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The Significance of Narcissism

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I met Pleshette many years ago, but we forged our friendship not long ago out of our mutual distaste for petty academic squabbles and the *ressentiment* that plagues our profession—*ressentiment* that is frequently motivated by greed, vanity, etc. I remember one particular evening while dining together we shared a conversation in which I realized we also shared a mutual love of Rousseau. No doubt all of these mutual loves were connected. I first read Pleshette's book, *The Right to Narcissism: A Case For an Im-Possible Self-Love*, over the 2014 summer in preparation for her visit last fall to my gender theory class at Texas A&M.¹ Unfortunately, she injured her back and was unable to make the trip. When I returned to her book a year later to write this paper, I felt like I was reading a different book. The words were the same, but her discussions took on new meaning given her recent tragic death.

Pleshette is everywhere in this book. Her sensitivity, her erudition, her creativity, and her love of life touch each page. I will be honest. This paper is one of the most difficult I have ever written and writing it simply made me sad. Although many of us work on philosophers who have long passed away, we do not mourn them as much as we might wish we could still ask them a question or two. It is so different when the philosopher is someone you knew, someone you corresponded with, someone you called a friend. Her book is generative and the themes and questions it generates are rich. Reading her book, I wished Pleshette was here and we could work out these themes and the questions her book generates over a nice meal and a glass of wine. What I would like to do now is outline the narrative arc of her book and then raise some questions and themes that her book generates for me—and maybe for others also.

In *The Right to Narcissism*, Pleshette takes us through three accounts of self-love offered by Rousseau, Kristeva, and Derrida respectively.² In each case, she demonstrates that self-love is necessary for love of other. Let me begin with Rousseau. As most readers of Rousseau know, Rousseau gives two accounts of self-love, which as Pleshette notes, are frequently and

naively read as distinct and unconnected. The first, *amour de soi*, is viewed positively. It is the “good kind” of self-love. Good, here, is read as natural. It emerges out of and is linked to self-preservation. The second kind of self-love, *amour-propre*, is generally viewed as the bad kind. It is the kind that feeds, or rather is fed by, flattery, vanity, greed, and so forth. It is a self-love that is dependent in a way that concerns Rousseau. *Amour-propre* is not “natural.” Rather it forms out of the developmental process. Many read Rousseau as treating education as a means to stave off or mitigate this particular brand of self-love. In her discussion of Rousseau, Pleshette makes several important observations. First, by reading Rousseau against himself, or more accurately, by reading Rousseau with himself, Pleshette demonstrates that these two versions of self-love are not as unrelated or disconnected as conventionally thought. Second, she demonstrates that the love for another emerges out of the love for the self via *pitié*, or pity.³

Carefully taking us through the steps for this movement, Pleshette shows how Rousseau sees the connection. I am able to identify the suffering in/of another and I recognize this suffering as something that I might experience. That is, motivated by self-preservation, I see two things: first, I recognize that this suffering is something I would wish to stop, and second I can see this in the other also. I recognize the other’s suffering as something that she also would wish to stop. Thus, *amour de soi*, and by implication *amour-propre* gives birth to the love for another. Rousseau’s argument does not quite work, but I’ll return to this later. The more important point is that Pleshette links the two kinds of self-love so that the so-called bad version is intimately connected to the so-called good version, and that love for the other emerges from self-love—the two versions connected together.

As one might expect, Kristeva’s view is more complicated than Rousseau’s and it is altered in interesting ways. In Pleshette’s words, Kristeva’s 1983 book *Tales of Love* was her “study of the powerful and inextricable relationship between love of the self and love of the other in Western letters.”⁴ In her reading of Freud, Kristeva notes that narcissism is transformed from being the problem to being viewed as a symptom of a larger problem: the incapacity to love another. These symptoms of the modern individual “arise from an inability to find a discourse for love, or, that is, an incapacity to speak and exist within the boundaries of a lover’s discourse” --a circumstance that Derrida corrects in his re-reading of Echo.⁵ Yet in asserting her claim that “all love discourses have dealt with narcissism,” Kristeva also confirms that the love experience “rests on narcissism.”⁶ That is, she confirms that love for the other comes from love for the self. But Kristeva’s conclusion is more interesting. Pleshette argues that “in a time when there seems to be no absence of narcissistic symptoms, Kristeva asserts that what we are witness to is, ‘our being unable today to elaborate primary narcissism.’”⁷ Thus, our modern crisis is not the result of too much narcissism, but rather not enough.⁸ As a result, Kristeva returns us

