

## Echoes of Beauty

---

In Memory of Pleshette DeArmitt

*Elaine P. Miller*

Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy - Revue de la philosophie  
française et de langue française, Vol XXIII, No 2 (2015) pp 67-75

Vol XXIII, No 2 (2015)  
ISSN 1936-6280 (print)  
ISSN 2155-1162 (online)  
DOI 10.5195/jffp.2015.704  
[www.jffp.org](http://www.jffp.org)



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.



This journal is operated by the University Library System of the University of Pittsburgh  
as part of its D-Scribe Digital Publishing Program, and is co-sponsored by the  
University of Pittsburgh Press

# Echoes of Beauty

In Memory of Pleshette DeArmitt

---

*Elaine P. Miller*

Miami University

There is a special poignancy to the fact that Pleshette DeArmitt's essay "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation" foregrounds Freud's essay "On Transience," in which he muses on the fact that beauty seems to be inextricably linked to a fleeting existence. As DeArmitt writes, "beauty, even in full flowering, foreshadows its own demise, causing what Freud describes as 'a foretaste of mourning.'"<sup>1</sup> Such a transience, in Freud's mind, increases rather than decreases the worth of all that is beautiful.<sup>2</sup> In her essay, DeArmitt argues that Kofman's 1985 text *Mélancolie de l'Art* reinscribes Freud's text, but brings it into the present by pointing to contemporary art as the occasion for the opening up of a new space, one capable of "dislocat[ing] the space of representation and meaning" and "invent[ing] a space of indetermination and play."<sup>3</sup> Through dislocation of a fixed reference or meaning and opening up a place for indeterminacy and play, contemporary art acknowledges and celebrates, rather than regrets, the transience of beauty.

In her introduction to *Sara Kofman's Corpus*, which she co-edited with Tina Chanter, DeArmitt writes that Kofman described the art of modernity, in particular that of Kandinsky, Magritte, and Bacon, as figurative but non-mimetic. Kofman argued that such art presents something that goes beyond the descriptive capabilities of linguistic discourse, and thus the question of the meaning of the this new figurative order of art cannot be definitively answered, even by a theory such as her own; in other words, art poses questions, rather than giving answers. DeArmitt's own philosophy is also informed by this capacity of contemporary art to suggest and question, and her monograph *The Right to Narcissism* features an "elegant and spare" portrayal, by the artist Billy Zane, of Echo and Narcissus.

DeArmitt traces Kofman's rejection of a certain understanding of the meaning of beauty, which, for the sake of simple reference, I will call (as she does) "Platonic." Kofman describes this ideal as "an unchanging, eternal,

marmoreal beauty that nothing can taint, wither, or ravage" which, "in contrast to physical beauty, is not destined to decay."<sup>4</sup> We might compare this ideal beauty, which escapes all evanescence and decline, and of which all earthly beauty is but a pale shadow, to a self-enclosed and replete narcissism that eschews any flaw and indeed any relation to temporality at all. Kofman explores this kind of aesthetic narcissism in her reading of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, a story in which Basil, an artist, discovers in Dorian Gray, his model and muse, the "secret wonder he is seeking...of which the visible beauty of Dorian is just a shadow or a mere pattern."<sup>5</sup>

In dismantling the Platonic ideal of beauty, Kofman chooses to focus on the figure of the flower, which has traditionally often been chosen by writers to represent ideal beauty (and indeed Wilde's text is full of flowers). From Ovid to Kant, the flower has been used, in Kofman's words, as a figure of protection from the "loss of our narcissistic securities," which threatens beauty as well as life.<sup>6</sup> As DeArmitt notes, Narcissus, in the myth recounted by Ovid, not only is a beautiful young man, but also becomes a beautiful flower. Unlike the ideal beauty that they stand in for, however, actual flowers are fragile and transient. The Narcissus flower, in contrast to both the youth, who perishes, or idealized beauty, which endures unchanged, is in fact a "symbol of the evanescence of human beauty and its imposture," for, even as it manifests fragility, it "makes us believe in the illusion" of its impossible eternity.<sup>7</sup> This doubleness in time, simultaneous transience and apparent eternity, finitude and a beautiful mask that protects us from our anxiety in the face of this finitude, characterizes both beauty and narcissism understood in the more complex sense traced by DeArmitt in her later work.

