

# LOU ANDREAS-SALOMÉ, VIRGINIA WOOLF, AND ANNIE ERNAUX: TOWARDS A FEMINIST THEORY OF NARCISSISM

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## ABSTRACT

Sarah Kofman has shown us how often narcissism is presented as an incriminating trait of femininity. Mistakenly confused with egotism, self-love is denigrated in the name of higher, altruistic values. Salomé's essay "Narzissmus als Doppelrichtung" provides us with a new theory of narcissism, whereas Ernaux offers in her fiction what amounts to a new literary practice. Together, they invite us to redefine this self-love in terms of an autobiographical project that is founded on memory and is ultimately destined to bear witness to the human condition. An aesthetics of self-absorption founded on a narcissistic impulse becomes thus the foundation for a better morality, one that invites us to re-examine the fate of the subject within the symbolic and the social order. A feminist reading of these two authors begs one further question, however. To what extent do the narratives and structures unveiled in these "narcissistic" investigations reflect the condition of woman or, more broadly, the law of gender?

KEY WORDS: Women philosophers, narcissism, autobiography, memory studies, feminism and ethics, feminist theory, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Annie Ernaux.

## RESUMEN

Sarah Kofman ha indicado que el narcisismo se presenta frecuentemente como un rasgo incriminatorio de la femineidad. Erróneamente confundido con el egoísmo, el amor propio se condena en el nombre de valores altruistas superiores. El ensayo de Salomé "Narzissmus als Doppelrichtung" nos provee de una nueva teoría del narcisismo, mientras que Ernaux nos ofrece en su ficción una nueva práctica literaria. Juntas, nos invitan a redefinir este amor propio en términos de un proyecto autobiográfico basado en la memoria, destinado a ser testigo de la condición humana. Una estética de la autoabsorción basada en un impulso narcisista se convierte así en el fundamento para una moral mejor, que nos invita a reexaminar el destino del sujeto dentro del orden simbólico y social. Una lectura feminista de estas dos autoras provoca, sin embargo, otra cuestión: ¿Hasta qué punto las narrativas y estructuras desveladas en estas investigaciones "narcisistas" reflejan la condición de la mujer, o más extensamente, la ley del género?

PALABRAS CLAVE: filósofas, narcisismo, autobiografía, estudios de la memoria, feminismo y ética, teoría feminista, Lou Andreas-Salomé, Annie Ernaux.



With the mythical figure of Narcissus, Freud found an opportunity to develop his theory of desire while giving a psychological foundation to the relation between the self and the other that had otherwise been articulated from a philosophical or ethical perspective. As a libidinal stage connected to the unification of sexual drives and as a structural feature of desire that is never fully overcome, narcissism appears to be a constant, general feature of the human condition. There is no question, however, that universal as it may seem, the concept of narcissism was, from its inception, vested with gendered interests. In *The Enigma of Woman*, Sarah Kofman has astutely traced the misogynistic streak in Freud's 1914 essay "Zur Einführung des Narzissmus" that makes of narcissism a trait shared, mostly, between women and cats (69-70). John Forrester and Lisa Appignesi have meanwhile argued, in *Freud's Women*, that there might be an interesting personal subtext to Freud's theorization of narcissism to be found in the latter's frequent encounters with Lou Andreas-Salomé while he was working out his theory. They suggest that the emphasis on women's narcissism owes much to Freud's regular encounters with an independent, self-confident, cat-loving Salomé and perhaps even more pointedly to the way in which one of her cats, much liked by Freud, turned a cold eye on him (259-60).<sup>1</sup> Narcissism, as Freud conceived it, might well be the brain-child, in the shape of a woman, of wounded male narcissism. Or, if Kofman is right in arguing that Freud really needed Salomé's example and inspiration to pursue modes of speculative and philosophical thinking that conflicted with his positivist, scientific bias, then narcissism was conceived by the creative pairing of these two minds.<sup>2</sup> Giving weight to this hypothesis is the fact that a sibling to Freud's article was born a few years later, in 1921, in Lou Andreas-Salomé's own speculative essay "Narzissmus als Doppelrichtung".<sup>3</sup> There are, however, two striking differences between Freud's and Lou Andreas-Salomé's essay: Narcissism seems in no way gender-bound for Salomé and it is endowed by her with a positive ethical value, which serves not merely the individual narcissistic subject, but humanity at large.<sup>4</sup> All of us, Salomé

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<sup>1</sup> They point out that Salomé regularly attended the meetings of the Vienna Psychoanalytical Society between late October 1912 and early April 1913 (258). Kofman also remarks that the text was written when Freud "was particularly taken with Lou Andreas-Salomé" ("Narcissistic" 36).

