Narcissism: Reflections

Maria Takolander

Deakin University

‘My language is the sum total of myself.

— Charles S. Peirce, Collected Papers, vol. 5

‘A birth certificate tells me that I was born. I repudiate this certificate: I am not a poet, but a poem. A poem that is being written, even if it looks like a subject.’


‘He fell in love with an insubstantial hope, mistaking a mere shadow for a real body.’

— Ovid, ‘Narcissus by the Pool’, Metamorphoses

The human condition: word-full and narcissistic.

*

When I write, I reach for the words that make up my soul, that doppelgänger of language, that reflection of myself that is myself, that well of beauty and terror.

*

My niece, Charlie, found an imaginary friend when she found language. Now, five years old, she hears footsteps on the stairs at night that keep her from sleep. Already she is haunted by the ghost of herself.

*

Like the Surrealists, I engage in automatic writing, word association, finding metaphors that reveal the otherness of all the words that make up myself: words that always mean something other than what they seem to mean; words that reveal the interconnectedness of everything. That’s where I begin. Like God, like Narcissus, like everyone, I see the world in my own image.

*

Before the reflection, there is desire, but there is also fear. Lacan argued that ‘metaphor occurs at the precise point at which sense emerges from non-sense, that is, at the frontier’ (2001: 175). That frontier of metaphor, analogy and simile is both dangerous and exquisite. I never know what I’ll find there.

Some of what I have found there is collected in my chapbook of poems, Narcissism (2005), which has occasioned these thoughts and from which the following poem comes.

*
There can be no need for reflection.

Quid pro quo.
This is the matrix of reason.

Such things can be seen here:
A white that’s not the moon’s;

Glass at its most pure;
Air that shines like tiles;
The frisson of space;
The shock of containment;
The taxidermy of colour
And shapes;

This birth-less red;
Its illusion of revolting.

Sex and violence are futile.
Fingernails are hard with all of human secrets.

(Click, click.)
Be warned: this fragrance shatters teeth.

* *

When I write, I reach into the mirror for something I cannot see, but it’s something I know I’ll recognize when I claw it up through the silver. I’m fishing for the feeling that makes me catch myself. When I do that, it feels true; it feels right.

I want to effect the reader like that, too. A narcissist reaching into myself, I simultaneously need to be reaching out to you, if only to hear an echo I can reject with a violence that is real. Narcissus, answered by Echo, scorned her: "I would die before I would have you touch me!" (Ovid 1983: 84). Thom Yorke of Radiohead sings with a beautiful vindictiveness: ‘we hope that you choke, that you choke.’ (1997)

* *

In ‘Borges and I’, a work of narcissism and word-play in which the ‘real’ writer separates himself from his writing persona, Jorge Luis Borges writes that he recognizes himself less in his own words than in the music and words of others (1996 (1960):186). I feel that way about the oeuvres of Borges, Radiohead, and Stanley Kubrick, which operate with such intensity, communicating on an intangible, dream-like level, bringing the otherness at the heart of us into being, shocking the soul into recognizing its irrationality.

I have discovered a particular affinity with the work of Kubrick, finding my precursors in retrospect. As Borges argues in ‘Kafka and his precursors’, chronology and identity in such matters becomes irrelevant: ‘every writer creates his own precursors.’ (1996 (1952): 87) The recognition that leads to meaning is paramount.

* *

Kubrick recognized the dream-like state that viewers inhabit when they watch films, and he aimed to communicate with them in that condition. He said of A Clockwork Orange (1971): ‘the film communicates on a subconscious level, and the audience responds to the basic shape of the story on a subconscious level, as it responds to a dream.’ (qu. Weinraub 1972) Alex, so viscerally abhorrent, Kubrick suggested, represents the id.

* *

Freud attributed the uncanny effect of identification or haunting that art can induce in its audience to a subliminal recognition of repressed urges being represented in the work. He famously explained away, for example, the effect of Hamlet in terms of the way it whispers to the Oedipus Complex of its audience.

According to Freud, literature is dangerous for both the writer and the reader living in civilization, encouraging a regression into infantile narcissism, into memory, producing symptoms in its audiences similar to those of childhood or neurosis.