to the figure of Narcissus so that we can reorient our relationship to narcissism. In this return, Pleshette believes Kristeva resists the temptation to make self-love a value, or a redemptive feature, leading to love of the other (though I am not sure she is successful here). Kristeva's conception of narcissism provides an advance over those who preceded her. Her originality lies in her ability to see how self-love becomes a constitutive feature necessary to the developing subject⁹. Her reading of self-love is also differentiated from other conceptions insofar as the structure Kristeva outlines is ternary rather than monadic or dyadic.¹⁰ The significant point here is that even the two can be reduced to one insofar as they are fused. The third in Kristeva's account serves, to use Levinas's language, as an interruption, preventing the two from becoming enclosed unto themselves. The emerging subject moves or vacillates between the mother and a third party. The two movements—separation and transference, both of which are essential, form, as Sara Beardsworth writes, "the 'central node of connection and disconnection, fullness and emptiness, positions and losses'"¹¹ and generates what Kristeva calls an "immediate symbolic sensuality."¹²

More significantly, Kristeva sees something in Freud's structure that he did not see—the benefit of transference outside of the therapeutic relationship. For Kristeva, "therapeutic transference is only possible because the *first experience* of love—of being loved and loving oneself—is a movement of transference."¹³ This transference then opens up a space or an emptiness, which becomes the space of imagination. This space, this site of imagination, these fictions form the core of the individual's identity.¹⁴ In short, the child becomes like the loving Other, who appears as One. The child begins to love himself and take up "a position of subjectivity,"¹⁵ which Kristeva defines as "being for and by the Other."¹⁶ Pleshette writes: "We learn that the movement toward individuation, which can only take place through loving identification and transference, entails that the 'I' lose itself in the Other and find itself (transformed) in and through this Other."¹⁷ Yet in spite of this original reading, Pleshette's analysis of Kristeva reveals that love for the other is inextricably bound to love for the self. So while it is the case that self-love is necessary for the emerging subject, that is constitutive of subjectivity, it also remains attached to and redeemed by love for the other, even as Pleshette demonstrates that this movement, this process, is "a source of renewal and creativity."¹⁸

Derrida's reading, although it returns to the story of Narcissus and Echo, focuses primarily on Echo. By taking up themes from both Kristeva and Rousseau, we can see questions that emerge in Rousseau's account but which are not addressed there. There are several versions of the story including one where Narcissus was said to be a Hunter from Thespieae in Boeotia. In other words, he is from the city and merely visiting the woods. Regardless, it is Ovid who inserts the story of Echo into the story of Narcissus.

The conventional reading of Echo is that she repeats what others say—or more specifically, she repeats the last words that others say. Echo takes in the voice or words of Narcissus. She ingests them if you will. Derrida's reading is reminiscent of Levinas's ethics where "we find ourselves *before* the other who will have always come *before* us." Although not directly mentioned, this reading can be supported by the play on words that describe Echo's actions—her response, where "respond" has its roots in responsibility. To respond to the other is to be responsible to or for the Other. Yet, in Derrida's account, the other is not only in us, but also before us. The other is not only taken up and appropriated by us but also exceeds us, resists us. Whatever attempts we make at appropriating the other, this appropriation can never be complete or "successful." The other will always remain "foreign" or transcendent. Indeed, Derrida's reading recalls Kristeva's beautiful reading of the biblical figure David through the figure of Ruth. In this reading, Kristeva reveals how the foreign is fundamentally embodied in the self.¹⁹

