# Narcissism and Its Discontents

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# Contents

# Introduction

I shall begin this book with a warning: there is little in the following pages to affirm the presentation of the narcissist as found in the contemporary clinical literature or among the array of self-help books dedicated to healing from narcissistic relationships. The narcissist that we shall consider here will not be reduced to a lack of empathy, or an inflated sense of entitlement, nor typified by a destructive grandiosity, or an exploitative approach to interpersonal relationships. Rather we shall encounter a figure whose *turning away* extends a call to others, and who finds in the vulnerabilities of the self the makings of the social scene. As a consideration of the desirability of narcissism – beyond the usual concessions to its necessity or utility – this book returns us to the mythic scene of the poolside where, lying enraptured by the enigmas of reflection, Narcissus draws a crowd.

Sigmund Freud's treatment of narcissism, in his seminal paper of 1914, 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (hereafter 1914a), and in his wider psychoanalytic writings, contributes to the enduring interest that the figure of Narcissus holds for both psychoanalytic and social theory. There is, it would seem, a longstanding discursive commitment to interrupting Narcissus' gaze of self-love and subjecting it to various critical treatments. For some, Narcissus stands as a figure of rebuke, perhaps on the grounds of his egoistic withdrawal from the world, or his constitutional disavowal of the other (Echo), or for his incapacity to transcend the temporal order of the present, or for his shorthand status as vanity, exhibitionism, and psychological immaturity. For others, Narcissus stands as an ethical exemplar, perhaps on the grounds of his embodiment of the ideals of beauty and contemplation, or for his intimate and equitable relationship with nature, or for his achievement of integral peace and fulfilment, or for his gesturing to modes of

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relationality beyond the proprietorial. Over the course of this book we shall see how the eponymous hero – or, indeed, anti-hero – represents an engagement with the liminal spaces of identity that are the subject of psychosocial enquiry: most notably the boundaries between reality and fantasy, intimacy and sociability, the public and the private, and the personal and the political. Following Narcissus' lead, we shall approach these contested categories by testing the difference between the self and the world which Leo Bersani has identified as the 'obsessive concern' of psychoanalysis (2010b, 101).

Such is the ubiquity of the Narcissus myth in the cultural imagination of the Western world that the briefest of sketches will serve here to remind us of its appeal. Narcissus was a figure of youth and beauty who spurned the attentions and advances of many lovers, and about whom it was prophesised that life would be long 'provided that he never knows himself' (Graves, 286). The would-be-lover who is mute witness to Narcissus' demise is Echo. Echo suffers her own afflictions and is unable to be known to Narcissus. In time, the gods avenged the befallen suitors of Narcissus and condemned him to fall in love without the possibility of love's consummation. Thirst-stricken and exhausted one day, Narcissus comes upon an inviting pool where he sees, as he bends to drink, an image of beauty . . .

The ellipsis in my narration signals what I take to be the principal point of argument in the readings of narcissism that we shall be exploring below. What is Narcissus' mode of engagement with the image with which he is besotted; what does he see when he looks into the pool's surface?[1] We shall see, in particular in Chapter 1, considerable variance when accounting for *how* exactly Narcissus appropriates – or misappropriates – the image of his seduction, and what the consequences of this act are for understanding the subject's individuation from his environment. For psychoanalysis, the myth of Narcissus becomes the myth of the origin which, broadly conceived, leads to three competing geneses: in the beginning was the monad; in the beginning was the harmonious relation; in the beginning was the illusion. I shall begin to set out my orientation to the third of these theses.