*
The Surrealists reclaimed art and its effects from Freudian psychoanalysis, celebrating the retrograde, the forbidden, the infantile. Think of the coprophilic Dali, playing with his own shit. Perhaps Freud was right. However, it’s hard to reconcile his profane vision with that of the Romantics who viewed artists as divinely inspired. Mark Roche, following in their footsteps, refers to the aesthetic experience of haunting as ‘divine possession’ (2004: 81-2), with the sacred representing something other and true: a much more flattering view.

* 

Because of Kubrick’s self-conscious agenda, his films tend to be metafictional, which further intensifies the haunting of the viewer, as the boundaries between self and narrative collapse further. In The Shining (1980), for example, Jack Torrance’s experience of possession by the ghosts in the hotel is mirrored by our own possession by the ghosts on the screen.

What does this haunting, effected by music, film and literature, reveal about the permeability of our subjectivities? Does it manifest a repressed truth about the ghostly nature of our souls?

* 

The effect of literature, music or film, as Derek Attridge argues (focusing on literature alone), cannot be easily explained: ‘in attempting to specify what the singularity of literature consists in, we cannot proceed wholly in accordance with the norms of logical reasoning or philosophical discussion.’ (2004: 24)

This makes sense if we consider art, as Attridge does, as a process involving the other coming into being within the self. The other is ‘that which beckons or commands from the fringes of my mental sphere as I engage in a creative act.’ (2004: 32) The creation of an art work is a response ‘called for by this glimpsed apprehension of otherness as a result of the failure of existing modes of thought and evaluation.’ (33) When this is allowed to come into being, through writing for example, the result is at once haunting and real. Writing, Attridge argues, is ‘a handling of language whereby something we might call “otherness”, or “alterity”, or “the other”, is made, or allowed, to impact upon the existing configurations of an individual’s mental world.’ (19) He characterizes this impact partly in Freudian terms, attributing it to the fact that words consist of certain sounds and shapes [which] … are nexuses of meaning and feeling, and hence deeply rooted in culture, history, and the varieties of human experience. … Works of literature offer many kinds of pleasure, but one aspect of the pleasure that can be called peculiarly literary derives from this staging, this intense but distant playing out of what might be the most intimate, the most strongly felt, constituents of our lives. (108)

* 

Kubrick intuited how language, images and music can be meaningful precisely in this way.

He understood the intimate hold and irrational horror of the word. Think of, for instance, that talismanic word Redrum in The Shining (1980), and that impregnable, black machine, the typewriter, which produces nothing but violent nonsense. Lacan said: ‘speech was given to man to hide his thoughts’. (1953: 11-12) Kafka, in comparison, believed that words could be used as the axe to break the frozen sea within us. However, when Jack uses an axe to break through the frozen heart of things, he is ultimately frozen in turn.

Kubrick understood the primordial power of the image. Consider the drama of red: the blood flowing from the elevator; and the red bathroom in which Jack speaks to his double. Think of the nightmare of symmetry: the hotel corridors with their mirrored doors; and the twin girls, the labyrinth’s minotaurs. As Juhani Pallasmaa argues, ‘Kubrick’s structural fear is built into the architectural setting itself instead of deriving from a succession of frightening events. Architecture serves as a metaphor for the human mind’ (2004: 199-200). Lacan said: ‘I don’t have a conception of the world; I have a style.’ (qu. Brophy 1998: 80) Style, Kubrick similarly recognized, as the organising force, is everything.

Kubrick, too, understood the primitive power of sound. Think of the insect hysteria that accompanies the arrival of the monolith among the humanoids in 2001: A Space Odyssey, and the black silences.

Words, images and sound: all things that come together, too, in poetry.

* 

Kubrick also understood the uncanny, the sources of which Freud identified as the double,
repetition and symmetry. The uncanny, according to Freud, is the anxious experience of sensing those things we have forgotten about ourselves; those things we cannot know about ourselves; those things we do not want to know about ourselves. But it’s an erotic experience, too. The uncanny describes not only a terrible recognition of primal urges but also a carnal awakening to repressed truths — of the soul as a ghost of our own making? — arousing reckless, narcissistic desire.

The anxiety and eroticism, the terror and the beauty, conjured by the forgotten and the repressed is something I’m interested in. I like the uncanny.

The following is another poem from Narcissism.

