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# Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Who is the Most Beautiful of Them All: A Psychoanalytic Reflection on Narcissism, the Ego, Lacan's Mirror Stage and Cultural Identity

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## Abstract

In the stories of Snow White, Narcissus, and other such tales, we see brilliant examples of identities based on imaginary features. These turn out to be narcissistic and ego-centred identities. The question for the psychoanalyst and therapist is, are there any other forms of identity? A close reading of Freud, informed by the psychoanalytic teaching of Lacan, shows us that there are. Using a Lacanian orientation in psychoanalysis in conjunction with a reading of the Samoan author Albert Wendt's book *Sons for the Return Home*, we see that there is a subjectivity that is also a cultural identity that is not based on a 'Westernized' idea of a strong ego.

'Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most beautiful one of them all?' the queen asks the mirror fairly early on in the story of Snow White.<sup>1</sup>

The wicked stepmother continues to ask the mirror the same question even though, at the start of the story, the mirror continues to tell her that she is the most beautiful. She needs constant reassurance as to her identity as the most beautiful.

Then, one day, it is as if this mirror image can not hold up. It replies to the queen, 'Though queen thou are beautiful, Snow White is the most beautiful one of all', much to the queen's chagrin. She is then consumed by anguish, rage and envy. Even though she started off beautiful, envy and anguish have made her ugly.

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1. I have changed the word 'fair' in the story to 'beautiful' as that seems to be what the queen is saying and at this point I do not want to get into the politics or psychoanalysis of colour, although that could be an interesting theme to develop.

In one of Aesop's tales (1984: Omega), a dog is carrying a piece of meat. It crosses a stream by a bridge but, on looking down into the water, sees a dog with a piece of meat in its mouth. It goes to grab the meat from the dog. Of course, what it sees in the water is its own reflection and on grabbing at the meat it loses what it already has.

Lastly, we have in the *Metamorphoses* of the Roman poet Ovid (trans. A. D. Melville), the story of Narcissus who refused the overtures of Echo, and was so enchanted by his own image seen in the water that he could not take himself away from this enchantment with himself, and so pined away and died. There was no need to go outwards to others. He was complete unto himself and this completeness destroyed him.

We see in these brief stories examples of mirror imaging and narcissism. In all three cases the mirror images do not hold up and lead the subjects of the stories to destruction. Now we know that the mirror image does not work, because whenever we walk down one of the main streets of any city we see people looking at their image in the glass windows as they go by. But they are not content with just one glance. They walk three feet on and look again and then again.

In Chinese culture, during bereavement rituals the mirror is covered by red paper. This is in order that departing spirits do not see themselves in the mirror and so become unable to move on to another position, another identity. Psychoanalysis is similarly concerned with a person becoming fixed in some mirror image identity which they are unable to move on from.

Freud in one of his papers on technique also invokes an image of the mirror. The analyst 'should be impenetrable to the patient, and, like a mirror, reflect nothing but what is shown to him' (1912/1991: 162). Some analysts have taken this mirror image description of analysis literally and they see analysis as providing a type of mirroring of what the client says. According to Etchegoyen (1991: 505), Grunberger, for instance says that an analyst should constitute himself strictly as the patient's alter-ego, as a mirror whose sole function is to allow the patient to see himself reflected there. To him, that is why the analyst sits behind the person, leaving the analysand alone without an object that would drive the analysand from their narcissistic position. Here, of course, the analysand is a narcissist with the analyst as his Echo. But we can indeed question whether this is what analysis is about.

Many therapeutic endeavors aim at strengthening a person's image, their ego, to build self-esteem, to give a sense of wholeness to a person. Sometimes, perhaps narcissistically, the analyst or therapist sees themselves serving as a role model with which the client can identify. The relationship is to be made as equal as possible, even to the point of needing sameness in both the analyst and analysand: same sex, same race, same culture, same problem. But, one can ask, is not this a type of mirror imaging, and what are the consequences? The problem in this way of working is that it does not get people out of the same alienating situation as Snow White, Aesop's dog and Narcissus, who are all locked in mirror image identities. Rather than mirroring identities by congruence and empathy, psychoanalysis—for Lacan—is about making a difference. Sitting behind a person, in fact, starts to break the mirror effects of analyst-analysand working together. It gets away from the image to a concern with language. It is with language that one can reach an other beyond one's ego. Things can be different. The queen can be different from Snow White and not lose her beauty. Aesop's dog does not have to have the other's meat and Narcissus could get beyond himself and even do better than to be with Echo.

