

Hérica VALLADARES Reflections on the Subject of Narcissus

The myth of Narcissus, as it appears in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (3.339-510), is a tale of tragic self-love and self-knowledge. In this version of the story, the poet takes the figure of a young man enamored of his own reflection as an opportunity to explore the tenuous division between reality and illusion, between corporeal presence and representation. Vision is the key player in this episode: it is through vision that Narcissus falls for himself (*visae correptus imagine formae*, 3.416) and, again, it is through vision that he finally comes to understand his mistake and his identity (*iste ego sum: sensi, nec me mea fallit imago; uror amore mei...*, 3.463-4). Yet Ovid's tale is also a reflection on the function of vision and desire in shaping one's understanding of oneself and of the relationship between the self and the other.

Ovid's emphasis on vision's power to enthrall and instruct reverberates with Jacques Lacan's discussion of the mirror stage in the formation of subjectivity and the function of the gaze as the trigger and cause of desire. For Lacan, the process of individuation begins with the self's identification with his mirror image which offers the illusion of a unified subject. But in addition to and outside the subject's specular image, there is also the gaze. The gaze is an ambiguous object: it is that which slips out of or is, to a certain degree, banished from the subject's consciousness as he enters the world of language, of culture, of the law. The gaze thus represents an essential lack that disturbs the dynamics between subject and object. For at the same time that the individual longs for the alluring, brilliant object that is the gaze, he also longs to be the other's object of desire.

Such echoes between Ovid's retelling of the myth of Narcissus and Lacan's theories on subjectivity and the gaze point to the authors' indebtedness to a poetic and philosophical tradition that sees vision, desire and knowledge as being intricately connected. What Lacan's psychoanalytic model offers to classicists is a structure through which to articulate this connection. In the context of Pompeian wall-painting, a Lacanian analysis of the function of images in the formation of subjectivity yields significant insights into Roman constructions of the self in a period when questions on the nature of reality, the power of representation and the effects of desire were of intense interest.

The painted interiors of Pompeian houses, where images of Narcissus abound, can be seen as interactive theatrical settings designed to engage viewers in a performance of the process of individuation and of the drama of the gaze. In the House of Lucretius Fronto, for instance, a sensual image of Narcissus serves as a pendant to a painting of Pero and Mycon, an example of filial piety and devotion. Often interpreted as a didactic program, these images of an androgynous youth and of a father turned into an infant consciously play with ancient definitions of masculinity and invite the viewer to contrast different kinds of gazes. In the House of Octavius Quarto, paintings of Narcissus, Pyramus and Thisbe and of Actaeon and Artemis draw the viewer into a multi-media recreation of a *locus amoenus* where he becomes a protagonist in the depicted narratives, taking part in the mythological characters' fatal acts of viewing. In such spaces of leisure, contemplation of mythological images were bound to spur discussions on the relation

between vision and desire, between representation and reality--activities that were considered both an intellectual pleasure and essential to the formation of Roman subjects.