Successful art has this fundamental duality, which Kofman discusses in terms of the Nietzschean distinction between the Dionysian and Apollinian aesthetic forces, where the Dionysian force is destructive of individual form in a way that is at once terrifying, intoxicating and unifying, and the Apollinian force gives rise to a series of dream-like and measured images.<sup>8</sup> This duality is not to be interpreted in the simple or straightforward sense that Apollo's images give us solace from the intolerable truth of Dionysus, that is, as a divine illusion, however. Rather, in the words of Derrida commenting on Kofman's work on Nietzsche, which DeArmitt in turn cites, art understood as indeterminacy or play among two forces manifests a certain "affirmation of art...even in its function of occultation or illusion, the *non-illusory life of an illusion*, manifesting, affirming and still holding on to life, carrying it living right to its limit."<sup>9</sup> This is what Kofman refers to as the "imposture of art". Life's limit, be it death, or suffering, would be intolerable if not for this joyous affirmation in indeterminacy and play and in dislocation of reference and meaning, one that nonetheless recognizes and acquiesces to its own nature as illusion.

DeArmitt's reconceptualization of Narcissus in her 2014 monograph *The Right to Narcissism* reflects this second relationship of the Dionysian to the Apollinian as interpreted by Kofman and Derrida in their reading of Nietzsche. Apollo's dream images interpreted as a Schopenhauerian detachment shielding us from the Dionysian abyss of existence would align with the idea of a beauty that endures untouched by time. To understand the relationship between the Dionysian and the Apollinian as a knowing and playful imposture, by contrast, is to conceptualize art as the non-illusory life of an illusion. While Narcissus might initially seem to be a figure for a kind of delusional imposture, one that, in Kofman's words, appears to protect us "from any fall, any flaw, failure, defilement, degradation, corruption—from ruin, the defeat with which, in reality, beauty itself is fatally threatened,"<sup>10</sup> in fact there is a kind of knowingness in this new, richer sense of narcissism that allows us to rightfully call it, along with art, a non-illusory life of an illusion. In this new, more complex sense of narcissism that DeArmitt uncovers in the texts of Rousseau, Kristeva, and Derrida, a fundamental doubleness perdures that I will relate to Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*.

While DeArmitt's earlier article on Kofman concerns the dual capacity of art to both unmask and affirm a peculiar type of illusion, her monograph outlines a doubleness or ambiguity (Beauvoir uses the word in its etymological significance) that we might call both structural in the formation of the self in its relations to others and the world, and existential. She traces a specific form of experience in which "the relation to the other is fundamental to the formation of the *self* and its narcissism, while at the same time [it] interrupts the self's return to itself."<sup>11</sup> She links the narcissistic circuit of self-return to the history of the constitution of the atomic philosophical subject, and to that of the democratic citizen "who recognizes himself first and foremost as the subject of rights."<sup>12</sup> She cites Derrida, who argues that "the history of the rights of 'man,' beginning with the right to recognize oneself as a man" belongs to the "metaphysical movement of specular self-relation."<sup>13</sup> The legacy of the rights of man is inextricably bound up with the "*autos* of autonomy, symmetry, homogeneity, the same, the like," to the point of insisting that if the other is involved, it must be one who is similar, like him.<sup>14</sup>

In terms of the discourse of subjectivity and human rights, being closed to any other except the one who resembles me correlates to the eternity of the traditional "narcissistic" vision of beauty, and thus this structural and existential sense of doubleness can be related back to Kofman's discourse on art. A transformed sense of narcissism would, then, correlate to a theory of beauty that acknowledges time, transience, and loss. This more complex sense of narcissism would be one that is open to the other, even the one with whom I have nothing in common. In DeArmitt's argument, for Rousseau, this experience lies in what he calls *pitié*, or empathy; for Kristeva, in

“transference love”; and for Derrida, in the context of an open-ended mourning that is both structural and singular.<sup>15</sup>

