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The Image of Narcissus in Roman Art: From Hunter to Hunted

Narcissus is interpreted in this paper as a liminal figure, whose hunting attire and setting in their artistic representations offer a metaphor for male-female transformation in the realm of Eros, erotic pursuit, youth, heroism and death.

The ancient myths and representations of Narcissus present elements of communication or mediation between two extremes. Narcissus starts out as predominantly male, as is indicated in artistic representations by his attire - that of a male hunter. When he stops to drink in the course of a hunt and is transfixed by his own image in a pool of water, his own body becomes the object of his desire. During his transfixion he takes on a predominantly "female" role: he becomes the prey of his own gaze returned to him by his reflected image. Narcissus' ambiguous situation sets off a process of self-exploration. Ovid relates that it is only after Narcissus recognizes himself that he falls into a rage and tears at his clothes. However, in artistic representations he is shown in the process of taking off his clothes or gazing at his naked body, and thereby as able to see himself as "other". These representations suggest that it is this that constitutes the process of transformation, which entails self-knowledge and sets in motion his *moira*, which brings about his death.

Narcissus' transfixion in Roman artistic representations constitutes a sign of his transformation. From the world of the hunt, in which he is predominantly male, he enters the world of Eros, where the hunter and the hunted are bound together in an eternal exchange of roles. In artistic representations, Narcissus' feminine aspect as "captured by his gaze" is suggested iconographically by the shedding of his hunter's costume, which reveals his feminine contours and posture, and by his passive stance with arms raised, his transfixion and the motif of the mirror.

Narcissus' transitional state positions him as a liminal figure in which both male and female, hunter and hunted, observer and observed, hero and victim, life and death, co-exist. This liminal position may also explain his representations on Roman sarcophagi, in this case suggesting the possibility of regeneration.