



SOCIETÀ AMICI DEL PENSIERO
SIGMUND FREUD



CHRONICLES OF NARCISSISM

Notes about a Logic Named Humankind

Urbino (Italy), December 15th 16th 17th, 2014

REPORT

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Maria Gabriella Pediconi

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STUDIUM CARTELLO – IL LAVORO PSICOANALITICO

Via Francesco Viganò n.4, 20124 Milano, Italia. Tel +39.02.29009980 - CF e Partita IVA 11289890151
www.societaamicidelpensiero.com www.studiumcartello.it www.sicedizioni.it mail@studiumcartello.it



NARCISSUS BETWEEN MYTH AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY THE FREUDIAN CORRECTION

Introduction

by Maria Gabriella Pediconi ¹

Like says the title of the Seminar, its specific emphasis concerns *narcissism*. It is *Chronicles of Narcissus*. Now some reasons about the interesting subject of narcissism as a tool to read our times.

1.

The Seminar will provide an opportunity to extend the psychoanalytical references with some works open to several international conceptualizations.

The seminar aims at analyzing the different versions of the myth of Narcissus in order to assess its importance even today. It could be used as a tool for analyzing explicit and implicit factors in social relationships and in leadership management.

The analysis of the myth, which Freud had developed to the point of recognizing it as a prototype of the narcissistic syndrome, allows us to acknowledge its significance also today as a tool for analyzing social relationships. Learning to identify narcissism enables us to discover the healthy and pathological aspects of everyday social exchanges. In this way affective factors come to light which, in a latent manner, obstruct social life. Narcissus is unable to love even when he is exerting authority and power. He has an eclectic and extrovert personality, but he is unable to establish real collaboration among peers. Narcissus can be revealed as the figure who obstructs participation and the success of complex social networks.

The seminar also deals with the following themes:

- narcissism is present in pathology and daily life
- narcissism makes people unable to love
- we can find some pathological signs of narcissism in all kinds of social relationships including economic, political and educational ones, as well as in friendships and in love
- learning to identify narcissism is a good tool to defend ourselves from its threats

¹ Maria Gabriella Pediconi is Assistant Professor of Dynamic Psychology, University of Urbino, Italy, and Psychoanalyst, Member of the *Società Amici del Pensiero "Sigmund Freud"*, Milan, Italy.

This paper refers the intervention delivered during the Seminar entitled *Chronicles of Narcissus*, Urbino (Italy), December 15th 16th 17th, 2014.



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- the leadership skill is the opposite side of narcissistic social difficulties as we noted from an analysis of the movie *J Edgar* by Clint Eastwood
- 2. at least: can narcissus heal? Yes, if he stops playing the narcissistic system.

Now, some key basic questions and ideas treated in the seminar.

What is the structure of mental disease? How and why did the individual build his psychopathology? How can psychoanalysis change the fixed structures by only using words? What is the power of words? What was the role played by words in the construction of mental disease?

By understanding psychoanalysis you can discover the very deep power of language and its influence in the psychical constitution. It's true. The words of others - first mine then yours - determine psychical life, both the healthy one and the pathological one.

Words kill more than swords! All of us know that.

The seminar *Chronicles of Narcissus* intends to be an invitation to consider *narcissism* as a concept. It describes one of the models of behavior and thinking traceable within each form of psychopathology. In this direction *narcissism* is discovered as transversal in mental diseases and culture. It marks at the same time one of the deviations from the correct psychical constitution and one of the deviations of civilization. With which mark? The mark of *Denied Access* or *No Entry*. The trauma by disappointment due to the uncanny aging of others is transformed into an imperative to abandon and reject all relationships and the external reality. The Others are enemies and the world is bad and dangerous. Narcissistic behavior will avoid the other person, the individual will withdraw, in other words remove himself or herself, from any relationship. Why does it happen?

Our daily life, our psychical life, lives by appointments. *Narcissism* works against appointments! Slowly psychopathology as a compulsion frustrates ordinary daily life. How could we change this structure? It is impossible to change this structure if the individual doesn't want to change it. Healing will only come about if the individual works to achieve it.

It is impossible to enter into psychoanalysis if someone imposes it. Psychoanalysis cannot be forced upon a person. It cannot be obligatory. Psychoanalysis is the other side of psychopathology.

3.

Last but not least, a brief presentation of the idea in the subtitle of this Seminar: *a logic named humankind*.

The aim of the subtitle of this seminar is to link together logic and narcissism. In this way logic is forced off of shelves of Philosophy and becomes compromised with psychopathology. At the same time mental illness leaves the narrowness of the clinical in order to recognize its own theoretical statute. One can think good or bad, correctly or incorrectly, rightly or wrongly. When the thinking is deviated from its own right way the body, the social life and the reality of the relational experience of the individual are totally disrupted.

The subtitle refers to an Italian book entitled *Una logica chiamata uomo. Uomo versus Narcisismo*, Editor Sic Edizioni, published in 2014.

The notes about a *logic named humankind* have the aim of looking for traces and figures of narcissism among the folds of Culture and Literature, beyond clinical cases.

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When we observe narcissism we have a diminished Ego, both when it becomes grandiose and vulnerable. Narcissism is a parody of the Ego supported by a contradictory theoretical asset that is a system to conceive the whole world. In this system the Others will be ignored but at the same time they are subject narcissistic claims. Narcissus absolutely needs to depend on exclusive relationships. Addiction is the closed and disruptive system of each narcissistic world. In his psychotic psychopathology Narcissus still remains part of humankind. Humankind – even Narcissus – is always imputable both for his own merits and his dramatic faults. The specific title of this first session of Seminar is:

**NARCISSUS BETWEEN MYTH AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY.
THE FREUDIAN CORRECTION.**

My colleagues, Savino Romani and Sara Giammattei, will deliver their own paper. It's a great pleasure for me to share with them the specific research about the value of Freudian thinking today as well as at the beginning of his creation, the psychoanalysis.

Savino Romani will treat **NARCISSISM, THE GROUND OF MYTH**
Sara Giammattei will treat **NARCISSISM, CLINICAL MATERIALS: WHAT IS THE
*FIL ROUGE?***
My title will be **NARCISSISM, THE FREUDIAN CORRECTION**



NARCISSISM, THE GROUND OF MYTH

by Savino Romani²

Narcissus and Echo, the House of Cadmus

Tiresias' fame of prophecy was spread through all the cities of Aonia, for his unerring answers unto all who listened to his words. And first of those who listened to his fateful prophecies, a lovely Nymph, named Liriope, came with her dear son, who then fifteen, might seem a man or boy - he who was born to her upon the green merge of Cephissus' stream – that mighty River-God whom she declared the father of her boy. – she questioned him. Imploring him to tell her if her son, unequalled for his beauty, whom she called Narcissus, might attain a ripe old age. To which the blind seer answered in these words, "If he but fail to recognize himself, a long life he may have, beneath the sun," – so, frivolous the prophet's words appeared; and yet the event, the manner of his death, the strange delusion of his frenzied love, confirmed it. Three times five years so were passed. Another five-years, and the lad might seem a young man or a boy. And many a youth, and many a damsel sought to gain his love; but such his mood and spirit and his pride, none gained his favour.

Once a noisy Nymph, (who never held her tongue when others spoke, who never spoke till others had begun) mocking Echo, spied him as he drove, in his delusive nets, some timid stags. For Echo was a Nymph, in olden time – and, more than vapid sound – possessed a form: and she was then deprived the use of speech, except to babble and repeat the words, once spoken, over and over. Juno confused her silly tongue, because she often held that glorious goddess with her endless tales, till many a hapless Nymph, from Jove's embrace, had made escape adown a mountain. But for this, the goddess might have caught them. Thus the glorious Juno, when she knew her guile; "Your tongue, so freely wagged at my expense, shall be of little use; your endless voice, much shorter than your tongue." At once the Nymph was stricken as the goddess had decreed; - and, ever since, she only mocks the sounds of others' voices, or, perchance, returns their final words.

One day, when she observed Narcissus wandering in the pathless woods, she loved him and she followed him, with soft and stealthy tread. The more she followed him the hotter did she burn, as when the flame flares upward from the sulphur on the torch. Oh, how she longed to make her passion known! To plead in soft entreaty! to implore his love! But now, till others

² Savino Romani is Psychologist and Psychoanalyst, Member of the *Società Amici del Pensiero "Sigmund Freud"*, Milan, Italy.

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have begun, a mute of Nature she must be. She cannot choose but wait the moment when his voice may give to her an answer. Presently the youth, by chance divided from his trusted friends, cries loudly, "Who is here?" and Echo, "Here!" Replies. Amazed, he casts his eyes around, and calls with louder voice, "Come here!" "Come here!" She calls the youth who calls. He turns to see who calls him and, beholding naught exclaims, "Avoid me not!" "Avoid me not!" returns. He tries again, again, and is deceived by this alternate voice, and calls aloud; "Oh let us come together!" Echo cries, "Oh let us come together!" Never sound seemed sweeter to the Nymph, and from the woods she hastens in accordance with her words, and strives to wind her arms around his neck. He flies from her and as he leaves her says, "Take off your hands! you shall not fold your arms around me. Better death than such a one should ever caress me!" Naught she answers save, "Caress me!" Thus rejected she lies hid in the deep woods, hiding her blushing face with the green leaves; and ever after lives concealed in lonely caverns in the hills. But her great love increases with neglect; her miserable body wastes away, wakeful with sorrows; leanness shrivels up her skin, and all her lovely features melt, as if dissolved upon the wafting winds - nothing remains except her bones and voice - her voice continues, in the wilderness; her bones have turned to stone. She lies concealed in the wild woods, nor is she ever seen on lonely mountain range; for, though we hear her calling in the hills, 'tis but a voice, a voice that lives, that lives among the hills.

Thus he deceived the Nymph and many more, sprung from the mountains or the sparkling waves; and thus he slighted many an amorous youth and therefore, someone whom he once despised, lifting his hands to Heaven, implored the Gods, "If he should love deny him what he loves!" and as the prayer was uttered it was heard by Nemesis, who granted her assent.

There was a fountain silver-clear and bright, which neither shepherds nor the wild she-goats, that range the hills, nor any cattle's mouth had touched - its waters were unsullied - birds disturbed it not; nor animals, nor boughs that fall so often from the trees. Around sweet grasses nourished by the stream grew; trees that shaded from the sun let balmy airs temper its waters. Here Narcissus, tired of hunting and the heated noon, lay down, attracted by the peaceful solitudes and by the glassy spring. There as he stooped to quench his thirst another thirst increased. While he is drinking he beholds himself reflected in the mirrored pool - and loves; loves an imagined body which contains no substance, for he deems the mirrored shade a thing of life to love. He cannot move, for so he marvels at himself, and lies with countenance unchanged, as if indeed a statue carved of Parian marble. Long, supine upon the bank, his gaze is fixed on his own eyes, twin stars; his fingers shaped as Bacchus might desire, his flowing hair as glorious as Apollo's, and his cheeks youthful and smooth; his ivory neck, his mouth dreaming in sweetness, his complexion fair and blushing as the rose in snow-drift white. All that is lovely in himself he loves, and in his witless way he wants himself: - he who approves is equally approved; he seeks, is sought, he burns and he is burnt. And how he kisses the deceitful fount; and how he thrusts his arms to catch the neck that's pictured in the middle of the stream! Yet never may he wreath his arms around that image of himself. He knows not what he there beholds, but what he sees inflames his longing, and the error that deceives allures his eyes. But why, O foolish boy, so vainly catching at this flitting form? The cheat that you are seeking has no place. Avert your gaze and you will lose your love, for this that holds your eyes is nothing save the image of yourself reflected back to you. It comes and waits with you; it has no life; it will depart if you will only go.