The theories on developmental narcissism of all three of these thinkers express an ambiguity in the Beauvoirian sense, that is, both a fundamental two-ness, but also a dynamic, changing temporal existence whose meaning is never fixed, must continually be won.<sup>16</sup> Much of Beauvoir's work advocates an existentialist struggle against the reifying plenitude that results when one attempts to constitute oneself as a self-enclosed and motionless thing or the embodiment of an ideal. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir defines narcissism as the attempt to “accomplish the impossible synthesis of the in-itself and the for-itself.”<sup>17</sup> There, noting the limitations historically placed on women, she argues that in not being able to achieve self-realization through concrete projects and objectives, women are too often forced to find their reality in the immanence of their own person, either in the “motionless, silvered trap” of their appearance or in their fantasy life, a “‘strength’ or ‘virtue’ as obscure,” Beauvoir writes, “as phlogiston.”<sup>18</sup>

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir describes the serious man as similarly one who tries to achieve the impossible synthesis of the for-itself and in-itself.<sup>19</sup> The serious world, where the child and to a certain extent woman lives, is constructed in advance by values, customs, and laws which they have not chosen and to which they have no choice but to conform. The world appears as given in advance to the one on whom economic and social circumstances act, rather than being modifiable by her own acts.<sup>20</sup> God, the ultimate plenitude of in-itself and for-itself, is the creation, in Beauvoir's mind, of serious “men” who desire “the regard of this existing Being to change [their] existence into being.”<sup>21</sup> Because the source of meaning is external to the serious persons and monolithic, they also require that others bend to its dictates for their own good.

DeArmitt writes that what Derrida's corpus calls for, and that to which her own monograph responds, is “the coupling of the deconstruction of every narcissism of the One with the reconfiguring of a narcissism, and the ‘right’ to it, that is more open to the other *as* other.”<sup>22</sup> Likewise, in Kofman's words, in repeating or doubling herself in the work of art the artist achieves “a nonpresence to self, an originary dissatisfaction, a death immanent in life, and the absence of any simple and full origin.”<sup>23</sup>

DeArmitt finds psychoanalytical inspiration for this deconstructed sense of narcissism in the work of Julia Kristeva, in particular in Kristeva's conception of self-love as a “‘primary identity organization’ that enables the emergence of a subject.”<sup>24</sup> Because Kristeva's account of narcissism involves the child's separation from fusion with the mother (or autoeroticism) toward an identification with a discursive Third, with whom it identifies and whose speech it incorporates, it is particularly central to DeArmitt's structural historical account of narcissism. In becoming like the Third or loving Other,

the child may also begin to love herself and take up a "position of subjectivity transformed in and through the Other."<sup>25</sup> Like Echo, the newly formed subject in process "catches the words, or simply the sounds, of the Other and delights in repeating, reproducing, and sending back the music that her ears have caught."<sup>26</sup>

To trace this new sense of narcissism historically, DeArmitt begins by delimiting two levels of self-love in Rousseau: a more natural and healthy notion of *amour de soi*, which propels a vital existence, and a malignant form of self-love, *amour propre*, which is gained in society through vanity and comparison with others. Ultimately, DeArmitt argues, however, that Rousseau's condemnation of *amour propre* cannot be aligned with the moralist tradition that he inherits. Rather than simply condemning *amour propre*, on DeArmitt's reading, Rousseau transforms it and devises a historically unprecedented conception of narcissism,<sup>27</sup> that is, a fully fleshed out (and thus no longer simply natural) *amour de soi* that can only be made manifest through the socially constructed *amour propre* that the tradition out of which he arises condemns.<sup>28</sup>

In addition to reworking the opposition between *amour de soi* and *amour propre*, Rousseau's concept of *pitié* also opens up a new way of thinking the relation between love of self and love of other, for *pitié*, or empathy derives from *amour de soi*, which propels every animal to tend to itself for its well-being and self-preservation. Empathy is *amour de soi* turned outward, tending toward the preservation of the species and not solely of the self. Neither pity nor this natural self-love are reflective or the product of imagination. *Amour propre*, by contrast, is the product of imagination; it is the "functioning of the *I* as it is socially constituted." Thus, DeArmitt argues, *amour de soi* can only persist in intersubjective life as a form of *amour propre*, one mediated by empathy for the needs of others, and thereby transformed into a virtue.<sup>29</sup> This relationship bears a likeness to that between the Dionysian and the Apollinian in art; the framing of the Apollinian, despite its provisionality and artificiality, forms a means through which the Dionysian can be sustained and transformed.

