

# PLATO'S EROS REFLECTED IN OVID'S NARCISSUS

## KAITLYN BOULDING

*Lieben, belebt. – Goethe*

In book 3 of the *Metamorphoses*, Ovid parodies Plato's ideals of self-knowledge and the immortality through *eros*, which is the ideal unification of subject and objective principle. He does this through the story of Narcissus—a boy on the cusp of maturity who falls in love with his reflection. Ovid criticizes Plato's theories of love in relation to mirrors and self-knowledge as expressed in the *Phaedrus*, *Symposium*, and *Alcibiades*. Ovid does this in his usual manner of subversive mythologizing and philosophic play. Favoring wit over a dialectical search for the truth, Ovid shows the futility of Narcissus' sterile *eros* in opposition to the divine fertility of Plato's love. Although this may seem to be a powerful criticism of Plato's theories of love and self-knowledge, the Ovidian innovations<sup>1</sup>—the Tiresian prophecy, the addition of Echo as a foil, and that Ovid's Narcissus is both naïve and knowing, that he comes to know<sup>2</sup>—underline the ways in which Narcissus cannot be the embodied fulfillment of the ideal Platonic lover. A consideration of mirrored self-knowledge, co-existence versus lack, and the divine in both conceptions of love shows that Narcissus is the self-destructive antithesis to Plato's productive love.

### **Ovidian Dialectic: γνόθι σεαυτόν, or Not**

On account of Tiresias' prophecy, the conjoined nature, and the divine aspect of Narcissus' love, it appears that Ovid's story of Narcissus is a cautionary commentary on the ideal fulfillment of Platonic love. The introductory prophecy from Tiresias is a prominent Ovidian

---

<sup>1</sup> Ovid Met. 3.339-510. It is impossible to prove beyond any doubt the extent of Ovid's innovations are purely due to the fragmentary nature of our knowledge of Hellenistic poetry. (Hardie, Philip. 1988. "Lucretius and the Delusions of Narcissus". *Materiali e Discussioni Per L'analisi Dei Testi Classici*. (20/21): 73.) Scholars, however, tend to assume that the linking of the stories of Echo and Narcissus is indeed Ovid's invention. Janan states that "Ovid is apparently the first ancient writer to bring these two figures together." (Janan, Micaela Wakil. 2009. *Reflections in a serpent's eye: Thebes in Ovid's Metamorphoses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 136.)

<sup>2</sup> Bartsch argues that the addition of Tiresias' prophecy works together with Ovid's synthesis of Pausanias' two versions of the tale: one in which Narcissus dies in love with a reflection that he does not recognize as his own, and another where he wastes away in love mooning over the reflection of his loved and lost twin sister. "In Ovid alone, the story of Narcissus has been transformed into a story of *coming to know* the self, of moving from the naïve Narcissus to the knowing Narcissus: the presence of Tiresias' prophecy, the development of Narcissus' relationship with his specular other, and the emphasis on the moment of self-recognition seem to be uniquely Ovidian. (Bartsch, Shadi. 2006. *The mirror of the self: sexuality, self-knowledge, and the gaze in the early Roman Empire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 84) Bömer is in agreement with this approach. (Bömer, Franz. 1969. *P. Ovidius Naso: Metamorphosen. Kommentar*. Heidelberg: C. Winter.)

innovation.<sup>3</sup> The fate-speaking seer prophesies that Narcissus will see a lengthy old age (*tempora maturaе visurus longa senectae*), “if he does not come to know himself” (*si se non noverit*).<sup>4</sup> This is the negation of Delphic oracle’s dictum, “Know Thyself,” which is so dear to Socrates.<sup>5</sup> Narcissus does meet his fateful *anagnorisis*. After coming to recognize the boy he loves is himself, he promptly wastes away.<sup>6</sup> This destruction appears to be a result of fulfilling too completely the Platonic aim of attaining self-knowledge through *eros*.<sup>7</sup> This story strikingly recalls Plato’s teaching about coming to self-knowledge through mirrors,<sup>8</sup> beauty, and *eros* in the *Phaedrus* and *Alcibiades I*.