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Nor food nor rest can draw him thence outstretched upon the overshadowed green, his eyes fixed on the mirrored image never may know their longings satisfied, and by their sight he is himself undone. Raising himself a moment, he extends his arms around, and, beckoning to the murmuring forest; “Oh, ye aisled wood was ever man in love more fatally than I? Your silent paths have sheltered many a one whose love was told, and ye have heard their voices. Ages vast have rolled away since your forgotten birth, but who is he through all those weary years that ever pined away as I? Alas, this fatal image wins my love, as I behold it. But I cannot press my arms around the form I see, the form that gives me joy. What strange mistake has intervened betwixt us and our love? It grieves me more that neither lands nor seas nor mountains, no, nor walls with closed gates deny our loves, but only a little water keeps us far asunder. Surely he desires my love and my embraces, for as of it I strive to kiss him, bending to the limpid stream my lips, so often does he hold his face fondly to me, and vainly struggles up. It seems that I could touch him. ‘Tis a strange delusion that is keeping us apart. Whoever thou art, Come up! Deceive me not! Oh, whither when I fain pursue art thou? Ah, surely I am young and fair, the Nymphs have loved me; and when I behold thy smiles I cannot tell thee what sweet hopes arise. When I extend my loving arms to thee thine also are extended me - thy smiles return my own. When I was weeping, I have seen thy tears, and every sign I make thou cost return; and often thy sweet lips have seemed to move, that, peradventure words, which I have never heard, thou hast returned. No more my shade deceives me, I perceive ‘Tis I in thee – I love myself – the flame arises in my breast and burns my heart – what shall I do? Shall I at once implore? Or should I linger till my love is sought? What is it I implore? The thing that I desire is mine – abundance makes me poor. Oh, I am tortured by a strange desire unknown to me before, for I would fain put off this mortal form; which only means I wish the object of my love away. Grief saps my strength, the sands of life are run, and in my early youth am I cut off; but death is not my bane – it ends my woe. – I would not death for this that is my love, as two united in a single soul would die as one.”

He spoke; and crazed with love, returned to view the same face in the pool; and as he grieved his tears disturbed the stream, and ripples on the surface, glassy clear, defaced his mirrored form. And thus the youth, when he beheld that lovely shadow go; “Ah whither cost thou fly? Oh, I entreat thee leave me not. Alas, thou cruel boy thus to forsake thy lover. Stay with me that I may see thy lovely form, for though I may not touch thee I shall feed my eyes and soothe my wretched pains.” And while he spoke he rent his garment from the upper edge, and beating on his naked breast, all white as marble, every stroke produced a tint as lovely as the apple streaked with red, or as the glowing grape when purple bloom touches the ripening clusters. When as glass again the rippling waters smoothed, and when such beauty in the stream the youth observed, no more could he endure. As in the flame the yellow wax, or as the hoar-frost melts in early morning ‘neath the genial sun; so did he pine away, by love consumed, and slowly wasted by a hidden flame. No vermeil bloom now mingled in the white of his complexion fair; no strength has he, no vigor, nor the beauty that wrought for love so long: alas, that handsome form by Echo fondly loved may please no more.

But when she saw him in his hapless plight, though angry at his scorn, she only grieved. As often as the love-lore boy complained, “Alas!” “Alas!” her echoing voice returned; and as he struck his hands against his arms, she ever answered with her echoing sounds. And as he gazed upon the mirrored pool he said at last, “Ah, youth beloved in vain!” “In vain, in vain!” the spot returned his words; and when he breathed a sad “farewell!” “Farewell!” sighed Echo too. He

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laid his tired head, and rested on the green grass; and those bright eyes, which had so loved to gaze, entranced, on their own master's beauty, sad Night closed. And now although among the nether shades his sad sprite roams, he ever loves to gaze on his reflection in the Stygian wave. His Naiad sisters mourned, and having clipped their shining tresses laid them on his corpse: and all the Dryads mourned: and Echo made lament anew. And these would have upraised his funeral pyre, and waved the flaming torch, and made his bier; but as they turned their eyes where he had been, alas he was not there! And in his body's place a sweet flower grew, golden and white, the white around the gold.

***A Psychoanalytic Interpretation of Ovid's Myth of Narcissus*³**

The static image of Narcissus gazing at his own reflection in a pool of water, is firmly fixed in the Western imagination.

Beginning with Freud, psychoanalysts have been no less fascinated by the character of Narcissus. Theoretical and clinical explorations of narcissism continue to sharpen the focus of both questions and answers.

I have used the English translation of the Latin version of the myth.

There are three distinct models of narcissism in Ovid's myth: Narcissus from his infancy to young manhood, Narcissus in his abortive romance, and Echo. Narcissus's progression from early behaviours to the familiar sequel demonstrates the Freudian continuum of primary and secondary narcissism.

Although Ovid's account of Narcissus's prior history is brief, it nevertheless contains significant information. His inability to handle Echo's overture is but one way Narcissus is characterized. The question posed is whether his personality exhibits a Narcissistic Personality Disorder, or whether his behaviour demonstrates progression from primary to secondary narcissism. At the point where he meets Echo, Narcissus seems to be still in the phase of primary narcissism.

Liriope brings her newborn son, Narcissus, to Tiresias to inquire about his life span. Tiresias gives an enigmatic reply, that he will live a long time "if he not know himself". Ovid acknowledges that the vox (the same word he uses for Echo) of the prophet seems empty for a long time, but is eventually borne out by the nature of Narcissus's death and the "strangeness of his madness".

Ovid also reports that Narcissus, as an infant, "was of such a sort able to be loved". This type of clause is difficult to translate into English, but occurs frequently in Latin where the subjunctive mood is used to indicate a relative clause of general characteristic. The meaning then is not just that Narcissus was loved by those who knew him, but that he was one of those people who attract love by their very nature. Freud acknowledges the existence of the type and speculates that it is such people's very narcissism that attracts others who have given up their own narcissism.

³ My psychoanalytic interpretation of Ovid's myth of Narcissus starts with the issue of Maryanne Hannan: A psychoanalytic interpretation of Ovid's myth of Narcissus and Echo, *Psychoanalytic Review* 1992, 79, 4.



The exercise of charm over others, self-sufficiency, and inaccessibility are certainly characteristics of Narcissus prior to his encounter with Echo. Many young men, many girls desire him, but none have touched him. He is indifferent to the overtures of others. Ovid thereby acknowledges Narcissus's curious self-sufficiency and inaccessibility even at this stage.

His age is always an issue. Although Ovid writes that he could be considered either a boy or a young man by others, Ovid repeatedly refers to him as a boy.

While his sexual maturity is problematic, his relationship with family and friends is quite regular. His mother has nurtured him. She may have brought him to the prophet Tiresias perhaps with unwarranted pride in his lovability, but she has not stood in the way of his developing normal relationships with others. Freud speculates that "a revival and reproduction of their own [the parents'] long since abandoned narcissism" often results in the overestimation of the child.

His mother's estimation of him may be grandiose, a view which he internalized while alienating others.

When Narcissus meets Echo, he is unequivocally faulted for one kind of interpersonal failure. He exhibits a cool indifference in his sexual relationships.

Freud's description of primary and secondary narcissism is enlightening. According to Freud, primary narcissism is the universal original condition. The child proceeds from this state characterized by the ability to form an appropriate object of affective investment in people or things outside oneself. This libidinal energy ebbs and flows; it can invest in an object and then later be reabsorbed into the ego in an imperative manner. In fact, mobility of the libido is essential to psychological maturity. Secondary narcissism is an aberration from this healthy pattern. It is pathological, an interruption of normal development; it is characterized by the withdrawal of libidinal energy from objects back into the self where it remains. Megalomania, hypochondria, affective disturbances, and regressions indicate secondary narcissism.

What drives Narcissus to seek death, rather than enjoy what so delights him? Freud asks a similar question: "Our curiosity will of course raise the question why this damming up of libido in the ego should have to be experienced as unpleasurable". His answer is that psychic discomfort is integral to the withdrawal of libido back into the ego: "unpleasure is always the expression of a higher degree of tension [...] and a quantity in the field of material events is being transformed here and elsewhere into the psychical quality of unpleasure". Narcissus experiences his infatuation as most unpleasurable when he realizes, in effect, that what he had thought was an object of affective investment, a newly found love for another, is an ego-affective investment. This is Tiresias's prophecy; the key to the enigmatic reversal of the Delphic oracle is provided. Narcissus will live a long life if he does not recognize himself, and "himself" is exactly what he now knows. Narcissus is in psychic pain because he has recognized that the part of self-regard that "proceeds from the satisfaction of object libido" will not be his. He is in psychic pain because secondary narcissism is, by its very nature, painful.

Echo affords Narcissus a second opportunity for a mirror transference when she returns as he is dying. She offers him the possibility to reconnect, and he does not respond at all to what is, at least on the surface, an empathic approach. He is so imprisoned in his ego that he is incapable of responding. The unlikelihood of Echo being able to sustain a therapeutic relationship because of her own narcissism is not germane. It is difficult to imagine him accepting any therapeutic relationship. Thus, Freud seems correct, at least in the case of Narcissus, in excluding narcissism from the classification of transference neurosis.



What do these Cases of Narcissism Have in Common?

A past case springs to mind: a young man, about 18-19 years of age and whose symptoms I recognised immediately. He was limping, looking scruffy and with an overgrown beard. He wore tatty clothes and had glasses but he would only direct his gaze above the rim.

I ask him in and he instantly submerges me with his incessant talking – mostly unintelligible, which I found difficult to understand – as if he were talking to no-one. His delirium was immediately evident. He said he owned the White House because he was engaged to the President's daughter. He said he was a very powerful man. He would go to parties, he had an expensive car – despite the fact that his licence had been revoked due to somebody else's mistake.

In common with the other cases of narcissism, this man spoke of his delusions of grandeur with a slight lisp - not dissimilar from J. Edgar Hoover's.

His licence being revoked was one of the only truthful facts one could gather even when directly questioned; it later emerged that three people were at his service – like other narcissists –: his father, mother and older sister.

I met with them; they played down the importance of his delirium; they laughed it off and claimed that the problem was clearly another: he had no friends, he couldn't pass his driving test, he spent hours on end at the computer. He was the master; they, the servants.



NARCISSISM, CLINICAL MATERIALS: WHAT IS THE *FIL ROUGE*?

by Sara Giammattei⁴

1. *Clinical Cases and Narcissistic Personality*

My report would be an introduction about pathological narcissism and is aimed to show some ideas with clinical cases, which are based on an article written by Pincus, Cain and Wright entitled '*Narcissistic Grandiosity and Narcissistic Vulnerability in Psychotherapy*'⁵.

Narcissism is a very pernicious issue. We could define it as a riddle, been very complicated to solve.

Anyway, we can recognize some features with Freud's thinking.

We could ask ourselves what happened to Narcissism after Freud.

Post-freudian theory was focused on Narcissism at a developing stage.

According to this theory, narcissism becomes a normal stage in human life.

This conception is the core of the maladaptive argument of a sane narcissism: it would be the source for ambition and creativity according to Kohut's thesis.

We could indicate another important element as *social narcissism*: in this idea our society would suffer due to a social form of narcissism.

Lasch was a important author, he wrote *The culture of Narcissism*: he explained our society was suffering due to the crisis of values and social changes cause an individual and then social withdrawal. By this conception, narcissistic tendency could become very habitual in our society. In Lasch's opinion, it is a social phenomenon. Media, internet, and newspapers use this term to describe several situations, but this considerable use of the word Narcissism has consequences: the first, among others, is the lack of the real concept of narcissistic personality.

Narcissism has become a common place: the concept of narcissism is spread on the entire society. Mass media defined the last ten years of the past century as the era of the Narcissism, in my opinion we haven't got rid of this definition, because the words narcissism, narcissus and narcissistic are over used. Spreading a concept on everything does not necessarily mean making it stronger, but on the contrary it becomes banal: therefore this operation has conducted the widespread of the concept, but on the other hand if we define everything as narcissism it is useless, because we can't do anything about it. I think this spreading concept actually could be called social narcissism.

