COLLECTION

The Essentials of Applied Psychology

Encyclopedia of the Narcissistic Abuser



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The Essentials of Applied Psychology
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Chapter 1 — Narcissus in mythology

Introduction: why begin with a myth?

Any encyclopedia devoted to the “narcissistic abuser” — an expression coined by the French psychoanalyst Paul-Claude Racamier (1986) and popularized by Marie-France Hirigoyen (1998) — must confront an initial paradox: the central word of its object, narcissistic, comes neither from medicine nor from experimental psychology, but from a poetic narrative two millennia old. Before it was a diagnostic criterion in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013) or a category of everyday language, narcissism was a myth. Understanding this myth is not a scholarly detour: it means grasping the symbolic matrix of which all later usages — clinical, philosophical, popular — are the heirs, sometimes faithful, sometimes unfaithful.

> *Key point.* The myth of Narcissus does not describe a man who loves himself too much: it describes a being incapable of relationship*, imprisoned by an image that can give him nothing back. This nuance, present from Ovid onward, will lie at the heart of modern clinical conceptualizations of pathological narcissism.*

Let us state this book's editorial position at the outset: the “narcissistic abuser” of contemporary French-language discourse is not a diagnostic category recognized by the international nosographies. The DSM-5 describes a Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD), defined by nine criteria including a grandiose sense of self-importance, an excessive need for admiration and a lack of empathy (APA, 2013). The “narcissistic abuser,” for its part, is a French psychoanalytic concept (Racamier, 1986, 1992) that has become a popular notion designating a destructive relational mode. Throughout this volume, we will rigorously distinguish these two registers — the clinical and the popular — whose conflation is one of the main sources of misunderstanding in the popular literature (Garrec, 2026c). But both descend from the same founding narrative, which must now be reread attentively.

1.1 Ovid: the canonical narrative of the Metamorphoses

1.1.1 Context and structure of the narrative

It is to the Latin poet Ovid (43 BCE – 17/18 CE) that we owe the fullest and most influential version of the myth. It appears in Book III of the Metamorphoses (ll. 339–510), a vast epic poem completed around the year 8 CE (Ovid, trans. 1992). The Ovidian narrative articulates two destinies: that of the nymph Echo and that of the young Narcissus. This articulation is crucial — modern rewritings that isolate Narcissus from his missed interlocutor lose half the meaning of the myth.

The narrative opens with a prophecy. Asked about the destiny of the newborn Narcissus, son of the river Cephissus and the nymph Liriope, the seer Tiresias replies that the child will live to old age "if he does not know himself" (si se non noverit, Ovid, trans. 1992, III, l. 348). This deliberate reversal of the Delphic maxim "know thyself" signals from the outset that the myth deals with a pathological relation to self-knowledge: there is a way of seeing oneself that destroys, a capture by one's own image that forbids life.

1.1.2 Echo: speech amputated

Narcissus, having reached his sixteenth year, possesses a beauty that arouses the desire of "many young men and many young women"; yet "in that tender body there dwelt a pride so hard that neither young men nor young women could touch him" (Ovid, trans. 1992, III, ll. 353–355). Enter Echo, a nymph punished by Juno: for having detained the goddess with her chatter during Jupiter's infidelities, she is condemned to be unable to speak first, or to keep silent when spoken to — she can only repeat the last words she has heard.

The encounter scene is one of the poem's high points. Echo, smitten, follows Narcissus through the woods without being able to approach him. When the young man, separated from his companions, calls out “Is anyone here?”, she can only answer “here.” To Narcissus's “Come!” his own “come” is sent back. The dialogue culminates in a tragic misunderstanding: “I would die before I would have you touch me,” Narcissus cries; “have you touch me,” Echo answers, throwing herself toward him with open arms. Rebuffed and humiliated, she withdraws into the caves and wastes away with grief until her body vanishes: nothing remains of her but a voice and bones turned to stone (Ovid, trans. 1992, III, ll. 379–401).

> *Key definition — Echo as a figure of the victim of coercive control.* In the contemporary psychodynamic reading, Echo prefigures the position of the person caught in a relationship of coercive control: deprived of speech of her own, reduced to returning the other's words, progressively emptied of her substance to the point of erasure. This reading is a symbolic interpretation*, not an empirical datum; but it sheds remarkable light on modern clinical descriptions of the erosion of victims' identity (Hirigoyen, 1998; Garrec, 2026b).*

The almost clinical precision of Ovid's device deserves emphasis. Echo is not simply silent: she speaks, but her speech is never initiated by her. She can exist in language only in second position, in response, as a sonic reflection. Contemporary work on relational coercive control describes an analogous process: the victim, at the end of the phases of idealization, isolation, and destabilization, no longer expresses her own needs but anticipates and reformulates those of the abuser (Hirigoyen, 1998; Dutton & Painter, 1993). The myth condenses into a single image — the nymph become pure echo — what the psychology of trauma will describe as loss of agency.

