

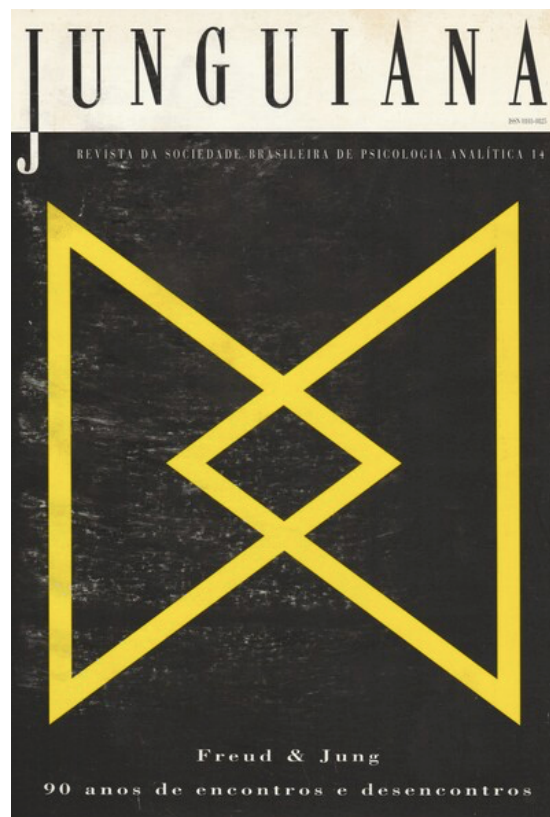
# Narcissism: considerations today<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

The author reviews the concept of narcissism in psychoanalysis contrasting it with Jung's concept of individuation. Starting with the myth of Echo and Narcissus following C. Byington's description of creative and defensive structuring functions, the author describes the narcissism-echoism polarity in a similar way. She interprets the myth of Echo and Narcissus from normality to the psychotic reaction of their personalities, within the creative-defensive inter-relationship of the narcissism-echoism polarity. She concludes by quoting Jung to emphasize the importance of the ego-other relationship in the individuation process. ■

**Keywords**  
narcissism, echoism, myth of Echo and Narcissus, creative and defensive structuring functions, analytical psychology, individuation process.



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## Narcissism: considerations today

The concept of narcissism was introduced by Freud in 1914. A text rich in new intuitions, difficult, dense, written during the atmosphere of divergence with Jung and which Freud himself acknowledged as having been a difficult delivery. On carrying the libido over to the ego, Freud opens the possibility of development of the psychology of the ego. There he described the roots of the future superego concept through the notion of the ego ideal. Although the text contains the idea of normal narcissism necessary for development, there seems to be a predominance of reflections on pathology that are amply developed in later psychoanalytic literature (FREUD, 1974).

Jung apparently did not devote himself to the subject of narcissism. In all of his vast work we find few references to the concept, and these are always in the pathological sense used by Freud. Jung brought to psychology two fundamental concepts that are the main stay of his thought and permit us to seek comprehension of the psyche in its normal development and in its creativity: the concepts of archetype and individuation (JUNG, 1966a).

On conceiving individuation as a process coordinated by archetypes that organize the id, Jung establishes an important counterpoint to the concept of narcissism. In the process of individuation, Jung displaces the center of development from the ego and superego to the Id through the notion of the Self and the Central Archetype. Even today this difference has not been well understood in psychology, for there are many who have difficulty in differentiating individuation from individualism. This counterpoint of Freud and Jung was little perceived because Jung described the individuation process as the differentiation that occurs in the second half of life, whereas Freud described development in childhood.

It was up to the followers of Jung – Michael Fordham, Erich Neumann and, in our midst, Carlos Byington – to associate archetypes and ego formation from the outstart of life (BYINGTON, 1987a). According to Jung, it is the transcendent function that connects the Central Archetype to consciousness (JUNG, 1969). The transcendent function is therefore the great mediating function between the Central Archetype and the symbolic structuring of the ego throughout life. In this way we can understand the archetypal base of narcissism, i.e., the archetypal structuring of the ego from the Central Archetype situated in the id.

