

## NORMAL NARCISSISM IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

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*The Americanization of Narcissism* by E. Lunbeck (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014; 367pp);

*The Right to Narcissism: The case for an Im-possible Self-Love* by P. DeArmitt (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014; 192pp).

*Narcissism and its Discontents* by J. Walsh (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015; 182pp);

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Psychoanalysis is at once a theory of human development from infancy to adolescence, a therapeutic modality for the treatment of neurotic illness and character pathology in children and adults, and an interpretative strategy in the cultural analysis and interpretation of group pathology at the societal level (Galatarioutou, 2005). 'Narcissism' as a Freudian category offers an effective illustration of the appeal of this multi-level Freudian hermeneutics and the attendant limitations, particularly as narcissism carries normative overtones that invariably become political at all three levels of analysis.

In our present moment, Donald Trump's obnoxious campaign and his unstable presidency of the United States of America have brought clinical notions of 'malignant narcissism' into the public consciousness and produced no shortage of armchair diagnoses, more often than not from people who usually know better than to make such pronouncements without direct observation of the patient. Trump himself would appear to illustrate and even embody the nosological category of 'Narcissistic Personality Disorder' in the DSM-5/ICD-10 and its equivalent rendering in the PDM-2. Complaints, first articulated in *Teen Vogue*, that Trump

has been ‘gas-lighting’ the American public, have become commonplace (Duca, 2016). The appeal of this discourse is such that few have stopped even to ask if other clinical concepts—such as sadism or sociopathy, or just run of the mill charlatanry or greed—might also capture elements of the American president’s behaviour. NPD it is, as every psychologically-minded contributor to Facebook™ or Twitter™ agrees. To be fair to those who have jumped on this bandwagon, Trump’s repeated outbursts do provide ample interpretative fuel, even if the analytical traction of these insights may be limited, insofar as they cast the American public and perhaps the global community as (more or less) innocent victims of an odious narcissist. The more common complaints of the last three decades, that American culture had become narcissistic or at least self-obsessed, have faded into the background. In 2017, ‘narcissism’ no longer conjures ghosts of Christopher Lasch’s critique of American consumerism in *The Culture of Narcissism* (1979), remixed for a world of selfies and social media; instead, we have the spectre of megalomaniacal political leadership of the most powerful nation in the world, amidst the resurgence of far-right populist discourses evoking an assault on western cultural identities.

Although Lunbeck, DeArmitt, and Walsh could not have foreseen Trump’s presidency when they published their three volumes on narcissism, all written from a contemporary Freudian (as opposed to Kleinian or Lacanian) perspective, the political events of the last two years make their considerations of normal narcissism even more urgent.

Lunbeck takes the distinction between normal and pathological narcissism as her starting point in *The Americanization of Narcissism*, which explores the importance of the concept in the self-psychologies of Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg. Lunbeck is simultaneously interested in how the evolution of this concept within North American psychoanalytic

discourse is mirrored by what she sees as the rather facile use of ‘narcissistic’ as a critique of late twentieth- and early twenty-first century American culture. In keeping with that problematic, Lunbeck sets up Kohut and Kernberg in chapters two and three of Part One as competing but ultimately compatible theoreticians of narcissism in the American context. In her account, ‘Kohut’s fragmented, malaise-ridden narcissists’ and ‘Kernberg’s malignant narcissist’ represent the two poles of pathological narcissism, leaving room for a Kohutian healthy narcissism which Lunbeck asserts was ‘completely ignored’ in the ‘popular media’ because the last was compatible neither with mainstream orthodox Freudian cultural criticism, nor offered a rebuttal of the criticisms of those, such as Christopher Lasch, who would lump the therapeutic project of psychoanalysis itself with other objectionable instantiation of cultural narcissism (pp. 12-15, 57).

In Part II, Lunbeck uses Freud’s own writings as points of departure in each chapter, to explore how the dialogue plays out between Kohut and Kernberg, taking ‘self-love,’ ‘independence,’ ‘vanity,’ ‘gratification,’ ‘inaccessibility’ and ‘identity’, in turn, in chapters four through nine. The concluding chapter, more of an epilogue, pulls the disparate strands of Lunbeck’s story together, reviving her plea to take Kohut’s normal narcissism seriously, and rejecting the ‘orthodox stance,’ which she sees as fundamentally reactionary and more revealing of the attitudes of the analyst than of the culture its meant to critique (pp. 269-271).

