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*“...the proximity of the Other is not simply close to me in space, or close like a parent, but he approaches me essentially insofar as I feel myself—insofar as I am—responsible for him. It is a structure that in nowise resembles the **intentional** relation which in knowledge attaches us to the object—no matter what object, be it a human object. Proximity does not revert to this **intentionality**; in particular it does not revert to the fact that the other is known to me”*

Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*

*“..while feigning to reproduce the ends of Narcissus’s sentences, Echo ‘**intends**’—if **intentionality** is defined as, and I repeat, ‘a process of appropriate by repetition, by identification, by idealization’—to speak for herself and to declare her love.”*

Pleshette DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*

In *The Right to Narcissism: A Case for Im-Possible Self-Love*, Pleshette DeArmitt opens the space for an alternative to the origin story so popular with political philosophers, namely, the social contract, which assumes a rational and self-identical subject. She does this obliquely by deconstructing narcissism as love of the self-same, or, love of what Kristeva might call “the clean and proper self.” Like Echo interrupting Narcissus’s soliloquy of deadly self-absorbed pleasure and his solitary auto-affection upon seeing his own reflection, Pleshette interrupts the seeming proximity of self-same, the closeness of near, and the propinquity of proper by deflecting the image of Narcissus onto the voice of Echo, who comes into her own by repeating his words. How, asks Pleshette, can Echo’s reiteration of the words of another be anything more than mere repetition or reduplication?¹ Echoing Derrida, she answers that it is through a declaration of love. Echo’s repetition of the words of Narcissus take on new meaning, and allow her to express herself, and her love, through the words of the other. After all, words are words of

the other. Language comes to us from the other. Echo becomes a self, a “little narcissist,” through an address from and to the other, through the appropriation and ex-appropriation of the other’s words.

Re-reading the myth of Narcissus through the subject position of Echo—and Rousseau, Kristeva, and Derrida on self-other relations through proximity, Pleshette develops what she calls an ethics of Narcissism based on response and responsibility that recuperates intentionality and agency from philosophy’s turn to the other. Unlike Levinas, who insists that responsibility is nothing like intentionality, and following a certain Derrida, Pleshette argues for a “little narcissism” that re-establishes intentional agency through reiteration and repetition rather than self-authorship or autonomy of the will.

Pleshette’s account of the “origin” of the self as a mirror of the other suggests that the “real” Narcissus in Ovid’s myth is the image in the pond or the mimicking voice of Echo; and that the solitary man (or boy) himself is the real illusion. More to the point, her account suggests that “we” are caught in a hall of mirrors or an echo chamber, both mourning and celebrating that we are always and only chasing an illusion of self-sameness, an illusion of stable identity, an illusion of some unified “we.” All self-same identity, whether individual, group, or state, is an illusion produced by repetition, specifically, it is a deception of proximity or closeness to oneself, one’s group, or one’s nation. Or, in the case of philosophy, the illusion may be that of human beings’ special proximity to the meaning of life, or to Being itself. Necessary illusion or dangerous supplement?

It is this illusion of proximity that Derrida challenges in his famous engagement with Heidegger in 1968 in “The Ends of Man” when he asks who is the “we” of philosophy? Who is the “man” of metaphysics? He answers that, among other things, this we, this man, is self-sustained, automatic, what later he might identify with Robinson Crusoe’s wheel spinning on its axis. Insofar as the metaphysical subject is sustained by its own self-proclaimed ends, the man of philosophy is just spinning his wheels. That is to say, both the man of traditional metaphysics, and Heidegger’s anti-metaphysical Dasein, are defined in terms of a *telos* (what is proper to man), and in terms of death (the end of man). Derrida suggests that the double meaning of the phrase “ends of man” comes down to “the play of a certain proximity, proximity to oneself,” a proximity that ultimately cannot be so easily assumed or secured, a nearness that is “trembling,” as he says.² Calling into question the erection of/as what is proper to man, yet still echoing Heidegger, Derrida ‘deconstructs’ the oppositions between the near and the far, the close and the distant, the inside and the outside, and ultimately, the self and the other, man and woman...Narcissus and Echo?

What, we might ask, if the “man” of metaphysics is not a man at all? And to make matters worse, what if there is nothing proper to this no-man?