<sup>2</sup> Sarah Kofman develops this argument in "*Il n'y a que le premier pas qui coûte*." Samuel Weber points out that for Freud, philosophical thinking, in its striving for unity and totality, corresponds to animist thought and thus has narcissism as a "psychological correlative" (12-13). This suggests that the ambitious philosophical scope of Freud's theory on narcissism is itself the product of the complex it describes.

<sup>3</sup> The references are to the German text, and the translations are my own. Leavy's translation into English, valuable as it is for a first introduction to Salomé's ideas, is too inaccurate and not attuned enough to the philosophical register of Salomé, for my own purposes. The French translation is remarkably accurate.

<sup>4</sup> As Kofman has shown, meanwhile, Freud's "depreciation of women" occurs in the name of "a certain ethics with an egoism which must be overcome." Stepping back from his discovery concerning the "profoundly 'immoral' character of love," Freud chooses instead to "hand down a moral indictment against the love life of woman" ("Narcissistic" 39-40).

argues, will benefit from the knowledge about self and other acquired by those, writers and metaphysicians in particular, who cultivate their narcissism.

It is an amusing thought that the very woman who epitomized narcissism for Freud and may have provoked, indirectly, its moral indictment, answered him with a positive defense tactfully placed on neutral ground: nowhere does she argue that narcissism is the prerogative of one or the other sex. Yet Salomé too builds her theory around an exemplary type, in this case, a young man whose identity is barely mentioned in her essay, but whose example is of primordial significance for her argument —the poet Rainer Maria Rilke. If Salomé was Freud's case-study in narcissism, Rilke remained, albeit discreetly, the source for Salomé's own investigation into the narcissus complex. Just as it helps our understanding of his text to know about the strong, yet unacknowledged imprint of Salomé on Freud's thinking, knowing that Salomé's very intimate acquaintance with Rilke provided the crucial inspiration for her theory helps elucidating some of the riddles of her essay. Given Freud's familiarity with Salomé, the allusion would not have escaped him: It is very likely that he would have known about the young poet who, around 1912, was debating whether to continue writing poetry that led him to the verge of a breakdown or to undergo analysis that would bring relief but would bring his creative, narcissistic quest to a halt (Goth 18). With her piece, Salomé was thus taunting Freud with the idea that narcissism is well represented in both sexes.

The discussion I develop is born from the contrast between Freud's and Salomé's ideas concerning narcissism and proposes a theory on subjectivity and gender that is inscribed in this controversy, a theory that, in considering gender in a structural light, enables us to transcend historical and cultural differences. The kinds of existential and ethical questions concerning the self that are raised by narcissism are indeed timeless: they invite us, as Salomé argues, to think of the inscription of our lives within symbolic and social structures in ways that are crucial for our psychic survival. Indeed, in her conception, narcissism is the individual's best response to the overpowering force of the Real —hence its dual orientation, towards the subject's outer as well as inner world. We owe to ourselves, she writes, to probe into our existence and identify what we have experienced; narcissism will give us the necessary impulsion to begin this search for our story.<sup>5</sup> But this quest will only begin, Salomé tells us, if out of self-love, we accept to revisit in the depth of our psyche (or, alternately, if we witness in another) the landmarks constituted by early impressions and, especially, the stigmas left by painful experiences. Salomé's assumption that narcissism is connected to a self that feels under threat finds confirmation in the recent work of American analysts, who, relying on the perspective of ego-psychology argue that the emotional and thus psychological correlative of narcissism is a feeling of shame (349-54). Excessive self-love that stands in the way

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<sup>5</sup> On the challenge that faces women in search of their autobiographical stories, see Shoshana Felman's afterword to *What Does a Woman Want*.

of loving another (as narcissism is commonly understood) is symptomatic of a wound that offends morality and causes a sense of shame. Narcissism, in other words, hides a shameful secret. But although Freud himself was aware of the link between a psychical trait and a buried secret, as Kofman shows, he nevertheless eschews the consequences of this discovery (“Narcissistic” 44-45). So intent is he on pursuing his “tendentious,” misogynistic discourse that he makes of this shame the natural condition of woman and fails to see what stares him in the face: that narcissistic women are in possession of a secret that they know, a secret that might well be worth unraveling in the name of a better understanding of the human psyche.<sup>6</sup>

It is then left to women themselves to shed light on the nature of narcissism and to probe its secrets. Salomé provides the decisive theoretical breakthrough in valorizing narcissism positively, while autobiographical texts by Virginia Woolf and Annie Ernaux reveal a type of specular encounter rooted in narcissism that richly illustrates one of Salomé’s other contentions, namely that narcissism is perhaps best represented among writers. For her, *Dichters* are best able to articulate a subjective knowledge which, although grounded in self-love, transcends individual subjectivities. In her theory, the writer’s narcissism defines a unique space devoted to the exploration of the innermost recesses of the psyche: it becomes the mirror that enables us to search for and scan the contours of a self with unparalleled loving care and attention.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, what we know of Freud’s single encounter with Woolf suggests that he may, in the end, have endorsed Salomé’s theory. Why would he have indulged in a peculiar and symbolic gesture—giving Woolf a narcissus—if not to intimate that literary creation and narcissism are related?<sup>8</sup>