In a session, it happened that I said I was going to be away one week. The client immediately said that she was going to be away the week after and expected that she could. We see the beginning of some identifying process here. We see it, also, when she made a connection with my having been very English in my ways, the same way that she saw herself. Of course, I did not collude with this mirror imaging. I started to make a difference. Missed sessions had to be paid for. I was a New Zealander.

### The history of the ego

Just as the ego has a history within each of us, so on a social level it has a history. It can be dated as beginning with Martin Luther in the sixteenth century: 'Here I stand', he said (Erickson: 1962: 231). He then proceeded to try to dismantle the mediation of the church and the social group as the way of obtaining a communication with God. He tried to establish a direct one-to-one communication with God. This autonomous ego was further developed by Descartes, with his *cogito ergo sum*: 'I think therefore I am' (Descartes: 1970: 69). Certainty now resided in one's self. The knowledge of others, even of God, was secondary and less well-founded than the certainty coming from one's own thinking process embedded in one's own self.

With the growth of capitalism and secularization, the individual became totally alone, almost solipsistic and autistic, certainly narcissistic. 'Me, myself and I' go the words of a modern song. But without the social world and the mediating factors of language, symbols and rituals to hold this individualized being in existence, the modern ego itself started to have problems. Hence the development of psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. Philip Rieff (1966), the sociologist of psychoanalysis, sees therapy as taking over from theology the task of keeping the self together in the modern world. The self in the modern world is conceptualized as the ego. Christopher Lasch, in his book *The Culture of Narcissism* (1980), outlines some of the effects of this modern world which he says is plagued by narcissism. Therapy may have got beyond the *cogito* of Descartes, but it did not get a lot further because in place of the *cogito* it puts feelings. *Sentio ergo sum*: 'I feel therefore I am' says the modern western therapist. Both, for Lacan, involve an unnecessary attention being paid to the ego. Lacan's reading of Freud says the seat of analysis and therapy is in the unconscious and language (1977). Perhaps he would say 'I speak, therefore I am', or at least 'therefore I can come to be'. It is here that the subject can be found.

## Freud

In his paper 'On Narcissism' Freud says: '...we are bound to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego cannot exist in the individual from the start' (1914: 77). The ego has to be developed; it has a history. In 'Totem and Taboo' Freud says that the ego is established at the same time as narcissism is established (1912-1913: 89). In 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' he describes infantile sexuality as auto-erotic: '... the instinct is not directed towards other people, but obtains satisfaction from the subject's own body (1905: 181). The obtained satisfaction is the satisfaction of individual component instincts such as the oral and anal instincts, which function anarchically rather than as an organised group of instincts. But this is not, for Freud, the stage of narcissism. Freud postulates that after the stage of auto-eroticism there is the stage of narcissism. Here the isolated sexual instincts come together into a single whole and have found an object, which he says is the ego (1912-13: 88-89; 1914: 75). At this point in his writings, the narcissistic stage is located between auto-eroticism and object-love. The ego is the organization of the libido and from there libido can go out to objects. It can also be withdrawn back onto the ego as seen particularly in illness and psychosis.

In the 1923 paper 'The Ego and the Id', often given central place in training schools, Freud initially reiterates the importance of the conscious/unconscious distinction, even if he complicates matters a little more. The paper is not strong about strengthening the ego. He refers in this paper to 'the narcissism of the ego' although, admittedly, this is secondary narcissism that he is referring to that has come back from objects (1923: 46). But still later, in 'An Outline of Psychoanalysis', he speaks of primary narcissism made up from the libido that the ego stores up before it goes onto objects. The resistance and defences come from the ego, he says (1940: 178-179). The ego defends itself, it ignores situations, it represses, it opposes itself to desire.

In some places, certainly, Freud talks about strengthening the ego. In 'The Introductory Lectures', for example, he talks about a strong ego (1916-17: 387) as he does elsewhere, but he gives more weight to the fact that we cannot trust the ego, that the ego leaves out of account the unconscious, and that, 'we are prepared to find that the ego's assertions will lead us astray' (380). In 'An Outline of Psychoanalysis', Freud talks about strengthening the ego by, amongst other things, extending self-knowledge. But in the same paper he also says:

...the desire for a powerful uninhibited ego may seem to us intelligible, but as we are taught by the times we live in it is in the profoundest sense hostile to civilization (1940: 185).