What if *he* is really an outlawed *she* who owns nothing, not even her voice, which must be given to her by--or taken, even stolen, from--another? What if the "proper" (and therefore displaced) subject of philosophy is not the man who dies, but the woman who mourns? Indeed, what if she is constituted as a self through her mourning of the other rather than through her own being-unto-death. The death of the other rips out her heart, silences her lips, and undoes her sovereignty, if she ever had any. What if the philosophical subject is not the man in love with himself, but rather the woman--wood nymph, or perhaps even disembodied voice, ghost or *revenant* of one--who loved another.

Starting Echo as a displaced origin, Pleshette transforms the metaphysical subject into an ethical subject anchored only by its tenuous relationship with another being through a call and response that depends upon a proximity of another sort, an embodied social proximity that revolves around listening, hearing, and responding to, the other. Still mortal, if no longer merely human all too human, these ethical beings, perhaps wood nymphs in the forest, are called into their own not in relation to their own individual deaths, but rather in relation to the death of the other, that is to say, in relation to the fact that one of them will die before the other, and that one of them will survive to face the immeasurable loss of his or her beloved.

The death of the other undoes all illusions of mastery and sovereignty, namely, the "I control" or "I can." Yet, at the same time the death of the other constitutes the self as one who mourns. Quoting Derrida, "I mourn therefore I am."³ As Pleshette tells us, as if speaking directly to us in our own time of mourning her, "We must and must not get over the other, making the position of the survivor truly untenable, often unbearable, always impossible."⁴ Yet, as Pleshette also insists, this untenable position is the locus of the ethical subject, constituted through both love and loss. For, there is no love without loss precisely because one of us dies before the other. Contained within all love is loss. And, within every self is a multitude of others.

Recuperating the proximity of the self-same through the language of the other, Pleshette reclaims a certain intentionality—we might say, a "little" intentionality--that takes us beyond mere repetition or calculation, beyond moral law or rule following, and towards ethics, and possibly even politics. Implicitly taking issue with Levinas's insistence that the proximity of the other shatters intentionality, Pleshette suggests an alternative, even forbidden, intentionality as response to and from the other that makes intentionality a form of ethical responsibility. For Pleshette, Echo is "a 'little narcissist' who is responsible to the other by answering and returning his call. Yet, while echoing the words of her other, Echo is resourceful enough to speak of and for herself, signing her own name" by declaring her love.⁵

While acknowledging the fundamental loss of self at the core of subjectivity, or what we might call “the improper that is proper to man,” Pleshette focuses on love, if always a forbidden love. Instead of dwelling on Narcissus’s severe rebuff and rejection of Echo’s embrace, Pleshette celebrates the possibility of escaping the harsh confines of a punishing law to express the chance of love. Recall Ovid’s myth wherein when Narcissus says “I would rather die than have you caress me,” Echo responds “Caress me.” Rather than focus on Narcissus’s cruelty and ultimate death, Pleshette, following Derrida, rereads this story as a love story and emphasizes another proximity to counter the proximity of self-love that is usually the moral of the story. Rather, Pleshette recounts Narcissus, lost in the woods, calling out “Is anyone nearby?” and Echo responding “Nearby,” and in response to the question “Is anybody here?” answering “Here.”

In his last words on Echo, in an 2002 conversation with Jean-Luc Nancy, describing infinite responsibility, Derrida says, Echo, “in repeating the last words, or rather the last syllables, in order to obey and at the same time disobey the law, that is, in order to say something in her own name by playing with language, she manages to produce a totally unforeseeable event for Narcissus.”⁶ This event derails the sovereign performance of responsibility and opens up the possibility of ethical response rather than calculated reaction, which is the hallmark of responsibility, or what Derrida calls responsibility “to come” beyond recognition, subjectivity, will, autonomy, and freedom.⁷ This beyond could be called love.