The idea that writing is connected to narcissism is at the center of Salomé’s argument in “Narzissmus als Doppelrichtung”, it also accounts for her reliance on Rilke’s own allegorical poem “Narziss” for her theorization. Reading the figures of his text allegorically, she establishes that the *Dichter* is driven or “fated”, as he puts it, to explore, out of self-love, the lineaments of his innermost self, to the point of greatest intimacy with experiences of the sensual, sexual body. But far from binding Narcissus to his body, such regression becomes the ground for sublimation, the “fertile kernel” from which the creator’s work expands.<sup>9</sup> Narcissism, for Salomé, represents a psychological complex in which a love for the self invites the subject to look again and again at his picture in the mirror in a quest for self-knowledge.

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<sup>6</sup> “Tendentiousness” is Freud’s own word, as part of his defense while reviewing the argument that made him conclude that women are narcissists by nature, in compensation for their sexual inferiority (70). Kofman begins her critique of Freud’s theory by denouncing the set of misogynistic commonplaces that Freud adduces to build his case (“Narcissistic” 36).

<sup>7</sup> According to Jean Laplanche, for whom narcissism represents a vital psychic function, the maxim “I live for my own love, for the love of the ego” summarizes the narcissist stance (83).

<sup>8</sup> We know this from Woolf’s diaries: The gift of that single, symbolic flower is recorded on January 29 th. 1939.

<sup>9</sup> Salomé borrows this figure from Rilke’s poem, where it represents interiority and subjectivity (“Narzissmus” 217).

Thus, in answering the call of his image, as he is impelled to do for the love of his ego, Narcissus is bound to revisit what Salomé calls, in evocative terms, the paradise as well as the hell of childhood (219). In this process, his gaze travels what is at once the most fertile and the most threatening of paths, namely that of raw affects. Meanwhile, in so pointedly referring to the pain experienced by the child, Salomé wants us to see that narcissism opens the road towards the retrieval of early trauma. This is why, as Rilke himself saw, Narcissus's quest is far from risk free and might turn out to be nefarious: his poem closes with two lines that speak of the mortal threat inherent in the dual act of self-love and self-contemplation, and with a warning that total absorption in a self-loving, reflexive gaze might lead to the dissolution of the self.<sup>10</sup> Salomé, however, does not dwell at length on the risk of psychical dissolution that the narcissistic subject incurs, she emphasizes that narcissism plays an invaluable role in our understanding of subjectivity, to the point where the poet's narcissistic quest becomes exemplary in light of an ethical imperative that demands self-knowledge.

Salomé's theory of narcissism is extremely rich and thought-provoking, and yet it has hardly received any attention.<sup>11</sup> It is then all the more striking that one of the most respected and theoretically astute contemporary psychoanalysts, André Green, should build his study of narcissism around the same assumptions as hers. He too thinks that narcissism is a response to trauma, and that it is motivated by the need to repair an early wound (*Narcissisme* 17). Even more importantly perhaps he too argues, albeit less overtly than Salomé, that narcissism can be positive, and even necessary. "At a certain point in our reflection," writes Green, "we have to lock ourselves into our narcissism, that is into the innermost recesses of our selves, since it is very heart of our ego, the centripetal movement that wants to know nothing but ourselves, and can only reveal its meaning in opposing the other to the self" (18).

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<sup>10</sup> In *Narcissisme de vie, narcissisme de mort*, André Green focuses on the radically ambivalent nature of narcissism. He defines negative narcissism as tending towards "inexistence, anesthesia, emptiness" and, ultimately, "blankness invested in affect (indifference), representation (negative hallucination), thought (blank psychosis)" (39). One can understand, meanwhile, why Salomé does not dwell on the negative aspects of narcissism: her major concern is to rehabilitate it and show its beneficial aspects. Translations of Green are mine throughout.

<sup>11</sup> There exists, to my knowledge, no extensive commentary on this essay and, tellingly, her work is not mentioned in any of the recent works on narcissism I consulted. Appignesi and Forrester discuss it very briefly and superficially (270). The researcher's best tool remains then the annotated edition prepared by Inge Weber and Brigitte Rempp. This neglect may be due, in part, to the sheer difficulty of Salomé's prose, which combines psychoanalytical, philosophical and even religious conceptions (Leavy, her translator into English, describes it as "cumbersome and turgid," 1). When reading Salomé's theoretical work, one cannot help but regret the lack of conceptual rigor in her writing. But her formal training in philosophy, at the University of Zürich, was interrupted after a few months because she fell ill. Before that, in her late teens, her education was in the hands of Pastor Gillot, who tutored her and also fell in love with her, leading to the abrupt end of her tutorials with him. By all accounts, Paul Réé, Nietzsche, Rilke, and of course Freud deeply enjoyed their intellectual exchanges with Salomé, and had the highest esteem for her untrained intelligence.

