

Dalí and the Myth of Narcissus

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Of all the extant versions of the myth of Narcissus, the best known is that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, according to which Narcissus is the son of the nymph Leiriope and the river god Cephissus. Upon his birth, the diviner Thiresius makes a prediction to his mother that her son would have a long life "if he does not get to know himself".

In his youth, Narcissus's beauty made him an object of desire for many young people of both sexes, but he rejected them all. Among his pretenders, the nymph Echo fell head over heels in love, but he paid no attention to her, and she, in desperation, withdrew to a solitary place in which nothing remained of her but her voice.

Nemesis, taking up the plea of one of his victims, managed one hot day when they were strolling in a spot where there was a fountain, to get Narcissus to bend down to drink and fall in love with the image he saw reflected in it — his own image. Unable to achieve that, Narcissus allows himself to die, still bending down over his own image. There arose at the scene of his death the flower that bears his name, the narcissus.

"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."

This is the description that Ovid gave of this solitary and idyllic spot, a virtually unspoiled place difficult of access, and one that immediately brings to mind the geological nature of Cap de Creus point on the northernmost coastline of Catalonia. In the photo we present, currently kept at the Centre for Dalinian Studies and most probably taken by Gala herself (we still have the negative from the period) we can see the painter bending down over a pool at the point known as Punta dels Tres Frares at Galladera bay, between Cap de Creus and El Port de la Selva, a place that can only be reached by sea and one of the few such fully preserved places along the Catalan coastline.

If we look closely at the landscape in Salvador Dalí's painting *The Metamorphosis of Narcissus*, we will be able to recognise the typical texture of the Cap de Creus rocks, so heavily present in the Dalinian oeuvre.

In Paris in 1937 Dalí published with Éditions Surréalistes a poem bearing the same title as the painting, declaring — as a kind of educational counsel left to us by the painter — that it should be read while contemplating the painting.

According to Dalí, these were the first poem and painting to emerge in their entirety through application of his paranoid-critical method. And this device is particularly significant if we analyse the theme of Narcissus, bearing in mind that this myth has lain at the origin of an extensive iconography in painting and sculpture and in literary texts. To cite only a few, we have the Narcissus by Caravaggio, the Narcissus at the Tintoretto fountain, Narcissus with Echo from a Pompeian painting, and, among the texts, the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, and on down to André Gide (the painter numbered among the books in his library the *Traité du Narcisse*) or Paul Valéry.

In the text, Dalí recommended that the painting be contemplated in a state of “distracted fixation”, under the influence of which Narcissus would gradually disappear. The figure emerges at the left of the painting, his vague outlines reflected in the water, his head resting on his knee, probably bending down to die; to one side, the double image with the transformation of Narcissus into a hand holding an egg from which the flower of the same name would emerge. Between these two images can be seen a group of people, whom the painter calls in his text the “heterosexuals” and who he tells us are made up of a Hindu, a Catalan, a German, a Russian, an American, a Swedish woman and an English woman, they being pretenders of both sexes who approach Narcissus and whom he rejects systematically.

When the poem comes to an end, with the death of Narcissus according to Ovid’s version and his transformation into a flower, in Dalí’s version love appears in the form of Gala, saving him from that gloomy fate. It is in the final stanza of the poem that there occurs the metamorphosis referred to in the work’s title:

“When that head splits
When that head bursts
When the head shatters in pieces
It will be the flower,
The new Narcissus,
Gala,
My narcissus.”

In the painting the artist reveals the human drama of love, death and the transformation known in psychoanalysis as “narcissism”. In his *Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Sigmund Freud defines the term as “the displacement of an individual’s libido towards that individual’s own body, towards the ‘ego’ of the subject.”

In July 1938, Dalí travelled to London to converse with Freud, and in the course of the visit showed the psychologist his painting. Freud later remarked: “Until today I had tended to think that the surrealists, who would appear to have chosen me as their patron saint, were completely mad. But this wild-eyed young Spaniard, with his undoubted technical mastery, prompted me to a different opinion. Indeed, it would be most interesting to explore analytically the growth of a work like this ...”

In this oil painting Salvador Dalí linked the classical tradition of Greek mythology with the latest investigations of science, in this case psychoanalysis, doing so by recourse to the myth of Narcissus, so charged with significance for an artist constantly seeking to construct his image.



Salvador Dalí



Salvador Dalí
The Metamorphosis of Narcissus, 1937