⁴ Sara Giammattei is Psychologist and Psychoanalyst, Member of the *Società Amici del Pensiero "Sigmund Freud"*, Milan, Italy.

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⁵A. L. Pincus, N.M. Cain, A.G.C. Wright, *Narcissistic Grandiosity and Narcissistic Vulnerability in Psychotherapy*, American Psychological Association 2014, <http://www.sakkyndig.com/psykologi/artvit/pincus2014.pdf>



This considerable use of the term doesn't help us to describe the true pathology and it isn't useful to understand the narcissistic disorder.

The narcissistic disorder appeared in DSM in 1980.

Both Kouth's and Kernberg's theories together with the clinician's experience were the bases to find a criteria's set to diagnose the narcissistic disorder.

After the new revision, DSM 5, it was clear that the criteria' set is not satisfactory requiring a revision because there are only some features, as grandiosity, arrogance, self-enhancement, emptiness, superficiality of relationship but these features are not enough to have a diagnosis, as Pincus, Cain and Wright analyze in their article.

We need to listen to the subject's words and observe his acts to understand if he shows a narcissistic disorder. We need our eyes and ears.

We could describe the increases and decreases after Freud in psychoanalytic history, where increases are not always good.

The first is an increase.

When the theories declare narcissism as sane competence in people, they lose Freud's work. According to the new theory, we erase Freud's judgment work. Freud observed and analyzed what happened in narcissistic dynamics because if narcissism is present, something wrong happened in individual relationship at the beginning of life.

The second is another increase.

Lack of empathy and difficult relationship are considered the main features of narcissistic functioning. In my opinion there is another central issue, the narcissistic withdrawal.

It is not only a feature, but more important: the narcissistic person works to avoid every invitation, call, effort coming from other people. He uses other people to solve his needs. It is a work against a work. So we could say it is not only a lack of empathy – because in this way we relocate the core of the pathology –, but a form of not permeability impenetrability.

The third is once again another increase.

A considerable aspect of narcissism is the dependence on other people, people addiction. It is another very specific aspect of the narcissistic behaviour. The narcissistic person seems completely self-sufficient but, in reality, he is completely dependent on others who surround him.

He considers these others basing only on his representations of them.

In brief, narcissism is a system: the narcissistic person could not live without the help and care of some people around him. Narcissism doesn't aim to a satisfactory relationship with a partner: Narcissism is opposed to partnership, but it needs the others to solve the situations and to face life.

Other people help the narcissistic person and so we can define them as assistants. Narcissistic personality doesn't consider the other as a partner, but as an assistant.

Narcissus and his others form a system which can remain the same for all his life, if something doesn't happen. Narcissus loses his capacity to offer and propose and to answer to his partners.

The capacity to offer and propose to others is a law, the law of the life of thought⁶.

⁶ «The thinking of nature is the thinking - at the same time moral, ontological, juristic, and economic, – of satisfaction or perfection or success of the body in the universe of bodies, or also the thinking of the destination, or rather it is the thinking of the law of motion of the body. Perhaps to the careful reader these words are enough not to miss that in them the concept that Freud already designated with the word «drive», Trieb, is



Freud describes this law as the beginning of life, it is the drive.

Finally, I concluded with a proposal: we could elaborate some criteria to diagnose a narcissistic behaviour and personality. According to the work of my colleagues in the seminar *Chronicles of Narcissus*⁷, I propose three criteria:

- 1) Does the subject work with another subject aiming to reach a common satisfaction?
- 2) Does the subject adhere to any theories?
- 3) Could we say the subject is satisfied? If not, why?

In accordance to these criteria we could illustrate all information in our possession about the subject to understand if he is or not a narcissistic case.

I think the following cases described by Pincus, Cain and Wright are very useful to observe and analyze the features of narcissistic construction of relationships and thinking.

«Case examples. In the following cases, we first provide an example of a patient meeting DSM NPD criteria and then provide two examples of patients we diagnose as suffering from pathological narcissism, but may not meet DSM criteria because of their pronounced vulnerability.

In portraying these latter cases, we opted to present their vulnerable characteristics first, followed by their grandiose features.

We chose this approach because narcissistic patients who seek outpatient treatment in community mental health centers typically present in dysregulated states in which more vulnerable symptoms are prominent and grandiosity is only detectable later in treatment after patient stabilization. All of these cases portray patients with severe personality pathology. However, it should be noted that pathological narcissism is associated with a range of impairment and can also be seen in higher-functioning patients.

2. Case 1: Mr. A

Mr. A was a single male in his late 30s who lived alone, met criteria for DSM NPD, and presented at the clinic twice for treatment within a 2-year period. He saw two different therapists and unilaterally terminated both therapies after 7 sessions and 18 sessions, respectively. He was a disabled veteran who reported feeling angry toward and envious of the VA, neighbors, women, and society as a whole. He also reported feeling very mistreated and disrespected by most other people and institutions. Mr. A reported that he felt his parents were cold and aloof, emphasizing that they had not helped him resolve highly competitive feelings he developed toward his older brothers. He recalled being treated frequently with strong allergy medicines that left him foggy and detached from others. As an adult Mr. A's contingent self-

assumed, as the Freudian name of the law of motion of the body in the universe of bodies (the «external reality» as made uni-versa). It could not to be missed either, in the summariness, that such a juristic law of the movement of beings such as human bodies, and of others and separate beings that are their objects - the two groups of beings are co-ordinatable but not homologable - is also an economic law». (G.B. Contri, *The thinking of nature. From psychoanalysis to juristic thinking*, Milan, 1998, translated by Luigi Ballerini and Philippa Wheadon. It is on website www.studiumcartello.it

⁷ The seminars *Chronicles of Narcissus* was organized by M.G. Pediconi on 15, 16, 17 December 2014.



esteem and unresolved competitive needs appeared compensated for by a distorted self-view that he was far more capable, powerful, and deserving than reality suggested.

In treatment, Mr. A's narcissistic vulnerability was identifiable through the dominant affects of unrelenting resentment, anger, and envy, which he clearly could not regulate effectively. However, his therapists' efforts to empathize with his emotions and developmental history were consistently met with increased grandiosity and denigration. In therapy he regularly belittled, mocked, and challenged therapists, "I know I'm narcissistic and there's nothing you can do about it," "You can do your empathy thing, but it will have no effect on me," "You're just a trainee, you don't know enough to help me," and "I'm only here to get medication because the VA requires too much paperwork and makes me wait too long." In addition to deriding his therapists, Mr. A. regularly threatened people he found parked in his apartment's assigned parking space and fantasized to his therapist about buying a gun and shooting the next person who parked there. A clinically relevant fact to note is that Mr. A did not drive or even own a car.

Mr. A exhibited chronic grandiosity and entitlement throughout his two therapies and never acknowledged receiving anything beneficial from them before unilaterally terminating treatment. Understandably, both his therapists felt deskilled and beat up in sessions. Countertransference feelings of incompetence and inutility can be useful in recognizing pathological grandiosity, as it may signal a narcissistic dynamic where the therapist cannot be right, or good enough, or know something about the patient that the patient doesn't know him- or herself, because these experiences threaten the patient's idealized self-concept.

Although Mr. A expressed simmering resentment, anger, and envy, he did not respond positively to therapeutic efforts to process these feelings, never sought help for them, and never wanted support from his therapists. This patient is among the very few we have seen who meet DSM NPD criteria in an obvious and immediately apparent way, and voluntarily seek treatment. In fact, it may very well be that Mr. A's main motivation for seeking help from the clinic was to by-pass whatever he found intolerable about receiving treatment from the VA. This is a cycle that might repeat itself with numerous treatment providers.

3. Case 2: Mr. B

Vulnerability. Mr. B was a 40-year-old single, collegeeducated male living with his parents after discharge from his most recent hospitalization. He presented for therapy as socially isolated with impaired intimacy. He had no friends or relationships except with his parents, had difficulty maintaining employment as a dishwasher, and expressed pessimism about his ability to improve his life. He wished to pursue permanent disability status and was interested in moving to a residential facility for the mentally ill.

His most pronounced symptom was an empty depression characterized by agitation and anhedonia but with an absence of sadness or melancholia. Mr. B was chronically suicidal and described waking up each day feeling "horrified" he was still alive. Early in treatment, he would commonly respond to therapist questions with long latencies during which he lowered his head into his hands and repeatedly rubbed his head in anguish before responding with one or two words or "I don't know." Mr. B tried many different antidepressants with minimal effects and was admitted to the hospital 3 times in a 12-month period, once for a long course of ECT that was similarly ineffective. Clearly Mr. B's initial presentation was one of a vulnerable and



anguished patient, and he would be appropriately diagnosed with a mood disorder, but he would not meet criteria for DSM NPD.

Grandiosity. Over the course of psychotherapy, the therapist learned about several other features of Mr. B's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that suggest narcissistic grandiosity. But unlike the first case, these expressions were at first subtle or unacknowledged by the patient and they oscillated with more depressive states. Mr. B was a skilled keyboard player with a sizable home recording studio. But the instruments lay untouched and he reported no intrinsic pleasure in playing them as he only enjoyed it when people paid to hear him play. He tried playing with a few local bands, but none were "serious enough" or "talented enough" and he even devalued his own musical interests as too "flawed and disappointing" to pursue. Mr. B also used to be an avid bicyclist. However, after excitedly purchasing a new and high-quality model, Mr. B became obsessed with the various noises the bicycle made while riding it. He was unhappy and felt it was too noisy. He tried to stop the offending noises without success. With the encouragement of his therapist, Mr. B tried for some time to ride the bike despite his disappointment over its imperfections. However, like playing music, he eventually lost interest in riding his bike and felt depressed about that as well.

Mr. B also felt that daily responsibilities like buying groceries, finding a job, balancing his checkbook, filling out forms, and paying taxes were a "hassle" and he should not have to do them. In fact, he continued to rely on his parents to do most of these things for him. When he was living in his own apartment, he lived off of a trust fund and his mother still balanced his checkbook and took him on a weekly shopping trip. When the trust fund ran out, he strategically took an overdose to ensure his mother would find him when she arrived for their weekly grocery shopping. Despite all of his parents' help (for better or worse), in therapy he expressed resentment toward them for aging and having decreasing resources. For example, he complained bitterly that his mother took much longer to balance his checkbook than she used to and he was disappointed when they could not immediately buy him a car. The therapist learned the main reason Mr. B could not hold a job was because he resented the lack of control over his schedule. He would angrily quit jobs when asked to change his schedule to accommodate other employees' vacations or even his employers' changing needs. He had no friends because he saw relationships as meaningless and insisted he "can't tolerate listening to other people's shit."

Mr. B was very depressed at times, but recognition that it was attributable to his personality pathology improved his treatment. Important features of his presenting mood symptoms can alert therapists to pathological narcissism. First, his depression was characterized by emptiness, nihilism, and agitation rather than sadness. Ultimately, his perfectionism and grandiose expectations of self and others destroyed his ability to experience positive reinforcement from any social, occupational, or recreational activities. Second, depression and suicidality were exacerbated by resentments and disappointments over entitled expectations (depleted trust fund, decreasing parental resources). Third, his mood symptoms did not respond to medication or ECT. Therapist countertransference was also informative in identifying narcissism. Although Mr. B reported and exhibited significant anguish, his therapist experienced increasing impatience over his chronic passivity and externalization of blame. Ultimately she realized that he was exhibiting entitled expectations that someone (parents, therapist) or something (medication, ECT, social assistance) should



solve his problems rather than taking responsibility for working hard in therapy. By recognizing the phenomenology of Mr. B's depressive symptoms and narcissistic themes in her countertransference, the clinician better understood the patient's mood disorder diagnosis in the context of his pathological narcissism.