Many people translate Freud's '*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*' in 'The New Introductory Lectures' (1933: 80) as 'Where Id was, there ego shall be' and see this as the aim and catchcry of psychoanalysis. Lacan takes it differently, interpreting the statement as: 'There where it was, I would like it to be understood, it is my duty that I should come to being' (1977: 129). Here 'I' is not the 'I' of the ego but the 'I' of the subject. If *Es* meant id, Lacan says, Freud would have used '*das Es*' and similarly '*das Ich*' for the ego. The understanding here is that the subject must come into being and is not to be found as identified with the ego.

### *Identification*

Besides narcissism, the other important element that Freud associates with the ego is that of identification.

Early in his work Freud noticed that people not only seemed to imitate others, but seemed to assimilate aspects of another. In hysterical identification, for

example, a person can take on a symptom or trait—say a cough—that is part of the symptomatology of another person. A person can also identify themselves with a dead person. Libido here, instead of being directed onto a person, is withdrawn into the ego (Freud: 1917: 249). Freud says in ‘The Ego and the Id’ that the ego is formed to a great extent out of identifications (1923: 48).

Freud also, and this is an important point, talks of another type of identification that is somewhat different from the two examples above. He speaks of an identification with the father or with the parents at the dissolution of the Oedipus complex (1923: 28-34). This identification, unlike the other two, is not related so much to the ego and narcissism but to object love and the ability to desire another outside the family. It is related also to the castration complex which symbolically, for Freud, cuts one off from Oedipal desires.

### **Lacan**

Lacan homes in on and develops the relationships which Freud makes between narcissism, the ego, and identification. It is, perhaps, where he begins his work. Lacan (1977: 1-7) relates these concepts to one another in his mirror stage theory and more broadly in what he calls the Imaginary, which is on one level opposed to the concept of the Symbolic.

Lacan agrees with Freud that the ego is not present at birth. From the age of about 6-18 months, Lacan sees the baby starting to recognize himself in the mirror. The child is fascinated by the image and eventually comes to see the image as his own. Because at birth a baby is relatively uncoordinated, helpless and dependent, the mirror image gives the child a sense of totality, unity and mastery despite the lack of real mastery. This is the ego according to Lacan. Because of the disparity between the image of the baby and what the baby actually is (not co-ordinated or masterful) alienation is present. We can say, then, that the ego is formed on the basis of an imaginary relationship of the subject to his own body. His own body is other than himself and this structures the subject as a rival with himself. Now the image he identifies with can be the image of another, the gaze of the mother, for example. We see this confusion of who is who sometimes in children’s play where the child who strikes another says that he was struck, the child who sees another fall himself cries. A child recently said to me when she saw me with my legs crossed that I had my shoes on the wrong way.

Given that the ego is imaginary, it neglects, misconstrues events and refuses to accept the truth coming from the unconscious. It can hardly, then, be seen as the human subject.

But, as we saw for Freud, there was for Lacan more than one type of Identification. There was the one at the dissolution of the Oedipal scenario that gave a person a place outside the family in a greater scheme of things. Along with Freud, Lacan associates this position as one within culture. Unlike many analysts who leave Freud's social and cultural writings out of account, Lacan uses these to show the nature of this different type of identification and to show that it is a movement into culture. The castration complex moves the child away from its mother, away from imaginary identifications to symbolic ones. Lacan shows how Freud clearly outlines this process in his primal horde myth, which is a variation of the Oedipal myth. But, unlike the Oedipal myth, which is unfinished, the primal horde myth does show a way out of the Oedipus complex. A careful reading of this myth can be very helpful in our reading of Freud's works on culture, religion, mourning and politics, and also for clinical work.

In the beginning, Freud postulates that humans live in primitive horde-like groups where a primal father has all the women to himself (1912-13). There are no rules against murder and incest. In fact there are no rules at all. The men are under the threat of actual castration. The brothers then group together and kill this father, devouring him. But this way of living is not then perpetuated. Instead of carrying on this way of life, the brothers feel guilty. The people then form communities that exist by law, primarily laws against incest and murder. They negotiate by means of language and symbols rather than act by brute force. It is the beginning as Freud says 'of so many things—of social organization, of moral restrictions and of religion' (1912-13: 142).

Though the primal father is dead, from this death the symbolic father comes into being as the rules of the symbolic system. This is what Lacan refers to as 'The Name of the Father'. The men celebrate this movement from the horde to culture by a ritual of circumcision which Freud says is symbolic castration. We are then in the realms of what Lacan calls the Symbolic.