For, it is through love that Echo transforms her reiteration of the words of Narcissus from mere repetition into a response. Pleshette says, “it is Echo’s love that infuses and gives new life to the words of Narcissus; it is her love that exceeds his call *to come*.”⁸ She prepares our ears to hear Echo’s reiteration as a declaration of her own love by taking us on a “journey through an exploration of voice as a process of iteration and ex-appropriation, which must always take the form of, and gain its force from, a loving affirmation.”⁹ She identifies this journey with deconstruction itself. “Echo, an exemplary figure of a deconstruction of self and a figure of deconstruction itself, offers us another narrative of narcissism, which does not disavow mourning but instead opens itself to the experience of the other as other.”¹⁰

To echo the very last line of Pleshette’s book, in her very last footnote, “Deconstruction as love.”¹¹ Like Echo, deconstruction takes the words of a text and repeats them in order to make them say something in excess of what they appear to mean. We could imagine that this is also true of a certain type of analytic practice whereby the analyst returns to the analysand his or her own words, the ends of sentences, fragments of a story, in order to facilitate what Kristeva calls the “rebirth” of the psyche with and against the death drive. Analysis as a kind of loving echo chamber through

which, like Echo, the analyst opens the space for the analysand to hear him or herself.

Although Pleshette repeats the Kristevan rhetoric of birth and rebirth throughout *The Right to Narcissism*, in the final chapter, her text is punctuated, if not punctured, by Derrida's metaphor of abortion. Pleshette quotes Derrida describing mourning:

We can only live this experience in the form of an aporia ... where faithful interiorization bears the others and constitutes him in me (in us), at once living and dead. It makes the other part of us, between us—and then the other no longer quite seems to be the other, because we grieve for him and bear him in us, like an unborn child, like a future. And inversely, the failure succeeds: an aborted interiorization is at the same time a respect for the other as other, a sort of tender rejection, a movement of renunciation which leaves the other alone, outside, over there, in his death, outside of us.¹²

This aborted interiorization is the otherness of the other, that which cannot be incorporated, what exceeds all narcissism of the self-same. In Pleshette's words:

The gaze of the other remains infinitely other and will remain the other's: No narcissism can wholly incorporate it and no subjective speculation can reduce its singular force. Therefore, this being 'in us' should not be thought of as a purely interior speculation or as 'narcissism' as it has been traditionally understood. For this inversion and dissymmetry of the gaze can only be internalized by wounding, fracturing, and exceeding the interiority that welcomes it in love and hospitality.¹³

But the death of the other also interrupts narcissistic interiorization in another way that also could be described as aborted interiorization, only this time not the abortion of the other in the self but of the self-same in the fantasies of sovereign interiority and of self-consciousness as the interior fortress of the subject. "Narcissism," says Pleshette, "even armed with all of its tricks, is unable to reduce the other, whether dead or alive, to the structures of the same."¹⁴ Rather, the other, dead or alive, "can only be internalized by wounding, fracturing, and exceeding the interiority that welcomes it in love and hospitality."¹⁵ If self-sovereignty is a performance, then the death of the other is both the stage upon which it is played out and the curtain that signals that the performance is a ruse.

What, then, are we to make of psychoanalysis and the attempt to recover and reconstitute the sovereign self from out of the depths of

mourning? Can a “proper” psychoanalysis avow the wounding, fracturing and instability of the psyche confronted with the other, which both constitutes it and undoes it? For, as Pleshette reminds us, the goal of psychoanalysis is to get an optimal return on one’s psychic investments and minimize loss.¹⁶ But, is it always the case, as Pleshette concludes, that whereas for Derrida mourning inaugurates the self, for psychoanalysis the self precedes mourning and is only subsequently destabilized by it?¹⁷ While this may be true for orthodox or “proper” Freudian psychoanalysis, as Pleshette so deftly demonstrates throughout her writings on Kristeva, it is not the whole story for an analysis that revolves around the “improper,” or in Kristeva’s terms, the abject.

For Kristeva, abjection is both a precondition for narcissism and a challenge to it.¹⁸ Psychic space or interior experience, what Kristeva identifies with intimate revolt, is traversed by abjection. It is a fluid space that conjures images of remote proximity as filled with otherness as it is with anything that might be called self-same, or even self-contained. Negativity and expulsion are the centrifugal forces that spin out anything like a stabilized instability in and from this precarious interior space. As Pleshette reminds us, for Kristeva abjection begins with the violent expulsion of one body from another during birth. Abjection, or the improper, is there from the beginning before the clean and proper self.

On Pleshette’s reading, Kristeva’s emphasis on the incorporation of the words of the other lend support to considering babbling wood nymph Echo, rather than pretty boy Narcissus, a model for subjectivity. Indeed, for Kristeva what the contemporary Narcissus sees in the mirror is not pretty or even lovable, but instead his own abjection: “Today Narcissus is an exile, deprived of his psychic space, an extraterrestrial with a prehistory bearing, wanting for love. An uneasy child, all scratched up, somewhat disgusting, an alien in a world of desire and power, he longs only to reinvent love.”¹⁹ Narcissus as ET. In her recent book, *Marriage Considered as a Fine Art*, written with her husband Philip Sollers, Kristeva lists people who have most influenced her thinking on love: Plato, Hegel, Freud, Stendal, and last but not least, Stephen Spielberg’s E.T.! Narcissus phone home.