Case 3: Mr. C

Vulnerability. Mr. C was a 38-year-old college educated male living in the basement apartment of his parent's home after his marriage ended in divorce. He presented as socially isolated, socially anxious, and fearful of intimacy. Mr. C described increasing anxiety when interacting with others, and he had no friends and was unemployed. Both of his parents worked full time. Mr. C spent most of his time in the basement apartment, only venturing upstairs when his parents were gone. He was deeply ashamed of his current circumstances, had difficulty communicating his needs directly, and coped with this via withdrawal. When therapy began, he explained that he was currently unemployed because he "gets too emotional" at work. Mr. C complained that social exposure elicited significant shame if he had to disclose his unemployment status and living situation. Like Mr. B., he also reported an empty depression characterized by anhedonia, feelings of worthlessness, and suicidal ideation, but no sadness. Mr. C presented as a vulnerable and ashamed patient and he would be appropriately diagnosed with an anxiety or mood disorder, but he would not meet criteria for DSM NPD.

Grandiosity. Over the course of psychotherapy, the therapist learned about several other features of Mr. C's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that suggest narcissistic grandiosity. Mr. C often lied about his current life situation to others when he was in public, indicating he was "building a new restaurant in the next town over." Early in therapy, Mr. C successfully returned to work in retail sales, a job he reported to be "exceptionally" good at. Soon after, the retailer hired another salesperson. Mr. C resented this and instigated a physical altercation with the new employee the first day he arrived at work. Mr. C was subsequently fired. It also became clear that Mr. C expected special treatment without commensurate skills or achievements. He told his therapist that he would feel better about trying to get another job if he were just paid a dollar more an hour than everyone else. After actually obtaining another position, Mr. C was fired on his first day of work for requesting a raise after only 1 hour on the job. Rather than mobilizing toward independent living, he commonly retreated into grandiose fantasies about being a benevolent company owner who was adored by his employees.

Mr. C also experienced angry affects as a result of his entitled expectations. In therapy he reported that when his parents were at home he would retreat to the basement feeling angry that they intruded on his space and time. When alone in the house, he experienced it as "his house" and reported becoming particularly enraged one day when his father interrupted this fantasy by unexpectedly coming home from work for lunch. Mr. C's parents asked him to do chores around the house and property, which he reluctantly tended to. Although he lived in the basement apartment rent free, in therapy he expressed resentment over these requests and was critical of his parent's inability to do the chores themselves. Although he presented as ashamed, anxious, and depressed, Mr. C routinely externalized blame for his problems to his parents, coworkers, therapist, even the weather.

Many features of Mr. C's presentation are similar to the prior case. His depression was characterized by emptiness and agitation rather than sadness. His grandiose expectations of self



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and others impaired his social and occupational adjustment. Finally, his depression and suicidality were exacerbated by resentments and disappointments over entitled expectations (chores, favored employee status). Also consistent with the prior case, Mr. C's therapist experienced an increasing impatience over his chronic passivity, externalization of blame, and entitled expectations that others should be more tolerant and understanding. Unlike the prior case, Mr. C's perfectionistic intolerance of showing others any flaws or needs led to greater social anxiety. He also retreated into grandiose fantasies to cope with his isolation and negative affects. Thus he often avoided looking at the reality of his circumstances in session and instead reveled in his fantasies to convey that he was a good son, a good employee, and someone on the verge of accomplishing something great if only the conditions were right.»⁸.

⁸ A. L. Pincus, N.M. Cain, A.G.C. Wright, *Narcissistic Grandiosity and Narcissistic Vulnerability in Psychotherapy*, American Psychological Association 2014, <http://www.sakkyndig.com/psykologi/artvit/pincus2014.pdf>, pp. 2-4



NARCISSISM: THE FREUDIAN CORRECTION

by Maria Gabriella Pediconi⁹

1. *The Errors about Narcissism: Classification and Trivialization*

On Narcissism was published 100 years ago. And the literature about Narcissism became enormous. But what was and what is its direction? Not the Freudian ones.

To prove this sentence we can compare two important presentations regarding the concept of Narcissism from Treccani's Encyclopedia and Laplace.

In the first one we find the definition of Narcissism as (1) a step of human development and (2) the ground for self-esteem.¹⁰ The two misunderstandings in which the deviation of concept of Narcissism from the Freudian introduction was constructed.

Also Laplace describes the destiny of the concept of Narcissism in the psychoanalytic movement: it is an estrangement from the Master. The post-Freudian scholar contended the separation between a good and primitive Narcissism at the beginning of human life and a secondary and negative Narcissism that takes place within psychopathology. The same fusional psychic life ignoring external reality is tolerated at the beginning of life and condemned in adulthood.

Now I refer you to a synthesis about the two main errors concerning the concept of narcissism in the conventional wisdom with common psychological beliefs.

The Error of Classification.

A few sentences from the paper by Keith Campbell entitled *Are we more narcissistic than even before?*¹¹ Quote. «Selfies, social media and video challenges - society is becoming inundated with

⁹ Maria Gabriella Pediconi is Assistant Professor of Dynamic Psychology, University of Urbino, Italy, and Psychoanalyst, Member of the *Società Amici del Pensiero "Sigmund Freud"*, Milan, Italy.

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¹⁰ The *Encyclopedia Britannica* defines narcissism as «pathological self-absorption, first identified as a [mental disorder](#) by [Havelock Ellis](#) in 1898. Narcissism is characterized by an inflated self-image and addiction to fantasy, by an unusual coolness and composure shaken only when the narcissistic confidence is threatened, and by the tendency to take others for granted or to exploit them. The disorder is named for the mythological [Narcissus](#), who fell in love with his own reflection. According to [Sigmund Freud](#), narcissism is a normal stage in children's development, but it is considered a disorder when it occurs after puberty.» (see *Narcissism* on *Encyclopedia Britannica* written by [Frederick Rhodewalt](#)) This definition is comparable to the Italian ones. It contains a very frequent error about Freud. The aim of my intervention will be to individuate the error in detail and suggest its correction

¹¹ See *The Independent*, Thursday 28 August 2014.



the me, myself and I. (...) When we wrote [*The Narcissism Epidemic*](#) a few years ago we didn't predict the extent of these changes. Narcissism has become such a part of culture that a [*new study*](#) found people could report their own narcissism simply by [*answering a question*](#): Are you narcissist? Yes I am! (...) But narcissism is more complicated - and confusing - than a single question can capture.» Finally Campbell suggests a common classification of three kinds of narcissism: the low level of each one is not so serious, but the high levels could become very very serious.

In this direction who is without a narcissistic mark? Nobody. We are all in the same bad boat. But it is not true!

The Error of Trivialization.

The second kind of errors is the trivialization of narcissism. I quote in this sense the intervention of Marc Vernon at a BBC program some months ago which introduced an inconsistent idea entitling it *In defense of narcissism*. Narcissism is reviled as a pathological state, but Mark Vernon argues that it may be necessary for our emotional survival. Quote. «Narcissism is a necessary form of love because human beings are born too early. A current theory in evolutionary biology suggests that we have to be born long before we are able to look after ourselves so that our oversized heads can navigate the birth canal. Dogs and cats, dolphins and apes, do not face such difficulties and so become independent relatively speedily. (...) And yet, the word narcissism carries ugly, disparaging connotations. My thesaurus lists vanity, conceit, self-importance and self-absorption. (...) Things go wrong psychologically for the young child when it does not feel at the centre of attention. Without that comfort and protection, it comes to dwell in a state of perpetual fear and learns that life is a threat.»

Mark Vernon suggests at the end to treat babies like individuals who don't have any competence about their ongoing experience. At the beginning they have to obtain complete attention, later everybody will expect only obedience from the children. A serious conflicting manner of the adults which represent in a lot of cases the real trauma of individual's psychopathology.

The Freudian Correction

We recommend the new reading of the Freudian text *On Narcissism* to correct the wrong direction presented before.

We say, along with Freud, some clear conclusive words about the concept of Narcissism.

1. Narcissism is not the origin of psychic life. At the beginning the baby's as well as human thinking is not narcissistic. An external stop introduces the narcissistic temptation. The confusing stop is received from the external world. It is a subtle attack of the initial competence which is required to distinguish pleasure and displeasure. A kind of stop that produces the precocious psychopathology that is fortunately not so common.

Indeed Narcissism is always a word pertinent to psychopathology and never to health.

2. With Freud we say that Narcissism is an alteration of the Ego. It contravenes the pleasure principle and actively produces the preclusion of the external reality. He stops to receive anything from the others and denies the access to affective experiences. Narcissus is fixed on this denied access without solutions, without the possibility of making changes. This preclusion leaves only one kind of relationship possible: the *addicted relationship*, the absolute dependence of the individual on the caregiver! We can



see this kind of addiction in the psychiatric forms of illness as well as in the more subtle fusional couple often described in the psychological field.

The way of addiction is the slow killing of the Ego by means of its disruptive and ecstatic grandiosity.

3. With Freud we say, at least, that we can all recognize the common version of Narcissism. Common but not safe. It takes place in culture, literature and the Arts. And we learn to recognize it by common experiences. It is *falling in love*, the most common misunderstanding about the constitution of real loving. In falling in love the individual is subjected to the undervaluation of the object. That is the most common experience of compliance in which the Ego disappears. Freud suggested two different versions of falling in love: they are the Narcissism of the parents and the Ideal of the Ego.

We can come to know Narcissism. If we can learn to understand it, it won't kill us.

2. Two Famous Examples

J. Edgar: the Addiction as a Way to Escape Reality

J. Edgar Hoover is one of the founders and first director of the FBI. –moreover, a few tidbits of his life story have long-circulated in the public mainstream, such as his innovations in forensic science and rumored information about his tendencies for being power-hungry, corrupt and a closeted homosexual. With “J. Edgar,” the well-reviewed, Oscar-buzzing film directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Leonardo Di Caprio, audiences can start to get a better sense of the man behind the institution. Filling in the gaps of J. Edgar’s personality involves understanding his strengths and weaknesses. Born with a sensitive and kind temperament, Edgar seemed nurtured by a domineering and intrusive mother. This mother-son dynamic warrants some tangential description because it set the stage for the person that Edgar became and, more specifically, the myriad social and emotional limitation that he would later endure. Edgar clearly perceived the world as an unsafe, unpredictable place, perpetually on the verge of catastrophic threat, and, with a mixture of competence and grandiosity, he saw himself as the new sheriff in town. However his relationships to others were as unstable as his relationship to himself. He did not seem to desire intimacy with others or expect favorable outcomes. And with the exceptions of his assistant Clyde and his secretary Gandy, Edgar tended to view others with hostility and aggression - assuming that people would act as enemies rather than friends. This was maladaptive for establishing friendships but quite adaptive for thriving in the power structure of Washington D.C. Alienation and narcissism coexist in him.

Two movie scenes are very representative about the embracing between homosexuality and narcissism. In the first one his Mother suspects the homosexual temptations of her son and reminds him of the very sad destiny of his schoolmate. A very astute intimidation!

J. Edgar’s Mother fights the temptations of her son only by implicit threats, but the effect on the contrary is the fixation and increasing of the same temptations in him.

In the second scene we can observe the first professional meeting between Edgar and Clyde who will become his main assistant. Edgar leads the conversation, but slips without noticing into a weak position as soon as Clyde touches on the words concerning his appearance. Appearance is the sensitive skin of the narcissistic mind!



These kind of personality shows us in what homosexuality consists: it is not the attraction for the same sex – man/man, woman/woman. It is the rejection of what the difference of the other person is in each occasion. The other is different and the sex is the main sign of this being different. Homosexuality avoids the difference and cultivates the illusion about the equivalent identity. In the narcissistic world we must all be equal.

Only equivalents can understand and treat each other and share experience together. But it is not true.