*  

**Storm**

Dreams don’t happen like this,  
Although we think they should:

The earth giving in, flattening  
To the darkness, the storm

Fattening, blacking like squid.  
It creates its own space,

This petit mal, this little night,  
With a need as vast as that

Of the beginning of time.  
It may be true we don’t deserve this,

Our earthly things reduced  
To shadows we dream

Things from: the firs, the stooks,  
The fence posts — none belong.

They don’t belong.  
Yet we’ve always waked and slept

When the sky says we should,  
Like birds and monkeys,

Abandoning the world  
Evening after evening,

With each noiseless revolution,  
To the secrets of insects and bats.

Each morning we find  
Something changed:

Something added —  
A shift in the soil,

The sibilance of grass.  
After rain, there are the snails,

Startling as hailstones.  
But always less remains.

And we’re left with this hurting,  
As if in the darkness

Or the infant light,  
We might have seen

The ocean as it really is  
Or god.

*  

Harold Brodkey writes: ‘Reading is an intimate act, perhaps more intimate than any other
Attridge describes the process experienced by the reader thus: ‘In performing the work, I am taken through its performance of language’s potency: indeed, I, or the “I” that is engaged with the work, could be said to be performed by it. This performed I is an I in process, undergoing the changes wrought by, and in, the encounter with alterity.’ (2004: 98)

The audience and her world, Attridge argues, is subtly changed by the reading experience. In fact, Attridge writes: ‘when I encounter alterity, I encounter not the other as such (how could I?) but the remolding of the self that brings the other into being as, necessarily, no longer entirely other.’ (24)

The experience of literature is an experience of metamorphosis.

Kubrick, compelled to withdraw A Clockwork Orange from screenings after threats to his family, was shown that art is more than a surreal game. Art has real effects on people and their worlds. The soul, after all, is rooted in the body, which is rooted in society.

Artists themselves, as Freud recognized, are subject to the unsettling symptoms they try to inspire. Mallarme wrote: ‘I have been afflicted by some highly disturbing symptoms caused by the mere act of writing.’ (qu. Brophy 1998: 202) The act of writing isn’t real to me if I’m not afflicted in those ways; if I’m not changed.

We like to write romantically about the writing process. It makes sense. Writing is a romantic endeavour. It comes from a love of our self, a wish to commune with our self, a desire to become one with our self. It comes from the fervour of knowing that we will fail.

Narcissus lamented: ‘I am in love, and see my loved one, but that form which I see and love, I cannot reach … Whoever you are, come out to me! Oh boy beyond compare, why do you elude me? Where do you go, when I try to reach you?’ (Ovid 1983: 86)

In popular culture, poems often appear as riddles in a mystery, holding the secret to dark truths and dark crimes. In an episode in the final series of Buffy, The Vampire Slayer, the gang investigates poems written by a girl who has self-prophesied her early death. The poems resist decoding, the girl cannot be saved, and she is ultimately co-opted by the evil forces of the underworld. Dorothy Porter plays with similar ideas in The Monkey’s Mask (1994), in which the poems left by a murder victim, who is killed partaking in consensual strangulation during sex, similarly offer unhelpful clues to the crime.

Freudian psychoanalysis, as Kevin Brophy suggests, mixed literature and darkness, presenting itself as saving humankind from the irrational, erotic and evil forces inherent in literature and the mind. Freudian psychoanalysis, as Brophy puts it, ‘exposes literature’s hidden source as the filthy, murderous impulses of incestuous children — a Bluebeard’s room of decomposing bodies.’ (1998: 103) A regressive, neurotic practice, literature must be resisted.

Roche represents a radically different and idealistic side to the story: ‘the lover of literature is enraptured — enthusiastic for the experience of beauty and its transferability to life.’ (2004: 81) If Roche, like Narcissus, admits to being enraptured, it is because the narcissistic practices of artistic creation and consumption do offer exciting possibilities for self-metamorphoses. As Attridge confesses, when he is writing, ‘I sense that I am pushing at the limits of what I have hitherto been able to think.’ (2004: 18) Literature, Attridge suggests, is ‘an event which opens new possibilities of meaning and feeling.’ (59) There is something life-affirming about that kind of open-endedness.

When Narcissus was born, a prophet foretold that he would live only ‘if he does not come to know himself.’. (Ovid 1983: 83).


REFERENCES

*Quotations of Borges are my translations.*


