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Éric Laurent

The Entanglements of Narcissism

FROM the time of Greek mythology and its Freudian uptake, the mirages of narcissism and death have borne the closest relation. The most concealed mainspring of narcissism is to choose one's path unto death. In his text "A Child is Being Beaten", Freud mentions the transformation of sadism into "masochism, which is passive and again in a certain sense narcissistic".¹ In his final text, *Moses and Monotheism*, he writes that the damage caused by early traumas and the narcissistic wounds they entail is valid across the board. Thus, something is rotten in the state of narcissism, whence happiness has been banished.

This tension that knows no remedy, the impossibility of joining up with one's own image, the impossibility of it not harbouring some injury, was the essential mainspring behind Lacan's Imaginary. It is the key to each subject's relation to his image and, beyond this, to any possible representation of the self as *oneself*.

The recent death of Steve Jobs and the merciless marketing drive that has put his authorised biography on the market within a fortnight of his passing away gives us pause for open reflection on the entanglements of narcissism. The exacting standards of Steve Jobs, along with his idea of taste down to the finest detail, were behind the originality of the Apple products. They also drove more

¹ Freud, S., "A Child is Being Beaten": a Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions", transl. by A. Strachey & J. Strachey, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works...*, Vol. XVII, Hogarth, London, 1955, p. 194.

than one of his colleagues mad with rage. His famous declaration, "be insatiable, be crazy", is Jobs through and through, with his highly particular vegetarian diets and his idea that the body can outlive the mind. *Fortune* magazine wrote that he was "one of Silicon Valley's leading egomaniacs".²

When in October 2003 he learnt he was suffering from a fairly rare form of pancreatic cancer, a neuroendocrine tumour of the islets of Langerhans, for nine months he refused the operation he was told would be a sure success. In the end he gave in to the recommendations of California's medico-digital upper crust. He went on to become the best expert on himself and his illness, rigorously controlling each decision. He got university teams from Stanford, John Hopkins, Harvard and MIT to work in collaboration on sequencing all the genes of his tumour along with his own DNA. That cost him a hundred thousand dollars and he became one of only twenty people in the world to have their DNA fully sequenced. From that, a bespoke treatment programme was put together and the path was opened to new innovative treatments. To his biographer he confided: "I'm either going to be one of the first to be able to outrun a cancer like this, or I'm going to be one of the last to die from it."³

This furiously original, solitary and singular spirit was not really cut out for fatherhood. Much as he wanted to "think differently", he was compelled to repeat the traumas of his childhood with their procession of narcissistic wounds, as Freud might have put it. Abandoned by his parents who conceived him out of wedlock at the age of twenty-three, he himself conceived a child outside marriage in his twenty-third year whom he abandoned for many years to come. When later he was told that the woman who would become his wife, Laurene Powell, a trader at Goldman Sachs, was pregnant, he thought out loud that he would leave her for someone else. When his daughter wanted to go to Harvard, he refused to pay her enrolment fee; a family friend put the money up. She didn't invite him to the graduation ceremony. Maureen Dowd quotes this friend, Andy Hertzfeld, who attributes the cause of his being "reflexively cruel" to his close ones to the trauma of being abandoned.⁴

In a 1987 interview, commenting on his autobiographical project, Jacques Derrida said a little more about his will to restore a "right to narcissism".⁵

There is not narcissism and non-narcissism, there are more or less comprehensive, generous, open and extended narcissisms, and what is known as non-narcissism is generally just the economy of a narcissism that is much more welcoming, hospitable and open to the experience of the other party as other. I believe

2 Colvin, G., "Steve Jobs' bad bet", in *Fortune*, Vol. 155, No. 5, 19 March 2007, p. 67.

3 Isaacson, W., *Steve Jobs*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 2011, p. 551.

4 Dowd, M., "Limits of Magical Thinking" in *The New York Times*, 25 October 2011.

5 Plissart, M.-F. & Derrida, J., *Right of Inspection*, transl. by D. Wills, Monacelli, New York, 1999.

his famous declaration, “be insatiable, with his highly particular vegetarian diets in mind. *Fortune* magazine wrote that he was a “narcissiac”.²

As suffering from a fairly rare form of cancer of the islets of Langerhans, for nine years he was told would be a sure success. In the fall of 1999, California’s medico-digital upper echelon, on himself and his illness, rigorously by teams from Stanford, John Hopkins, and on sequencing all the genes of his cancer, at him a hundred thousand dollars and in the world to have their DNA fully sequenced. The programme was put together and implemented. To his biographer he confided: “I want to be able to outrun a cancer like this, or at least to beat it.”³

His singular spirit was not really cut out for “repetition differently”, he was compelled to repeat the procession of narcissistic wounds, as he did with his parents who conceived him out of wedlock. He himself conceived a child outside of marriage, abandoned for many years to come. When he met the woman who would become his wife, Laurene, and she was pregnant, he thought out loud that he was going to have a daughter who wanted to go to Harvard. His family friend put the money up. She didn’t. Laureen Dowd quotes this friend, Andy, as being “reflexively cruel” to his close friend.

In his autobiographical project, Jacques wanted to restore a “right to narcissism”.⁵

“In narcissism, there are more or less open and extended narcissisms, but narcissism is generally just the much more welcoming, hospitable relation to the other party as other. I believe

that without a movement of narcissistic re-appropriation the relation to the other would be destroyed from the start. [...] [This relation to the other] has to sketch out a movement of re-appropriation in the image of oneself for love to be possible, for example. Love is narcissistic. So, there are minor narcissisms, there are major narcissisms, and there is death at the end of it, which is the limit point. In the experience of death itself – if indeed it is an experience – narcissism doesn’t altogether surrender.”⁶

DOUBTLESS Jacques Derrida and Steve Jobs dreamed of making their death an “experience”. An obsessional fantasy? Let’s leave them the last word on this score. Silence.

Translated from the French by Adrian Price

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² *Fortune*, No. 5, 19 March 2007, p. 67.

³ *New York Times*, 2011, p. 551.

⁴ *New York Times*, 25 October 2011.

⁵ trans. by D. Wills, Monacelli, New York, 1999.

⁶ Derrida, J., “‘There is No *One* Narcissism’ [Autobiophotographies]”, trans. by P. Kamuf in *Points... Interviews, 1974-1994*, Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 199 [translation modified].