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## Creation, Identity and Reflection

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**Abstract:** The paper “Creation, Identity and Reflection” approaches the identification in the “mirror” of reality with creation, in other words seeking the authors’ identity in the reflected images. Reflection means attempting to find oneself, the mirror being the main principle of creation. Many characters become interesting only when they step into the world beyond the mirror, when their faces are doubled by the other self or when their selves are returned by other characters. The narcissistic concept of the mirror, i.e. the reflection in the mirror and the representation of the mirror itself, is a recurrent one in literature, but the reflection of the self which is not the self (as it is a reflection) does not necessarily appear in a mirror or in a photograph or portrait. Sometimes, the not-self is returned to the self by another person or character. As far as Oscar Wilde’s theories are concerned, the main idea is that people are interesting for their masks, not for their inner nature. What Wilde calls “inner nature” is the characters’ un-reflected self and the mask is the reflection, the self in the mirror. Some characters’ relationships develop within a fiction that they dramatically try to preserve and protect with the risk of suffering. They refuse to take off the masks which define them in the others’ minds and hearts; the narcissistic individuals (both artists and characters) seek and love their own image which they project upon facts, thus creating a fictive realm.

**Keywords:** creation; Narcissus; mirror; reflection; identity; mask; self

*Motto: “Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known.”*  
(Oscar Wilde)

In *Subjective Mythologies*, a fascinating book on the mythical symbols of antiquity, Octavian Paler stated: “Before blaming Narcissus, we should probably understand more thoroughly what he saw in the water he mirrored himself in. By talking about him we are actually interested in what is happening to us. And nobody is forced to break one’s own heart to see what is hidden inside, but if one does it, he must not cheat.” (Paler, 1975, p. 117)

As writing means looking into one’s inner self, it should be concluded that writing is a narcissistic act. Tudor Vianu is known to have used the term *reflexive* in order to mention that in the language with a stylistic function the writer *communicates* and *communicates himself*, which actually represents the narcissistic nature of art. It must be added that also Jacques Lacan advanced a theory of language based on Narcissus complex (Lacan, 1978).

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Schlegel considers that all poets are just like Narcissus. Thomas Mann says, as well: "Self-love is always the beginning of a novelistic life just because writing makes sense only when the self has a problem." (Rank, 1997, p. 65). That is, the narcissistic problems find an unconscious solution through the act of writing, which actually represents the mirror of the writers' selves who communicate themselves through sublimation. In Victor Hugo's opinion, the outside (objective) world is seen in a narcissistic way, by mirroring in the inner (subjective) world: "It is fantastic that it is inside you where you must look in order to understand what is happening outside. The profound mirror is inside the human being." It is true, the same reality is perceived differently, depending on the way our inner mirror changes it by bringing new images and values.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Oscar Wilde approaches the same theme. Dorian hopes to stop the time, making it leave its tragic trace upon the portrait and not upon himself, thus remaining for ever young. The portrait is getting old, but the face in the mirror remains unchanged. Despite this, Dorian gets bored with his young face, breaks the mirror and kills the painter. As it was expected, as soon as he destroys the portrait, his face suddenly becomes ugly and old. Certainly, for Oscar Wilde, Narcissus embodies the tragic beauty which has spiritual dimensions. As Jeffrey Berman points out: "The lack of critical distance between the poet and his characters equals the absence of boundaries between Narcissus and the water." (Berman, 1994, p. 148) Octavian Paler would have said about Dorian Gray: "At first, the one who had bent over the water would have been glad to see how beautiful he was. Then, he found out how lonely he was. (Paler, 1975, 119) This is, indeed, a tragic aspect: the one who tries to find himself/ herself in the mirror finally understands that his/ her image is actually the image of his/ her own loneliness.

Beginning with Otto Rank, psychoanalysts have understood the importance of narcissism in Oscar Wilde's writings, particularly the theme of *the double*. However, what has not been analysed yet, is the extent to which Wilde's theory on aesthetics is based on a narcissistic foundation; he advances a theory on *art* in which the worship of beauty (in the form of self-love) has transcendent significance. "To love oneself is the beginning of a life-long romance", Wilde writes in *Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young* (1894). He was keen on creating a "new Hedonism" in order to worship Narcissus' two divine gifts, youth and beauty. Moreover, Clamence, Albert Camus's character from *La Chute*, says the following words: "Dear friend, this is what the human being is like: he cannot love without loving himself." (Camus, 1968, p. 121)

Camil Petrescu is also Narcissus's supporter, stating that: "We can consider something to be absolute only by looking at our own spiritual essence." (Petrescu, 1971, p. 21). Then he says: "I cannot escape myself" (Petrescu, 1971, p. 27). It is known that the Romanian critic blamed the omniscient point of view, pleading in favour of authenticity and stating that it is only what happens in our conscience that we can really know.