Carlos Byington emphasized the importance in the structuring of the ego of the interaction between creative structures described by Jung and defensive structures described by Freud, which in symbolic psychology correspond to the shadow. In this way we can see the transcendent function structuring normal ego formation and transformation through creative structuring functions and at the same time perceive the departures from normality, as expressed by defensive structuring functions that form the defensive ego in the shadow (BYINGTON, 1987b).

To Jung, every psychic phenomenon possesses opposite poles. All the archetypes include polarities, the good mother and the witch, the good father and the castrating father, and even life and death.

Byington described the polarities between the creative and the defensive structures, that is, between the essence of analytical psychology and of psychoanalysis. Creative structures are considered a polar opposite to defensive structures because the creativity of the latter is limited by fixation and repetition-compulsion. He also describes polarities within these structures themselves, which allows us to correlate the im-

portant polarities of introversion-extroversion, introjection and projection, and narcissism and echoism in normality and in pathology. We may associate pathological narcissism and echoism with sadomasochism.

To understand these polarities better, we have myths, the big dreams of all cultures. In fact, in the myth of Echo and Narcissus, poetically described by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, we find the script for narcissistic and echoistic structuring functions: initially normal, then neurotic, sadomasochistic, and finally psychotic.

Echo and Narcissus, two beautiful young people in the splendor of their youth, are walking through the forest. He is hunting and she sees him from afar:

She saw Narcissus roaming through  
the country  
Saw him, and burned, and followed  
him in secret,  
Burning the more she followed, as when  
sulphur  
Smeared on the rim of torches,  
catches fire  
When other fire comes near it.  
Oh, how often  
She wanted to come near with coaxing  
speeches  
Make soft entreaties to him! But her nature  
Sternly forbids; the one thing not forbidden  
Is to make answers. She is more than  
ready  
For words she can give back. (OVID, 1955,  
p. 68)

The structuring function of fascination expresses intensively the archetypes of the anima and of the animus which differentiate the ego and enhances its capacity of dialectic encounter with the other. Crossing the forest is the archetypal theme of the individuation process in human life. On this journey the ego will be progressively structured in normal de-

velopment, fixed and stagnant in neurosis, and severely damaged in psychosis. The paths of Echo and Narcissus, their individuation process and the typological narcissistic and echoistic dominance that each represents, are severely jeopardized by experiences related to the parental complexes in their personalities (BYINGTON, 1988).

To better comprehend the pathological development expressed in the Narcissus myth, we must perceive it within the development of the mythological pantheon of ancient Greece. During an era of happiness, Zeus and Hera celebrated through their marriage the domination of the patriarchal over the matriarchal organization of culture. Matriarchal dominance, often expressed through the chaotic passion of Titans and the incestuous breeding of monsters, was finally subdued. Greek culture went forward and embarked on the quest for the post-patriarchal pattern of the archetype of alterity. This is the time in which individual and culture need to detach from matriarchal and patriarchal dominance and go in search of a democratic standard of relationship in freedom and in love, thus differentiating the psychic functions that Jung described through the archetypes of the anima and the animus. The main task of this period is confrontation with the shadow and the creative differentiation of the unique archetypal potential of the Self.

The message of the myth is unequivocal. When they interact as a couple, Zeus and Hera are unable to elaborate envy and jealousy creatively.

Defensive competition prevents them from differentiating their identity of man and woman creatively. Tiresias, the wise seer, who so well expresses the transcendent function of symbolic elaboration, has his personality dissociated as an expression of the parental couple's strife. Tiresias is blinded by Hera's vengeance and acquires the creative function of clairvoyance by the grace of Zeus. The defensive competition between Zeus and Hera will pathologically affect

the personality of Echo. And it is here too that the rape of the beautiful and freckled Liriope, mother of Narcissus, by his father the river Cephysus, mutilates the personality of Narcissus. Primary identifications with the severely wounded bond of his parental complex form the terrible pathological Shadow that is to emerge in his adolescence. Narcissus was born of violence.