But why this insistence, in Salomé's argument, that writers are the exemplary narcissists? She gives several reasons that enable her to enrich her definition of this psychological complex. *Dichters*, in Salomé's conception, show a tendency towards introspection, a disengagement from practical existence that is unattainable under ordinary circumstance. But this removal from the concrete aspects of existence enables them to live under the sway of memory as well as affect and it leads them to the deepest and most crucial of impressions that marked their existence, those of childhood. Moreover, because they are attuned to the elemental forms of the psyche, creative writers can also find words or symbols for what can barely be articulated. Most of us, Salomé notes, like to recollect our beginnings and share a nostalgia for childhood, but only writers have the necessary psychical and verbal resources to do so in a truly significant and exemplary fashion. Finally, writers have the will and the resources to create figures for the most obscure of feelings or impressions: for them, just as for dreamers, Salomé argues, "the most complicated combinations can be endowed with the astonishing force of a form, of a convincing creation" ("Narzissmus" 197). Their words stand for a private, intimate experience and they are the anchoring points that situate the self in a world of objective realities.

In its autobiographical dimensions, Virginia Woolf's writing, as I have already intimated, provides striking confirmation for Salomé's theory. Like the writer described by Salomé, who keeps wanting to run away from his desk, and yet feels chained to it, Woolf cannot let go ("Narzissmus" 215). "The risk must be run, the mark must be made," she writes programmatically about her creator's task, in a formulation that acknowledges the imperative to never cease creating forms and that echoes Rilke's own awareness that Narcissus's quest is fraught with dangers.<sup>12</sup> This awareness that looking into the mirror may turn out to be fatal might account for the personal oddity that Woolf sets out to analyze in a well-known passage of her autobiographical essay "A Sketch of the Past": the shame she always feels when she looks at her face in a mirror (67-69). The discussion of mirrors, shame, feminine beauty, and finally terror ("I dreamt that I was looking in a glass when a horrible face—the face of an animal— suddenly showed over my shoulder" Woolf writes) she develops in her text clearly charts out the psychological, affective terrain of narcissism. It explains how Woolf came to be ashamed of her femininity. But it does more, it proves Salomé's contention that self-knowledge is what narcissism ultimately produces—a self-knowledge that demands witnessing because it raises deep existential and ethical questions.

In forcing herself to look again into the mirror so as to delineate, through her writing, the forms and shapes that lurk in the inner recesses of her mind, Woolf takes care of herself and shows her self-love in true narcissistic fashion. But she does more,

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<sup>12</sup> Cited from her fictional text, *To the Lighthouse* (147), which is the most self-referential of her novels, as I have argued in "Feminist Criticism in a Double Mirror: Reading Charlotte Brontë and Virginia Woolf."

as Salomé's theory would have us predict: she comes to a moment of self-knowledge. Childhood has its paradise, as Woolf started out to recount in a series of rapturous, ecstatic memories that mark the first pages of her essay, it also has its hell, as we are made to see when, wrapped in her narcissistic exploration, she suddenly remembers the "dumb and mixed" and indescribable feeling she experienced when Gerald Duckworth, her half-brother, "explored [her] private parts" ("Sketch" 69). Writing about such a moment, the writer invites us to peer over her shoulder, so that we too see in the mirror what she once saw: a childish body appropriated, violated by an adult. Here then, true to Salomé's theory, narcissism goes two ways: towards the subject's inner affective life, and towards the objective determinants of her experience.

Salomé's theory helps us see, meanwhile, that Woolf writes here not merely about herself or about how she felt. In documenting this traumatic encounter between the inner and outer event, she spells out the objective conditions of human existence, and, more poignantly, the harsh guises taken on by the Real. Given how closely Woolf matches the model of narcissism envisaged by Salomé, it comes as no surprise that she too would understand it in terms of a positive moral imperative—and not as self-indulgence. Indeed, writing of her shock-receiving capacity, which, she claims, distinguishes her as a writer, Woolf adds that she feels that "by writing [she is] doing what is more necessary than anything else." She knows she "might be walking, running a shop, or learning to do something that will be useful if war comes"—but write she must, in the name of a higher, ethical calling that is connected to what is her gift and her bane: the narcissus complex that sustains her writing. "I feel that by writing I am doing what is far more necessary than anything else," she concludes ("Sketch" 73).