The entry into the Symbolic is the dissolution of the Oedipal complex. Neurosis is only a partial entry into the Symbolic. With the movement from the realm of the Oedipal with its imaginary identifications, into the realm of culture and its symbolic identification, a person becomes a subject, subjected especially to culture and the symbolic realm. This gives a person their subjectivity as a being who can have some desire for some other outside themselves. There is room for difference and otherness to occur, not completely outside the symbolic system, as it is for the psychotic, but subjected to it.

Instead of alienation there is separation. A person does not have to be captivated by mirror image functioning but can get beyond this.

### *Sons for the Return Home, by Albert Wendt*

To show more clearly the workings of the above concepts, I refer to Albert Wendt's novel *Sons for the Return Home* (1987).

In summary, the novel is about a man who as a boy travels from Samoa to New Zealand, then eventually returns to Samoa. While at university, he meets a *palagi* woman. The relationship between them becomes the main focus of the book. Eventually, they decide to get married but, as in many love stories, their families do not sanction the marriage. The woman decides to go to Australia. There she has an abortion and does not return. The man with his family goes back to Samoa, but it no longer feels like home. Just as he did not fit into New Zealand society, he does not fit into Samoan society, but he learns much about himself, a process that first started when he met the *palagi* woman. Finally, after a serious argument with his mother, he leaves Samoa and returns to New Zealand. His journey could almost be the journey of a psychoanalysis.

### *Analysis*

The novel starts with the man sitting at a table in the university café and being approached by a woman. The woman says: 'You don't talk much do you?' (1987: 2). He is a man of few words. We are told that as a teenager the main character was a school prefect and a member of the first fifteen. But he did not enjoy the game. He used it for his own ends. He slept with girls, just to keep them at bay. He did well at school and was liked and admired as 'the best Samoan student our school has ever had' (1987: 12). He was the first Samoan to pass School Certificate and had the possibility of being 'the first Samoan to be picked for the All Blacks' (1987: 15), all of which pleased his parents, but did not please him. We start, then, to see an identity being formed, but we can ask, is this an identity or a seeming identity, an imaginary identity in Lacan's terms, as we saw above, one that builds up a 'strong' but alienating ego?

As a youth he was taught, especially by his mother, about Samoa: '... the sun shines nearly all the time... it never gets cold' (1987: 74). Samoa was compared to New Zealand as good is to bad. As the text says and he learned this much later:

...so she continued, throughout the years, until a new mythology, woven out of her romantic memories, her legends, her illusions, her prejudices, was



born in her sons, a new fabulous Samoa to be obtained by her sons when they returned home (1987: 76).

'Sons for the Return Home' was the identity given to him and his brother by their mother—an imaginary identity.

We get some inkling of the initial formation of this character's ego in the mirror stage in the second chapter of the novel. We are told that on board the ship as they were coming to New Zealand the mother dressed the boy in a gray sweater, shorts and shoes. These were quite different clothes from what he was used to. The boy and his father then stood 'in front of the full-length mirror, trying awkwardly to adjust to the strange clothes' (1987: 6).

The boy started crying, pleading with his mother to take off the shoes. She calmed him by promising him an ice-cream. We see here the image given to him by his mother and the reward for keeping it—an ice-cream—mother's love. His desire is being created as his mother's desire. It is also very interesting to see much later on in the novel, when he is back in Samoa and questioning himself and coming to an understanding of his own desire, that he goes against his mother's wishes. 'He adamantly refused to wear his charcoal gray woollen suit and the tie and shoes his mother wanted him to wear' (1987: 181). These are almost the same clothes he put on as a child at the request of his mother. It is as if he had been wearing them ever since, but now his ego, associated with these clothes, is being broken. On his return to Samoa, so far out of touch was he that it all seemed unreal. His mother wanted him to just pretend, but it was becoming increasingly impossible: 'It didn't seem real...it was hard to believe that he had spent nearly twenty years preparing and waiting for this return' (1987: 171-172).

In Chapter 21 we see, as his relationship with his girlfriend is deepening, the image of a mirror is applied by them to their relationship after making up after an argument: 'Now we can see each other more clearly. One more mirror shattered' (1987: 116). The ego and its identity are being deconstructed, allowing 'the other' to have a presence as other and not just a mirror image, (part of the development of an analysis).

At one point in Chapter 19, we come across Polynesian mythology—jealousy between brothers over being mother's favourite, incest, the phallus, the death goddess Hine-nui-te-po who made men immortal. It was Maui who entered Hine-nui-te-po while she was asleep. She awoke and found him in there. She crossed her legs and thus ended man's quest for immortality. He commented

to his girlfriend at the beginning of these narratives: 'Freud did not discover the Oedipus Complex' (1987: 99).