Derrida's creative reading provides an interesting twist. Rather than seeing Echo as simply a mimic, Derrida's Echo asserts herself. She puts forth her own voice, a voice that of course must originate from another, and in this case, from Narcissus—from self-love. Where the conventional reading hears Echo as only repeating someone else's words, Pleshette reads Derrida as re-hearing Echo's response—and in turn, he hears Echo as "responsible and affirming." Echo is not only repeating, but also inviting. Because Echo cannot initiate the call to come, she does what is in her power to do: "She prepares for and anticipates [Narcissus's] arrival."²⁰ That is, Echo cannot force or order Narcissus to come to her; but she can welcome him, or more accurately, she can prepare the space that will welcome him. In short, she can provide hospitality. By speaking only the last syllables of what was spoken, Echo makes these words her own. And thus she "signs her own name."²¹ Equating Echo's response to Narcissus with deconstruction itself—also always responding to a call from the other—Derrida sees Echo's words as a response that is not only her own signature, but also a signature of love. Thus, like the readings offered by both Rousseau and Kristeva, Derrida's reading of Echo also reveals a love for other that emerges out of self-love—indeed, it is a lesson that even Narcissus learns from Echo.

Pleshette's book gives much food for thought, so to speak. Her nuanced reading of Rousseau, her re-reading of Kristeva, and her elucidation of Derrida present an interesting and unified narrative that love for the other emerges from self-love, rendering self-love necessary for love. Her book is generative in that it raises a series of fascinating questions. For example, on this reading of self-love, love for the other also redeems self-love. That is, given the connection between the two, self-love is not necessarily valued on its own but rather valued because it allows for love of the other. Is this what the philosophers are saying? Is this what Pleshette is saying? If so, then an

important question to be raised is the following: Who has access to self-love? And in what ways is the answer to this question conditioned by gender? If we return to Rousseau's *Emile*, for example, where does the mother fit in to Pleshette's discussion of self-love in Rousseau? In Book I, the mother's "use" is to breastfeed the baby. The child is then taken from the mother, since the mother also represents culture and could be a "contaminant" to the developing child. Where is Sophie in this discussion? From the discussion in Book V, we know that Sophie is not afforded the same education as the one provided for Emile. On the one hand, it seems clear that Sophie has epistemic privilege in this relationship. We know this because the tutor essentially hands Emile over to her—and Sophie's job is to manipulate Emile to do the right thing without Emile realizing Sophie is manipulating him to do so. So what do we make of Sophie? Does *she* experience *amour de soi*? Is this natural to her? Does she experience *amour-propre*? Without either of these, can she experience *pitié*? Is that developed in her? Is it natural? Is Emile being asked to *learn* something that is *natural* to women? In other words, is the self-love/love of the other distinction not applicable to women? If this is the case, what does it mean for a woman to have love for the other that is not conditioned by self-love? Is this not the cliché of the suffocating or the self-sacrificing mother?

We also know from *Les Solitaires*, the sequel to *Emile*, that Rousseau suspected that his educational project fails in the most spectacular way. One cannot develop in such extreme isolation and then expect to develop healthy relationships. Now, it might be the case given Pleshette's careful reading that the two kinds of self-love, which are normally read as radically distinct, are actually more intertwined. This way of reading the relationship would disrupt the other reading. In other words, it might be the case that Rousseau realized early that the risk of greed and vanity winning out in favor of being able to develop relations with others is a risk that one must take.

There remains a more crucial problem. The argument that Rousseau makes is the following:

I understand myself as a being that suffers. I identify in the other this same kind of suffering. I am repulsed by that suffering. I want it to stop.

Rousseau's treatment of *pitié* offers an advance over previous philosophers, even as it falls short in other ways. He does not account for the different possibilities for how one might respond to the suffering of the other. I could help the person. I could also turn away, not wanting to see the suffering. There is nothing—at least nothing apparent—in Rousseau's philosophy that ensures we will do the former rather than the latter. And in fact we see these very different responses to the images of the drowning Syrian refugees.