It is clear that Ovid’s Narcissus is a mirror image of Plato’s Alcibiades in the *Alcibiades I*. The *Alcibiades I* references the inscription “Know thyself” thrice, and it emphasizes self-knowledge—knowledge of the soul—which can only come about through *eros*. Socrates’ description of Alcibiades at the beginning of the dialogue recalls Narcissus. Here Socrates tells Alcibiades how he “treated all those men who pursued [him]: they held themselves in high esteem, but [Alcibiades was] even more arrogant and sent them packing, every single one of

---

<sup>3</sup> The innovation of Tiresias adds to the motifs of hermaphrodites, romantic transgressions, blindness and foresight. Otis proposes that the story of Echo and Narcissus finds its place in the Theban history only through the superficial link of Tiresias’ prophecy. (Otis, Brooks. 1966. *Ovid as an epic poet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 231.) Goldenhard and Zissos argue that Ovid introduces Tiresias in order to signal an intertextual connection with Sophocles’ *Oedipus Tyrannus*, which is an interesting interpretation especially considering Narcissus’ *anagnorisis* in a tragic light. (Goldenhard, Ingo, and Andrew Zissos. 2000. “Ovid’s Narcissus (Met. 3.339-510): Echoes of Oedipus”. *American Journal of Philology*. 121 (1): 129-147.)

<sup>4</sup> Ovid, Met. 3.345-6.

<sup>5</sup> γνῶθι σεαυτόν; Plato’s Socrates references this inscription at the temple of Delphi as established wisdom in the dialogues: *Charmides* (164D), *Protagoras* (343B), *Phaedrus* (229E), *Philebus* (48C), *Laws* (II.923A), *Alcibiades I* (124A, 129A, 132C).

Ovid also plays with the Socratic dictum in the *Ars Amatoria* 2.493-502. Here Apollo comes to exhort the *praeceptor amoris* to lead his pupils to the shrine of Apollo at Delphi, and teach them that self-knowledge is necessary in love, saying, “Whoever will come to know himself, he alone will love wisely.” *Qui sibi notus erit, solus sapienter amabit*. It quickly becomes clear that this passage is a mockery rather than a serious endorsement. It is merely an encouragement for lovers to show off their best features (except for the bad poets). Bartsch notes this (2006, 84 nt.82).

<sup>6</sup> Ovid, Met. 3.463-510.

<sup>7</sup> Bartsch interprets the story similarly saying, “The story becomes one that is not only about love, vision, and the self, but also about philosophy: if the story is erotic because the act of seeing leads to love, it is also philosophical because the gaze mirrored upon the self leads to what Ovid has chosen to call self-knowledge. And it also functions as a warning, because when looking and loving meet up with knowing—that is when Narcissus realizes that his specular double is himself—he dies there, by the side of the pond.” (2006, 84.)

<sup>8</sup> Bartsch notes that mirrors are also prominent in relation to this injunction: “Narcissus’ fate thus seems to represent an Ovidian play on the longstanding injunction “know thyself” that ran parallel to the mirror tradition in antiquity” (2006, 84).

them.” This recalls how at first Narcissus shuns the maidens and men that desire him.<sup>9</sup> Socrates knows Alcibiades’ ambitions for political power and convinces him that the first step is self-knowledge, as he says, “we should first consider what the self itself is.”<sup>10</sup> Their dialectical discourse reveals that the body is merely an attribute of the self, and thus, to know the self itself (*auto to auto*) one must look to the soul.<sup>11</sup> Knowing what the soul is *is* to know one’s self.

Socrates describes the method of attaining self-knowledge with the metaphor of mirrored sight.<sup>12</sup> Mirrors allow the eye to see both the mirror and the eye itself. The eye is similar to a mirror because “when a man looks into an eye his face appears in it, like a mirror. We call this the ‘pupil’, for it’s a sort of miniature of the man who’s looking. ...An eye will see itself if it observes an eye and looks at the best part of it, the part with which it can see.”<sup>13</sup> The lover, looking into the best part of the eyes of the beloved, sees the best part of himself reflected there. To see itself the eye looks at “that region of it in which the good activity of an eye actually occurs,” from whence an eye sees.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, “if a soul...is to know itself, it must look at a soul, and especially at that region in which what makes a soul good, wisdom, occurs, and at anything else which is similar to it.”<sup>15</sup> Since the best and most divine part of the soul is the part “in which knowing and thinking take place, ... this part most resembles the divine, and someone who looked at it and grasped everything divine—vision and intelligence—would have the best grasp of himself as well.”<sup>16</sup> Socrates links the metaphor of seeing in a mirror to the notion of attaining self-knowledge through one’s mirrored soul.

Socrates never explicitly mentions to Alcibiades that these exchanged looks occur between lovers and beloveds, but this is evident from the dramatic context of the dialogue. As Halperin argues, “Plato refuses to separate—he actually identifies and fuses—the erotics of sexuality, the erotics of conversation, and the erotics of philosophical inquiry.”<sup>17</sup> Socrates starts

---

<sup>9</sup> Plato Alc. I, 103b-104a.:

Many youths and many maidens desired him  
 But in his tender form he was so hard and proud  
 That no youths nor maidens touched him.  
*multi illum iuvenes, multae cupiere puellae.*  
*Sed fuit in tenera tam dura superbia forma:*  
*nulli illum iuvenes, nullae tetigere puellae.*  
 Ovid, Met. 3.353-5.