Virginia Woolf: a Suicide as a Narcissistic Parricide

Here is not the place time now to consider the story of this famous English writer.¹² I'll recall only the last moments.

When Leonard and Virginia opened the Hogarth Press in 1917 they were the first Publisher of Freud's works in England. We know Leonard reads Freud's works. On the contrary Virginia avoided them rigorously. She resisted actually approaching psychoanalysis and Freud himself as well.

28 January 1939. Freud had been in London for a few months, when they visited him. Virginia recorded their meeting in her diary. Quote. «*Doctor Freud gave me a narcissus.*¹³ Was sitting in a great library with little statues at a large scrupulously tidy shiny table. We like patients on chairs. A screwed shrunk very old man; with a monkeys light eyes, paralysed spasmodic movements, inarticulate; but alert. Difficult talk. An interview. Daughter & Martin helped. Immense potential, I mean an old fire now flickering.» So Virginia Woolf described Freud in the 1939 (V. Woolf, *A Room on One's Own*, Granada, 1985: V, 202)

A few months later, in September 1939 Freud dies.

In December Virginia reads Freud for the first time. Diary entry for 2 December 1939: «Began reading Freud last night; to enlarge the circumference, to give my brain wider scope, to make it objective. Thus defeat the shrinkage of age.»¹⁴

She discovered some materials about the relationship Father&Daughter and decided to write a late memoir on her childhood entitled *A sketch on the past*. «It was only the other day when I read Freud for the first time, that I discovered that this violently disturbing conflict of love and hate is a common feeling; and is called ambivalence.»¹⁵ She remind the selfish behavior of her father and the anger she had felt towards him. But, finally she seemed to have found a viewpoint to elaborate the tormented story of her complicated family.

Nevertheless she decided for a tragic conclusion! In fact four months after the end of this writing she committed suicide walking into the [*River Ouse*](#). Symbolically Narcissus comes back to its *house*!

¹² I suggest the reading of *Virginia Woolf. Art, Life and Vision*, edited by Francis Spalding 2014

¹³ My emphasis.

¹⁴ *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, V, p. 248

¹⁵ V. Woolf, *A Sketch of the Past*, 1985, p. 108



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The last note was a letter to her husband Leonard who dedicated her all his life.

«Dearest, I feel certain that I am going mad again. I feel we can't go through another of those terrible times. And I shan't recover this time. I begin to hear voices, and I can't concentrate. So I am doing what seems the best thing to do. *You have given me the greatest possible happiness.* You have been in every way all that anyone could be. I don't think two people could have been happier 'til this terrible disease came. I can't fight any longer. I know that I am spoiling your life, that without me you could work. And you will I know. You see I can't even write this properly. I can't read. What I want to say is I owe all the happiness of my life to you. You have been entirely patient with me and incredibly good. I want to say that – everybody knows it. *If anybody could have saved me it would have been you.*¹⁶ Everything has gone from me but the certainty of your goodness. I can't go on spoiling your life any longer. I don't think two people could have been happier than we have been.»

These words were real aggressions to all relationships. She refused anybody and everybody. At the end she refused Leonard as well as Freud, the main ties of her life who have interpreted her father. She was, like Hoover, addicted, but not safe. She refused to be safe. She refused everything. She killed herself in order to kill everybody, that is the hidden intention of suicide as a narcissistic parricide.

This is at least the manifest of narcissism: to refuse totally. It means a definitive destroying - *access denied!*

¹⁶ My emphasis



**GO WHERE YOU WANNA GO BUT NO MORE APPOINTMENTS.
NOTES ON NARCISSISM AND «THE WILD»**

by Glauco Maria Genga¹⁷



«Happiness is only real when shared»
(Chris McCandless)

I will introduce my presentation about narcissism recalling the fact that every psychoanalyst should learn to work on literary cases, as well as on those of his patients.

I am a psychoanalyst and I like learning this kind of work first of all from Freud himself.

Freud dedicated instructive and beautiful pages to Dostojewski's novels, Heine's works, Shakespeare's tragedies, and even to Leonardo's masterpieces. In all these cases, we have rich materials to understand the innovative concepts and the themes that Freud introduced in the history of thinking.

Today I will try to give you a little example of this work about narcissism, that is one of the most relevant and discussed concepts in psychoanalysis. I will introduce you to a true story, which has been told in recent years by a book and a movie, whose title is *Into the Wild*.¹⁸

¹⁷ Glauco Maria Genga is Psychiatrist and Psychoanalyst, Member of the *Società Amici del Pensiero "Sigmund Freud"*, Milan, Italy.

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¹⁸ Jon Krakauer, *Into the Wild*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, USA, 1997. The book is an expansion of his article on Christopher McCandless titled *Death of an Innocent*, which appeared in the January 1993 issue of *Outside*. A decade after its publication, Sean Penn directed a film version with a soundtrack by Eddie Vedder, starring



Both of them are quite famous, very interesting and moving too.

The book *Into the Wild* (Jon Krakauer, 1997) became a national bestseller with millions of copies sold. The protagonist, Chris McCandless, was also the subject of a 2007 documentary. The abandoned bus where he set up camp and ultimately died has become a pilgrimage destination. A notebook at the site is filled with comments from those who traverse the twenty-two miles between the bus and the nearest road to pay tribute. These comments attest to the impact of Chris's life, though years have passed since his death. The story of Chris McCandless has reached mythical proportions.

I have just written on the board the statement you can read: "Happiness is only real when shared". This statement introduces us to our seminar, and is taken from the journal written by McCandless, the unlucky protagonist, before he died of starvation in Alaska in 1992.

He took this sentence from *Doctor Zhivago*, the famous novel by Boris Pasternak: it was the last book he read. I quote: «And so it turned out only a life similar to the life of those around us, merging with it without a ripple, is genuine life, and that an unshared happiness is not happiness.»

If we'll be able to approach this story without preconceptions and stereotypes, we can understand something about the boundary between health and psychopathology.

1. AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AS INTRODUCTION

I was 23 years old - the same age as Chris McCandless - when I visited the Grand Canyon for the first time. It was a great experience and a very breathtaking landscape. I had never seen something like it before. Furthermore, I refer here to the words of Theodore Roosevelt (the American President since 1901 to 1909), when he saw the Grand Canyon for the first time in 1903: «In the Grand Canyon, Arizona has a natural wonder which is in kind absolutely unparalleled throughout the rest of the world. I want to ask you to keep this great wonder of nature as it now is. I hope you will not have a building of any kind, not a summer cottage, a hotel or anything else, to mar the wonderful grandeur, the sublimity, the great loneliness and beauty of the canyon. Leave it as it is. You cannot improve on it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it.»

But my personal view and Roosevelt's view were very different from McCandless's one.

Let's ask ourselves what it means to experience the beauty. I think it has nothing to do with nature, but with human relations, especially the more genuine and deep ones. A brief note about this. For example, in my practice, I was told by a man the first time he had sex: his girl, stripping herself, nicely said, «...and then let's take off our bathrobes!»

He was admired and responded enthusiastically to her gracious offer.

In the Penn's movie, we will see a scene in which McCandless meets a girl (Tracy) along his way. But his view (i.e. eyes and thought) was very different from that of my patient. The young and pretty hippy girl fell in love with him, but he turned her down and conducted himself to reject that pleasant experience. He behaved in this illogical and disappointing way because in that occasion he experienced anxiety (or anguish). Different views, different choices.

Hemil Hirsch, Kristin Stewart and William Hurt. You can also go to the videoclip from Smithsonian Channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYcP3brBJ3s>, or to
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eR98wPYYqhc>



In order to escape the anguish you are willing to do anything. As you know, you would always like to go to «Alaska» when things are not going well where you are. Isn't that so?

Let us consider a statement written by G.B. Contri about a criterion that distinguishes health and psychopathology. I quote: «Psychic health is the individual's inherence in the "realm of appointments" (...) And psychopathology represents all forms of the suppression of this inherence, like the most diverse forms of withdrawing from an appointment that is a profitable partnership». ¹⁹ This is especially true in the case of narcissism: the narcissistic subject does everything to get away from each appointment. For this reason I have titled my presentation «Go where you wanna go, but no appointments».

In my presentation I will use many excerpts from Krakauer's book, which traces faithfully the history of McCandless until his death.

2. A SHORT SUMMARY ²⁰

Christopher McCandless was born in [California](#) in 1968, and was the first of two children to Walter (employed as a specialist for NASA) and Wilhelmina (his secretary, who assisted him in his work). Chris was raised in a "comfortable upper-middle class" family. He was close to his younger sister, Carine, an important figure in his life.

Chris and Carine had six half-siblings from Walt's first marriage. Walt was not yet divorced from his first wife, when Chris and Carine were born. Chris did not discover his father's first marriage until he was 18.

In May 1990, McCandless graduated from [Emory University](#) in Atlanta (Georgia) with a [Bachelor's degree](#). By the end of the summer, he left his family driving a Datsun through Arizona, California and South Dakota. When a storm flooded his car's engine, he left the car and at the same time buried the license plates. «In April 1992, McCandless went from [North Dakota](#) to [Fairbanks, Alaska](#), to live far away from civilization. He was last seen alive in April 1992 by a local worker, who gave him a ride from Fairbanks to the head of the [Stampede Trail](#). The man noticed that the guy had minimal supplies and no experience, but he could not do anything to stop him.»²¹

After hiking along the snow-covered Stampede Trail, he found an [abandoned bus](#), used by local hunters, and began to live there. He had a few kilograms of rice, a semi-automatic rifle, several books including one on local plant life, and some camping equipment. He had not brought with him a compass nor a map: a choice that cost him his life!

In July, after living in the bus for three months, he decided to leave the place, but unfortunately he found the trail back blocked by the [Teklanika River](#), which was then considerably higher and

¹⁹ G.B. Contri, *The Realm of Appointments*, Milan 2008 (translated by Rosanna Pediconi. Revised by Luca Flabbi and Maria Gabriella Pediconi)

http://www.studiumcartello.it/Public/EditorUpload/Documents/INTERNATIONAL_PAPERS/GBC_Realm_Appointments.pdf

²⁰ *In the following pages I have used several quotes: some of them are from the book by Jon Krakauer.*

Other quotations are taken from the site <http://www.enotes.com/topics/into-wild>, or from other summaries available online, such as <http://www.webenglishteacher.com/krakauer.html>

²¹ I. Krakauer, *ibidem*.



swifter than when he crossed it in April. Unknown to McCandless (!) there was a hand-operated rope that crossed the river not far from where he had previously crossed.

When he was very near to the end, he posted an S.O.S. note calling on anyone passing by to help him because he was too weak: «Attention Possible Visitors. S.O.S. I need your help. I am injured, near death, and too weak to hike out. I am all alone, this is no joke. In the name of God, please remain to save me. I am out collecting berries close by and shall return this evening. Thank you, Chris McCandless. August? ». ²²

His body was found in his sleeping bag inside the bus by a local hunter, in September 1992. McCandless had been dead for more than two weeks and was only 30 kilograms. His official cause of death was [starvation](#). His journal was investigated, among others, by John Krakauer, a writer and alpinist, who tracked the young man's travels, seeking to understand his motives for going on the road and the cause of his death.

He wrote in his Author's note:

«A surprising number of people have been affected by the story of Chris McCandless's life and death. In the weeks and months following the publication of the article in Outside, it generated more mail than any other article in the magazines history. This correspondence, as one might expect, reflected sharply divergent points of view: Some readers admired the boy immensely for his courage and noble ideals; others fulminated that he was a reckless idiot, a wacko, a narcissist who perished out of arrogance and stupidity—and was undeserving of the considerable media attention he received. » ²³

Roger Ebert, a famous US film critic, wrote in 2007: «Sean Penn's spellbinding film adaptation of this book stays close to the source. We meet Christopher (Emile Hirsch) as an idealistic dreamer, in reaction against his proud parents (William Hurt and Marcia Gay Harden) and his bewildered sister (Jena Malone). He had good grades at Emory; his future in law school was right there in his grasp. *Why did he disappear from their lives?* (my emphasis)». ²⁴

That's the question we want to address now.

