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Cosmic Narcissism: Self-Image and the Contemplation of Nature in Gaston Bachelard's Thought

Abstract: The mythical image of Narcissus has served to explore, both in art and in psychoanalysis, topics such as reflection, selfishness, contemplation and autoeroticism. Gaston Bachelard had a thorough reading of this mythological being, which we propose to reflect upon with a view to exploring the question of “self-image”. Our objective will be to clarify the notion of “cosmic narcissism” that Bachelard suggests, to analyze the “self” that emerges in the aesthetic experience. Through the image of Narcissus, Bachelard highlights the active role of Nature in shaping the artist’s self-image. He proposes a “cosmic narcissism” as an “idealizing” path of the self, which we will contrast with the “neurotic narcissism” suggested by Freud.

Keywords: Gaston Bachelard; Narcissism; Cosmic Narcissism; Self-Image; Imagination; Contemplation.

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Introduction

“**A**nd how then to love something other than oneself?”¹ Narcissus asks in Paul Valéry’s poem. The enigmatic scene of the beautiful Narcissus contemplating, absorbed, his own image in the water makes us think of a “self” duplicated through reflection, a “self-image” that goes beyond any concrete reference, an image charged with an oneiric force that only the natural landscape can show.

The very origin of Narcissus evokes the forces of Nature. Ovid tells us how his mother, the nymph Liriope, was taken by the waters of the divine and transparent river Cefiso, becoming pregnant. Tiresias foretells that the child will only reach middle age if he does not see himself².

Narcissus is the most beautiful of the young, his image seems to embody at first an idyllic state where the individual is self-sufficient, disdaining the favors of other women, young men and even creatures. But soon the narration shows us how, as punishment for having rejected the nymph Eco, he is shot by Cupid who condemns him to fall in love with his own reflection in the water. We then

see the motif of a “duplicate” self. Furthermore, this reflection seems to have a double reference: on the one hand, Narcissus’ own face and, on the other, the force of water.

The drama of Narcissus, who can only visually caress his beloved, seems to evoke the relationship between oneself and his image, and even between the artist and his work. André Gide takes this image to propose his theory of the symbol and Paul Valéry understands his poetic work through this enigmatic image stating “in short, I was seeking to possess myself. And here is my myth”³.

Gaston Bachelard reflects on this image in *Water and Dreams*, suggesting how matter, in this case water, participates in the creative process. We consider that Bachelard refers to Narcissus to problematize precisely the theme of contemplation, aesthetic creation and “self-image”. For Bachelard, the contemplation of Narcissus will evoke how the loneliness of the poet puts him in contact with the four fundamental elements (earth, air, water and fire).

Highlighting the participation of Nature in an action as apparently “selfish” as aesthetic contemplation, Bachelard argues with psychoanalysis and points out that not all narcissism is neurotic. He will also see the possibility of “cosmic narcissism” as a way to discover his self-image, a poetic way to self-knowledge. From our point of view, it also gives us a key to understanding one’s “self-image” in poetry, an alternative to the forms of identity and the narratives of the subject that characterize modern thought.

Narcissus: The Will to Appear and the “Self-Image”

Bachelard begins by suggesting that water is the universal mirror, and we

will see later how this approach will help us to think about “self-image” in relation to Nature. The philosopher warns that water almost always gives us volatile metaphors, highlighting that in the appreciation of this element it is easy to stay on the surface. However, the author wants to analyze the poems where the water arouses a profound poetic experience, that is, where this “universal mirror” makes vision and reflection “sensual” and not only “sensitive”⁴. We consider that this is how the author gradually distinguishes Narcissus from his banal or superficial aspect.

Bachelard makes a phenomenological distinction between the reflection captured as “ornament or appearance” – when it is perceived as an object – and when it truly symbolizes a “will to appear”⁵. In this distinction lies his departure from classical psychoanalysis in the understanding of narcissism and this is Bachelard’s contribution to making the question of “self-image” more complex.

Bachelard wants to make narcissism more complex and will affirm that this “double”, this reflection, also unleashes a double dynamic. In a phenomenology that takes reflection as its center, narcissism will appear as a dialectic between “seeing and showing oneself”.

