



Theoretical parallels in the exercise of the power of vision and reading

A comparative study of Ovid's and Caravaggio's *Narcissus*

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*'O utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem!
Votum in amante novum: vellem quod amamus abesset!'*
(*Met. III. 465-466*)¹

This paper reflects on the nature of reading and vision as analysed in a comparison between Caravaggio's work entitled *Narcissus* and a famous narration of the myth describing *Narcissus* and *Echo* as found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In lines 428–429 of Book IV in Ovid's poem, *Narcissus* yearningly approaches the image of his own love as reflected in the water's surface and touches the water. In Caravaggio's depiction, this gesture not only shows how vision can create illusion, but also breaks the illusion through the perception of touch that renders the object of desire unperceivable and, thus, unreachable. Since *Narcissus*'s face does not reflect the experience of breaking the illusion, Caravaggio offers an interpretation of Ovid's narration which suppresses the tension between perceptions via the domination of vision. The painting appears to claim that desire may remain unbroken based on vision even if *Narcissus* experiences the opposite. In contrast, the linearity of the narrative in *Metamorphoses* relays these two moments to the reader, one after the other. Additionally, in Ovid's version, the nature of visuality and perception appears within the story of *Tiresias*, the blind seer. Therefore, Ovid's thematization of vision becomes contextually connected to the literary motifs of blindness and foreseeing. The helplessness inherent to *Narcissus*'s physical sense of vision and *Tiresias*'s ability to foresee the future despite his blindness creates an opportunity for viewers and readers alike to ponder the potential of reading and vision in literature and art.

Keywords: comparative literary and cultural studies, literary theory, Caravaggio, Ovid, *Narcissus*

¹ "Oh, I am tortured by a strange desire / unknown to me before, for I would fain / put off this mortal form; which only means / I wish the object of my love away." Throughout this paper, I quote Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from the following publication and English translation: Ovidius 1922, Ovidius 1892. I refer to the text giving the number of the book and lines within *Metamorphoses*.

Figure 1

Caravaggio: *Narcissus at the Source*. 112x92cm (c. 1599), oil on canvas.
Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Palazzo Barberini



One of Caravaggio's early paintings, *Narcissus at the Source* fits into the category of portrait-like pictures, a significant detail particularly regarding the interpretation of the myth of Narcissus (Rényi, 1999, p. 11). A painting 112x92 cm in size and created around 1599, this work is currently found in Rome, in Palazzo Barberini. It was hung on the wall of one of the chambers of the Barberini family so that the composition may be seen at its best. Viewers can see the figure of Narcissus at eye-level, and the figure's shining face immediately attracts attention. Thus, in a process that is similar to reading and in accordance with the theory of how to approach a painting developed in the Renaissance, the viewer's glance starts examining the picture from left to right (Uspensky, 1975, pp. 33–39). The represented image reminds the viewer of the lines of Book III of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Many versions of Narcissus' story are contained there, a factor that makes the picture thematically familiar. Yet, the moment that Caravaggio immortalised is not a typical one. Enchanted by the vision of his reflection, the youth's gaze is already enraptured by love. He not only touches the water surface with his left hand, but also lightly dips his fingers into the water. Despite the fact that his touch obviously breaks the illusion, the gaze does not reveal disillusionment, but rather the opposite. The peculiarity of the painting is that it is connected to lines 428–429 of Book III of *Metamorphoses*, which describes Narcissus feeling the desire of love precisely when he touches the water's surface. In the history of representations of Narcissus, Caravaggio's

depiction is very rare; to my knowledge, until the nineteenth century this is the only painting to have depicted this particular moment.²

The significance of the captured moment can be comprehended by means of comparing it to Ovid's text. In the literary text, after Narcissus arrives at the source, he first quenches his thirst in an act of taste during which the sensation of touch also takes place. Following this, the reflection that appears on the water's surface influences the perception of sight, thereby creating an internal image in the character that becomes the target of desire. According to the text, this process is followed by the moment captured in Caravaggio's painting: touch, which at first does not lead to any realisation at all, and only later enacts change on the level of the cognitive function torn from desire. These elements are further complemented by the sensations gained from hearing and sight.