<sup>10</sup> Plato, Alc. I, 130d. Plato, John M. Cooper, and D. S. Hutchinson. 1997. “Alcibiades ” in Complete works. Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Pub., 211b.

<sup>11</sup> Socrates argues, “Since man is neither body, nor his body and soul together, what remains, I think, is either he’s nothing, or else, if he *is* something, he is nothing other than his soul.” Plato, Alc. I, 129b-130c.

<sup>12</sup> Plato, Alc. I 132c-e.

<sup>13</sup> Plato, Alc. I 133a. The Greek word, *kore*, means both ‘pupil’ and ‘doll’.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, Alc. I 133b.

<sup>15</sup> Plato, Alc. I 133c.

<sup>16</sup> Plato, Alc. I 133c.

<sup>17</sup> Halperin, David M. 1986. "Plato and Erotic Reciprocity". *Classical Antiquity*. 5 (1): 80.

out as an unlikely suitor to the young, rich, handsome, and politically powerful Alcibiades. By the end of the dialogue, however, Alcibiades has agreed to a reciprocal love, even to being the lover as opposed to the beloved.<sup>18</sup> The dialogue enacts its own message: Alcibiades comes to knowledge through *eros*. After Alcibiades' enthusiastic request to be the student and lover of Socrates, the dialogue concludes with Socrates promising a reciprocal love for Alcibiades. Socrates tells Alcibiades, "my love for you ... will be just like a stork: after hatching a winged love in you, it will be cared for by it in return."<sup>19</sup>

Just as both Narcissus and Alcibiades transform from proud young men disdaining all lovers into willing beloveds, drawn into self-knowledge through mirrored *eros*, the lover that Socrates describes in Plato's *Phaedrus* also experiences this change. Bartsch argues that Ovid is specifically engaging with the *Phaedrus*, saying that Ovid, "in treating the triad of mirrors, *eros*, self-knowledge, clearly had cause to reflect on a text whose popularity and influence are well documented for centuries before and after."<sup>20</sup> In the dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates describes a lover whose soul is as mad with love as Narcissus':

No one is more important to it [the lover's soul] than the beautiful boy. It forgets mother and brothers and friends entirely and doesn't care at all if it loses its wealth through neglect. And as for proper and decorous behaviors, in which it used to take pride, the soul despises the whole business. Why it is even willing to sleep like a slave, anywhere as near to the object of longing as it is allowed to get!<sup>21</sup>

This lover also comes to knowledge through *eros*. Socrates describes how those with philosophic natures develop the philosophic talent of their beloveds.<sup>22</sup> Socrates explains that a philosophic nature comes about on account of a well-controlled soul seeing the Gods on Olympus prior to its rebirth. These philosophic souls are equipped with "their driving need to gaze at the god and as they are in touch with the god by memory they are inspired by him and adopt his customs and practices, so far as a human being can share in a god's life."<sup>23</sup> The beauty

---

<sup>18</sup> This was a very important distinction in the Greek culture of *erastes* and *eromenos* and even more so for the Romans. See Bartsch 2006, 96-103.

<sup>19</sup> Plato, Alc. I 135e.

<sup>20</sup> On the *Phaedrus*' prominence in reception Bartsch writes that "Trapp (1990, 141) calls it "deeply entrenched in the 'cultural syllabus' of Hellenic *paideia* by the second century C.E." References to it can be found in Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Cicero, Dio Chrysostomos, Xenophon of Ephesus, Plutarch, and others. Trapp (1990) offers a full list of citations. Nussbaum (1993, 443n5) points out that "Plato's *Phaedrus* is a work well known and much valued by Roman Stoics" and lists a number of Ciceronian references to this dialogue, as well as other passages in Posidonius, Arius Didymus, Plutarch, Philo, and Galan.

(Trapp, M. B. 1990. "Plato's *Phaedrus* in 2<sup>nd</sup> Century Greek Literature." In *Antonine Literature*, ed. D. A. Russell, 141-73. Oxford.)

(Nussbaum, Martha. 1993. "Poetry and Passions: Two Stoic Views." In *Passions and Perceptions*, ed. Brunschwig and Nussbaum, 97-149.)

<sup>21</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 252a. Plato, John M. Cooper, and D. S. Hutchinson. 1997. "Phaedrus" in *Complete works*. Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Pub., 252a.

<sup>22</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 252.