The philosopher will understand “seeing” as a passive attitude, with which the psychological experience and the image of Narcissus are generally understood. In this pole of narcissism, we interpret, the face is only taken as the “presentation” of the person. Whoever looks at himself “receives” his own face as an “adornment” as a secondary quality of his being, the sensitive does not go beyond himself but simply enchants in the passive and complacent act of looking.

However, our author reminds us, psychoanalysis avoided the other pole of narcissism, that is, its active aspect. Bachelard suggests that: “the human face is above all an instrument of seduction”⁶. We are in the regions of a true “will to appear” to influence the world, to create an effect in the world. From our understanding, the author shows us that the reflection is much more than a passive object since it goes beyond the regions of what “is” and reaches those of desire. This is going to be one of the most interesting psychological experiences that our author presents to us, since we consider that there are some clues which make us think about an opening of “self-image” based on the phenomenological analysis of the reflection.

We believe that, without intending to do so, Bachelard is addressing both poles of the “self-image”. On the one hand, of an objectified identity that the subject projects in which he can rejoice until he is trapped. The most common interpretations of the Narcissus myth would refer to this pole.

But, on the other hand, Bachelard finds in Narcissus a true “desire to be”, which translates into the “will to appear”, a self-affirmation in the world that reminds us of Valéry’s artistic search. The distinction between being and appearance no longer occurs here, the second is not the object of the first. The reflection would be an opening door towards what is desired. Far from remaining in superficial satisfaction, it descends to the oneiric regions, revealing its own “will to appear” as the expression of a will present in the totality of Nature.

In the next section we will see how, from our interpretation, this “will to appear” coincides with a vital impulse that not only hosts the psyche, but also manifests

Nature’s own will to create and recreate itself. To discover a universe within oneself that wishes to be nothing but beautiful.

Cosmic Narcissism and Neurotic Narcissism

To continue pointing out the “cosmic narcissism” that Bachelard suggests, we would like to return to the Freudian conception of narcissism.

First, it is important to say that here Bachelard is arguing with one of the key notions of psychoanalysis. In his text “Introduction to the Concept of Narcissism”, Freud is responding in part to the criticisms that Carl G. Jung made of his approach. The focus of this work on narcissism is precisely the exploration of the notion of “the psychology of the self.”

Making the Freudian vision of narcissism more complex will mean, in our interpretation, thinking in a different way about the configuration of the “self-image” that occurs both in the case of the artist and in that of mythical thought. Indeed, Freud emphasizes at the beginning of his essay that narcissism is, above all, a distinctive feature of the psychic life common to children and primitive people, who show magical thinking, an overestimation of power and a great faith in the virtue of words⁷. Freud finds in magical thinking a delusion of grandeur that he will characterize through his concept of “narcissism”, an approach that Bachelard will discuss in his understanding of poetic thought, so close to mythical thought.

To explain his notion of “narcissism”, Freud begins by suggesting that the libido, although considered a unitary force, can have two directions that are initially fused: the

libido of the ego (narcissism) and the libido of the object. The psychoanalyst suggests that, contrary to what he had thought at the beginning of his explorations, this libido of the ego or narcissism, where the subject has himself as a desiring object, has an important psychological function. Its importance will lie in self-preservation. We would say that narcissism "would not be a perversion, but the libidinal complement of the egoism that is inherent to the drive for self-preservation"⁸.

Freud will be interested, on the one hand, in observing the cases where narcissism becomes pathological, becoming "paraphrenia". But, above all, it will seek to elucidate its function in the psyche and analyze its processes. We then see that, originally, the two directions of libido (of the self and of the object) are fused. The question would then be: why is there a separation between them? The answer will lead him to ask how the development of the self occurs. He will tell us that these two directions of the libido are divided when the investiture of the ego with libido has exceeded a certain measure. That is, when the libido accumulates itself and it cannot be as fully pleased in oneself. He also adds that there are phenomena "whose direct discharge would be undesirable"⁹.

The libidinal investiture of the self then turns to other objects. It is important to note that Freud relates narcissism to autoeroticism, as it means the self-satisfaction of desire. Therefore, he will also point out the necessary original separation between sexual and ego drives. Freud will tell us that, physiologically and evolutionarily, the individual is as much a goal to himself as a link in a chain. It is necessary for the psyche to develop the libido of the object that leads it to fulfill its social function.