1.1.3 The curse and the spring

Narcissus having rebuffed all his suitors, one of them raises his hands to heaven: “So may he himself love, and not gain the thing he loves!” (Ovid, trans. 1992, III, l. 405). Nemesis, goddess of just retribution, grants the prayer. The punishment is therefore not self-love as such: it is love impossible to consummate, the sentence of desiring without ever attaining. An essential nuance, often lost in the ordinary uses of the term “narcissistic.”

Exhausted by the hunt, Narcissus lies down beside a spring “with silvery, shining waters, which neither shepherds nor goats had troubled” (Ovid, trans. 1992, III, ll. 407–410). Leaning down to drink, he catches sight of his reflection and falls in love with it instantly — without knowing, at first, that it is himself he is contemplating: “Unknowingly he desires himself; he who approves is himself approved; while he seeks, he is sought” (III, ll. 425–426). Ovid multiplies mirror-formulations, the very syntax of the poem miming the specular structure of the scene.

The decisive moment comes when Narcissus understands: “Iste ego sum!” — “That one is myself!” (III, l. 463). Contrary to received opinion, Ovid's Narcissus is not deceived to the very end: he attains recognition of the illusion, and it is precisely this lucidity that kills him. Knowing that the object of his love is nothing but himself, he can neither renounce it nor possess it. He wastes away at the water's edge, consumed by an inner fire, while Echo, invisible, repeats his final laments — down to the last, redoubled “Farewell.” In the place of his body, nothing is found but a flower with a saffron heart surrounded by white petals: the narcissus (III, ll. 509–510).

1.2 Pausanias: the rationalized version

The Greek geographer Pausanias (2nd century AD — not the 9th, an error sometimes encountered in the secondary literature), in his Periegesis or Description of Greece (IX, 31, 7–9), reports the myth as a skeptical rationalist: he judges it "absurd" that a young man of an age to love should be unable to distinguish a man from his reflection (Pausanias, trans. 1998). He then transmits a less well-known variant: Narcissus is said to have had a twin sister, perfectly like him, whom he loved and who died. Inconsolable, he took to contemplating his own reflection in the spring, knowing that he saw himself there, but seeking in it the image of the departed — "some relief for his love" (IX, 31, 8).

This version radically displaces the meaning of the myth: the reflection is no longer the trap of self-capture, but a substitute for impossible mourning. Narcissus does not love himself; he loves, through himself, another who is lost. Some psychodynamic authors have seen in it a prefiguration of the theories linking pathological narcissism to an early object wound — the hypothesis, developed in the twentieth century by Kohut (1971) and Kernberg (1975), that narcissistic grandiosity compensates for a primitive relational deficiency. Here again this is a retrospective reading: Pausanias is not doing psychology, he is doing critical mythography. But the coexistence of the two versions, from Antiquity onward, shows that the myth already carried in germ its two modern interpretations: narcissism as excess of self-love (the popularized Ovidian reading) and narcissism as a defect of being, as a desperate attempt to fill a void (the contemporary clinical reading).

1.3 Symbolic analysis: the spring, the reflection, the impossible relation

1.3.1 The spring as mirror

The Ovidian spring is not just any mirror. Ovid insists: it is virgin, untouched, of absolute purity. The water-mirror is a living and unstable mirror — a single tear from Narcissus suffices for the image to blur and "flee" (III, ll. 475–476). The reflection is thus at once perfect and infinitely fragile: any attempt at contact destroys it. Here we have what might be called the proto-definition of narcissism: a relation to an ideal image of oneself that tolerates no testing against reality. The modern clinical literature on NPD will describe this same mechanism under the terms grandiose self and narcissistic vulnerability: the grandiose image collapses at the slightest contact with criticism, limitation, frustration (Ronningstam, 2005; Pincus & Lukowitsky, 2010).

1.3.2 The reflection as substitute for the other

Narcissus's tragedy is not that he looks at himself: it is that he takes his reflection for another — and then, once the illusion has dissipated, prefers the image to any real relationship. This point structures the relational reading of the myth: Narcissus is surrounded by real beings who love him (Echo, the suitors), and he systematically prefers to them an image that can give him nothing. Racamier (1986, 1992) will make this relational economy the core of his "narcissistic perversion": the narcissistic abuser does not invest in others as subjects but as image-supports, utilitarian and interchangeable — what Racamier calls "decorporation," the expulsion outside the self of conflict and psychic suffering at another's expense (Garrec, 2026c). Myth and concept answer one another: in both cases, the other exists only as a reflecting surface.

1.3.3 The Narcissus–Echo pair: matrix of the coercive-control relationship