<sup>23</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 253a.

of the beloved recalls, for these philosophic lovers, the divine beauty of the gods. Socrates describes how the lover's soul is "struck by the boy's face as if by a bolt of lightning. When the charioteer [of the soul] sees that face, his memory is carried back to the real nature of Beauty, and sees it again where it stands on the sacred pedestal next to Self-control."<sup>24</sup> This allows not only the lover's soul, as Socrates' myth says, to sprout wings in a sublimation of *eros*, but also acts reciprocally upon the beloved. Socrates explains how

the spring that feeds the stream Zeus named 'Desire' when he was in love with Ganymede begins to flow mightily in the lover and is partly absorbed by him, and when he is filled it overflows and runs away outside him. Think *how a breeze or an echo bounces back from a smooth object to its source*; that is how the stream of beauty goes back to the beautiful boy and sets him aflutter. It *enters through his eyes, which are its natural route to the soul*; there it waters the passages for the wings, starts the wings growing, and fills the soul of the loved one with love in return. He does not understand and cannot explain, what has happened to him. It is as if he had caught an eye disease from someone else but could not identify the cause; *he does not realize that he is seeing himself in the lover as in a mirror.*<sup>25</sup>

Through the lover's *eros* the beloved has a mirror image of love in him, a 'back-love' (*anteros*). Both lovers are drawn through love to recollection of the true beauty and ascension in knowledge of the unchanging 'Forms'. Coming from the beloved, the stream of beauty passes through the eyes of the lover as channels to his soul, and then it reflects back outward toward the beloved again. This love "acts like a film of *simulacra* hitting a mirror: it shows the beloved's beauty back to him via the eyes of the lover, and there, in the beloved, this vision nurtures and increases the wings in his soul."<sup>26</sup> The metaphorical mirroring in the *Alcibiades I* becomes literal in this mythological story. The experience of "ascension necessary to view the Forms" occurs "through the specular mediation of the lover."<sup>27</sup> Implied in this ocular mediation, as well as in Narcissus' love story, are the extramission and intromission theories of sight.<sup>28</sup> The basis of this Platonic love is not psychological but metaphysical, or rather it is *psyche*-logical. Thus, if the pair "follow the assigned regime of philosophy, their life here below is one of bliss and shared

---

<sup>24</sup> Plato, Phaedrus, 254b.

<sup>25</sup> Plato, Phaedrus, 255c-d. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Bartsch, 2006, 81.

<sup>27</sup> Bartsch, 2006, 80.

<sup>28</sup> For Ovid, Plato, and their contemporaries sight was considered a much more tactile sense than it is now. Bartsch divides the ocular theories into five schools but sees the common notion that "vision simply involved a form of contact between the organ of sight and its object" across all schools (2006, 59). This gave greater power to the notion of shooting cupid's arrows by looking at someone with love in your eyes and, on the opposite side, harming someone by sending the evil eye. Bartsch quotes Galen the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century natural philosopher who says that "a body that is seen does one of two things: either it sends something from itself to us and thereby gives an indication of its peculiar character, or, if it does not itself send something, it waits for some sensory power to come to it from us." For more on ancient optics see Bartsch (2006 58-67).

understanding,” which is further completed in an ascension to the gods, and therefore an understanding of the unchanging truth after death.<sup>29</sup>

Clearly Ovid’s Narcissus does not experience such a life of bliss and shared understanding, nor does he come to knowledge after death. In coming to know himself he is destroyed and in death he becomes “a shade gazing upon a shade.”<sup>30</sup> Narcissus’ realization is paradoxically at once the hyper-perfection and the destructive antithesis of the love and self-knowledge described in the *Phaedrus* and *Alcibiades I*. Narcissus lacks an independent subjectivity outside himself, which is as real as his self, with which to enact a dialectic of loving and learning. As Narcissus comes to realize this he says ironically, “I am that boy: I know it, nor does my image deceive me.” (*iste ego sum: sensi, nec me mea fallit imago*).<sup>31</sup> Yet he is not his image. He is deceived insofar as he continues to love his reflection, attributing to it a separate subjectivity rather than realizing that it is nothing but a reflection.