In Mateiu Caragiale's novel – *Craii de Curtea Veche/ The Boyars of Curtea Veche* - Pașadia, Pîrgu and Pantazi represent for each other the identity in the mirror; their relationships develop within a fiction which they tragically try to maintain with the risk of suffering all their lives. They refuse to take off their "masks", that define them in the others' minds. Taking off their masks means that the "invasion" of reality will trouble their image and the characters will no longer be able to reflect each other.

Theodor Codreanu considers that Anton Holban is one of those writers who consider writing as being the direct expression of the spiritual essence. His work has a confessional character, the author using

the first person singular when writing his memories. In other words, Narcissus complex is the archetype of the artistic creation.

Sigmund Freud did not refer to narcissism in his early writings, but he gradually realized its importance for psychoanalytic theory. The first reference appears in a 1910 footnote to the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905). Freud's major statement appears in the 1914 essay *On Narcissism: An Introduction*. In his very theoretical paper, Freud breaks new ground by making a metaphysical structure of the relationship between the self and object world. After the 1914 essay, Freud often returned to the implications of narcissism in *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, *Mourning and Melancholia*, *The Ego and the Id* and *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Freud's insights into narcissism result in paradoxes: behind narcissists' self-love lies self-hate; beneath their grandiosity lies insecurity. The emptiness characteristic of narcissism represents defences against the inner forces attacking a person's self-esteem.

The classical view on narcissism has been set forth by Otto Kernberg, influenced by Melanie Klein. A more revolutionary view comes from Heinz Kohut, who was the founder and leader of a new school of psychoanalysis called self psychology.

We should mention that Freud's best statement on the artist appears in the *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, where he mentions that the artist is "an introvert, not far from neurosis" (Freud, 1980, p. 312). Oppressed by powerful instinctual needs, the artist "desires to win honour, power, wealth, fame and love of women; but he lacks the means of achieving these satisfactions". Consequently, the artist turns away from reality and withdraws into the world of art, where he makes his dreams come true. For Freud, art represents a substitute gratification enabling the artist to escape illness. "It is well known, indeed", Freud writes in the same passage, "how often artists suffer from a partial inhibition of their efficiency because of neurosis." (Freud, 1980, p. 312)

There is some scientific evidence supporting the connection between suffering and art. The relationship between genius and insanity has been hinted at for centuries and numerous personalities, from Cesare Lombroso to Havelock Ellis, have speculated that genius and mental disorders are connected. However, it is said that none of these studies was scientifically rigorous. A study undertaken in the 1970s supports Freud's statement that the artist is more vulnerable than others to neurotic conflicts. Nancy Andreasen, a critic and psychiatrist, conducted a study at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop for the purpose of examining the prevalence of psychiatric symptoms in a group of poets and novelists. She discovered that the interviewed writers had a significantly higher incidence of illness and psychiatric treatment than did a matched control group. Nine out of the fifteen writers had previously seen a psychiatrist, eight had been in treatment and four had been hospitalized. Most of the writers described symptoms of mood disorder, which appears to be the illness most associated with creativity. Andreasen considers that mood disorders increase a writer's insight into human experience.

George Pickering has coined the term creative malady to describe the role of illness in personalities like: Charles Darwin, Florence Nightingale, Marcel Proust, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Freud. In his opinion, illness was an essential part of creation. But writers may be more vulnerable than other types of people because their bursts of creativity seem to be related to the intensity of their moods. Andreasen stated that most of the interviewed writers had described a sense of self-doubt and loneliness and believed that they were engaged in a life-or-death battle during the act of creation. They also experienced relief, peace and even joy when they were able to sublimate their conflicts into art; thus, writing becomes a form of personal therapy.

Gaston Bachelard pointed out that: "Narcissism is not always neurotic", in other words it has a positive role in the artistic creation. Sublimation does not always represent the negation of a desire [...]. It can be sublimation for an ideal. Then Narcissus does no longer say: "I love myself just the way I am", but says: "I am just the way I love myself" (Bachelard, 1995, p. 95). Therefore, "*the secondary creative narcissism*", as Theodor Codreanu calls it, is an ideal and not sublimation seen as a defence mechanism against frustration. Narcissus recreates himself through his love directed towards himself; love is no longer the result of the mirroring, but the cause of it: he mirrors because he loves himself.