A sure reason why theories of narcissism have remained contested sites of interest in psychoanalytic theory (and in social thought), is that they are bound up with the problem of the origin where what is at stake is nothing less than the conceptualisation of a primary state of being from which the individual emerges into the world. Because the narrative tales of individuation, differentiation, the formation of the self–other relation and so on, all follow from this first picture, we can

say that the problem of the origin is also, always, the problem of analogy. Freud observes that 'analogies [...] decide nothing, but they can make one feel more at home' (1933, 72). '[A] bird's egg with its food supply enclosed in its shell', and 'the body of an amoeba [and] the pseudopodia which it puts out', are two such analogies, offered by Freud to convey the most primitive image of the subject's relation to his environment (1911a, 219; 1914a, 75). But as we shall see, Freud's theory of primary narcissism has proved a difficult starting point to follow. In my reading of Freud's account, there are two ideas that I take as central to his thought and which go on to preserve the value of his reading of narcissism for psychoanalytic and cultural discourse. The first is that the narcissistic moment – both the primary 'egg' or 'amoeba' moment, *and* the moment of narcissism's many secondary instantiations – describes a relation with an environment. A principal mis-reading of Freud's theory is that primary narcissism disregards the environmental relation and thus presents an untenable image of the infant as a closed psychical system (see Chapter 1). I contend that the psychical system of the infant in a state of primary narcissism is already taken by Freud to be embedded in an environment of care, most obviously represented by the mother or primary care-giver. Crucially, however, we shall see that this environment is marked by an essential disequilibrium; it is the condition of birth – or perhaps the condition of conception – to be subject to the unequal power relations of the social environment. The second point of stress, then, in my reading of Freud's account, derives from this element of disequilibrium. It is precisely because the environment is unequal that the subject is compelled to produce the fantasy of self-sufficiency, or the illusion of non-relationality. Narcissistic self-sufficiency, like its dialectical counterpart the oceanic feeling of oneness, may be for Freud only another of those illusions which we have created 'to bear the burden of existence' (1920a, 45).[2] We shall see that the extent to which the various expressions of narcissism are understood as expressions of fantasy and illusion, comprises a further area of contestation among the readings and revisions of Freud's theory.

In giving the environment a critical place in my reading of narcissism, I affirm the direction of much psychoanalytic thought in the second half of the twentieth century that has sought to situate the task of individuation in relational terms. However, I also endorse Freud's image of fantasised self-sufficiency as that which underwrites the negotiation of this task and accounts for the structure of repetition that will be central to our understanding of narcissism on both the psychic and cultural

registers. In taking these two points of stress – narcissism as a primary relation within an uneven environment, and narcissism as an originary and formative illusion of self-sufficiency – and showing how they stand in perpetual tension with each other, I shall argue that rather than leading to an inevitable state of paralysis or stasis, this narcissistic tension safeguards the dynamic grounds for subject-formation. A comparative illustration of my intervention may be helpful here.

In her influential study of how the dynamics of differentiation and domination become organised along gender lines, Jessica Benjamin asserts that the 'classic' psychoanalytic perspective overlooks 'the paradoxical balance between recognition of the other and the assertion of the self' that is the groundwork of differentiation (1988, 46). For Benjamin the paradox of recognition where, 'at the very moment of realising our own independence, we are dependent upon another to recognise it', comprises the 'essential tension' which is experienced from the very first (33). Thus, Benjamin gives us a picture of a primary complexity characterised by the desire for mutual recognition between subjects. Freud, like Hegel, she explains, holds that 'the breakdown of [this] essential tension is inevitable [because] the hypothetical self [...] does not *want* to recognise the other, does not perceive him as a person just like himself. He gives up omnipotence only when he has no other choice' (53). Benjamin is correct to note that for Freud the desire for self-sufficiency persists as the singular aim of happiness, and it is central to her thesis to supplement such a power-hungry conception of the infant with an acknowledgement of the 'desire to be recognised [by another] as a subject' (101). Importantly, however, according to the reading of narcissism that I shall put forward in the following chapters, it is the *illusion* of self-sufficiency that the Freudian infant is asked to give up, and which is side-lined in Benjamin's account. Over the course of this book we shall see how the emphasis that Freud places on self-sufficiency as the goal of happiness can only be thwarted; the desire to re-capture the narcissistic state remains illusory precisely because the 'originary' experience is to be understood as a retroactively produced fiction. Importantly though, it is only through giving up this fictional state of being (though never with complete success) that the kind of 'essential tension' of mutuality that Benjamin posits as *primary*, is, in the Freudian schema, positioned as the optimum, and most difficult, cultural achievement. Benjamin's point of critique is my point of departure. When she explains that ('classic') psychoanalysis 'did not see differentiation as a balance, but as a process of disentanglement', I read the Narcissus myth to demonstrate how a precarious and perilous project of self-disentanglement persistently thwarts