What Narcissus sees, loves, and comes to know as himself is a reflection or the *simulacra* of his physical attributes, which is exactly what Socrates tells Alcibiades the true self is *not*. Ovid articulates this when he first introduces Narcissus’ love: “Seized by a vision of the beautiful form he sees, he loves a hope without a body: he thinks what is only a shade to be a body and he astonishes himself” (*visae correptus imagine formae / spem sine corpore amat: corpus putat esse, quod umbra est / adstupet ipse sibi*).<sup>32</sup> Narcissus is “both deceived and comes to know himself via an image of extreme beauty.”<sup>33</sup> This case is in the most idealized, purest and yet insubstantial form the reciprocity of knowing, seeing, and loving. The result is that “the reflection in which you see and love yourself is a closed circle in which subject and object mirror each other and are literally collapsed into each other. The paradox is that this perfect reciprocity is also perfectly sterile.”<sup>34</sup> This can only happen in a mythical place where “cognition and the objects of cognition behave as if they were part of a single ontological continuum, rather than securely divided between subject and object, mind and world.”<sup>35</sup> In this collapse, rather than perfect combining of subject and object, Ovid presents a world where love and self-knowledge are nothing but delusions.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 256a.

<sup>30</sup> On Ovid, *Met.* 3.504-5. (Brenkman, John. 1976. “Narcissus in the Text.” *Georgia Review* 30:325.)

<sup>31</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 3.463.

<sup>32</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 3.414-6.

<sup>33</sup> In this way he is “implicated in not one but both sides of the ancient mirror: Ovid has combined the traditions of the mirror as something that represents deceit, illusion, and vanity, and of the mirror as a tool for self-knowledge.” Bartsch 2006, 94.

<sup>34</sup> Bartsch 2006, 92.

<sup>35</sup> Janan 2009, 124.

<sup>36</sup> Hardie has an interesting take on how on account of how through this simulacra based love Narcissus is the embodiment of the Lucretian lover. Hardie 2002, 158-163. On Lucretius account of love and Narcissus’ experience “the fallacy lies in believing that the source of an appetite can also yield its satisfaction.” (Hardie, Philip R. 2002. *Ovid's poetics of illusion*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. 160)

### When Two Become One: Love that is Only Mirror Deep

This collapse of subject and object recalls a more general lover's ideal of the lover and beloved becoming one. Plato expresses this ideal through Aristophanes' speech in the *Symposium*. The co-existence of lover and beloved in Narcissus is similar to the primary nature of conjoined people in Aristophanes' myth about the origin of *eros*. Plato's Aristophanes relates how *eros* is caused by the desire to return to a previous state where two humans were "parts of the same whole,"<sup>37</sup> before being sliced apart by Zeus on account of their strength and hubris. For this reason, "love is born into every human being; it calls back the halves of our original nature together; it tries to make one out of two and heal the wound of human nature."<sup>38</sup> Aristophanes claims that what all lovers want is "to come together and melt together with the one he loves, so that one person emerge[s] from two ... 'Love' is the name for our pursuit of wholeness, our desire to be complete."<sup>39</sup> Narcissus is whole insofar as he is not separated from his beloved. He even suffers the melting<sup>40</sup> together, for which Aristophanes' lovers long.

Ovid's Narcissus cannot be an embodiment of ideal Platonic love, however, because he does not find his independently existent other half. Narcissus feels this acutely when he realizes that he desires a strange wish for a lover, "*votum in amante novum*," the very separation that *eros* aims to close. He is not rounded out and completed as a happy globular being by his unified love.<sup>41</sup> He says, "Oh, if only I could be divided from my (our) body! / a strange wish for a lover, I wish that my beloved be absent." (*o utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem! / votum in amante novum, vellum, quod amamus, abesset*).<sup>42</sup> He lacks a sufficiently substantial beloved outside himself.

In this way Narcissus lacks the lack, which Plato argues is necessary for substantial love. He lacks the required independent subjectivity separate from himself to be the object of his love, instead desiring his own reflection. Even if Narcissus did accomplish Aristophanes' ideal, the speech by this comic playwright is not the definitive account of love in the *Symposium*. According to Socrates' teacher, Diotima, who is an expert on *eros*, love requires lack. Diotima articulates this in her speech as recounted by Socrates. A progression takes place throughout the

---

<sup>37</sup> Plato, John M. Cooper, and D. S. Hutchinson. 1997. "Symposium" in Complete works. Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Pub., 192d.

<sup>38</sup> Plato, Symp. 191d.

<sup>39</sup> Plato, Symp. 192e.-193a.

<sup>40</sup> Ovid uses fire imagery thrice: 3.426, 3.464, and most notably at 3.485-7 in the simile describing Narcissus' wasting away:

"as the yellow wax melts before a gentle heat, as hoar frost melts before the warm morning sun, so does he, wasted with love, pine away, and is slowly consumed by a hidden fire."

*ut intabescere flavae*

*igne levi cerae matutinaeque pruinae*

*sole tepente solent, sic attenuatus amore*

*liquitur et tecto paulatim carpitur igni.*

<sup>41</sup> Aristophanes' describes the doubled humans as happy globular beings who role around the hills.