In her pathology, Echo is to express at first the neurotic fixation of the echoistic function. She is only capable of expressing herself through the other. The dysfunction of echoism is as important in pathology as that of narcissism. Echo, however, was “narcissistically” forgotten. Psychology seems to have identified itself with the ego and delegated to the other the condition of “object”. There is no doubt, however, that the disorders of the echoistic function are present in our consulting rooms as much as the disorders of the narcissistic function. There are persons fixed in their relationship of dependence to the other who repeat Hera’s curse to Echo. In the grips of echoistic repetition-compulsion, they are incapable of exerting echoism in a creative and selective way and of “narcissizing” when necessary. To echo is a necessary creative function, as shown so well by Patricia Berry (1980) in her article “Echo and Beauty”. People with an echoistic fixation generally associate, whether in marriage or in a profession, with persons with an opposing, that is, narcissistic fixation, who complement them in pathological symbioses of difficult therapy. In the myth, Echo, despised and unable to endure the shame and pain of rejection, goes beyond the neurotic compulsion of her relationship with Narcissus. Configuring a masochistic conduct that progressively exacerbates itself, she moves on from a neurotic dimension to psychosis: her body wastes away until she is only skin and bone. Her blood evaporates into the air pouring from all of her veins and she dissolves into death.

Along other paths, Narcissus is also to follow progressive pathologization. The key symbol in

the archetypal understanding of the progressive deterioration of the narcissistic structuring function represented in the myth is the likeness seen by Narcissus in his reflection in the lake. The dominance of an egoic perspective in the psychological tradition has led researchers to identify in this reflected image the expression of Narcissus identity. However, the archetypal perspective allows us to interpret symbolically the image that Narcissus can see and that fascinates, attracts, and enslaves him, as the image not of his ego but rather of his Self, the concept that Jung described to express the totality of the personality, which includes the ego and all other psychological functions. The Self conceived by Jung includes the tortuous path of human development with the historical vicissitudes that have marked and wounded us and that today form our circumstantial or chronic shadow, together with what is best and most creative in us. The Self also expresses the future, not in a prophetic way but rather prospectively through the archetypal potential with which we were born and which is to color our fate.

In this, Byington differentiates the ontic from the ontological identity. Ontic identity is the identity of the ego with all of its characteristics of here and now, age, nationality and profession. Ontologic identity is the identity of the process of development of being that includes the ways which each one of us will travel through the great forest of life (BYINGTON, 1988).

Narcissus is extraordinarily beautiful. The fascination that Narcissus experiences through his own image, which up to then was unknown to him, is the impact of the anima archetype, the psychopomp which called for his individuation and, as foreseen by Tiresias, was to lead him to death.

We know that adolescence is one of the most dangerous phases in life. The emotional load the ego must bear in separating from the family and in the encounter with the world can unleash fixated contents of the shadow with severe regression and pathology. Risk behavior in ado-

lescents, a propensity to drugs and delinquency, very often followed by accidents that may be fatal, may be viewed as an unbalance of the ego due to the heroic overload imposed on it by the constellation of the anima, the animus, and the hero archetypes.

Narcissus falls in love with the anthropos, the image of his own totality. However, the abyss of an immense shadow carrying severe fixation and dissociation prevents him from reaching “the treasure hard to obtain”. His desire becomes the downward path of his insanity. The symptom of his inflation is the illusion to touch the image as if it were real. This is the disorder of literalization that impregnates psychopathology. Narcissus’ omnipotence literalizes that which is symbolic, concretizes what is metaphoric, transforms into entity that which is process.

Again and again, Narcissus tries to touch his reflection: gradually he is exhausted and despairs. The repetition-compulsion of neurosis is the way through which the defensive structuring functions maintain symbolic expression, even if through the shadow. The archetypal perspective allows us to see in repetition-compulsion not only a mechanism of defense of the ego, but also an archetypal defensive structure involving the whole psychodynamic structure of the Self. The Central Archetype of the Self continues to express through the shadow symbols that are indispensable to life. Their expression, however, is inadequate and damaging to the existential productivity of the personality and culture. In this way, both neurosis and psychosis may be seen as a strategy of the Self to continue symbolic expression, even though in an inadequate and destructive way.