In *Marriage Considered as a Fine Art*, Kristeva reiterates her claim from *Tales of Love* that we lack a discourse of love. Love, she says, has become more obscene than sex.²⁰ There is something sweetly obscene, even delightfully disgusting, about that little ode to love between Kristeva and Sollers. Laughing about the conundrum of when your wife becomes your mistress, extolling the open relationship of Sartre and Beauvoir, and comparing marriage to bullfights, criminal acts, and literature, there is something unseemly about this public declaration of love. Kristeva asks whether today anyone can without irony consider the ancient institution of marriage as securing sexuality for the life of two people, whether marriage is any more a legitimate convention. She answers not really. Rather, she

promises to try to describe love as “passion, precisely, without shame and without cowardice, without altering or embellishing it, while surrounded by false displays of spectacular sentimental obsessions, of erotic fantasies in which from now on the auto-fiction of “Selfies” becomes our pleasure.”²¹ Within this banter between lover and beloved, there is more than just a little narcissism. And yet, it is clear that in the course of nearly fifty years of marriage, they have found joy and sorrow together in the echo chamber that is love, whatever that may mean.

Indeed, in the context of this lovers’ discourse, the story of Narcissus and Echo appears again to authorize their love. In *Marriage Considered as Fine Art*, Kristeva maintains that by associating the look, the image, and the incapacity for love of the other with suicide, Ovid anticipates our contemporary difficulties with forms of autism that are symptomatic of virtual culture where we are interconnected primarily through screens and the internet. She claims that a new discourse on love requires reinventing “the genealogy of the myth of Narcissism,”²² one in which “the erotic body imprints itself in phonemes, the flesh speaks, language isn’t just a sign conveying an idea,” or a mirror of self or world.²³ Rather, the intertwining of flesh and sound, the reverberation of echoes in the body, give meaning to our experience and our loves against and beyond mourning and loss. Reinventing the genealogy of the myth of Narcissism is precisely what Pleshette does in *The Right to Narcissism*. If that is a prerequisite for recreating a discourse on love, then Pleshette has put us on the right track.

In terms of where we began, we could describe this reconfigured Narcissism in terms of proximity and distance, or a distance at the heart of proximity, at least insofar as that proximity becomes a basis for ethics, and even for politics. In her discussion of disability, Kristeva argues for a democracy based on proximity rather than on contracts. Considering disabled people when thinking about political rights and moral responsibilities challenges traditional notions of rights and equality based on rational autonomy and physical independence. Kristeva suggests that it forces us to rethink democracy not in terms of contracts implicitly ‘signed’ by rational agents, but rather in terms of the proximity of otherness within the self.

Within a proximity model rather than a contract model for social participation, the goal would not be integration so much as interaction based on sharing a world.²⁴ Kristeva worries that integration means assimilation into the liberal political economy that values bodies only insofar as they are productive. She argues against trying to turn every body into a productive worker through integration programs that define the value of humanity in terms of the ability to work or perform tasks.²⁵ Indeed, she claims that our culture’s “maniacal surge of productivity” is an attempt to deny our fundamental vulnerability, a disavowal manifest in traditional philosophies based on rational autonomy of the will.²⁶

Her analysis suggests, while important, there is a contradiction in trying to integrate disabled persons into a political economy that values independence over dependence to the point of disavowing the interdependence and vulnerability that is fundamental to the human condition. Dependence and independence are two sides of the same liberal ideal of autonomy; they are intimately connected rather than opposed. And, it is their inseparability, namely our *inter-dependence*, which makes politics necessary. Basing democracy on proximity—or, at least, a certain proximity suggested by Pleshette's engagement with Rousseau, Kristeva and Derrida in *The Right to Narcissism*--rather than on contracts, reminds of who and what have been forgotten, disavowed, and excluded within the traditional social contract.