<sup>42</sup> Ovid, Met. 3.467-8. This mirrors Tantalus' wish as he thirsts beside the pool and is famished with fruits just out of reach. The imagery that Ovid employs here also recalls Tantalus, as Narcissus grieves, his breast blushes like apples that he could no sooner grasp than Tantalus could the overhanging fruits.

speeches in the *Symposium* as each participant reiterates and corrects the previous speakers. The form of the dialogue matches the content of Diotima's speech to Socrates, in which she tells of the progression that love makes as it sublimates desire for earthly things to knowledge of the unchanging through the image of the ladder of love.<sup>43</sup> On Diotima's account, *Eros* draws mortals from desire for particular changing beautiful things to a sublimated love of unchanging Beauty. Diotima corrects Socrates' notion that *Eros* is a great God, for *Eros* is a child of *Poros* (resource) and *Penia* (poverty).<sup>44</sup> *Eros*' parentage poetically explains the necessarily in-between nature of love. To love and to desire implies that the object of that love or desire is not satisfyingly your own. Satisfied *eros* is no longer love, for love requires lack. The acute feeling of this lack drives the lover upwards to ontological ascension. Accordingly, Narcissus does not have this lack sufficiently because he is his own beloved. On the other hand, he is separated too completely from his beloved because his beloved is co-existent with the separating surface.

Narcissus' beloved can only exist superficially, i.e. on the surface of the mirroring pool. It is clear that Narcissus' lack is not a lack of *eros*,<sup>45</sup> as he is finally destroyed by his love. In fact, Narcissus' story fits into the 'lover wailing outside the door' genre, *Paraclausithyron*, as the preeminent case.<sup>46</sup> As opposed to Pyramis and Thisbe<sup>47</sup> and other pairs of lovers separated by a physical presence that creates an 'almost but not yet' [*paene*] scenario, for Narcissus "the person of the beloved is consubstantial with (and as insubstantial as) the barrier that separates him from his lover: the surface of the water bears the face of the beloved."<sup>48</sup> The barrier shrinks to the thinnest possible division, but is still impassible for the very reason that it is required for the existence of his love. His reflection cannot exist apart from his self and the mirroring 2-dimensional surface of the pool. His beloved's closeness, which makes the beloved so nearly tangible, also makes Narcissus' love impossible.<sup>49</sup> Narcissus' lover is untouchable and his love unrequitable, because his lover lacks substantial existence apart from his barrier. In this way, Ovid subverts rather than realizes the Platonic lover's aim of immortal unification with the beloved. There can be no unification, nor lack, nor sublimated *eros* because there is cannot be a separation of self from self, or reflection from the mirror.

### **Active Divine Reproduction vs. Impotent Passive Petrification**

---

<sup>43</sup> Plato, *Symp.* 204d-212b.

<sup>44</sup> Plato, *Symp.* 203b-204a. As Diotima says, "anything he finds his way to slips away, and for this reason Love is never completely without resources nor is he ever rich."

<sup>45</sup> At first it may seem that Narcissus lacks any *eros*, as he turns down all lovers. But then he makes up for this coldness by being the lover and beloved.

<sup>46</sup> Hardie, 2002 143-6.

<sup>47</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 4.55-166.

<sup>48</sup> Hardie 2002, 145.

<sup>49</sup> Narcissus describes this saying, "You would think he could be touched: It is the smallest thing which stands between the lovers" [*posse putes tangi: minimum est, quod amantibus obstat*] Ovid, *Met.* 3.453.



In Plato's *Alcibiades I*, self-knowledge comes about through seeing the most beautiful and divine part of ones' soul mirrored in a lover's eyes. In the *Phaedrus*, Plato repeats this and emphasizes that love is a divine madness. Socrates strives to prove that erotic "madness is given us by the gods to ensure our greatest good fortune."<sup>50</sup> Socrates proves to Phaedrus that "the man who practices philosophy without guile or who loves boys philosophically"<sup>51</sup> returns to see the truth and beauty among the gods of Olympus. The philosopher nears the divine, "since [the soul's] memory always keeps it close as possible to those realities by being close to which the gods are divine."<sup>52</sup> This philosophic *eros* comes about only because one is "possessed by a god" in the best and noblest form.<sup>53</sup> In both the *Alcibiades I* and the *Phaedrus*, *eros* comes from the gods and leads back to the gods.