the ideals of social reciprocity (46). Freud's mode of underscoring this difficulty is to foreground the seductions of self-sufficiency – *if I were truly self-sufficient I would be spared the trials of mutual recognition*. In this way we can detect in Freud's account of primary narcissism, as a necessary though fictive state, a productive double structure where narcissism provides the grounds for establishing the ontological priority of illusion and fantasy, and where narcissism is proposed as the necessary condition for the achievement of sociability – even when this achievement forever falls short of ideal differentiation and recognition of the other. In light of this, we shall proceed on the understanding that all narcissistic subjects are, enduringly, *subjects-in-formation*.

The bearing that the concept of narcissism has within Freud's work resonates beyond the ontogenetic tale of development. Among the many different guises that narcissism adopts we shall encounter the productive and interlocking narcissisms of the infant–parent gaze, the charming narcissism of the child, the sociability of the narcissistic coquette, and the creaturely narcissism of particular animals. By exploring Freud's appreciation of the various narcissists that he consults with, we shall see how, ultimately, he redeems narcissism from a negative appraisal. This said, it would not do to present Freud as an indiscriminate champion of the narcissist. The target that Freud considered most necessary to challenge was that of man's overvaluation of his standing in the universe. He spells this out most clearly in his theory of 'the three blows', in which he places his own contribution to research in the field of psychology alongside two other significant attacks on man's naive self-love, namely the Copernican revolution in astronomy, and the force of Darwinian evolutionary theory. Once man has been knocked from the top of the cosmic hierarchy, and then confronted by his animal ancestry, Freud delivers the third blow to his narcissism by revealing to 'the ego that it is not even master in its own house' (1917a, 285). This narrative of man's diminishing narcissism finds a parallel expression in Freud's discussions of the origins of religion where he gives an account of man's historical evolution and suggests an incongruity between forms of 'magical' thinking and the prevailing scientific *Weltanschauung* (world-view).

> At the animistic stage men ascribe omnipotence to *themselves*. At the religious stage they transfer it to the gods but do not seriously abandon it themselves, for they reserve the power of influencing the gods in a variety of ways according to their wishes. The scientific view of the universe no longer affords any room for human omnipotence;

men have acknowledged their smallness and submitted resignedly to death and to the other necessities of nature. (1913, 88)

Alongside this conviction that mankind's narcissistic omnipotence cannot be sustained within a scientific world-view we are obliged to acknowledge an alternative account that would test Freud's rationalist description of modern man's self-positioning. Both the neuroses that Freud attended to on the couch, and the colossal cultural changes of the early twentieth century that impacted on his life and thought, can be seen as denials of mankind's 'smallness' and finitude. Hence, when Freud insists that man's resignation to the 'necessities of nature' is the only appropriate posture (or level of maturity) for the current 'stage' of human evolution, when he informs us that delusions of omnipotence would be wholly incompatible with a modern and scientific civilisation, what we hear is his most profound cultural fantasy. Because, of course, what psychoanalysis demonstrates, perhaps more so than anything else, is narcissism's altogether intractable character.