In her early essay, "Renegotiating the Contract," Pleshette argues that Kristeva's inclusion of the psyche in the socio-symbolic contract allows for the process of abjection and exclusion to take place within rather than outside. The inside and outside become intertwined such that exteriority is essential to interiority, and coming to terms with otherness in the self can work against projecting hatred and fear outside. "The other," says Pleshette, "so hated and desired, is no longer projected over there at a safe distance but is in me, disrupting my naïve assuredness of my own unity and purity. In the birth of the self (as citizen), the other need not be made into a scapegoat, into a sacrificial victim...the ethical and political task of our time is that each psyche must come to terms with its 'own' impropriety—the improper understood as that which precipitates the emergence of the proper and that which ceaselessly destabilizes what sets itself up as proper."²⁷ This "new kind of social space...is not based on the logic of the scapegoat, of the inside versus the outside of the polis, but a new sort of solidarity that traverses national, ethnic, and economic borders and is founded on the consciousness of one's unconscious."²⁸ The proximity of otherness within the self, otherness that is both constitutive of the self and at the same time destabilizes any self-certainty, self-sameness, and self-unity, gives us a new kind of ethical and political subject, a new kind of "we." One that is not one, but rather many. One that is born, dies, and is reborn, through an aborted interiority. One that comes to itself through the Other and others.

The self may be nothing more than an echo, but this resonance between beings who mean, living or dead, can transform the clichés of our culture into singular events and declarations of love. As Kristeva says in *Sense and Nonsense of the Revolt*, "'I' will express my specificity by distorting the nevertheless necessary clichés of the codes of communication and by constantly deconstructing ideas/concepts/ideologies/philosophies that 'I' have inherited."²⁹ The relationship between intimate revolt and loving support makes it possible to transform the past into a future of hope out of hopelessness. Kristeva calls this energetic pessimism.

With something like energetic pessimism, Pleshette imagines an ethics and politics based on a reconfigured narcissism, and “a new understanding of self-relation, in which to speak of and for oneself,” which “would as Echo knew well, pass by way of and be indebted to the other.”³⁰ Only through the language of the other, can we speak our hearts and minds as ex-appropriated, im-possible little narcissists. Hear, now, the echo reverberating in Pleshette’s words, “It’s a love story, after all.”³¹ A tragic love story, to be sure, when the beloved is taken, as she is, always too soon, and we are left in “the position of the survivor truly untenable, often unbearable, always impossible.”³²

¹ Pleshette DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism: A Case for an Im-Possible Self-Love* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 135-36.

² Jacques Derrida, “The Ends of Man,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), 124.

³ Derrida cited in DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 118.

⁴ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 116.

⁵ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 98.

⁶ Jacques Derrida, *For Strasbourg: Conversations of Friendship and Philosophy*, trans. Michael Naas and Pascale-Anne Brault (Bronx, NY: Fordham University Press, 2014), 64.

⁷ Derrida, *For Strasbourg*, 68.

⁸ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 136.

⁹ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 126.

¹⁰ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 99.

¹¹ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 176.

¹² Derrida qtd. in DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 113.

¹³ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 117.

¹⁴ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 118.

¹⁵ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 117.

¹⁶ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 114.

¹⁷ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 120.

¹⁸ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 65.

¹⁹ Julia Kristeva, *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 382-83.

²⁰ Julia Kristeva, "Julia Kristeva in Conversation with Rosalind Coward [1984]," in *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 350.

²¹ Julia Kristeva and Phillipe Sollers, *Du mariage considéré comme un des beaux-arts* (Paris: Fayard, 2015), 10.

²² Kristeva and Sollers, *Du mariage considéré comme un des beaux-arts*, 68.

²³ Kristeva and Sollers, *Du mariage considéré comme un des beaux-arts*, 84.

²⁴ Julia Kristeva, *Hatred and Forgiveness*, trans. Jeanine Herman. Reprint edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 223.

²⁵ Julia Kristeva, "At the Limits of Living: To Joseph Grigely," *Journal of Visual Culture* 5 (2): 221-222.

²⁶ Kristeva, "At the Limits of Living: To Joseph Grigely," 222.

²⁷ Pleshette DeArmitt, "Renegotiating the Contract," *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 42 (2004): 120.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Julia Kristeva, *The Sense and Non-Sense of Revolt*, trans. Jeanine Herman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 432.

³⁰ DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 140.

³¹ Derrida cited in DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 136.

³² DeArmitt, *The Right to Narcissism*, 116.