I would suggest the more common response is for people to construct their lives so that they do not see the suffering of others. One often reads this failure as precisely the failure of the move from nature to culture. Emile was simply not able to handle this transition. Yet, if Pleshette is right, Rousseau had already embedded *amour-propre* in Emile's development—in other words, the stark distinction between nature and culture is a misreading. Why then the failure? Is it the case that these two kinds of self-love are described independently for descriptive reasons but must in fact develop at the same time? In other words, to put the question differently, what is it that generates the breakdown in the relationship between Emile and Sophie, which becomes emblematic of the breakdown in Rousseau's educational project? As a result, while I agree with Pleshette's reading of this narrative, and indeed, while I believe that she offers an original and important reading of Rousseau, I am not sure that Rousseau has figured out how to make this work.

If we line up *amour de soi* with nature and *amour-propre* with culture, then the comparison with Derrida's reading of Narcissus and Echo becomes even more interesting. Narcissus is a city boy so to speak, who finds himself in the woods—and gets stuck there because he misbehaves. He does not belong in the woods. And in fact we can ask if it is his fault that he does not return Echo's love (although on Derrida's reading, it appears that he does return her love). Echo is a wood nymph who is favored by several of the goddesses and of course punished by the one really important goddess.

On Derrida's reading, Echo responds to the self-love of Narcissus and asserts her own voice. Is this self-love or love of the other? Or, is the story telling us that Echo, as the proxy for love of the other, necessarily emerges from Narcissus—that is, from self-love. One way to read this is to consider that together Narcissus and Echo become the metaphor for what Rousseau attempted to explain. They are the masculine and feminine parts of the self, love of self and love for another—two parts of a single, gendered individual. Like the two previous narratives developed in Pleshette's reading of Rousseau and Kristeva, Pleshette's reading of Derrida's reading of the Narcissus story also follows the movement from self-love to love of/for the other. I appreciate the interpretation that Derrida provides for this myth. But if we circle back around to Rousseau, it remains unclear how this move is made—one can identify with the other and not want to help the other; rather one might be secretly grateful that one is not the other.

As a final observation, I wish to note the resemblance that Kristeva's view has to the one offered by Merleau-Ponty in his 1960 essay, "The Child's Relations with Others."²² Narrating the development of the child from infancy through the stage of separation, Merleau-Ponty describes how we move from a fused state [syncretic] to the state of having a separated, or individuated, identity. Although narrated in a linear fashion, Merleau-Ponty is quick to indicate that he believes we do not leave the syncretic stage

behind. The experience of the fused state remains with us. Indeed, he confides at the end of the essay that he believes love is precisely the movement between the syncretic stage and separation. For Merleau-Ponty, this is how we come to experience the world as a “we.”

The syncretism of childhood, which is never completely liquidated, and the cogito form a relationship that is mutually dependent. This syncretism underlies our relations with others. It is what allows us to experience the world intersubjectively. Love, then, for Merleau-Ponty, is characterized as a blurring of these two states. It sits in the ambiguity of the We and I structures. In love, one returns to a syncretism with another, but this adult syncretism is differentiated from the syncretic we experience in childhood in that the respective perspectives remain. That is, having *moved through* separation and developed our own perspective, we return to syncretism with that individuated perspective in tact. I am not fused with the other. Rather, in love “one enters into an undivided situation with another...,” but the experience of the other is “necessarily an alienating one in the sense that it tears me away from my lone self and creates instead a mixture of myself an other,” a mixture that entails the recognition of other as other.²³ The possibility of love reveals one way the relations between self-awareness and our relations with others is reconciled in a non-conflictual relation, or at least a relationship where the movement between fused boundaries and independent egos can be seen. Although Merleau-Ponty’s view differs in crucial ways from the one offered by Kristeva, we can nonetheless note that on the surface these thinkers struggle with the problem of self-love, or in Merleau-Ponty’s case, overcoming solipsism, which one might say is the epistemic version of narcissism.