The tragedy of Narcissus increases and reaches a climax at the moment the repetition-compulsion is exhausted. The defensive projection of literalized totality is touched and fades away through the indifferent cruelty of reality. Narcissus despairs and his psychological balance, maintained by neurotic projection, breaks down. This is the passage of the neurotic to the psy-

chotic dimension and what follows is an attack on his own body. That same body that he would not allow Echo to embrace. Yearning for the encounter with totality, experienced through neurotic projection, gives way to psychotic introjection. Like a mad surgeon, he now searches for his Self through a brutal attack upon his own body.

He torn his garment from the upper margin  
Beat his bare breast with hands as  
pale as marble  
And the breast took on a glow, a rosy color  
As apples are white end red, sometimes,  
or grapes  
Can be both green and purple.  
The water clears  
He sees it all once more, and cannot bear it  
As yellow wax dissolves with warmth  
around it,  
As the white frost is gone in morning  
sunshine,  
Narcissus, in the hidden fire of passion,  
Wanes slowly, with the ruddy color going,  
The strength and hardihood and comeliness  
Fading away, and even the very body  
Echo had loved. (OVID, 1955, p. 72)

We know the disintegration of the body image in psychosis. We can understand the suicidal self-inflicted mutilation on the part of Narcissus as a rearticulation of the narcissistic with the echoist function on the extremely defensive level of psychotic sadomasochism.

Just as the myth presents a relationship of Echo and Narcissus through complementarity, we must not separate them. Complementarity of the narcissistic and echoistic structuring functions is indispensable to theoretical comprehension, both in normal development and in treatment of neurotic, psychopathic, borderline or psychotic conditions.

Narcissus and Echo present a dialectic relationship of opposites not only as male and female, but also as symbols of dominance of the ego and of the other in relationship: he who

remains in himself, and he that remains in the other. The yellow flower with a corolla surrounded by white petals, born where Narcissus died, expresses, together with the etymology of his name, the stupor (*narke*) of this extraordinary individuation of two young adolescents and of Greek culture itself on its path to alterity.

The tragic finale of the myth is the starting point for other great myths that seek to elaborate and overcome the enormous difficulties of cross-

ing the existential forest and the great mystery of the formation and transformation of the identity of the ego and the other.

In the words of Jung: “The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a ‘you’” (1966b, par 454). ■

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## Resumo

### *Narcisismo: considerações atuais*

*A autora revê o conceito de narcisismo desenvolvido por Freud e o contrapõe ao conceito de individuação de Jung. A partir do mito de Eco e Narciso e seguindo a descrição de C. Byington das funções estruturantes criativas e defensivas, a autora descreve as polaridades narcisismo – ecoísmo como funções estruturantes criativas*

*e defensivas. Faz uma releitura do mito desde a normalidade até a desestruturação psicótica das personalidades de Eco e Narciso, dentro da inter-relação criativa-defensiva da polaridade narcisismo-ecoísmo. Conclui citando Jung para ressaltar a importância da relação Eu-Tu no processo de individuação. ■*

**Palavras-chave:** Mito de Eco e Narciso, narcisismo, ecoísmo, função estruturante criativa e defensiva, psicologia analítica, psicologia simbólica junguiana.

## Resumen

### *Narcisismo: consideraciones actuales*

*La autora revisa el concepto de narcisismo desarrollado por Freud y lo contrapone al concepto de individuación de Jung. A partir del mito de Eco y Narciso, y siguiendo la descripción de C. Byington sobre las funciones estructurantes creativas y defensivas, la autora describe las polaridades narcisismo-ecoísmo como funciones estructurantes*

*creativas y defensivas. Hace una relectura del mito desde la normalidad hasta la desestructuración psicótica de las personalidades de Eco y Narciso, dentro de la interrelación creativa-defensiva de la polaridad narcisismo-ecoísmo. Concluye citando a Jung para resaltar la importancia de la relación Yo-Tu en el proceso de individuación. ■*

**Palabras clave:** Mito de Eco y Narciso, narcisismo, ecoísmo, función estruturante criativa y defensiva, psicología analítica, psicología simbólica junguiana.

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