Over the course of what follows, my treatment of narcissism will move between numerous different registers – the clinical, cultural, metapsychological and socio-political. Psychoanalysis is no stranger to the methodological difficulties to be negotiated on such varied terrain; indeed, Freud advises that we proceed with caution:

I would not say that an attempt [...] to carry psycho-analysis over to the cultural community was absurd or doomed to be fruitless. But we should have to be very cautious and not forget that, after all, we are only dealing with analogies and that it is dangerous, not only with men but also with concepts, to tear them from the sphere in which they have originated and been evolved. (1930, 144)

If a desire to deal with something more substantial than 'analogies' is expressed in this quotation, then we should note that elsewhere Freud readily accepts that the 'determination of the original state of things [...] invariably remains a matter of construction' (1913, 102n). This applies to the metapsychological project, just as it is does for the analysand on the couch; which is to say, most broadly, that each distinct register of enquiry shares a common reliance upon an origin myth. Freud practised his theory in a therapeutic context; and irrespective of whether he confessed to becoming a therapist 'against [his] will', the influence of the consulting room on his thought should not be underestimated (1896, 232). The dynamics of the clinical encounter

will be borne in mind throughout this book. The analyst is subject to the demands of tact, where tact, like certain other words that we shall encounter in later chapters – 'charm' and 'sociability', for example – signifies something added to mere intellectual mastery. Tact, which is so integral to the whole question of the seductions of psycho-analysis – of touching and knowing when not to touch – is brought to bear on all aspects of the analytic exchange: questions of timeliness, offering interpretations, managing the transference, and so on. One of the questions of tact that the analyst must concern herself with is, *at what pace is it appropriate to ask the patient to give up her symptoms?* That the weight of this question, concerning the obduracy of fantasy, is not confined to the consulting room, allows Freud to be positioned as a kind of 'physician to society' (Gay, 63). In his theoretical writings on culture, we shall see Freud to be most qualified in demonstrating the tall-order of civilisation because of his tactful role as witness to its microcosmic re-enactment on the couch.

Before setting out the structure of the book's argument, let us briefly consider the place of fantasy in the theoretical field, and the value of narcissism for defining this place. One of the first texts in which we find mention of narcissism in Freud's work is his famous 1911 paper on Judge Schreber where he attributes his subject's paranoia to what he terms a 'fixation' at the narcissistic stage of development (1911b, 62). That a vast literature has been inspired by the Judge's authorial charisma and the specific intricacies of Freud's engagement with the mechanism of paranoia, is a fate Freud himself predicted when, in a concluding comment, he framed the case's posterity in the following terms:

> It remains for the future to decide whether there is more delusion in my theory than I should like to admit, or whether there is more truth in Schreber's delusion than other people are as yet prepared to believe. (1911b, 79)

Prior to this point in the text, the reader has had the opportunity to enjoy the stylistic mirroring at work in Doctor Freud's systematic exegesis of Judge Schreber's systematic delusions. Now, however, the reader is tantalised by the further thought that these two writers have more than a style in common, or rather that their shared style indicates a common problem of origin. Is it any accident that when confronted with the writings of a supreme narcissist Freud feels compelled to admit an affinity (that narcissism begets narcissism would become a derivative tenet of his theory, after all)? Freud, we see, indulges in the paranoid

speculation that his theory may be as deluded as Schreber's delusions are true. Of course we could put this down as a fine example of Freud's rhetorical panache, but what is more interesting to consider is how his diagnosis of narcissistic fantasy in Schreber's writing reflects back upon his own theory-building ambition. As well as being located in the pathological subject and therefore subjected to Freud's theorising, narcissism poses a question to the theorist concerning the 'construction' of his theory. Narcissism is, in other words, deeply metapsychological (or meta-theoretical) insofar as it brings theory into reflection with itself. Most powerfully it reveals the possibility that metapsychology relies upon a fantasy-construction for its foundation. In a later work, Freud memorably indicates the place of fantasy in theory when addressing himself to a metapsychological knot concerning the instincts:

> If we are asked by what methods and means this result [a 'taming' of the instinct] is achieved, it is not easy to find an answer. We can only say: 'So muss denn doch die Hexe dran!'['We must call the Witch to our help after all!'] – the Witch Meta-psychology. Without metapsychological speculation and theorizing – *I had almost said 'phantasying'* – we shall not get another step forward. (1937, 225 my emphasis)