While it offers the most compelling justification for the ethical value of narcissism, Salomé's argument is difficult to the point of obscurity. Her thesis reads as follows: "In truth our narcissism is nothing else than the still obscure knowledge, rooted in our affective life, which posits *the ultimate in subjectivity as resulting from our objective existence*," Salomé advances in a formulation that is so terse and dense that can only be unpacked gradually ("Narzissmus" 205, emphasis in the text). First, in a paraphrase: "narcissism, which directs us towards the deeper reaches of a knowledge that are infused with our emotions, carries the ultimate meaning of our subjective condition; it acknowledges subjectivity in its anchoring in objective circumstances." Then, in a gloss: the imperative to remember born from our narcissism provides the obscure and yet most acute revelation of what it means to be a subject inscribed in a history and in the *logos*. Indeed, the notions of "history" and "*logos*" sum up best the two distinct aspects of existence which, in her conception, provide the subject with an anchoring point (*eine Anschlussstelle*): The history of our *Dasein*, on the one hand, and, on the other, the story of our encounters with the law (*Gesetz*) and with rules (*Regel*).<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting how Salomé highlights

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<sup>13</sup> With her notion of *Anschlussstelle*, Salomé seems to have anticipated Jacques Lacan's notion of a *point de capiton*, for whom language provides such anchoring points in the Symbolic.

the place of *Gefühl*—that is of feeling and emotion—in the constitution of subjectivity.<sup>14</sup> Affects are part of our search for the true meaning of existence, because they are deeply embedded in our intelligence of the world or, to put it differently, because they are bound up in the history of our impressions and experience. For Salomé then, the memories uncovered in our narcissistic search bear the traces of a composite experience—both cognitive and emotional—of the world. What emerges from the writer’s obsessive, often painful quest for images of the self in the mirror of the past are representations of subjective experiences which, she claims, contribute to the moral edification of others. Thus a writer, such as Rilke, will offer his body, his soul, or his “psyche” to others—to his readers—as if in sacrifice. They, in turn, will learn from witnessing his suffering.

Perhaps the most shocking, most poignant moment in Annie Ernaux’s autobiographical story *Shame* consists in her invitation to her readers to partake, in a parody of the Holy Supper, of her post-traumatic suffering. Thus, when commenting on what motivates her to write and to pursue relentlessly an “ethnological study of [her]self” (as she defines her autobiographical project), she declares:

Perhaps I write so as to dissolve in the universality of laws and of language the unspeakable scene I experience in my twelfth year. Or perhaps I have encountered here this mad and deadly truth, inspired by the words of missal which I now find impossible to read ...*take this, all of you, and read it, this my body, this is the cup of my blood, it will be shed for you.* (38, translation mine)

As readers of Ernaux’s story, our role is then to witness (or even endorse and incorporate) a scene of narcissistic reprisal and demise. The figure glimpsed in the mirror—intimate, shameful, almost deadly—is so threatening that Ernaux cannot but hope to that it will dissolve and disappear from the mirror—to be taken up or to be reformulated (as it were) in another place, namely the symbolic. What are the laws that will enable her to emerge from the deadly threat glimpsed in the mirror of her narcissistic quest? How can the fear be objectified, so as to free the writer from her brush with death? As a writer—that is, as merely the historian of herself—Ernaux is not concerned with identifying or labeling the particular law that determined her fate as a subject—that would be the task of the analyst.<sup>15</sup>

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The narcissistic writer expresses, through language, her “situatedness” in a universe ruled by external laws (“Narzissmus” 212).

<sup>14</sup> Stanley Leavy has suggested that Salomé’s fundamental interest is the “unconscious life of the emotions” (3). The relevance of Salomé’s approach can be gauged from the fact that much research is currently devoted to reconciling cognition and emotion, in the sciences see for example the work of Antonio Damasio and of Joseph LeDoux or in literature [see for example Charles ALTIERI, *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of Affects* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2004), a recently published book which “challenges the sharp dichotomy between cognition and ‘mere’ feeling”].

<sup>15</sup> Commenting on *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf writes “I suppose I did for myself what psycho-analysts do for their patients. I expressed some very long and deeply felt emotion” (“Sketch” 80).



It suffices that she should know that there is such a law, that she should know, in the words of Salomé, that *the ultimate in subjectivity results from our objective existence*.