While reading this prominent literary excerpt, the central significance of the faculty of sight is noteworthy. As was mentioned before, owing to the internal line of the picture's horizon and its composition arranged based upon the golden ratio, the first glance at Caravaggio's painting is also directed to Narcissus' face. Disappearing into the darkness, his gaze is asymmetrically framed by his two arms and thereby places *the process of seeing* into the visual centre. This impression is only reinforced when, looking at the reflection from a distance, we observe that the painting's composition recreates the shape of an eye. These parallels force the reader/viewer to pose the question of what particular significance *seeing* has in the story and painting of Narcissus. Both in the case of the painting and the text, *seeing* is related to (self-) interpretation. It seems as if Narcissus' gaze is in fact drawing attention to the vital importance of hermeneutics.

In addition to the hermeneutical significance of *seeing* and our awareness of the myth's tragic outcome (a fate suggested throughout by the dark tones in the painting and the narrator's sinister prolepses in the text), we must clarify who possesses the ability to see. In Ovid's work, the first character to have 'seen' (*'vidit' in praesens perfectum*) Narcissus was Echo, who glimpsed Narcissus and fell in love with him. The same event occurs within Narcissus himself, whose object of love becomes the same Echo's the moment he glanced at his own reflection. Because of the mirroring structure of the text and the painting – produced on the basis of repetition – in the course of interpretation, it may seem that the reflection is real and capable of seeing. All this is put into an essential frame in Ovid's text: the myth of Narcissus is found within the story of Tiresias foreseeing the future. (Met. III. 314-336; 509-528) Since it is precisely this framing story that reveals why Tiresias, one of the most famous prophets, was blinded by the Gods, his contextualising figure also emphasises the issue of blindness, in addition to the question of seeing: who is blind and in what sense? Beyond the evident motif of Tiresias' blindness, who is mostly far-seeing, Echo is blind because she cannot see and understand Narcissus' narcissism. In both Ovid's and Caravaggio's work, Narcissus' hermeneutical glance is blind to reality: on the one hand, he remains blind to the physical

² A traditional iconographical example is: Poussin: *Narcissus and Echo*, 74x100cm (1629–1630), oil on canvas. Louvre.

reality of the nature of water, and, on the other hand, fails to recognise himself in his own reflection. In Ovid's version, Narcissus is a character who only arrives at partial recognition; he can partially see yet remains partially blind. Although Caravaggio's Narcissus touches the water, contrary to the case of the apostle Thomas from the Gospel, it is not belief that results from his touch, but rather the untouchedness of his gaze blinded by desire.³ As possibilities of for interpretation and misunderstanding, sight and blindness draw either the reader or the viewer into the myth of Narcissus in so many instances and in such a complicated way that it is reasonable to ask whether our own interpretive process is blind or not. The moment when, before realising the painting's title, visitors standing in front of Caravaggio's work in Palazzo Barberini recognise the myth of Narcissus or, owing to this, reread Ovid's text, it might be their own prejudices or viewpoint that might lead the interpretative intention to misunderstanding. The most important sign of blindness may be the static anchoring of the hermeneutical circle: "I finally understood the work of art". Full of hubris, this fictional sentence contains a driving force that subsequently encourages us to suspend interpretation and cease magnifying the infiniteness of mirroring found either within the text or painting by putting the two works of art beside one another. Yet paradoxically, we can recognise ourselves as interpreters whose task – like Narcissus' – is to understand what we have seen exactly by acknowledging the interminability of interpretation.