3. BRIEF COMMENTARY ON TEN SELECTED SCENES FROM THE FILM

N. 1 McCandless' breaking with his family after graduating.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kb83JKfxYn8>

Chris graduated from high school in 1986. After expressing to his father his thankfulness for all he had done for him, he left his family. With no definite itinerary, Chris journeyed to the Pacific Coast. In a few words, he disappeared without a trace. He confessed his intent with these words: «Since they won't ever take me seriously, for a few months after graduation I'm going to let them think they are right, I'm going to let them think that I'm "coming around to see their side of things" and that our relationship is stabilizing. And then, once the time is right, with one abrupt, swift action I'm going to completely knock them out of my life. I'm going to divorce them as my parents once and for all and never speak to either of those idiots again as long as I live. I'll be through with them once and for all, forever.» ²⁵

22 J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.

23 J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.

24 <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/into-the-wild-2007>

25 J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.



In this scene we see the first important steps of his decision. His mind was full of resentment toward his parents. From that moment on he proceeded along his pathological pathway.

N. 2 The sudden conclusion of divorcing from his parents.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAAedFvnP0>

This scene shows us a discussion between McCandless and a certain Westerberg, the employer who had taken a liking to him. Chris had idealized Alaska to escape from everyone: we see him shouting against society («Society, society!»). Westerberg asks him: «But what are you talking about?». Chris: «You know, parents!». And the other replies, shaking his head: «You're sick!»

Westerberg told in an interview: «Alex talked a lot when we got together. It was pretty obvious he didn't get along with his family». He didn't concern himself with McCandless's family problems: «Whatever reason he had for being pissed off with them, I figured it must have been a good one. Now that he's dead, though, I don't know anymore. If Alex was here right now, I'd be tempted to chew him out good: 'What the hell were you thinking? Not speaking to your family for all that time, treating them like dirt!'».²⁶

Westerberg's latter conjecture was a sharp good analysis of the relationship between Chris and his father: both of them were stubborn and high-strung. So, their conflict was inevitable. Eventually, Chris rebelled and when he finally did, it was with characteristic immoderation.

Narcissism in both of them brought forward so much tragedy.

It is the same conflict which was well represented and idealized in a famous song written by Cat Stevens, *Father and Son* (1970).²⁷

Not only. Please, take note that his claim was the same as John Lennon in his song *Gimme some truth*.²⁸ Rebellion against fathers was the leitmotif of the mentality of '68: the same culture as Chris' father. And again: who does not remember the great success of the song *Born to be wild* (1968)? It became famous as part of the soundtrack in *Easy Rider* (1969).

N. 3 An illogical inference leads Chris and Carine to get a wrong conclusion about their sense of identity.

The facts. Wilhelmina (called Billie) and Walt's relationship began when she was a young secretary and he was her married boss. In the later few years, he would father two more children with his first wife (Marcia) and two with Billie: Chris and Carine. So Carine says: «Dad was already married, which made me and my brother two illegitimate children». She was convinced that their father was lying to both women. Marcia finally escaped with her six children, and Billie repeatedly vowed to leave Walt, raising her children's hopes, but she never followed through.»

My comment: why “two illegitimate children”? Both of them grew up with a father and a mother, who could certainly have had their own personal lives. But there is another issue: What

²⁶ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.

²⁷ <http://www.azlyrics.com/lyrics/catstevens/fatherandson.html>

²⁸ «I'm sick and tired of hearing things / From uptight, short-sighted, narrow-minded hypocritics / All I want is the truth Just gimme some truth / I've had enough of reading things / By neurotic, psychotic, pig-headed politicians / All I want is the truth Just gimme some truth. / No short-haired, yellow-bellied, son of tricky dicky / Is gonna mother hubbard soft soap me With just a pocketful of hope / Money for dope Money for rope (...) All I want is the truth now / Just gimme some truth (...)».



kind of relationship did Walt and Billie had? We can suppose it was not satisfactory enough for the two of them. That's the problem. Kids always have the freedom to choose how they want to think, live and judge the situation.

N. 4 A very fateful day.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6pXGJaI0uc> (Italian)

Chris's journal entry for January 11 (1991) begins with these words: «A very fateful day». After traveling some distance south, he beached the canoe on a sandbar far from shore to observe the powerful tides. An hour later violent gusts started blowing down from the desert, and the wind and tidal rips conspired to carry him out to sea. The water by this time was a chaos of whitecaps that threatened to swamp and capsize his tiny craft. The wind increased to gale force. The whitecaps grew into high, breaking waves. With his own words: «In great frustration, he screams and beats canoe with oar. The oar breaks. Alex has one spare oar. He calms himself. If loses second oar is dead. Finally through extreme effort and much cursing he manages to beach canoe on jetty and collapses exhausted on sand at sundown. This incident led Alexander to decide to abandon canoe and return north».²⁹

So he left the stubby metal boat and started walking north up the deserted beach.

Please take note that «he keeps journals in which he sees himself in the third person as a heroic loner» (R. Ebert). What does this writing style mean if not a false sense of identity, a severe confusion between fantasy and reality of everyday life? One with a fluent knowledge of the English language may also note that the above quote is written in an almost primitive manner: McCandless abandons the use of most articles and the repetition of various pronouns, so his text almost seems like a telegram. This is an interesting detail.

N. 5 He presented himself under a false name: “Alexander Supertramp”.

The scene shows Chris seeking accommodation at a charity that deals with homelessness. There he declares to be called “Alexander Supertramp”. The name he chose shows a strong trait of his superego, or haughtiness. In fact, a few minutes later, while walking down the street, he sees a young couple, dressed in an elegant way, through a restaurant window.

What happens? At that moment he sees himself in that boy who belongs to the high society. This hallucination leads him to run away from there, even refusing the bed. He really wants to escape from any form of civilization, including a simple conversation between a boyfriend and girlfriend. This episode shows us more than others the process of identification: at first Chris takes a model of civic life, and then rejects it. The nature and the Wild have nothing to do with all this.

²⁹ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.



N. 6 His obstinate rebellion against rules.

During his travels he even worked at a McDonald's: «One thing I do remember is that he had a thing about socks» - says Zarza, the assistant manager - «He always wore shoes without socks. But McDonald's has a rule that employees have to wear appropriate footwear at all times. I was surprised he ever got hired (...) He could do the job - he cooked in the back - but he always worked at the same slow pace, even during the lunch rush, no matter how much you'd get on him to hurry it up. It was like he was off in his own universe.»

«I don't think he ever had relationships with any of the employees after work. When he talked, he was always going on about trees and nature and something like that. (...) When Chris finally quit," Zarza admits, "it was probably because of me. When he first started working, he was homeless, and he'd show up for work smelling bad. It wasn't up to McDonald's standards to come in smelling the way he did. So finally they delegated me to tell him that he needed to take a bath more often. Ever since I told him, there was a clash between us. And then the other employees—they were just trying to be nice—they started asking him if he needed some soap or anything. That made him mad. But he never showed it outright. About three weeks later, he just walked out the door and quit.»³⁰

Here is another trait of his narcissistic character, because he does not want to take care of himself and so despises other people.

N. 7 Chaste as a monk: how he refused the advances of Tracy, the pretty hippies' daughter.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGWnUVp8SXw>

Among the residents of the Niland Slabs was a seventeen-year-old named Tracy. She fell in love with McCandless during his week-long visit: «She was this sweet little thing," says Burres, «the daughter of a couple of tramps who parked their rig four vehicles down from us. And poor Tracy developed a hopeless crush on Alex. The whole time he was in Niland, she hung around making goo-goo eyes at him, bugging me to convince him to go on walks with her. Alex was nice to her, but she was too young for him. He said he couldn't take her seriously.»³¹

«There is little evidence that he was sexually active as a teenager and even less to suggest that he slept with any woman after graduating from high school. (Nor, for that matter, is there any evidence that he was ever sexually intimate with a man.) It seems that McCandless was drawn to women but remained largely or entirely celibate, as chaste as a monk.

Chastity and moral purity were qualities McCandless mulled over long and often. Indeed, one of the books found in the bus with his remains was a collection of stories that included Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, in which the nobleman-turned-ascetic denounces "the demands of the flesh." Several such passages are starred and highlighted in his text, the margins filled with cryptic notes printed in McCandless's distinctive hand.

And in the chapter on *Higher Laws* in Thoreau's *Walden*, a copy of which was also discovered in the bus, McCandless circled: «Chastity is the flowering of man; and what are called Genius, Heroism, Holiness, and the like, are but various fruits which succeed it.»

Chastity can also be a sign of a pathological way of thinking, as in this case. The sexual life of human beings is hindered and inhibited by psychopathology. It always happens from early

³⁰ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.

³¹ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.



childhood. In this delicate area of experience, nature is mute: there are no laws or rules (instincts), unlike what happens to animals. The human sex life depends on the thoughts of the person, who can accept or reject any kind of excitement. According to Freud, narcissism is perhaps the form of psychopathology in which sex life is less developed and less invested.

N. 8 Being an heir to someone: a question to dodge.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Owixihm4BPA>

«After leaving the Slabs, Chris made his way to Salton City, California, in January of 1992 where he met Ronald Franz, an older gentleman who had lost his wife and son (both of them brutally murdered) and recovered from alcoholism, becoming ‘a devout Christian’.»³²

Franz questioned Chris many times about his lifestyle; and Chris explained to him that he chooses to live his life this way and described his future Alaskan adventure. The two men create a father-son type of relationship and spend much time together.

Eventually, Ronald asks Chris if he can accept to be adopted by him. This is a sincere desire of the old man, but Chris refused. Even now! He decided to leave him and went back to Carthage, South Dakota. This was the most touching contact he made.

The refusal to think of oneself as heir to someone is an issue that goes hand in hand with the previous point. It is precisely what Freud called *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex*. Here I recall the title of one of his essays (1924).³³

N. 9 His agony and death.

See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2k-oo2TT-0>

The author, Jon Krakauer, went back to where Chris died a year later to try to gain a greater understanding of the young man. Krakauer believes McCandless went into the wild «to explore the inner country of his own soul». Here’s the tragedy.

Chris McCandless resumed his solitary life at his camp after finding the Teklanika uncrossable. He caught enough to subsist for a month, and apparently spent that time hunting and reading. At the end of that time, he “made the mistake that pulled him down.” On July 30, his journal indicates that he was “extremely weak”. He faulted “pot.seed” for his predicament. There have been many conjectures as to what exactly caused Chris’s “precipitous decline.” It is possible that he ingested potato seeds he had brought in with him, which become toxic. More probably, he might have mistakenly eaten a toxic plant that closely resembles the other kind of edible potato.

Did he die of hunger or was he poisoned by the seeds of the wild potato? There is still a debate about this. But the point is: what could he do when he realized the river was in flood season, that is before losing the strength to hunger? He could throw himself into the river and seek salvation drifting downstream. He would have had a chance. Why did he not do it?

N. 10 What were his last thoughts and desires?

The final scene is perhaps a gift that Jon Krakauer as first, and then Sean Penn give to Chris’s parents, showing the reunification of their son with them while he is dying. They infer that this

³² <http://www.enotes.com/topics/into-wild>

³³ S. Freud, *The Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex*, 1924, S.E. vol. XIX, pp 171-179.



is his last thought and desire. I think that it depends on the meaning of the sentence I showed you at the beginning of my presentation: «Happiness is only real when shared».

Should we think that his was a case of repentance?

What does it mean to share something with someone else?