According to Jacques Lacan, all infants were born in the realm of the *Imaginary*, the main feature of which is the symbiotic relationship of the infant with the world. The symbiosis of the infant with the world is disrupted by the intervention of a third term, that of the patriarchal law, or the Name of the Father, the *nom du pere*. What is instituted at the moment of disruption of the Imaginary by the *nom du pere* is Desire, an urge to return to the utopian state of the Imaginary, of oneness, from which the subject has been driven away. Unfortunately, one can never fulfil one's Desire; the loss of the Imaginary is a permanent one. But this desire is repressed and this act of repression brings the unconscious into being. From the point of view of the *Mirror Stage*, the subject becomes established in the realm of the Symbolic, the realm of language and representation and this relies on the recognition of the Other in the mirror, that is both oneself and not-onese. Lacan advances an almost hallucinating theory and Jeffrey Berman is right when he wonders: "One is never sure whether to read Lacan literally or metaphorically. Is he primarily a scientist, whose authority is based upon observational research; a philosopher, whose influence rests upon his problematic redefinitions; or a poet, whose power resides in his vivid language? (Berman, 1995, p. 29)

The narcissistic issues exist on four separate but interrelated levels: fictional character, text, author and reader. Generally, the authors' narcissistic injuries are transmitted to their characters, who live their lives trying to cope with their creators' experiences. The problems experienced by characters in their adult lives may be traced, with few exceptions, to early parent-child conflicts, particularly to an overloving or underloving (or absent) mother and a father who does not offer enough love or attention. When they suffer from an improper mirroring in childhood, real and fictive characters are likely to be depressed in their adult life and also deforming mirrors for their own self or for the others. Both types of characters respond to narcissistic injuries in a similar way and present and past are a continuous line. Thus, there is a question to be raised: is the relationship between the real and the fictive character one of dependence (the character is subordinated to the author) or one of interdependence (both characters are images of the same self, they mirror one in each other).

Narcissism also plays a role in the act of reading. Marshall Alcorn and Mark Bracher consider that literature provides the opportunity for the "re-formation" of the reader's self. The reader forms a "narcissistic alliance" with a fictional character. Just like psychoanalysis, literature can alter the reader's self by changing his or her perceptions of the world and pursuit of ideals. At the same time, the reader tries to find himself in the act of reading, although he must keep his own identity.

Mihail Sebastian's and Oscar Wilde's works represent a game of mirrors: the two writers look at themselves in the mirror and create characters similar to them (narcissistic act) and the characters reflect themselves in order to find their true self, their true nature, which is the inner one. They represent 'shards' of the same mirror which form a whole together. In other words, Sebastian's and Wilde's selves are fragmented and reflect an inner reality called: Dorian Gray, Lord Henry Wotton, Basil Hallward, Ștefan Valeriu, Bogoiu, Miroiu, Paul, Corina or Mona.

Wilde elaborates his philosophy of art in the four essays that make up *Intentions: The Decay of Lying, Pen, Pencil and Poison, The Critic as Artist* and *The Truth of Masks*. In *The Decay of Lying*, he defines the four doctrines of the new aesthetics: “Art never expresses anything but itself. It has an independent life, just as Thought has, and develops purely on its own lines”; “All bad art comes from returning to Life and Nature, and elevating them into ideals”; “Life imitates Art far more than Art imitates Life”; “Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art” (Wilde, 1990, p. 83). Central to Wilde’s theory of aesthetics is the separation between art and life; the idealization of art implies the devaluation of nature. He considers nature as totally imperfect, even deformed. “My own experience is that the more we study Art, the less we care about Nature. What Art really reveals us is Nature’s lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition.” By contrast, “Art is our spirited protest, our gallant attempt to teach Nature her proper place” (Wilde, 1990, p. 84). Wilde emphasizes the art-nature dichotomy, associating art with health and nature with illness. “One touch of Nature may make the whole world kin, but two touches of Nature will destroy any work of Art.” Anticipating existentialist and poststructuralist assumptions, Wilde denies the objective existence of nature, arguing that people discover in nature only what they bring to it.