Not another step forward without going back to the fantasy of metapsychological beginnings. The author of this book, dedicated to returning to the often opaque terrain of primary narcissism, can only take solace from the thought that speculation and theorising arise from such returns. Although narcissistic fantasy – where the world is me and I am the world – cannot preclude the vicious circularity of delusion, it is nonetheless at the heart of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic that the social world takes place through the fantasy of the 'I'. I suggest that when Freud's theory comes face to face with narcissism, it comes face to face with itself.

## Chapter development

Freud held that his paper 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' displayed all the signs of a difficult labour, an appropriate metaphor no doubt when we consider narcissism's troubled adoption within the broader psychoanalytic community.[3] In Chapter 1 I begin with a reading of Freud's paper of 1914, identify some of its major difficulties, and explore

some of its prominent (mis)readings, with a particular focus on its treatment by the object relations theorist Michael Balint. I then turn to the figure of the mirror in the work of Donald Winnicott and Jacques Lacan to consider how the challenge of conceptualising the subject's initial relation with his primary environment anticipates the ongoing challenges of the subject's acculturation to society. With their different accounts of the infant-narcissist at the mirror, Winnicott and Lacan invite us to engage directly with the Narcissus myth, and to ask how we should understand the eponymous hero's recognition – or misrecognition – of the image with which he is besotted. Here, the mythic prophecy that 'Narcissus will live to a ripe old age, provided that he never knows himself' becomes an important element of our story, putting into question the relation between self-love, self-knowledge and self-possession (Graves, 286). I consider Herbert Marcuse's political reappraisal of the figure of Narcissus and, focussing on the question of the quality of Narcissus' engagement with his image, subject it to a comparative analysis with the Lacanian account of the mirror stage, and the idea of a primary and authentic relationality seen differently in the work of Balint and Winnicott. Ultimately, I offer my own interpretation of Narcissus' moment of self-love that is in keeping with my reading of primary narcissism as a state which enacts all the imaginary seductions of the mirror but also provides an aperture onto society. I make a case for preserving the value of primary narcissism as a 'construction' of a formative illusion underwritten by the fact of the infant's existence in a precarious environment. Taking seriously Judith Butler's call to 'think through [...] primary impressionability and vulnerability with a theory of power and recognition', I return to the force and originality of narcissistic illusion as that which defends the self, and at the same time posits the self in the social world (2004, 45). Once we have considered the paradoxes of an original illusion, we shall be in a position to consider its social efficacy.

Chapter 2, 'Socialising Narcissus via the Case of "Little Hans"', examines the two examples of narcissistic object-choice identified in Freud's 1914 paper that will have a strong bearing on our ongoing discussion of narcissism as a productive social force; namely, that 'a person may love what he himself would like to be', and that 'a person may love someone who was once a part of himself' (1914a, 90). These examples – the ego-ideal, and the narcissism of parenting – allow us to see narcissism's durability in the social field beyond the state of infancy. The subject of parenting, and more specifically the interlocking narcissisms of the parent and child, remain central to the discussion as I offer an

extended reading of Freud's case history of 'Little Hans' (1909). I develop the idea that the child's narcissism is inextricably linked to his 'research instinct' or *Wissbegierde* (the desire to know) such that demarcating the boundaries between the narcissist's self-love and the scientist's 'passionless impartiality' becomes a moot point (1915a, 275). My interpretation of the successes and failures of Hans' treatment recapitulates the double structure that I have identified in Freud's concept of primary narcissism where the essential disequilibrium in the child's given environment of care motivates his narcissistic fantasies of self-sufficiency. Thus, while Freud attributes the success of Hans' case to the 'affectionate care and scientific interest' with which it was administered, we will identify an additional element to Hans' treatment, namely the child's particular resistances to his educative environment (1909, 5). Significantly, Hans' narcissistic obstinacy is not only scientifically rewarding but also establishes the terms for his social endearment.