Although the psyche develops the libido of the object, the narcissistic libido does not disappear. Instead, the psyche generates a mechanism that consists in creating an "ideal self", that will be a "model" which desire will be pleased with social acceptance.

He argues that in the "ideal self now lies the self-love which was enjoyed during childhood"¹⁰. Hence, narcissism is replaced by a social ideal that, above all, will have a function of social adaptation. For Freud, this "idealization" is above all a repressive process: the more charged the ideal self is, the stronger the repression mechanisms will become, leading to a neurotic narcissism. The concept of ideal self will later be identified in Freudian theory as the "Superego".

In some cases, Freud describes how narcissism turns into hypochondria or paraphrenia. He characterizes these states by explaining how the destiny of the libido is withdrawn from objects and a delusion of grandeur emerges. He will tell us that the psyche can fall into a "stasis of the libido of the ego."¹¹

Nevertheless, Bachelard clearly sees how the energy of the ego has a neurotic tendency in Freudian's approach. We consider that his objective is to escape from the social frameworks that determine the Freudian psyche, and opens it to what he calls "natural experiences"¹². We will see how, by introducing an understanding of Nature linked to the psyche (in the same way that Jung does), Bachelard escapes from the neurotic ego and will conceive art as a path towards the discovery of an amplified self. Through a "self-image" that will involve an awakening of his link with the totality, the way opens to a "cosmic

narcissism". We consider that more than interpreting the image of Narcissus, Bachelard will center his reflection on the role of Nature in shaping the "self-image", highlighting its therapeutic or healing aspect.

Bachelard starts from the elements, as it is typical of his phenomenology. He will begin by remarking that "water serves to make our image more natural, to give a little innocence and naturalness to the pride we have in our private contemplation"¹³. In our interpretation, the issue here is how the poetic image, analogously, has a "support" in the natural elements. The self-image will be given in the reflection of an "other" that Nature provides us.

From our point of view, the image of Narcissus will then reveal for Bachelard, the poetic way as an alternative to the construction of "self-image". The face that Narcissus sees in the water is the one that allows him an "open imagination" and not a socially imposed one.

For Bachelard, the elements are the "hormones of the imagination"¹⁴. From a perspective that takes a lot from Jung and feeds on Romanticism, dreaming allows us to enter the regions of the unconscious which is the creative source shared with the rest of the cosmos. Indeed, when we understand that water is the support of Narcissus' face, that is not only "perceived" but "dreamed", we then can interpret that it is Nature itself, through its elements, that truly reveals the "self-image". This image will, of course, be much more than a construction of consciousness. The author tells us:

Here we have grasped one of the elements of natural dream, its need to

be engraved deeply into Nature. One cannot dream profoundly with objects. To dream profoundly, one must dream with substances. A poet who begins with a mirror must end with the water of a fountain if he wants to present a complete poetic experience. Poetic experience as I conceive it, must remain dependent on oneiric experience.¹⁵

We remember then that for Freud, dreaming was a sort of narcissistic state¹⁶. But for Bachelard, oneirism will be the access to an amplified "self-image" that arises or is raised in the fullness of the aesthetic experience that leads us to "reverie" or daydreaming. In our interpretation, the ego energy that Freud deems to be necessary for "self-preservation" would be for Bachelard the route that connects us with creation itself, with the creative "instant" in which Nature is immersed¹⁷. Narcissism, far from necessarily being a cycle of dissatisfaction or stagnation of the libido, would have a core as deep as the very past of humanity. Reverie takes us to the origins of the cosmos.

From a Bachelardian point of view, it is necessary to raise the possibility of a "cosmic narcissism". In his encounter with Nature, Narcissus discovers in himself a will to appear, which is the will of Nature itself. Here the Bachelardian perspective becomes metaphysical, suggesting that what Narcissus discovers in his image is precisely the will of all Nature to "contemplate" itself.

This step from Narcissus's "will to appear" to the "will to contemplate" that floods the entire cosmos, shows us the most complex aspect of Bachelardian understanding

of narcissism and, in some way, speaks like Jung about the possibility of a deeper self. In that sense, Bachelard suggests: "The world is an immense Narcissus in the act of thinking about himself"¹⁸.