Indeed, as we just learned, coming into writing has enabled Ernaux not only to say, publicly, “this happened to me,” but also to acknowledge that the event that occasioned her shame is anchored in objective circumstances —was shaped by the Real. As intensely and subjectively as the event may have been felt, it *was*, to use Virginia Woolf’s very apt phrase, a “blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton-wool of daily-life” —it belonged to outside (“Sketch” 72). Narcissism may well be connected to shame (here Ernaux’s case clearly bears out the ego-psychologists’ theory), but it can also offer the best antidote, the best cure to shame. For, as we just saw with Ernaux and as Salomé knew, when used positively, it will shift the burden of shame from the subject who feels it to the rational, objective knowledge that it was inflicted by the outer world. Thus, Ernaux’s example helps us understand that narcissism is dual in more than one way. We saw early on that it concerns the self as well as the other, while the passage we just analyzed reminds us (as was intimated in Salomé’s reference to Rilke’s *Narziss*) that it positions the subject precariously between life and death. More importantly perhaps, we understand now that a narcissistic quest, ego-driven and insistently personal as it may seem, calls us to witness what is in fact a dual structure: one that is both very private (the ultimate in subjectivity) and most broadly historical (an embodiment of the conditions or laws of our human existence). What this means for the narcissistic subject herself is that the revelation of the secret —however grueling the spectacle and need to return to it may have been— will eventually remove the burden of shame away from its victim. “I write this scene for the first time,” Ernaux tells her readers while lifting the veil over a harrowing experience of her childhood, “Until today doing it seemed impossible, even in a diary. Like an action that is prohibited and demands to be punished” (*Shame* 16).

With its focus on shame, Annie Ernaux’s literary career reads like a case-study of narcissism. Indeed, as her detractors have been quick to point out, her creative output (ten books to date) is driven in one single direction, towards herself. However, this single-mindedness has not stood in the way of Ernaux’s success, both with the literary establishment and with her broad public. Her fan-mail, studied closely by a British scholar, shows that many readers respond to her writing because her story —her experiences— seems to echo their own (Thomas 118-130). Yet over the years, each new publication is greeted with acerbic comments chiding her for another act of self-exposure. Abortion, adultery, dirty family secrets, the guilt-fraught mourning of her parents: these are the secrets, the intimate experiences Ernaux has written about, lucidly recognizing, meanwhile, that this puts her, with her shameful secrets, in the full glare of public scrutiny. “To write is something public,” she declares in *Shame* (86).

“Her work,” remarks a literary critic, “is one unceasing and tireless return onto herself” (Bacholle 37). The fact that this comment was made while Ernaux was still in the early stages of her literary career, before *Shame*, gives it a quasi-prophetic quality. Over time, Annie Ernaux has not only repeated, but in fact in-



tensified her narcissistic quest. She has now told most of her stories twice: *L'événement* repeats *Les Armoires vides*; *Se perdre* is another version, in diary form, of *Une passion simple*; in *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*, she revisits the gradual loss of her mother that she already recounted in *Une femme*. (This pattern provides striking confirmation to Salomé's idea that creative writers, just like young children who want to hear the same story again and again, are driven to rehearse and repeat again and again the same stories in their *Dichtung*). But an even more striking indication that Ernaux's literary project is indeed directed at the self is given by a broad generic and grammatical change in her work, which led her to give up third-person narration or disguised autobiographies in favor of a clear acknowledgment of an autobiographical "I."

*Shame* is unabashedly autobiographical, and here, Ernaux pursues defiantly the deepest of her secrets, as proclaims after the fact: "I have always wanted to write books which would make it impossible afterwards to talk about them, books that would make the gaze of another person unbearable. But what about writing a book that would rise to the level of what I experienced, felt (*éprouvé*) in my twelfth year, what shame would that bring me?" (*Shame* 132). Placed in its context, namely the book, the question that the narcissistic writer raises here finds a partial answer. As we have seen, in peering deep enough into the mirror, the writer hopes to reach a place where the pain dissolves or rather perhaps, is absolved—because it is superseded (*aufgehoben* the philosopher would say) by knowledge. "It wasn't me, it was done to me," is the crucial transfer or translation that writing enables, freeing the subject from her burden of responsibility and thus of shame.<sup>16</sup> But in Ernaux's "dare"—the provocation of writing a book that represents the ultimate in shame—lies, as we have learned from studying Salomé's essay, another question, which bears on the fate of the subject. What if, instead of dissolving the pain, the encounter led to the collapse of all boundaries within the subject? Here, the words of *Narziss* provide us with an apt reminder "Nothing binds us enough / Yielding matter at my core, kernel of weakness / That cannot contain its flesh" leading to the awareness that the Narcissus's gaze may ultimately be deadly.

The scene that Ernaux recounts in her book—the scene for whose revelation she fears she will be punished—is depicted in the first pages, and summarized in the first sentence of her book: "My father tried to kill my mother one Sunday in June, in the early afternoon." In Ernaux's carefully chosen, unemotional and meas-

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*Dichtung* or "creative writing" can indeed be the site of transference, as Salomé saw. But from the perspective of the subject herself, there is no need to invoke concepts or a theory—as is typically the case when language is used performatively. What matters is success or failure in naming the experience and not diagnostic accuracy. Ernaux comments on this in *Shame*, "I expect nothing from psychoanalysis... Abstract words can only hover above what I am" (31).