But where is the father in all of this? At the beginning of the novel, we see the desire of the man for the women at university is kindled on the bed of his mother. The father does not seem to have any authority over his son. The father seems to have abdicated his position of what Lacan calls 'The Name of the Father.' There is neither primal nor symbolic father present. Consequently there is not an adequate separating from the mirroring identity of the mother.

The father, for Lacan, puts in place the incest prohibition: you must not sleep with your mother. The father inaugurates an entry into culture, into the world of language and of desire. But the father is unable to do this, in this case, mainly because he himself has no desire of his own.

The father had encouraged the boy to study medicine to become a doctor, partly because of the high estimation the father has for the *palagi* doctor who allowed his mother to be able to conceive, but also because, as we learn much later, it is a family tradition that the youngest son be a healer. His father had failed to take up this position, so how can he pass it on to his son? So that when the father said to the son that he had disobeyed him by not studying subjects which would allow the son to become a doctor, it is not so much disobedience we see here but the inability of the father to subject the son, mainly because the father himself does not possess what it takes— 'the phallus' which is what you get after a symbolic castration. (Remember castration starts the Oedipal scenario, and entry into the phallic stage completes it for Freud).

Once he is back in Samoa he becomes aware of many things. He is struck by the position that language is given in the culture, a notion about culture in general that also intrigued Lacan and that he saw as being of utmost importance in becoming a subject:

He concluded that their respect for the spoken word was equal to their respect for physical courage... The word separated man from the beast... (and) respect for the correct use of language was peace, harmony, civilization (1987: 179-180).

The above passage could just as well have been taken from Lacan's reading of Freud on the importance of language.

One day, while walking in the jungle, the young man—we can not yet call him a subject—came upon a grave. He removed all the bracken from it: 'He worked

as though he was trying to uncover an important mystery, which lay buried within himself' (1987: 185). It was his grandfather's grave. His grandfather was someone everyone had been afraid of, but also respected. Perhaps the absent father. This is verified as we read on. We learn that his grandfather 'grew to conquer through his healing powers and what comes to be known as his epic phallus' (1987: 188).

In Chapter 37 we have the moving description of the main character's father introducing his son to his son's dead grandfather. This grandfather, the father said, was someone very much like his son and what he wanted his boy to become, a doctor, yet he had not wanted his son to be like this person, a free man. (Here replace free man by 'subject'). The main character also learned here that he had been the son through whom his parents had especially tried to live their dreams. He learned that his grandfather had given his wife an abortion which killed her and that his grandfather had betrayed the only person that he loved—his wife—and thus betrayed himself. Remember that the young man had let his girlfriend go to Australia where she had an abortion.

This time in the forest was a revelation to the son and the father as to who they were as men, but especially for the son, who in Lacanian terms was being introduced to 'The Name of the Father'. The grandfather possessed the phallus and had the power to make the son identify with him and so become free.

In the next chapter, we see the main character finally confronting his mother with what had happened with his girlfriend. In anger the son hits the mother (1987: 215) which in Samoa means an acceptance of death, but this death we can read as the Heideggerian 'being for death', which gives human life meaning because of the finite limit of death. The idea can be seen in Freud's 'Death Drive' and also in Lacan's reflection on these elements of Heidegger and Freud. The death of symbolic castration allows a new life to come to be. It is described in the novel thus: 'The sharp final slap of his forgiving hand across her face broke open the womb of his grief and guilt, and he was free at last' (1987: 215).

He accepts a symbolic castration then, partly through the agency of his girlfriend and his grandmother, and also through the myth of Hine-nui-te-po, but most especially through encountering his grandfather. All these elements are acting in 'The Name of the Father'. He is thus freed from being the object of desire for his mother and can take up his own desire, as a cultural, Samoan, subject.

The wicked stepmother in Snow White becomes more ugly as hatred sets in. The dog in Aesop's fable probably dies through starvation. Narcissus dies but lives on, not just in the flower with that name, but in the ego of us all. The subject of Albert Wendt's novel becomes a subject, a subject of culture, which is also the work of all psychoanalysis.

At the end of *Sons for the Return Home* we see our subject returning to New Zealand. He writes on the plane: 'And Hine-nui-te-Po woke up and found him in there. And she crossed her legs and thus ended man's quest for immortality' (1987: 217).

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