From the poetic gaze, he argues, Nature itself is animated by a will. Water springs would be eyes that contemplate the landscape and want to look. Even the flowers seem to observe and appreciate the surroundings. From our perspective, Bachelard highlights the active and participatory role of Nature, he tells us: "Between contemplated Nature and contemplative Nature, there are close and reciprocal relations"¹⁹.

Contemplation will consist, precisely, in "dis-objectifying" Nature and in understanding it as a subject, as an oneiric force whose will, far from any pragmatic purpose, desires beauty and blooming into the creation of forms.

Cosmic narcissism is revealed to us as a form of participation in Nature where the reason for being of all things, the very purpose of existence, is beauty. Bachelard mentions an Oriental Practice where flowers are grown in front of a mirror so they can contemplate their beauty and can blossom better²⁰. In some way, the poem is that mirror which restores its beauty to Nature.

Thus, Bachelard will tell us that cosmic narcissism tends to a "pancalism" that consists in founding all existence in beauty itself. This will not be a matter of some banal or self-centered vision, but an understanding that "I am handsome because Nature is beautiful, Nature is beautiful because I am handsome"²¹.

We would then add that "self-image" ceases to be understood as a social construction with only restrictive desires, hence ceases to be centered on neurotic

social ideals. The self accedes to another form of "idealization" that will precisely have to do with a discovery of himself as being "traversed" by a will of beauty, a will to create forms, a force of Nature. For Valéry this will is also the enjoyment of the "form"²².

At this point we ask ourselves: how does Bachelard interpret Narcissus's tragic end? The philosopher does not ask himself this question, he limits himself to delving into the contemplative experience of Narcissus in the water. However, Valéry's poem cited in his essay portrays the death of Narcissus not as a blockage of libido, but as a sacrifice where the poet abandons himself to the call of the natural reflection becoming one with the cosmos. Valéry says:

Farewell, my Soul, I must fall asleep:
Time ceases to be from form to form
Strength, presence, and noble movement ...
And you, Beautiful Body, clear Idol of the Wave,
Here's for you to see the last day of the world
Where nothing pure adorns a sole moment (...).²³

We take this poem, as it serves Bachelard to refer to cosmic narcissism as an "idealizing" narcissism, a revelation of oneself as a duality.

In the presence of water, Narcissus receives the revelation of his identity and of his duality; of his double powers, virile and feminine; and, above all, the revelation of his reality and his ideality²⁴.

It is in Valéry's poem where Bachelard finds that: "Narcissism does not always produce neuroses. It also plays a positive role in aesthetics and, by expeditious transposition, in a literary work"²⁵. Here Bachelard will see that narcissism not only tends to a repression against instincts but to a "sublimation by an ideal"²⁶.

Paul Valéry was a poet particularly obsessed with the image of Narcissus, in whom he found the mythical model of the artist. For him, Narcissus is the poet *par excellence*. It is precisely in his work that we read an almost platonic yearning to find the purity of "form" and eternity through poetic creation. Akin to the Bachelardian spirit, Valéry is a poet of solitude. In fact, Pedro Gandía characterizes his poetry by a "loss of self on the basis of wanting to affirm it"²⁷.

In Valéry's poem, the reflection of Narcissus unleashes a whole dynamic between the corporeal and the ideal, the body being a living reflection of the universe and the idea as the only possibility of transcending. The verse that we have quoted, which is near the end of Valéry's poem, shows us precisely the impossibility of "purity" in the world.

For Bachelard, Valéry's Narcissus desires "unreality" and with it "ideality" through the image contemplated in the water, in which he achieves a true "rejoicing in form" sublimating the sensitive caress in the visual caress. "Narcissus takes pleasure in a linear, virtual, formalized caress. Nothing of the material remains in this delicate, fragile image"²⁸. Paradoxically, water as a material element is what makes this sublimation possible.

This "idealizing" narcissism is possible due to the poet's participation in "the

floral dynamics", through the creation of forms that characterizes Nature. Idealization is not a process detached from Nature, it is an amplification of its creative force because the aesthetic experience is a "vitalizing" one, which continues the will to appear that animates the cosmos. Bachelard's idealizing narcissism tends to a self that does not deny corporeality or desire, but the desire appears as an aspiration to become one with the whole. The aesthetic experience, based on the contemplation of Nature, reveals the "self-image" as a poetic image where the material and the formal, the corporeal and the ideal, the real and the desired are reconciled.