<sup>16</sup> Monique Schneider analyzes this semantic and grammatical transfer in "Temporalité, inconscient et répétition: du mythe à l'élaboration théorique" and shows the positive, therapeutic value of such re-articulation for the writer (28).

ured words, this statement acquires the power of a myth or of a phantasm.<sup>17</sup> Its ostensible, objective theme is castration, as is borne out symbolically when we see that the instrument wielded by the father is a scythe, the same tool he uses to chop off the heads of ducks. Thus, Ernaux stages in the midst of an ordinary Sunday, in her chronicle of a working-class life in a small town of Normandy, a theater of ordinary familial violence that is turned two ways, subjectively and objectively, so that a personal crisis can receive collective testimony: “See —don’t you see what was done to me?” the writer tells her readers in substance: “I was made to see what no child, especially a girl, should have to witness —that castration is not an empty threat.” In his theory of literature, Jean-Paul Sartre suggests that a text is a mirror offered to the reader and indeed, in reading Ernaux’s work with something like fear or fascination we are in the mirror: we participate in the drama, held in the thralls of a scene that both fascinates and repels us, a scene that spells out death. The writer, however, lived to tell the tale, and she lived, of course, after telling her tale, in spite of her well-founded fears. With *Shame* then, Ernaux succeeded in retrieving the ethical significance of an event that held her, for years it seems, enthralled, waiting, and biding time, chained to her desk in what is a specular, narcissistic relation. But she found the words in which to shape the event and thus did precisely what writers, according to Salomé, are able to do in an exemplary fashion: she conveyed her “knowledge, rooted in her affective life, which posits the ultimate in subjectivity as resulting from objective existence.” In daring to lift the veil on a scene of castration, Ernaux reconfigures the pathos of her individual story in terms that speak of a universal structure, of the *logos* that defines the objective conditions of our existence, in terms “of the generality of laws and of language”. How well Ernaux succeeded in translating her subjective story into a fable of universal ethical relevance can be summarized in Claire Messud’s laudatory comment that greeted the novel’s translation into English: “The careful, unflinching specificities of *Shame* give voice to a resonant and universal truth; and Ernaux’s particular discomfort is, most profoundly, that of being human” (16). What Ernaux did, in her narcissistic quest for images lurking in the mirror, was indeed to symbolize a human truth. That she did not name this truth, meanwhile, in no way weakens the novel’s ultimate claim: what matters crucially for the writer is to be able to speak of her shame. What matters for us, her readers, is that we have been made more richly aware, through the writer’s own unflinching gaze into the mirror of her existence, of the human condition. This is how Annie Ernaux, who has openly acknowledged the influence of existentialism and of Camus in particular, unwittingly provides the

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<sup>17</sup> This scene exists now for Ernaux as a “psychical reality,” however much or little of it may have been fantasized or the work of retrospective construction. In other words, its truth-value, when it comes to the fate of the subject, is not diminished by the fact that it may have been partly misremembered. On this subject see my chapter “Freud’s Screen Memories,” *Architexts of Memory: Autobiography, Literature, and Science* (U of Michigan P, forthcoming).





concrete illustration for Salomé's theory, itself representative of existential psychoanalysis.

Meanwhile, the fact that castration —unnamed by the writer but so clearly spelled out in the figures of her story— should be presented to us as the narcissist's ultimate secret is surely significant —and not merely in light of a theory of narcissism, but also in so far as gender is concerned. Here we need first to return to Freud, via Samuel Weber's rich and subtle exegesis of Freud's thoughts on narcissism. Weber shows how for Freud, the child's confrontation with castration causes the first "narcissistic" shock" and becomes the original landmark for the development of the ego, as it introduces simultaneously the notion of a difference and of a loss. Narcissism, Weber explains, comes with the "conviction that the child inhabits a world of sameness in which difference and alterity can be regarded merely as privative, negative forms of an original and pervasive identity: as *Mangel* or *loss* of what once was" (32). Salomé's own description at the outset of her autobiography, *Lebensrückblick*, echoes Weber's commentary, in what seems like an uncanny coincidence: "Our first experience is, remarkably, a disappearance. We were an undivided whole... and now that we are born [as subjects]... we are a fragment of a larger being and we fear other amputations... losing our absolute wholeness, we have fallen as if into a void, a dispossession" (9).<sup>18</sup> Salomé's analysis does not spell out that the subject's accession to subjectivity is connected to castration —unless that is what she means by *Verkürzungen*. But for Ernaux there is an unmistakable link between the scene that occurred on that fatal day in June in her twelfth year, and a feeling of void and alienation (whose description matches Green's definition of negative narcissism) that has haunted her ever since.<sup>19</sup> The scene that played itself out in front of the twelve-year old girl cannot but be overwhelming and the ultimate in shame: it seems to have been designed, uncannily, to reactivate the original narcissistic shock that marks the discovery of difference. What better reminder to the growing child of her subjection to a difference —to sexual difference than to see her father wielding a scythe in an attempt to kill her mother?<sup>20</sup>