That narcissism attests to the problem of the origin – and of analogy – is as evident in sociological discourse as it is in psychoanalysis. In Chapter 3, 'On the Narcissism of Nostalgia', I suggest that certain modes of sociological analysis are marked by a nostalgic impulse to return to the primary bonds of community. Accordingly, I designate Ferdinand Tönnies' account of the move from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (civil society) as a scriptural moment in the history of sociology, the influence of which is still discernible in contemporary critiques of mass society. Of particular relevance to the topic of narcissism is Tönnies' emphasis on the social bond and the vision of an original state of intimacy and harmonious relationality that accompanies it. By nominating Tönnies' text as 'scriptural' I mean to suggest that it represents an enduring reference point in sociology's discipline-defining script, where social change is narrated through the poetic lines of the weakening centre: 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold' (W.B. Yeats). Tönnies' is an account that offers an early formulation of this cultural decline. As we shall see in Chapter 4, when the infamous centre can no longer hold, a culture of self-centering, branded as 'narcissistic', vies for attention as the authoritative cultural script. However, in keeping with my prior reading of the value of primary narcissism as a necessary but fictive structure, it will be important to interrogate the inclination of nostalgic sociology towards invoking a developmental moment when something 'real' was lost. By examining the structural affinities between narcissism and nostalgia, I shall demonstrate the power of return and repetition as psychical mechanisms operating within social discourse.

Accepting that '"[N]arcissistic libido" is not just love for the self, but love that covers up a loss', we can anticipate an ironic affinity between nostalgia as a mode of sociological analysis, and narcissism as an object of sociological critique (Frosh, 1991: 70). Which is to suggest that when the nostalgic sociologist critiques *his* culture's narcissism (and the gender assignation is not irrelevant here), by betraying his preoccupation with a lost object, he unwittingly holds up a mirror to his own disposition. The thesis taken forward in Chapter 4 is that the ground between a culture of narcissism (or a so-called therapy culture) and its fierce sociological opponents may be more shared than contested. I place the work of Christopher Lasch, the most influential critic of narcissism, alongside that of Richard Sennett and Alasdair MacIntyre to convey a mode of sociological narration that I term 'critical declinism'. In the broadest terms, Sennett, Lasch and MacIntyre share the conviction that modern society is marked by the decline of cultural resources necessary for a robust public life, and the confusion between the value categories of psychological intimacy and cultural impersonality. Their critical declinism, as I suggest it, refers to a melancholic impulse to mourn the social bonds of community *and* to critique the relational prospects that emerge in their wake. This double aspect is important because it reflects a particular normative orientation in which an active critique of contemporary social reality is sustained via investments in a narrative of decline. My suggestion is that this element of critique is only sanctioned by critical declinism's concern with a loss, irrespective of whether the lost object was 'real'.

For Sennett, narcissism dictates a retreat from 'surface sociability' into a fallaciously conceived 'deeper' life (1993 [1974], 315). We test his claim that modern culture is tyrannically governed by the logic of psychological intimacy, and explore in some detail the opposition he draws between the impersonal principles of play, and the ascetic principles of the narcissistic personality. We then turn to the most (in)famous and influential critic of a culture of narcissism, Christopher Lasch, in whose hands narcissism is transformed into a metaphor for the war-like conditions of the modern social world. I shall focus on Lasch's survey of American cultural life and challenge the conception of the 'new Narcissus' that he puts forward. It will be important to highlight some of the contradictions that reside in Lasch's nostalgia for a cultural authority in what he recognises to be an increasingly pluralistic culture marked by factional politics. Indeed, we shall see that Sennett's and Lasch's interpretation of the rise of 'authenticity politics' – or 'identity politics' – as a further symptom of cultural narcissism, rests on a particular analysis