In the poetic creation, the "self-image" is idealized to sublimate itself, without a repressive purpose. The flesh is "luminous flesh", and the self-image is no longer the limit of the force of desire, but the cosmic center itself, the will to beauty that animates the living. Keats also sees the poet in Narcissus's face:

The blue sky here, and there, serenely
peeping
Through tendril wreaths fantastically
creeping.
And on the bank a lonely flower he
spied,
A meek and forlorn flower, with naught
of pride,
Drooping its beauty o'er the watery
clearness,
To woo its own sad image into nearness:
Deaf to light Zephyrus it would not
move;
But still would seem to droop, to pine,
to love.
So while the Poet stood in this sweet
spot,

Some fainter gleamings o'er his fancy
shot;
Nor was it long ere he had told the
tale
Of young Narcissus, and sad Echo's
bale²⁹.

Finally, we understand that this "idealizing narcissism" occurs as an "awakening" of the self, a unique experience of participation and coincidence between wills, where the self is discovered within the creative power of forms that floods Nature. Bachelard, who claims "For being is before all else an awakening, and it awakens in an extraordinary impression"³⁰, also asks us: "Who will give us back a natural awakening, an awakening in Nature?"³¹.

Final Remarks

Bachelard's notion of "cosmic narcissism" gives us some clues to understand how

the "self-image" reveals itself through aesthetic experience. The philosopher highlights how the desiring energy, when it is self-centered, is not necessarily neurotic. For Bachelard, as for Carl G. Jung, the core of the "self" is much deeper leading us to the unconscious. The aesthetic contemplation reaches this core and coincides with the very will of Nature and its creative force, which for Bachelard is closely related to the oneiric.

In the configuration of the "self-image" the importance of natural experiences and not only of social ones, acquires great relevance from the Bachelardian point of view. In some way, the philosopher opens the question of identity to other types of experiences where the self allows Nature to intervene actively. The "self-image" is no longer understood in terms of determinations or causalities, it even goes beyond conscious self-affirmation. The "self-image" can open itself to a horizon as plentiful as the forces of Nature.

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NOTES

1. Paul Valéry, *Narciso*, Ed. Pedro Gandía, Madrid, Hermida Editores, 2017, p. 69. *Et qui donc peut aimer autre chose que soi-même?* (my translation).
2. Ovidius, *Metamorfosis Libros I-IV*, trad. José Carlos Fernández and Josefa Cantó, Madrid, Gredos, 2008.
3. Paul Valéry, *Narciso*, p. 35.

4. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, Michigan, The Pegasus Foundation, 1999, p. 30.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
7. Sigmund Freud, *Obras completas*, Vol. XIV, Buenos Aires, Amorrortu, 1992, p. 73 (my translation).
8. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 81.
12. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 20.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
14. Gaston Bachelard, *El aire y los Sueños. Ensayo sobre la imaginación del movimiento*. México, Fondo de Cultura Económica. 1985, p. 22.
15. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 22.
16. Sigmund Freud, *Obras completas*, p. 80.
17. Gaston Bachelard, *La intuición del instante*, Mexico, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2002.
18. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 24.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
20. Gaston Bachelard, *El derecho de soñar*, Mexico, FCE, 1997, p. 15.
21. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 24.
22. Paul Valéry, *Narciso*, p. 35.
23. *Adieu, mon Ame, il faut que l'on s'endorme./ Le temps finit d'être de forme en forme/ Force, présence et noble mouvement.../ Et vous, Beau Corps, claire Idole de l'Onde,/ Voici pour voys le dernier jour du monde/ Où rien de pur ne pare qu'un moment (...)*, Paul Valéry, *Narciso*, p. 122 (my translation).
24. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 23.
25. *Ibidem*.
26. *Ibidem*.
27. Paul Valéry, *Narciso*, p. 15.
28. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 23.
29. John Keats, *Complete poems and selected letters of John Keats*, New York, The Modern Library, 2001, p. 3-10.
30. Gaston Bachelard, *Water and Dreams*, p. 7.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 33.