Could it be then that there is some truth after all in the connection that Freud makes between some "natural deficiency" in women and their narcissism? Could it be that the "shameful secret" bound up in their narcissism is the fact of their castration? Not so, for this would mean overlooking the rich lesson we learned from Salomé as well as the breakthrough that defines her theory. In specifying that

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<sup>18</sup> Translation mine. Salomé also recounts this episode in "Narzissmus" 140.

<sup>19</sup> She organizes her autobiography around the rupture created by this event, from then on, she inhabits what could be defined as a depressive position. The places where she discusses the change of affect this accident produced in herself and in her perception of the world are too numerous to cite.

<sup>20</sup> In her feminist film *The Piano*, Jane Campion stages castration too, in a scene that closely mirrors, in its structure, the one recounted by Ernaux. Anna watches as her mother's angered husband cuts off Ada's finger.

the narcissist wound occurs where the inner meets the outer—that is where the subject encounters her “objective circumstances”—Salomé shows how deeply history or the *logos* are inscribed into the subject’s fate. Thus we learn from her to “denaturalize” narcissism as well as subjectivity. Indeed, instead of a “natural deficiency,” the narcissist invites us to consider situations, events, or histories that mark or signify, for the subject, the reality and the nature of her subjection. Thus Salomé’s theory and, in its wake, the narcissistic explorations of Woolf and Ernaux help us answer the critical imperative that Lynn Enterline defined in *Tears of Narcissus*: “Feminist criticism,” she writes, “faces the double task of theorizing gender as a construct with very specific historical manifestations and as a construct given meaning by a binary, hierarchizing logic that has persisted despite momentous historical changes” (27). What is exposed in the writer’s mirror and rendered more visible by the lens offered by Salomé is indeed the fate of the subject within the social and the symbolic order—not merely the impact of masculine power over female bodies, but a hierarchy that, indeed, “has persisted despite momentous historical changes.”

This is not to say, however, that the kinds of traumatic encounters that haunt the narcissist’s psyche, only affect women. Even just a glance at the turn of the twentieth-century literature (or at Renaissance texts, as Enterline has shown) reveals the centrality of the narcissus complex for a number of male writers: Rilke is not alone in relying on the figure of Narcissus to describe his creative plight and to use it to probe into his secrets.<sup>21</sup> There might be a very simple and obvious cultural and social reason, meanwhile, for men’s reluctance to flaunt their narcissism—for their reticence towards staging publicly what are “shameful secrets” involving the intimacies of their body and their sex. The current culture of masculinity has, if anything, reinforced images of male invulnerability and toughness, making it harder for men to explore and express affects. Women, on the other hand, have had long experience in articulating emotions, being placed on the side of pathos in the binarisms that define gender.<sup>22</sup> Recent research has indeed shown how much more difficult men find it to discuss intimate trauma.<sup>23</sup> Thus Lou Andreas-Salomé’s strategy in “Narzissmus als Doppelrichtung”—removing gender from her definition of

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<sup>21</sup> Thus for example, Lynn Enterline examines figurations of narcissism among male Renaissance writers, while Henri Peyre discusses the significance of the Narcissus figure for Valéry and Gide (*What Is Symbolism?*: Alabama: U of Alabama P, 1980. 131-35). Jody Norton shows how narcissism is connected to questions of masculinity and postmodern aesthetics in *Narcissus Sous Rature: Male Subjectivity in Contemporary American Poetry* (London: Associated UP, 2000). See also the articles collected in *Echoes of Narcissus*, ed. Lieve Spaas (New York: Berghahn, 2000.)

<sup>22</sup> Nicole Loraux studies women’s inscription on the side of *pathos* in Ancient Greece [see for example *Born of the Earth: Myth and Politics in Athens* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2000)]. Norman Bryson discusses the persistence of such a division in *Tradition and Desire: From David to Delacroix* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984).

<sup>23</sup> M. KIA-KEATING, F.K. GROSSMAN, L. SORSOLI, M. EPSTEIN, & J. GREENE. “Containing and Resisting Masculinity: Narratives of Resilient Male Survivors of Childhood Sexual Abuse,” (2003). (Under review).



narcissism and yet to build her argument around the example of Rilke— shows not only great intelligence but extraordinary prescience. We owe to her, and not to Freud, a theory that charts the way towards an understanding of narcissism and gender —a theory that moreover gives a strong ethical justification to any writing, such as Woolf's or Ernaux's, that explores the intimacies of a subject's life.



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