of the shifting contours of the public and the private spheres. In light of this, there is a clear demand to historically situate the theses under consideration in this chapter. Tied to a distinct moment in the history of (Anglo-American) sociology of the late 1970s and early 1980s, we might ask what this sociological style brings to an analysis of contemporary psychosocial relations beyond the possible pleasures of its critical lamentations? The conflation of identity politics with a politics of narcissism leaves critical declinism open to the charge of patrician retrenchment. That said, and demonstrating that there are indeed modes of relationality and intimate sociability that narratives of decline are ill-equipped to appraise, I am disinclined to reject outright this mode of sociological engagement. What is of value in critical declinism, which we will see to be in contrast with the reflexive sociology of Anthony Giddens, say, is its commitment to *critiquing* the narratives of selfhood that are demarcated by 'therapeutic' modes of modern authority.

One of the enigmas of narcissism concerns how the turn to the self – the illusion of self-sufficiency – can be simultaneously associated with a feeling of unboundedness, or not knowing where the self is in relation to the other. This leads us to consider that the respective narcissistic positions of 'splendid isolation' (the illusion of self-sufficiency) and the 'oceanic feeling' of being one with the world (the illusion of merging) are in dialectic relation.[4] Although they speak to the same boundary confusion between self and other, these positions have often been distinguished along gender lines where unboundedness is related to the metaphysical consolations of femininity, and self-sufficiency to the autonomous masculine subject. When Freud describes the narcissist as the 'purest and truest' female type, we might well raise an eyebrow; indeed, many critics have taken issue with psychoanalysis' unbalanced association of narcissism with the feminine (1914a, 88). It is true that, late in his career, Freud comes to warn the analyst that he may rightly be frightened by the 'rigidity' that a woman will display in the consulting room under the sign of her narcissism: 'Her libido has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no paths open to further development; it is as though the whole process had already run its course and remains thenceforward *insusceptible to influence*' (1933, 135 my emphasis). However, among those qualities that Freud attributes to the narcissist in his 'On Narcissism' paper (where the female narcissist makes her debut), are the 'limits to [the narcissist's] susceptibility to influence', her 'inaccessibility', her 'self-contentment' and 'charm' (1914a, 73; 89). In Chapter 5 we shall consider what scope there is for re-reading feminine insusceptibility

to influence as an active principle of seduction, in which case Freud's general orchestration of narcissism and the feminine may merit further consideration. Specifically, I want to ask whether Freud's 'feminine narcissism' can re-establish the values of impersonality and detachment that the so-called culture of narcissism was said to corrode. I shall do this through the introduction of a character-type I call the Narquette, a compound-figure drawn from Freud's female narcissist, and Georg Simmel's sociable coquette as outlined in his essays on 'Flirtation' (1909) and 'The Sociology of Sociability' (1910).

Taking licence from the enduring complexities of Freud's treatment of narcissism, this book argues for a re-imagining of a narcissistic sociability distinct from sociological critiques of narcissistic modernity. In terms of its discursive appropriation, it is my suggestion that narcissism has too often assumed a fixed shape that does not obviously lend itself to theorising the reflexivity and fluidity purported to prevail in twenty-first century social relations. Accordingly, narcissism may be said to have fallen out of fashion. In Chapter 6, 'From Narcissism to Melancholia, and Back Again . . .', we shall consider how contemporary critical investments in melancholia, paying particular attention to the work of Judith Butler, should be read in light of the reflexive understanding of narcissism advanced in the preceding chapters. What is striking about the turn to melancholia is that it is also a (re)turn to metapsychology. Whereas the configurations of (cultural) narcissism are more or less distanced from the theoretically speculative dimensions of the psychoanalytic project, with the move to melancholia contemporary critical theory makes a renewed investment in Freudian metapsychology. This means that the turn to melancholia is also, inevitably, a return to narcissism, but crucially one that enables psychosocial thought by focussing on the metapsychology of narcissism rather than focussing on negative narcissism as a cultural metaphor.