Similarly, in Plato's *Symposium*, a longing for communion with the divine drives the sublimation of *eros* to knowledge. Diotima explains that the Beautiful is the divine 'form', an abstract and unchanging principle in which beautiful things participate, and which drives all *eros*.<sup>54</sup> Lovers want their own things to be good and beautiful, for, "love is wanting to possess the Good forever"<sup>55</sup> and possessing the Good forever comes about by "giving birth in beauty."<sup>56</sup> Reproduction is the closest that mortals get to immortality. The lover wants his children, birthed ideas, and self to become beautiful. The love of beauty is then drawn together with wisdom (*philosophe*), for "the lover is turned to the great sea of beauty, and, gazing upon this, in unstinting love of wisdom, until having grown and been strengthened there, he catches sight of such knowledge, and it is the knowledge of beauty."<sup>57</sup> The aim of love's lesson is to come to knowledge of abstract beauty "itself by itself with itself."<sup>58</sup> In the end, by the lover knowing "just what is it to be beautiful,"<sup>59</sup> it is "possible for him to give birth not to images of virtue (because he is in touch with no images), but to true virtue (because he is in touch with true Beauty)."<sup>60</sup> Thus, on Diotima's account, *eros* results in production and reproductions of beautiful beings,

---

<sup>50</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245b. Socrates first argues that when madness comes from the well-meaning gods it delivers the best things and is necessary for prophecy, purification and poetic creation. *Phaedrus*, 244a-245c.

<sup>51</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249b.

<sup>52</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249c.

<sup>53</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 249d.

<sup>54</sup> The Beautiful "is always in one form; and all other beautiful things share in that, in such a way that when those others come to be or pass away, this does not become the least bit smaller or greater or suffer any change." Plato, John M. Cooper, and D. S. Hutchinson. 1997. "Symposium" in *Complete works*. Indianapolis, Ind: Hackett Pub., 211b.

<sup>55</sup> Plato, *Symp.* 206a.

<sup>56</sup> Plato, *Symp.* 206b.

<sup>57</sup> Plato, *Symp.* 210d-e.

<sup>58</sup> Plato, *Symp.* 211b.

<sup>59</sup> Plato, *Symp.* 221c.

<sup>60</sup> Plato, *Symp.* 212a.

thoughts, and actions through participation in the Beautiful. This virtue and reproduction of true beauty connects a human to the gods immortally.

Ovid also plays with this divine aspect in his tale of Narcissus, but rather than bridging the gap between mortal and immortal through knowledge and *eros* as Plato does, Ovid emphasizes the separation between the gods and mortals. Narcissus falls in love with his reflection as he sees his own eyes,<sup>61</sup> twinned stars, in the water and his hair “worthy of Bacchus, worthy of Apollo” (*Spectat ... geminum, sua lumina, sidus / et dignos Baccho, dignos et Apolline crines*).<sup>62</sup> These specious divinities contrast with Plato’s conception of the unmoving and ontologically grounding principles by being merely impotent, easily destroyed physical attributes. Rather than his soul or another immortal thing, the mere reflection of Narcissus’ *simulacra*-deep beauty is likened to the gods. This beauty is so fleeting, in contrast to Diotima’s divine principle, that even Narcissus’ tears are enough to destroy this image as they disturb the surface of the water.<sup>63</sup>

There is, on the other hand, an unmoving and immortal aspect to Narcissus, insofar as he ‘is’ a statue. Ovid describes Narcissus, “astonished by the sight of himself, clings unmoving with the same expression, as a statue formed from Parian marble” (*adstupet ipse sibi, vultuque inmotus eodem / haeret, ut e Pario formatum marmore signum*).<sup>64</sup> Narcissus cannot move as he looks at the reflection of his “ivory neck” (*eburnea colla*).<sup>65</sup> The motif of petrification echoes Echo’s fate too, since “her bones were turned into stone” (*ossa ferunt lapidis traxisse figuram*),<sup>66</sup> leaving only her voice, on account of her love for Narcissus’ looks. On Ovid’s account, love results in impotent petrification. Narcissus’ love is to a votive statue what Plato’s *eros* is to his unmoved moving divinities. The beauty of a votive statue stands in place of the Gods and is nothing compared to the beauty of the Gods.

Ovid calls to light the separation between the divine and mortal that Plato attempts to bridge through *eros*. Hardie argues that “the illusory surface of Narcissus’ pool reflects not just the impossible presence of the object of desire, but also other kinds of barriers permeable only in appearance. The ‘almost’ of the two-dimensional surface is also the distance between human worshipper and his *praesens deus*.”<sup>67</sup> The separation of Narcissus and his reflection is mirrored at once in the separation between a worshipper of a votive statue and the votive statue, and in the

---

<sup>61</sup> ‘*Lumina*,’ a Latin pun meaning both ‘lights’ and ‘eyes’.