To a certain extent, Mihail Sebastian’s theory of aesthetics is similar to the one developed by Oscar Wilde. In 1935, the Romanian writer and critic wrote in *Rampa* revue: “Theatre is a fiction that you believe in. A game you take part in. It is a delicate trick, a subtle trick that subjugates you, changes your views, obliges you to leave your loneliness.” (Sebastian, 1935, p. 1). In another chronicle from “*Rampa*”, Sebastian put down: “The mask expresses and satisfies this need to step beyond. It responds to our instinct of escape. An instinct like hunger, thirst, love - an instinct which is rich, certainly, luxurious and expensive, but not less natural.” (Sebastian, 1935, p. 1)

In the two critics’ view, art is a parallel reality, but as plausible and natural as the proper reality and it can never be eliminated. For Wilde, art cannot be the reflection of nature because it is an independent reality; on the contrary, mirroring functions vice versa: nature is the imperfect and deformed reflection of art, which is the supreme standard. For Sebastian, art seems to reflect nature, but without being subordinated to it. The entity in the mirror, i.e. art, represents a bright image, different from nature, which is the reflecting image. “Stepping beyond” means looking for your artistic and good self in the mirror.

Beneath their aesthetics there is a rescue fantasy, which means that the artists’ creation of beauty represents a refuge against the bleak reality. We can mention here Freud’s classic essay *A Special Type of Choice of Object Made by Men* (1910), in which he theorizes that a man’s wish to rescue a prostitute represents the son’s efforts to rescue the mother from the father, the boy’s rival in love. Freud interprets the rescue fantasy in terms of the Oedipus complex, which he introduces for the first time in this essay. With Wilde and Sebastian, the rescue fantasy represents the artist, who must save us from our imperfect nature and turn nature into a superior reality.

From this point of view, Gaston Bachelard’s interrogation is very interesting: “How could all these images have a meaning if they didn’t have a double meaning?” (Bachelard, 1999, p. 105). An explanation could be that an un-reflected image remains superficial, lacking the profoundness of the look into the inner side. Reflection means seeking the self; the real identity is not necessarily what we see, i.e. the social self; it can be the reflection itself, the self in the mirror (the artistic self). As Theodor Codreanu puts it, the mirror is the fundamental principle of creation. Sebastian’s and Wilde’s characters become interesting only when they step into the world beyond the mirror, when their faces are doubled by the other self or when their selves are returned by other characters. Sebastian’s

confession: “What I ask from life is the right to look into its eyes with total honesty” can be interpreted taking into account these statements. Looking means stepping beyond appearance, looking into the inner mirror.

Returning to Oscar Wilde’s theories, the most important idea is that people are interesting for their masks, not for their true nature. We consider that what Wilde calls “inner nature” is the un-reflected self of the characters and “the mask” is the reflection, the self in the mirror. Throughout *The Critic as Artist* we find the idea that life is inevitably painful and disappointing: “For Life is terribly deficient in form. Its catastrophes happen in the wrong way and to the wrong people. One is always wounded when one approaches it (Wilde, 1990, p. 85).

Jeffrey Berman points out that “Wilde’s dichotomy of art (perfection) and life (imperfection) reflects a fundamental split between the good and bad self. The opposition between idealization (of art) and devaluation (of life) is a familiar pattern of narcissistic thinking.” (Berman, 1994, p. 152) In other words, the narcissist seeks and loves his own image, that he projects upon facts, thus creating a fictive dimension.

In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, for Basil Hallward, Dorian is the great passion of his life. From the moment he meets Dorian, Basil is overwhelmed by him. Being afraid of his crazy love for Dorian, he tries to sublimate his strong emotions into art. Lord Henry and Basil worship Dorian in similar aesthetic terms. In the beginning, Basil tells Lord Henry that he cannot exhibit the painting of Dorian, since “I have put too much of myself into it.” (Wilde, 1992, p. 58) Basil does not abandon Dorian, but the creation abandons its creator. Basil expresses a subjective view of art, in which “every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter. The sitter is merely the accident, the occasion (Wilde, 1992, p. 45). The lack of distance between painter and subject suggests the lack of clear boundaries in the artist’s personal relationships. Basil suffers from unresolved issues typical of narcissistic disorders.

Gaston Bachelard considers that “the imagined fact is more important than the real fact.” (Bachelard, 1995, p. 199). Indeed, for all these characters it is much more important to show their masks, as this is their real nature. Their social self-preservation preserves the frustration caused by the disappointments and limits imposed by reality (i.e. Life/Nature in Wilde’s terms).

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