There is much to admire in Lunbeck’s nuanced, scholarly, yet accessible account, and it succeeds where many intellectual historians fail: she takes psychoanalysis seriously on its own terms, and possesses the technical competence to do so. As a consequence, her considerations of how late twentieth-century American psychoanalysis grappled, not always nobly or successfully, with male homosexuality or female domesticity, retain a power that

goes beyond the usual apologetics. Hers is a rigorous and a sympathetic account, but not without its own difficulties. The rhetorical strategy that Lunbeck employs creates the impression that Kohut and Kernberg were heroic reformers of classical Freudian psychoanalysis in its American context, and if taken seriously, Kohut in particular could have cured the movement of all that ailed it.

What is at stake ultimately is more than just the question of whether or not healthy or normal narcissism is useful as a category, either developmentally or clinically, though that is an important question, especially when considered alongside Kleinian or Lacanian framings. Rather, as Lunbeck recognises, what Kohut sought to do is to shift attention away from infantile erotic conflicts and their mastery, re-interpreting the Oedipus complex as parental abandonment and rejection, and the consequent damage done to conceptions of the self (p. 249). Kernberg resisted Kohut's re-tooling, preserving a role for psychosexual conflict, with the clinical aim of confronting the patient's grandiosity, however motivated (p. 72). The problem is that this debate was not principally about the nature of narcissism, but rather about the genesis of neurosis in either conflict (Kernberg) or absence/trauma (Kohut), and about the attendant ramifications of arrested developmental states for the adult personality and the differing clinical recommendations, if any, to arise from such theoretical differences. As many a practicing (or more likely now retired) twentieth-century psychoanalyst will attest, the controversy about Kohut was less about his theory and more about his technique, particularly vis-à-vis the classical analysis of transference.

Healthy narcissism was not an issue for classical psychoanalysis because, in their conception, repressed narcissistic conflicts caused symptoms in neurotic patients and, in more extenuated forms, characterological pathologies. For classical psychoanalysts, the challenge was to

identify and interpret these conflicts within the transference; transference conflicts provided the theatre for apprehending infantile narcissistic conflicts, from the very first consultation through the termination phase (Stein, 1981; Shapiro, 1984). Transference gets short-shrift in Lunbeck's account, and consequentially she downplays the sense in which 'orthodox' psychoanalysis objected to Kohutian self-psychology on relational grounds, long before the proponents of relational psychology enjoyed their ascendancy (Goldberg, 1985).

The importance that classical psychoanalysis places on the analysis of transference is also critical because it provides the glue that binds the three levels of psychoanalytic interpretation (infantile conflicts, adult neurosis, cultural criticism) together. Julie Walsh's *Narcissism and its Discontents*, which grew out of her Cambridge dissertation under the late John Forrester, explores many of the same texts that Lunbeck cites in the second part of her work. As with Lunbeck, Walsh wants to rescue narcissism from its deployment as a term of abuse for what has been described as American cultural malaise. In discussing normal versus pathological narcissism, Walsh uses the commonplace clinical distinctions between primary and secondary narcissism, a usage notably absent in Lunbeck, but an important one, insofar as it frames secondary (pathological narcissism) as the withdrawal of libido from the world of object-relatedness. Such a construction allows Walsh to frame her 'paradoxical relationship between the narcissist and the social world' through which she postulates her notions of 'narcissistic sociability'.

Despite a very different theoretical orientation from that of Kohut or Lunbeck, Walsh's work illustrates the power of self-psychology, in focussing attention on how narcissistic attempts to achieve self-knowledge necessarily throw the subject up against the limits of knowledge of the self. From this positioning, Walsh focuses attention on nostalgia as a generative force in

the construction of the social and in generating notions of community. In doing so, she bridges three generations of Freudian cultural criticism, from Fromm and Marcuse, to Christopher Lasch, and finally Terry Eagleton, Alasdair MacIntyre and Richard Sennett.

Walsh is far more attentive than Lunbeck to the dyadic nature of the therapeutic project (for instance in her Chapter 3), where analysis of transference does play a role, albeit chiefly in facilitating the work of memory (pp. 77-79). Walsh attempts nothing less than a theoretical reformulation of the nature of social relations, which is difficult to achieve in a monograph of this length. Walsh makes her own reading of Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917) central to her analysis (Walsh, pp. 147), a text which Lunbeck also omits to mention, which is all the more incredible insofar as Freud himself saw it as an extension of 'On Narcissism' (1914), upon which Lunbeck relies. But then again, narcissistic withdrawal of libido is most vivid when recognisable in the transference, which is another reason why self-psychology omits to consider withdrawal of libido and identification with the abandoned object as the corrosive process which hollows out and fragments a sense of self, causing a flight instead to defensive grandiosity. Walsh ends with a recognition that psychoanalysis as a social science was born within the conflicts and ambiguities of the consulting room (p. 162).