<sup>62</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 3.418-9.

<sup>63</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 3.475-6.

<sup>64</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 418-9.

<sup>65</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 421.

<sup>66</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 399.

<sup>67</sup>Hardie follows this thought by arguing that “the boundary between art and reality is overstepped by the application of the statue simile not to the inanimate object of Narcissus’ stupefied gaze, the reflection, but to his own living person; but since the reflection is of himself, the simile applies equally to the object of his gaze. He is his own simile.” 2002,146.

distance between the supposed substantial, independently existent God and the statue thereof. Gods can only be represented in statues. They are not present in them. For Ovid the gods are as unreachable, and perhaps as insubstantial, as Narcissus' reflection.

Narcissus' *eros* results not only in petrified impotence but also turns himself as a subject into an object. As Elsner argues,

since his beloved is an object to be penetrated by the active *erastes*, Narcissus has turned himself as subject into a kind of object. As subjectivity objectified, Narcissus as subject loses all capacity for action, becomes feminized, infantilized, passive. His objectification of self turns subject into an object and results in an absorbed paralysis of self, a self-absorption whose only end is death.<sup>68</sup>

Narcissus is the lover and the beloved, the actor and acted upon, the subject and the object, and thus, not only is he made stone by his love, but, what is much worse for the Romans, he is turned from the *erastes* to the *eromenos*.<sup>69</sup> Ovid plays with the passivity of Narcissus as he describes his love at first sight: "Unwitting he desires himself and he whom he admires, himself is admired, / And while he seeks, is sought and equally kindles the flame and burns." (*Se cupit imprudens et qui probat, ipse probatur, / dumque petit, petitur, pariterque accendit et ardet*).<sup>70</sup> Further, he realizes this passivity saying, "I am burned with love for myself: I kindle the flames and suffer them. What shall I do? Shall I woo or be wooed?" (*Uror amore mei, flammam moveoque feroque. / Quid faciam? roger, anne rogem?*).<sup>71</sup>

Finally, Ovid fills out this transition to self-objectification by alluding to Catullus 62<sup>72</sup> both at the beginning of Narcissus' tale and at the end. Catullus 62 is an *epithalamium* in which "chorus of girls claim that a girl who preserves her virginity will continue to receive honour and attention from boys and girls alike, whereas a girl will be ignored like a plucked and withered flower, whatever her former beauty and attraction, once she is no longer a virgin."<sup>73</sup> Ovid pointedly leaves out any reference to the challenge to this stance by a rival male chorus and the resolution of marital intercourse at the close of the poem.<sup>74</sup> Ovid emphasizes Narcissus' initial insistence of chastity, and thus agreement with the Catullus' maidens about the horrors of being a

---

<sup>68</sup> Jas Elsner: 1996, 255. Elsner, Jas (John). 1996. "Naturalism and the Erotics of the Gaze: Intimation of Narcissus." In *Sexuality in Ancient Art*, ed. Kampen et al., 247-61.

<sup>69</sup>Bartsch outlines the negative social implication of being the receiver rather than the giver in Roman Homosexual relationships. 96-103.

<sup>70</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 4.425-6 ff.

<sup>71</sup> Ovid *Met.* 4.464-5.

<sup>72</sup> Ovid, *Met.* 3.353-55 directly recalls. Catullus, Gaius Valerius, Francis Warre Cornish, J. P. Postgate, J. W. Mackail, G. P. Goold, and Tibullus. 1988. *Catullus*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. *Cat.* 62.39-47.

<sup>73</sup> Goldenhard and Zisso 2000, 139-40.

<sup>74</sup> *Cat.* 62.59-65.

plucked flower, with the repetition structured around the middle verse.<sup>75</sup> In the end, however, Narcissus' fate is to be transformed from a beautiful boy who has his choice of beloveds, into a little yellow flower (*croceum florem*)<sup>76</sup> out in the *locus amoenus* for any lover to pick. In opposition to Plato's account of *eros*, which results in self-knowledge through seeing the most beautiful and divine part of one's self, the soul, mirrored in the eyes of the lover and ultimately draws mortals to immortality, Narcissus' love results in the petrified decreation of one fragile flower

---

<sup>75</sup> Many youths and many maidens desired him  
But in his tender form he was so hard and proud  
That no youths nor maidens touched him.  
*multi illum iuvenes, multae cupiere puellae.*  
*Sed fuit in tenera tam dura superbia forma:*  
*nulli illum iuvenes, nullae tetigere puellae.*  
Ovid, Met. 3.353-5.

<sup>76</sup> Ovid, Met. 3.-10.