriguing and suggestive. In one of the most compelling passages of the book, Pleshette calls attention to the implications of Kristeva’s reading of Echo and Narcissus in *Tales of Love* by reminding us that Ovid recounts Echo’s predicament of being condemned to repeat the words of the other *prior* to his depiction of the scene in which Narcissus becomes enamored with and alienated from his own image in the pool of water. By insisting on the fact that Echo’s echoes both announce and prefigure Narcissus’s subsequent self-doubling, Pleshette (following Kristeva) underscores the fact that Echo and Narcissus are inseparable from one another and that they are inverted images of one another. Narcissus’s specular discovery that he is other *to* himself repeats and echoes Echo’s inability to speak *by* herself. Here, as elsewhere in the book, Pleshette DeArmitt’s rehabilitation of Narcissus entails a recognition of the fact that Echo was always already in the scene with Narcissus and therefore that the other participates in the construction of the self from the beginning. No Narcissus without Echo.

Freud’s “On Narcissism” also haunts the section of the book devoted to Derrida. At a critical moment, Pleshette cites a passage from Derrida’s *Memoires for Paul de Man* in which he calls for the “necessity” of re-reading of Freud’s “On Narcissism” together with Paul de Man’s writings on Narcissus and allegory:

On the question of Narcissus and the aforementioned narcissism, it will one day be necessary to read (and I am certain that someone will) those infinitely complicated texts on narcissism: namely, Freud’s “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” together with all the numerous and inexhaustible texts in which Paul de Man puts Narcissus back in play.⁷

Pleshette glosses this quote by suggesting that Derrida’s own texts perform the very task he calls for when she writes, “It is Derrida...who has put Narcissus back on the scene by re-working the structures of self-relation in terms of the experiences of vision and of voice.”⁸ But let us be clear about something: it is no accident that Derrida proposes to send in a proxy, some future reader, to do his reading for him when he here puts aside a future reading of “On Narcissism” for “another time.”

As Derrida knows only too well, narcissism in Freud (in all of its guises and all of its vicissitudes) never in fact describes a state of self-identity or of felicitous self-love. Narcissism—as it is lived by any subject, male or female, homosexual or heterosexual—is the source of a never-ending fatal love story consisting of alienation, aggression, cannibalism, and suffering. As Freud explains in “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” we are condemned to love so

as not to become sick but being in love makes us suffer and become sick. Moreover, contrary to what Kofman and Kristeva suggest, Freud himself openly concedes that the gender positions that he briefly and weakly assigns to two different modes of loving (anaclitic and narcissistic) are resolutely untenable. Any and every attempt to ascribe sex or gender positions to loving produces hallucinatory vertigo because we are all perpetually torn between narcissistic love (in which we attempt to take ourselves as the object of love) and object-love (in which we attempt to love another). More importantly, as Freud also points out, in order to survive, we must love the other in the self and the self in the other. When love fails (either because of an excess of self-love or an excess of love of the other), it is, as Freud himself explicitly puts it, nothing less than “the end of the world.”⁹ If there is too much love for the other, the world ends in suicide, if there is too much love for the self, the world ends in psychosis. In “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud famously writes that “in mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.”¹⁰ But the very fact that the world can be drained, or cease to be, indicates how very precariously it was constructed in the first place.

Some readers of Derrida’s *Work of Mourning* might be surprised to learn that the phrase “the end of the world” occupies such a pivotal place in Freud’s “On Narcissism.”¹¹ But if, as Derrida insists, and as Pleshette repeatedly quotes him as saying, there is “no one narcissism,” and “narcissism has no contrary, no other side, no beyond, and love for the other, respect for the other, self-denial in favor of the other do not interrupt any narcissistic moment,” it is because narcissism is not merely an element of madness within subjectivity, it is the very name for the madness of subject. Subjectivity is a precarious compromise formation that allows the world to come into being.

If we read it in light of Pleshette’s injunction to understand narcissism as “a structure and not a symptom,” Freud’s “On Narcissism” compels us to reckon with the thought that the other side of the subject is not the object, but the end of the world itself. Moreover, because the very essence of narcissism is an abyssal inability to differentiate between love of self and love of the other, the threat of madness and death that is inherent to narcissism does not lie outside or beyond the structure of subjectivity, it is constitutive of it. All narcissistic structures are maddening because they are all mad. Pleshette has shown us that Narcissus and Echo are not two distinct figures with two distinct sexes and destinies, but two allegories of the same structural madness that we call love. And, as she intimated throughout her work, in any elaboration of narcissism worthy of the name (and here I would include Ovid, Rousseau, Freud, de Man, Derrida, Kofman, for starters) one can no longer distinguish other from self, desire from identification, reality from fantasy, male from female, child from parent, or life from death.

As I imagine many of us have observed, Pleshette often liked to begin and end her papers by echoing the words of others. Like Echo, her voice was never more her own than when she spoke through quotation. We who are left here without Pleshette will have only begun to read the words she left with us. We will now need to echo all of the voices in her writings as we go on to think about what she put aside for another time.

¹ Although this essay will focus on Pleshette DeArmitt's book, *The Right to Narcissism: A Case For an Im-Possible Self-Love* (New York, Fordham University, 2014), for a better appreciation of Pleshette's longstanding engagement with mourning and melancholia, see also the following essays: "Conjuring Bodies: Kofman's Lesson on Death," *Parallax* 17:1 (2011): 4-17. "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation, or the 'Non-illusory Life of an illusion,'" in *Sarah Kofman's Corpus*, eds. Tina Chanter and Pleshette DeArmitt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008): 23-32. "A Mighty Narcissism," *The Oxford Literary Review: A Decade After Derrida* 36.2 (2014): 200-202.

² Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957) 67-102.

³ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 62-63.

⁴ Pleshette DeArmitt, "The Narcissism of Minor Sexual Differences." Paper presented at the annual meeting of SPEP, Philadelphia, October 19-22, 2011.

⁵ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 152.

⁶ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 73.

⁷ Derrida cited in DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 97.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Freud, "On Narcissism," 76.

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 14, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957) 246.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, eds. and trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001). The phrase "the end of the world" is highlighted in the French version of this collection, which was called *Chaque fois unique, la fin du monde* (Paris: Galilée, 2003). See Michael Naas's recent book, *The End of the World and Other Teachable Moments* (New York:

Fordham University Press, 2015) for an eloquent elaboration of how to understand Derrida's repeated claim that when someone dies, it is "the end of the world."