Kofman also calls this kind of relationship sublimation, arguing that the artist tries to repeat what the child does in play, that is, to repeat ever-differently. Calling sublimation a "little death" in that it effects a separation and thus partial liberation of the death drive, just as the child separates from the mother, Kofman argues that culture is possible only through regression, that is, through a liberation of death forces that allows for a splitting of the life forces into partial drives that can be channeled into self-enclosed entities like the subject and culture instead of constantly being discharged outwardly.<sup>30</sup> As Freud notes in *The Ego and the Id*, sublimation is related in this way to ego-formation, since it involves a channeling of sexual aims ordinarily directed toward external objects back toward the "I" itself, which constitutes itself as an object in order to deepen its relations with the id and

gain control over it by making itself essentially self-loved. Kofman argues that even more so in the case of artworks, which, like the ego, are a product of a specific form of desexualization, namely the transformation of object-libido into narcissistic libido, "the artist is not really the 'father' of his works," but rather "it is instead the works that engender their father and are constitutive of his identity."<sup>31</sup> Kofman emphasizes the narcissistic pleasure that is both a motivation for the creation of art and an effect of the experience of artworks, describing them, in terms of Andre Green's neologism, as "transnarcissistic objects" since both artist and public can share narcissistic pleasure in them, as reflections of personal and cultural achievement.<sup>32</sup>

Art's pleasure is a narcissistic one in the sense that it "rests essentially on a saving of expenditure, as 'narcosis.'" Life energy that would otherwise be directed outward toward an object of desire is instead held in reserve to feed the ego. Narcissism, for Kofman is "search for immortality" that "can only be achieved by mimicking death in life," that is, by sublimation in this specific sense. It is a kind of "stockpiling of the self," one which lulls both the individual and the society into a contemplation of the values it has created.<sup>33</sup> Beauvoir refers to this form of narcissism negatively as an ethics of being or saving; in storing up being, she argues, one aims at the stationary plenitude of the in-itself. An ethics of existence, by contrast, in Beauvoir's words, "makes itself only by destroying." She gives as an example the festival, where existence is celebrated *as* existence through consumption: "one eats, drinks, lights fires, breaks things, and spends time and money; one spends them for nothing." Likewise, in songs, laughter, dances, eroticism, and drunkenness one seeks both an exaltation of the moment and a complicity with other people.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, the "tension" and "pure negativity" of existence cannot maintain itself for very long, and so, for Beauvoir as for Kofman, one of art's roles is to "fix this passionate assertion of existence in a more durable way" without thereby transforming it into static being,<sup>35</sup> just as the Apollinian provides a frame within which to endure, but not to deceptively deny, the negativity of the Dionysian.

DeArmitt discerns an analogous relationship between Echo and Narcissus, one which accords to Echo a role that is much more than a simple mimicking of Narcissus' words. In reading Derrida in the third part of her book, DeArmitt notes that in Derrida's reading the call of Echo is the sole means through which Narcissus can gaze at himself.<sup>36</sup> Echo's words both repeat and return something other, something unforeseeable, to Narcissus' speech. DeArmitt finds in this reading of Echo a figure for philosophy itself, the kind of philosophizing we all strive to do. Citing Peggy Kamuf, she writes that Derrida chooses texts to "deconstruct" precisely because he feels an "impulse of identification" and "loving jealousy" toward them.<sup>37</sup> The words of Echo not only mirror, but also transform what they reflect, opening up the possibility of reading something in a new way, in the manner of a

trans-narcissism opened up to the other, one that would not be a mere endless spinning in a self-enclosed void.