In *The Right to Narcissism*, Pleshette writes, “Considering the scope of the thinkers who have carefully and critically treated the thorny question of self-love, it is simply daunting to broach the subject. But perhaps it is even more treacherous to raise the issue if one intends to offer a sympathetic interpretation of this much maligned term and experience.”²⁴ She attributes this courageous move to Kristeva, who undertook the theme in the 80s and 90s. But I would suggest the move is no less courageous in 2013 when Pleshette published her book. In the age of Facebook and “the selfie,” narcissism is viewed no less as a vice now than it was thirty years ago. In this context, the observation by Jill Walker Rettberg, a professor of digital culture, is worth considering. Rettberg writes, “It’s also interesting that dismissing selfies as narcissistic and vapid is almost always aimed at young women, who for the first time are able to decide for themselves how we see them and how they see each other.”²⁵ In other words, we have also not made any advance over the gendered dimension that narcissism conveys. If we follow the lead that Kristeva offers, maybe instead of thinking that these young women are “simply” narcissistic in that they are insecure, we can instead reinterpret their actions as conveying a love of self, a signature, an

autonomous voice that will allow them to have love for the other. In the end, these three thinkers attempt to carve a path that will traverse what appears to be an impossible bridge from the self to the other, from self love to love for the other. Pleshette's book helps not only them but also all of us with that journey.

¹ Pleshette DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism: A Case For an Im-Possible Self-Love* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013).

² Although this is not the space to treat this particular point, it is nonetheless worth noting that love for the other in all three of these thinkers is represented in three different ways. First, in Rousseau, love for the other resembles *agape*, or "brotherly love." Love for the other in Kristeva is maternal love from which the child learns to love another person--one assumes romantically or erotically. The story of Echo and Narcissus is very clearly about erotic love, but also about unrequited love. I am not sure if we were to look closely at these different kinds of love, especially a comparison of *agape* and erotic love, if we would find a common origin. Indeed, I would argue that at least in the case of Levinas, mentioned only briefly in this book, that erotic love emerges separately and is treated very differently from the ethical responsibility for the other that he occasionally describes in terms of love.

³ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 28ff.

⁴ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 54.

⁵ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 55-56.

⁶ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 56.

⁷ As quoted in Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 374/464. See DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 56.

⁸ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 56.

⁹ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 57.

¹⁰ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 67 ff.

¹¹ As quoted in Sara Beardsworth, *Julia Kristeva: Psychoanalysis and Modernity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004) 374.

¹² As cited from Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, 125/158.

¹³ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 59. Briefly, DeArmitt describes the process in the following way: "The first instance of transference, which will be repeated in every amatory relationship, occurs when the infant who is in the throes of separating from the maternal, identifies with and incorporates speech of the third. Through this process of oral assimilation in which the child is carried over to the site

of the third and takes himself for this ideal Other, that a kind of transference or substitution is effected.”

¹⁴ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 59.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 60.

¹⁹ See Julia Kristeva, “The Chosen People and the Choice of Foreignness,” *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press) 65-76.

²⁰ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 134.

²¹ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 135ff.

²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” trans. William Cobb, in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964). See also, Claire Elise Katz, “The Significance of Childhood,” *International Studies in Philosophy*, 34.4 (2002) 77-101.

²³ Merleau-Ponty, “The Child’s Relations with Others,” 155.

²⁴ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 54.

²⁵ Jill Walker Rettberg, quoted on Buzzfeed

http://www.buzzfeed.com/chrisrodley/pop-songs-fact-checked-by-professors?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=BuzzFeed+519&utm_content=BuzzFeed+519+CID_8e074f621f94d8f0d15066a72e8dd277&utm_source=BuzzFeed+Newsletters&utm_term=and+the+results+are+quite+interesting#.ruRkXQYwD

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