The final work considered, DeArmitt's *The Right to Narcissism*, explores many of the same themes, again attempting to rescue narcissism from its 'pejorative meanings' of egotism and vanity, through the author's readings of Rousseau, Kristeva and Derrida's accounts of self-love. DeArmitt is a philosopher not a psychoanalyst, and she is not principally interested in psychoanalytic conceptions of narcissism in a technical sense, i.e. in their etiology. In debates about healthy narcissism, this is a welcome tonic to those who are too concerned about the clinical recommendations attendant to any particular theoretical formulation, as DeArmitt's

account recognises the extent to which the concept can be meaningful without making Freud's project central to the discussion. Readers may be surprised to see echoes of primary and secondary narcissism in Rousseau's *amour de soi* and *amour-propre*.

DeArmitt's framing of Kristeva's interventions, namely that secondary narcissism is, in a sense, a product of the absence of sufficient primary narcissism (pp. 56-57) is helpful, in that it develops the notion that healthy self-love is the key to both loving others and to developing a stable identity. Self-love is also, for Kristeva, the *sine qua non* of transference, and the genesis of both self-organising subjectivity and of love of others (p. 60). Classically-trained American psychoanalysts might see this kind of self-love as constitutive of their notion of 'ego strength', which they held as one of the two (along with reality testing) criteria for analysability and the two basic requirements for engaging with psychoanalysis (Shapiro, 1984).

DeArmit's reading of Derrida's call for a 'right to narcissism' is less accessible than her engagement with either Rousseau or Kristeva, though that might be a product of her interlocutor as Derrida is notoriously difficult to get into sharp focus. But it would appear that DeArmitt's reading of Derrida is very similar to Walsh's construction of narcissism as inherently paradoxical, born of both self-knowledge and aporetic perplexity (p. 95). Derrida's notions of the impossibility of mourning follow a similar logic, as his work of mourning implies the interiorisation of an Other that resists appropriation while promoting self-renunciation (p. 118). Lunbeck would find an alternative account of Kohut's fragmentation of self in DeArmitt's reading of Derrida, which privileges intra-psychic conflicts around the impossibility of mourning as the source of the 'impossibility of self-love', over seeing the

genesis of pathological narcissism in the primal trauma of parental rejection and abandonment.

All three of these works are learned, erudite and rigorous in their engagement with elusive and foundational texts by Freud and his contemporaries and successors. Taken together, they formed an important rallying call for the rehabilitation of healthy narcissism, one that risks being drowned out amidst the current political storms in Britain and America. As with Trump, Theresa May's commitment to delivering Brexit reads to continental audiences like yet another exercise in English exceptionalism, solipsism and narcissism. Lunbeck, Walsh and DeArmitt offer competing yet complementary accounts of healthy narcissism. For Lunbeck, 'normal narcissism' represented a rebuke to orthodox American classical psychoanalysis. In Walsh and DeArmitt it instead emerges (in this review at least) as a notion more compatible with orthodox American psychoanalysis and its focus on the interpretation of transference.

Following Kristeva, one might well wonder if the erosion of sufficient primary narcissistic self-belief in the clinical validity of orthodox psychoanalysis was what has contributed over time to the disappearances of defences of healthy narcissism. After all, drug therapies and cognitive-behavioural therapies succeeded where Kohutian self-psychology failed to challenge the hegemony of psychoanalytic orthodoxies in North America in the treatment of most mental and emotional suffering. Today psychoanalytic psychotherapies are accepted within American psychiatry only as effective treatments for severe character pathologies: mainly narcissistic and borderline personality disorders, occasionally with non-psychotic schizotypal personality disorder, and very rarely in treatment-resistant dysthymia. The treatment of neurotic illness as conventionally and historically understood is no longer the

undisputed domain of psychoanalysis. Perhaps it is no surprise then that psychoanalysts do not trumpet the virtues of normal narcissism.

As for Trump and Brexit, explanations of conditions of cultural *anomie*, of racist and patriarchal politics born of wounded masculinities, and of the attendant resurgence of coercive, fascist ideologies are foremost the result of conflicts arising from the internal logics of globalisation. If globalisation, which requires mourning national identities while internalising them in the first instance, is to occur without destroying the imagined communities of nation-states, then it must depend on something akin to the primary narcissism of state actors. There are alternatives, of course, in the form of a global commons, but that solution would appear today to be an impossible fantasy.

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