Pleshette's book eloquently argues for a conception of self-formation that remains open to the other. Her Narcissus responds to the voice of Echo, who, outsmarting the law of reiteration, lets be heard "something other than what she is saying" so that she may speak "of herself and on her own" and not simply repeat his words.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, Pleshette's philosophy also reflects the influence of Luce Irigaray, who argued that woman's role historically has been to function as the speculum of the other, the mirrored surface that reflects back to him his own self-absorbed image without herself coming to presence.<sup>39</sup> For Pleshette, the mirror's surface, understood in this new way informed by Rousseau, Kristeva, and Derrida, may be able reflect Echo herself by virtue of her relation to the other, and not at her own expense.

On a personal note, Pleshette's discussion of Echo's voice struck a chord with me, because when I think of her, I can still, above all, hear her voice, lovingly and gently mocking both herself and others, "the *non-illusory life of an illusion*, manifesting, affirming and still holding on to life, carrying it living right to its limit." We mourn her, and our mourning is unfeasible. In her own words: "We must and must not get over the other, making the position of the survivor truly untenable, often unbearable, always impossible."<sup>40</sup> We feel, in her absence, what Derrida called "*la mort dans l'ame*," a death in the soul, because, as he said of Paul de Man, from now on we are destined to speak *of* her, instead of *to* and *with* her.<sup>41</sup> We rejoice, however, that fragments of Pleshette's thought and life have been captured, however incompletely, in the ideas presented in these two strong and complementary texts she left behind.

---

<sup>1</sup> Pleshette DeArmitt, "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: State University of New York Press 2008), 23. See also Sigmund Freud, "On Transience," (1916), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1957), 305-308.

<sup>2</sup> Freud, "On Transience," 307; DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 24.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Kofman, *Mélancolie de L'Art* (Paris: Gallilée, 1985), back cover, trans. and cited in DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 23-31 in *Sarah Kofman's*



*Corpus*, eds. Tina Chanter and Pleshette DeArmitt (Albany: State University of New York Press: 2008), 24.

<sup>4</sup> Kofman, "The Imposture of Art: The Uncanniness of Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*," trans. Duncan Large, in *Enigmas: Essays on Sarah Kofman*, eds. Penelope Deutscher and Kelly Oliver (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (New York: Random House 1992), 36. Cited in DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 25.

<sup>6</sup> DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 25.

<sup>7</sup> DeArmitt, "Sarah Kofman's Art of Affirmation," 26.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 12-14.

<sup>9</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 182.

<sup>10</sup> Kofman, *Mélancolie de l'Art*, 33.

<sup>11</sup> Pleshette DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism: The Case for an Im-possible Self Love* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014), 13.

<sup>12</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Rogues*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 30.

<sup>14</sup> Derrida, *Rogues*, 35.

<sup>15</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 14.

<sup>16</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), 129.

<sup>17</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 670.

<sup>18</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 674.

<sup>19</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 52.

<sup>20</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 48.

<sup>21</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 12.

<sup>23</sup> Sarah Kofman, *The Childhood of Art: An Interpretation of Freud's Aesthetics*, trans. Winifred Woodhull (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 118.

<sup>24</sup> Julia Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 46. Cited in DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 57.

<sup>25</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 59.

- <sup>26</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 73.
- <sup>27</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 19.
- <sup>28</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 49-50.
- <sup>29</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 50.
- <sup>30</sup> Kofman, *The Childhood of Art*, 128-130.
- <sup>31</sup> Kofman, *The Childhood of Art*, 127.
- <sup>32</sup> Kofman, *The Childhood of Art*, 118.
- <sup>33</sup> Kofman, *The Childhood of Art*, 128.
- <sup>34</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 126.
- <sup>35</sup> Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, 127.
- <sup>36</sup> Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 2001), 204; DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 125.
- <sup>37</sup> Peggy Kamuf, *Book of Addresses* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 87, cited in DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 136.
- <sup>38</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 127.
- <sup>39</sup> See Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, trans. Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).
- <sup>40</sup> DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 116.
- <sup>41</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*, trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava, and Peggy Kamuf (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), xv.