4. HIS FAVORITE AUTHORS HAD BECOME HIS MASTERS

Krakauer's *Into the Wild* contains the entire series of the books that McCandless read avidly while he identified with those authors. They are: Jack London, Henry D. Thoreau (*Walden, or Life in the Woods*) Mark Twain (*Huckleberry Finn*), G.K. Chesterton, Lev Tolstoj and Boris Pasternak.

«McCandless had been infatuated with London since childhood, because of his fervent condemnation of capitalist society, his glorification of the primordial world. Mesmerized by London's turgid portrayal of life in Alaska and the Yukon, McCandless read and reread *The Call of the Wild*, *White Fang*, and other books. He was so enthralled by these tales, however, that he seemed to forget they were works of fiction, constructions of the imagination that had more to do with London's romantic sensibilities than with the actualities of life in the subarctic wilderness.

McCandless conveniently overlooked the fact that London himself had spent just a single winter in the North and that he'd died by his own hand on his California estate at the age of forty, a fatuous drunk, obese and pathetic, maintaining a sedentary existence that bore scant resemblance to the ideals he espoused in print.»³⁴

«The dominant primordial beast was strong in Buck, and under the fierce conditions of trail life it grew and grew. Yet it was a secret growth. His newborn cunning gave him poise and control.»

(Jack London, *The Call Of The Wild*)

«All Hail the Dominant Primordial Beast! And Captain Ahab Too!

Alexander Supertramp - May 1992»

(Graffito found inside the abandoned bus on the Stampede Trail)

«Jack London is King. Alexander Supertramp»

(Graffito carved into a piece of wood discovered at the site of Chris McCandless's death)

«Everything had changed suddenly—the tone, the moral climate; you didn't know what to think, whom to listen to. As if all your life you had been led by the hand like a small child and suddenly you were on your own, you had to learn to walk by yourself. There was no one around, neither family nor people whose judgment you respected. At such a time you felt the need of committing yourself to something absolute—life or truth or beauty—of being ruled by it in place of the man-made rules that had been discarded. You needed to surrender to some such ultimate purpose more fully, more unreservedly than you had ever done in the old familiar, peaceful days, in the old life that was now abolished and gone for good.»

(Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago* passage highlighted in one of the books found with Chris McCandless's remains. "Need for a purpose" had been written in McCandless's hand in the margin above the passage.)

³⁴ J. Krakauer, *ibidem*.



«Rather than love, than money, than fame, give me truth. I sat at a table where were rich food and wine in abundance, an obsequious attendance, but sincerity and truth were not; and I went away hungry from the inhospitable board. The hospitality was as cold as the ices.»

(Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* passage highlighted in one of the books found with McCandless's remains. At the top of the page, the word "truth" had been written in large block letters in McCandless's hand.)

In other words, McCandless was disobedient to society, but only in appearance.

He truly always obeyed to one theory, that of his masters.

Doing so, he was naïve, much more than they were, and gave his body over to a fatal experiment following a romantic and ascetic theory.

5. A COLLECTIVE CLICHÉ, OR "THE WILD" AS A FALSE THEORY TO EMBRACE UNTIL DEATH

The interesting and well documented book of Krakauer has another merit. The author reports many testimonies collected in the American press about the death of McCandless. He does not believe that the young man had voluntarily sought death in those extreme lands: he thinks of McCandless as a victim of poisoning. Nevertheless, he gives voice to those who believe that the behavior of the young man was almost mad because he was guilty of grave imprudence, such as in this case:

«The most strident criticism came in the form of a dense, multipage epistle from Ambler, a tiny Inupiat village on the Kobuk River north of the Arctic Circle. The author was a white writer and schoolteacher, formerly from Washington D.C., named Nick Jans (...):

"Over the past 15 years, I've run into several McCandless types out in the country. Same story: idealistic, energetic young guys who overestimated themselves, underestimated the country, and ended up in trouble. McCandless was hardly unique; there's quite a few of these guys hanging around the state, so much alike that they're almost a collective cliché. The only difference is that McCandless ended up dead, with the story of his dumbassness splashed across the media.... (Jack London got it right in "To Build a Fire." McCandless is, finally, just a pale 20th-century burlesque of London's protagonist, who freezes because he ignores advice and commits bigtime hubris)....

His ignorance, which could have been cured by a USGS quadrant and a Boy Scout manual, is what killed him. And while I feel for his parents, I have no sympathy for him. Such willful ignorance ... amounts to disrespect for the land, and paradoxically demonstrates the same sort of arrogance that resulted in the Exxon Valdez spill, just another case of underprepared, overconfident men bumbling around out there and screwing up because they lacked the requisite humility. It's all a matter of degree.

McCandless's contrived asceticism and a pseudoliterary stance compound rather than reduce the fault (...) McCandless's postcards, notes, and journals (...) read like the work of an above average, somewhat histrionic high school kid. Or am I missing something?"

The prevailing Alaska wisdom held that McCandless was simply one more dreamy half-cocked greenhorn who went into the country expecting to find answers to all his problems and instead found only mosquitoes and a lonely death. Dozens of marginal characters have marched off



into the Alaska wilds over the years, never to reappear. A few have lodged firmly in the state's collective memory.»

Krakauer also relates the stories of some other young men who vanished into the wilderness, such as Gene Rosellini, called “Major of Hippie Cove”, John Waterman, Carl McCunn and [Everett Ruess](#), an artist and wanderer who went missing in the [Utah desert](#) in 1934 at the age of 20. In general, we can say that in the thirties of the last century, the canyon lands of Utah, Arizona and New Mexico were a region nearly as sparsely populated and wrapped in mystique as Alaska is today.

6. FOLLOWING FREUD: A FEW WORDS ON THE DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION

Some people see in McCandless a myth, others consider him a madman and a suicide case. Many Alaskans have long been exasperated or downright hostile over the mythologizing of Chris McCandless. I am referring in note some links to websites that contain several opinions on psychiatric diagnosis of McCandless.³⁵

I choose to report here the contribution of Roxy Wilding (a British counsellor and psychotherapist) who considers that of McCandless «a story of broken attachment and unhealed wounds.»

She writes in her paper: «I do not think it is too fanciful to imagine that damaged and ruptured attachment, the deepest of all human wounds, sits at the root of the world's troubles. If we feel we cannot be loved, we turn inwards where we perpetually experience the early pain of rejection, or we lash out in our rage and agony, causing pain to others so we may not feel ours so keenly. “Into the Wild” so eloquently illustrates the lengths a person will go to, to escape their pain. When one is lost inside, there is no safe place, and not even the vastness and allure of one of the world's most breathtaking and terrible landscapes can offer a place to hide.»³⁶

I am not of the same opinion, and I have two main points to support my opinion:

- 1) It is true that McCandless was one that “cannot be loved”, as Wilding writes, but in the sense that he refused any offer of love to him by the people he met on his way. In this way he extended dramatically hatred for his parents: wanting to hit them without mercy, he struck mercilessly at all the others and, in his imagination, the whole world.
- 2) His story is not “a story of broken attachment”, but of imputability. It is indeed a choice at a crossroads.

We are interested in identifying the characteristic of his pathology. In my brief comments to the scenes I showed, I have highlighted some features of his narcissism.

We can say he was unable to collaborate with peers, because he refused any form of collaboration, while he developed a monothematic idea (Alaska, the Wild). At the same time, he was able to numb his affects towards anybody and refuse any appointment.

35 <http://www.adn.com/article/forget-chris-mccandless-has-craig-medred-gone-wild>
<http://www.farnorthscience.com/2007/10/13/media-watch/into-the-wild-the-false-being-within/>
<http://theadventureblog.blogspot.it/2007/11/was-chris-mccandless-crazy-literally.html>

36 R. Wilding, *Into the Wild* (2007), directed by Sean Penn. Chuck Zlotnick/Paramount Vantage, New Directions
In Psychotherapy and Relational Psychoanalysis Journal, 3:228-231.



SOCIETÀ AMICI DEL PENSIERO

SIGMUND FREUD



He was unable to love anyone else, or better, with Freud's words, he loved only «what he himself would like to be», according to the narcissistic type of the choice of an object.

We must not forget that Freud defined properly psychosis “narcissistic neuroses”.

In the psychosis we find a sharp devaluation of any other person. In contrast, we find in the neurosis an overestimation of the other. In the first case, the narcissistic subject falls in love with himself (!), in the second the neurotic subject falls in love with another one. These two extreme cases provide us with important information about the possibility of treatment of a mental illness. The chances of success of an analytic treatment exist only for those individuals who recognize their neuroses and are willing to correct it, abandoning any form of falling in love through the work of transference.

In my opinion, the case of McCandless is very useful because, according to the documents we have, it is an example of a person who was not treatable.

I would like to recall his statement “Happiness is only real when shared”. Let us ask ourselves what it means “to share” in this case.

I find it appropriate to conclude by quoting the great Italian mountaineer Walter Bonatti (1930-2011): «Some people, due to their moral cowardice, see no more in mountain-climbing than an escape from the harsh realities of modern times. This is not only uninformed but unfair. I don't deny that there can be an element of escapism in mountaineering, but this should never overshadow its real essence, which is not the escape but the achieving of a goal.»³⁷

Bonatti shows us a very correct judgment: you can reach a goal, whatever it is, only through a work done in partnership with another.

³⁷ W. Bonatti, *Montagne di una vita*, Baldini Castoldi Dalai 1995 (my translation).



THE PRODUCTION OF POVERTY: PATHOLOGY AND NARCISSISM

by Luca Flabbi³⁸

I am economist, working in academia and in public policy Institutions. At the same time, I have a long running interest for psychoanalysis and I am an associate with the SAP in Milan. What I have discovered after a few years is that the economy I was studying in Academia, let's call it the standard economics model, and the economy Freud is talking about are not two different economies, or two different spheres but they are one economy, which is the economy generated by the thoughts and acts of thinking of all of us. Without thinking there is not economy. That is why I do not want to say that what I am writing in this short essay is at the intersection of economics and psychoanalysis, or that it is the view of an economist on psychoanalysis or vice versa. Instead, I will talk about a theme, a concept; taking the liberty to use material from both economics and psychoanalysis on top of many other materials we all read about every day in the news.

Poverty is produced

Poverty is produced: we do not start our life from a state of poverty and then we build up wealth. It is quite the opposite: we start from a state of wealth and then we dig our way through poverty. (Usually with robust help from someone else). In other words: *Any baby is born rich*. When a baby is born, she is not born constraint in anything: she immediately looks for beneficial resources and when a beneficial exchange with another human being is reached, she is the richest girl on earth. Usually, the first example of this exchange is the breastfeeding relation with the mother but it may well be something else (the first touch; a father finger-feeding; another loving adult giving a warm bath).

Not everybody would agree with this description of the birth of a baby, i.e. with this description of the start of any human experience, but Freud definitely would. If we agree on this, then poverty happens later, through active work (superfluous to add pathological work) of the subject and other accomplices. Someone that would definitely not agree on this is an economist.

In economics, poverty is not a product but, at most, a by-product. Economics does not admit that someone will actively produce poverty; it will only admit it may happen because of some

³⁸ Luca Flabbi is Senior Research Economist, Inter-American Development Bank; Associate Professor, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill; Research Associate, IZA-Institute for the Study of Labor; Member of the *Società Amici del Pensiero "Sigmund Freud"*, Milan, Italy.

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market failures or market imperfections. The only concept that economics would agree on is that of scarce resources. If scarce resources, then we are not born rich: we are born constraint. But let me give you an example of what I mean by poverty as by-product. Imagine to cut a dress from a piece of cloth. The cloth is, say, rectangular and you start to follow with the scissor the shape of the dress. As you cut, some loose pieces will end up in the floor. These loose pieces are the by product of producing a shapely dress from a rectangular piece of cloth. You would not want them to happen, you would try to have very few of them but they may still *happen*. But this is the key difference with what I was saying at the beginning. They may happen but you did not work toward that goal: your goal was the product not the by product. What I am claiming - and on this I want to make explicit the reference to Giacomo Contri who is really the first person from whom I have heard this concept, or, I should probably say, judgment - instead is the following:

1. It is the *pathology* that *produces poverty*;
2. The pathology has *poverty as* its explicit and main *goal*;
3. *Without pathology* there would be *no poverty*.

Let me articulate this with an example and a question. Through this example it will also become clear the link with one of the main theme of these lectures: narcissism.

Who is rich?

The question: who is rich? is a crucial question. I gave you at the beginning the example of the richest girl on earth: a newborn breastfed with pleasure by her mum. In that definition, rich or poor had a direct link to the satisfaction (or pleasure, if you want). But I do *not* want to introduce a difference between rich from satisfaction and pleasure and rich from money and material resources, which is the usual definition of being rich. It is a good thing to have at your disposal a large sum of money: you can buy yourself things you want, you may freely choose the job you want, you may have as many kids as you want, you may invest in initiatives and causes dear to you.

But most of all money can buy the freedom.... of not thinking about money. Now, this is really invaluable (or priceless like the MasterCard advertisement: does it exist in Italy? I think it is correct this play on the concept of price that the ad does). Freeing up space to think about something else: this is (should be) the real benefit of being monetary rich: I do not have to think about it. This is the kind of favorable condition that also in the history of humanity has led to new thoughts, novel art and intellectual product, even technological progress. Money and monetary wealth are correct indicators of being rich only because they allow for (or they should allow for) better and more favorable conditions to reach satisfaction.

A little two years old does not think about money. If she has an half decent family, almost all her experiences are priceless: the happiness of seeing you after a trip, the satisfaction of improvising a show with her sister for the benefits of family and friends; the bottle of milk; a good night sleep; the discovery of a new friend.

Now think at somebody you know who is rich, monetary rich. Are they rich? Are they free from the urgency and compulsion of constantly thinking about money? Do they use their monetary possession to put themselves in favorable conditions to reach the satisfaction?

Is the richest family in the world rich? Do you know who is the richest family in the world? It is the Walton family. Let me give you some numbers:



1. The Walton Family is worth 150 billions dollars (150 thousand millions dollars). This is equivalent to the overall wealth of 2 millions and half of average American households. Among the top ten richest persons in the world there are 4 Waltons and each of them is worth four or five Berlusconi;
2. The Walton Family the largest employer in the US, employing more than a million workers.³⁹

And what do they do all day? They fight to save a cent and they produce poverty, literally. They are the owners of the largest low-cost supermarket chain in the world (*Wal-Mart*) and their workers are *working poor*: i.e. despite working full-time at Wal-Mart most of them are too poor to live with what they earn. They have to use food stamps provided by the federal government: subsidies given by the US government to avoid children malnutrition and adult hunger. They are coupons to buy basic food! And of course, most of them does not have health insurance, therefore they get treatment only for emergency (example: they can be treated for a cavity only when it is so bad you have to go to the emergency room). And it does not stop here: the Walton Family produces additional poor because they compete with other groceries and supermarkets. These competitors are left just with two alternatives: close shop and become working poor themselves or treat the workers in the same way that Wal-Mart does, generating other working poor. Again all these working poor would not survive if it was not for the help of the government so, in a sense, all the American taxpayers subsidize Wal-Mart.

This leads to *the first logical contradiction of the life and thought promoted by the Walton family*. As we just mention, without the help of the safety nets provided by the federal government, half of Wal-Mart's workers would literally die within a few years (not enough food, no health insurance).⁴⁰ But of course the Walton family favors the free market with respect to government intervention and its necessary correlate: taxes. And here is where I remain an economist. Let's take them at their words, let's imagine an economy as the one proposed by the Waltons: where would that lead us? Well, half of your workers die every few years, it means you do not only lose workers but you also lose clients (Wal-Mart workers can only shop at Wal-Mart: other shops are too expensive). Eventually you would lose your business too. Final product: every body dead or poor, Wal-Mart's family included! Only a catatonic could lead at such a perfect state of poverty. And Contri has recently and convincingly shown that a catatonic is the ultimate narcissist.

The second logical contradiction is equally striking. They are the richest family in the world but they are poor:

- They could free their life and thought of the constant preoccupation about money but they do exactly the opposite;
- They could live everywhere but they are stuck in a nondescript American city in the middle of nowhere (Bentonville, Arkansas);
- They have a lot of money but this is not a benefit for them, it is a burden, they do not know what to do with all these money except piling them up.

³⁹ A. Dube e K. Jacobs, "The Hidden Cost of Wal-Mart Jobs", *UC Berkeley Labor Center Briefing Paper*, 2004.

⁴⁰ See the detailed analysis presented by Dube and Jacobs (2004).



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I think this is nicely supported by a sentence reported in a profile recently completed on Alice Walton,⁴¹ the only woman of the four Walton siblings and the current richest woman in the world. She is described as some who lives relatively modestly, cooking herself (which would be fine) but then she declares:

“One of the great responsibilities that I have is to manage my assets wisely, so that they create value,”

“I know the price of lettuce. You need to understand price and value. *You buy the best lettuce you can at the best price you can.*”

Where of course *best* means *lowest*. But why? Who cares? Should she always look for the lowest possible price for lettuce? Actually the lowest price may be very bad, it may not “create value” at all: it may mean lowers wages, higher environment impact and so on. Why always have the price as objective?

As usual, the embarrassment of having too much money and the burden (turning frequently in an actual political problem) of having too much money lead to charity initiatives. Is there anything more narcissistic than these charity initiatives with your name on it? This is not something very common in Italy so let me explain. Do you know Stanford University? Vanderbilt University? The Bloomberg Public Policy School? The Guggenheim Museum? These are all universities, museums or other charity or cultural initiatives that take the name from the family who gave the money. Right now in US university you can actually sell “naming rights”: you give 5 millions dollars? You have your name in a classroom. You give 20 millions? One side of the building will have your name on it. You give 200 millions? Ok, the name of the entire school, or piece of university is yours. There are literally price tags. And of course all these money are “donations” and qualify for tax relief.

But another nice example is in the Walton family. Let me go back to Alice Walton. She has founded, built and supported a world-class museum, the *Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art* in Bentonville, in the middle of nowhere. It is quickly becoming one of the most important museum of American art, where that means good but minor painters from the US. She has created a strong inflation spiral on the price of this art. And if you have read the beginning of the article I gave you, you can see how crazy this is: she is participating at an auction, she is buying everything at a price 2 or 3 times higher than the one expected by the auctioneer; and she is doing this by phone through one of his agents, while riding her horse to win an important regional competition. She manages to end up spending 20 million dollars in art in a day.

And this is something I have been thinking for some time: there is something upsetting - in the sense of not being convenient, of not favoring anyone's work and satisfaction - in having so much money that you could never been able to spend it even if you wanted to. Not only you but not even the children of your children's children will ever been able to spend it. It creates a very dangerous *disconnect between money and work*. And this remain true even if you decide to donate all your money to charity. Take the two richest men in the world: Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. They have decided to donate all their money (with the exception of a few billions): they have pledged they will not go to their children but to foundations and charity initiatives. *The Bill*

⁴¹ Rebecca Mead "Alice's Wonderland. A Walmart heiress builds a museum in the Ozarks.", *The New Yorker*, June 27, 2011 Issue.



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and Melinda Gates Foundation (of course, their names again) is now one of the foundations with the largest endowment in the world and they are having a major impact on public policy. I have seen it, for example, in the impact of policies related to developing countries: they have strongly changed the policy debate and policy initiatives in this field. But this, on top of being not exactly democratic, is another sign of arrogance and narcissism: people have studied these issues for decades. I am a billionaire who has never cared about these issue and I suddenly decide what is worth doing in Africa, who has the best ideas and it is worth supporting and so on. Based on what? Why a billionaire should know what is good for Africa just because he has have invented a mediocre software and operating system 30 years ago?

But let me go back again to the Walton family. How can we explain these logical contradictions if not with the pathology? Actually, these logical contradictions are the pathology. Economy is coherent thinking; logical contradiction is pathology. So, how can we explain it? I do not know them personally but allow me a little speculation, they seem a quite classic and plausible case. But again, this is totally speculation which is not necessary to support my argument.

It is not difficult to imagine their father, *Sam Walton*, the original founder of a small grocery shop in Bentonville. He is not rich, he is not particularly skilled on choosing product. Worrying about shaving the last cent really becomes his one and only comparative advantage. He may have a certain disdain toward his workers (“I work so much and these lazy workers do not. After all I am giving to them! and blah, blah”). His children have not been able to go beyond this theory, they have actually and religiously adhered to this theory and they have create a veritable Empire of Poverty. And let me say, it is not little feat: it requires a lot of work. Pushing against union, negotiating with suppliers, lobbying politicians. It is active, tiring, boring work with the explicit objective of producing poverty: amazing to the point of being absurd!

And what is even more absurd is that it would be so easy for them to abandon this theory and become genuinely rich: they would have all the means to do it. But I have to say, I do not really know any billionaires who has ever done it. Actually, I know only one: Ludwig Wittgenstein, but he really just gave the money away. Think about it: four siblings, each one with more than 40 billions and none of them makes a move to abandon the theory, none of them propose to give health insurance to their workers’ children or decide to build a supermarket chain with a better work environment. And, of course, there is no difference if you have 40 billions, 20 billions or 4 billions. The attachment to this theory is so radical that I would say it really reminds of:

- the radicalism of the psychosis;
- the relentless negation of acts, movements, initiatives of the catatonic;
- the radical and militant closure to the other of the narcissist.

Again, remember the words of Alice Walton: I have to “manage my assets wisely, so that they create value,”. You have 45 billions dollars and the first thing you say to the interviewer is that you have to manage your assets wisely?! And what if you do not? And creating value for who? Definitely not for the people working for you.....

The one who is creating poverty is poor

By the same logic we can also state, almost as a corollary, that not only poverty is a product but also that *the one who is creating poverty is poor*. I cannot be rich if I produce poverty. This is obvious and stark when we look at the usual psychotic we meet in the street when we get off a train at a

STUDIUM CARTELLO – IL LAVORO PSICOANALITICO

Via Francesco Viganò n.4, 20124 Milano, Italia. Tel +39.02.29009980 - CF e Partita IVA 11289890151
www.societaamicidelpensiero.com www.studiumcartello.it www.sicedizioni.it mail@studiumcartello.it



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station begging for money. But it is equally true for anyone producing poverty, including the richest family in the world.

This conclusion is equally a result of the sentence *“poverty is a product”* and of the sentence, that I have first heard from Giacomo Contri:

“you cannot do good, you can only work so that your own good is produced through the work of another”.

This is production of wealth as opposed to production of poverty. Still another way to put it is a sentence by Jacques Lacan:

“there cannot be satisfaction of someone without satisfaction of everyone”

I want to be clear here that I am *not* talking about altruism here. I am not talking about being generous with others. I am talking about my own, individual, personal satisfaction which I can only attain through the work of another. If that is true, how can I - I ask - hope to stimulate, facilitate, excite the work of someone else if I am working to keep her in poverty? Now, treating someone as a Prince or a King or a Queen: that is a start. And by the way, this is exactly the way you are treated by a two years old. If I think about the welcome I am going to receive at the end of this trip from my two years old daughter, I really feel like a king. There is no red carpet that can compare with it!

On this, let me conclude with some words from Freud. In “Society and its Discontents” he says

“the pleasure principle establishes the aim and scope of human existence”

Given this, it becomes straightforward that if I produce poverty for me, I am also producing poverty for the other and for the entire Universe. Or vice versa: If I produce poverty for the other and the entire humanity, I also produce poverty for me. Profit can only be shared; a successful relationship, a genuine rapport can only be *shared profit* (benefit, good, satisfaction).