In addition to the thematic correspondence, the reason why we can pair Ovid's text with Caravaggio's painting lies in the visual reflection, the several anticipations, references and thought rhymes in the text. Based on repetition, its parallel structure invites us to do the same. In most cases, the viewpoints and voices intertwined in the mirroring structure are distinguishable from each other by close reading. However, parts can be found where the passive form of the verb renders it impossible to identify the voices. Located in line 424 in a scene that comes just before the instance immortalised by Caravaggio, an example of this is the verb *miratur*, meaning 'looking with admiration'. Because of the verb's passive structure, linguistically it is not clear who admires whom: is it Narcissus admiring his reflection, or conversely, is the literary text bringing the reader's viewpoint into radical closeness to Narcissus' viewpoint? In the latter case, the subjects become unidentifiable in a process that simultaneously dissolves and unites with one another by means of duplication. This twofold

³ The visual representation of seeing or blindness is also radical in Caravaggio's oil painting entitled *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* painted at the very beginning of the 1600s. The painting refers to seeing in belief by depicting Thomas's eyes remaining in shadow and staring into the void beside the body of Christ, while the disciple identifies his Master by putting his finger into Christ's wound. Instead of eyesight, tactile sensation leads to spiritual recognition. To this extent, blindness in the physical sense and meeting the unknown are associated very similarly in the story of Narcissus and Thomas according to Caravaggio's interpretation. Although Narcissus' touch is soft, while Thomas' is rough, both connect to the body of the other (Jesus) or of the character believed as the other (Narcissus' reflection). In addition, both characters of Caravaggio do more than connecting when they offend borders by their touch. The wound of Jesus' body is revealed to the apostle as the sign of torture aiming at desacralization, while the untouchedness of the water of the source ceases to be the symbol of innocence due to Narcissus' touch.

vision finally summarises the internal conflict of Narcissus' personality. In Caravaggio's work the same splitting and duplication of the subject is revealed to us on the left of the centre line. If we were to upend the painting in our minds, the range of colours used is the only element that would distinguish this area from the original pattern.⁴

In the throbbing of the quantitative verse of *Metamorphoses*, the rhythm continuously invites the reader to reflect upon the aspect of time. The motif of Tiresias' blindness represents past and future, while Narcissus, stuck in self-love instead of reality, represents the frozen present.⁵ However, the gestures in the examined painting show an even more precise picture. Sunk in the present, Narcissus' left hand touching the water surface may be interpreted as a movement originating in the present, but directed towards the desired future. Thus, since the painted figure's face and upper body positioned on the left side of the picture do not perceive sobering reality, the tension between the two states can be construed as if Narcissus' face and the unstable position barely supported by his right arm conveyed the fragile moment of balancing. In other words, the present is in contrast to the aerial movement of the left hand, which might refer to the experience of the future and intensifies the viewer's traditional perception of past and future owing to the Western custom of reading from left to right.

Observing Narcissus' own means of understanding, what we have previously anticipated can now be asserted: experiences and hermeneutics were organised into a hierarchical order in Caravaggio's picture. Narcissus does not believe what he has experienced by touching; thus, this type of perception is subordinate to the ability of seeing. However, the dominance of *seeing* should not result in blindness in the interpretive process. Vision, more precisely, the narcissistic interpretation of vision rules over the hermeneutical possibility of *seeing*. The consequences of this hierarchical structure are permanent: interpretation stands in the way of reality. While we approach the figure of Narcissus as active receivers and, as such, interpreters of a work of art, we have to ask the provocative question: can we see, read, and, finally, understand reality, or are we captives of our own interpretive tastes? The possibility of falsehoods in our misjudged readings of texts and blind viewings of paintings stares back at us from the mirror that is the work of art. What is more, the acknowledgement of this is also in parallel with the phenomenology of the creation of the work of art. As Derrida points out, blindness is an unavoidable part of drawing or painting, since it is impossible to see the blank paper, canvas or unfinished painting and the model to be depicted at the same time (Derrida, 1993, p. 44-45). Just as this mandatory blindness can be acknowledged on account of painting, the aporia that the understanding of writing exclusively happens by reading (while the two can never happen simultaneously) is sustained throughout the writing process. This is why every piece of writing is

⁴ In Rainald Raabe's opinion, more differences could be found between the two figures (Raabe, 1996, p. 58).

⁵ Ovid refers to the moment when the present becomes frozen permanence by comparing Narcissus' figure to a statue in one of the climaxes of the narrative.

exposed to the fact of not being read until the first reading, which is a trivial parallel to Derrida's artistic blindness. Exposed to the insensibility of blindness, the state of not being read or state of deafness, art exclusively owes its ability to be experienced to its own composition and individual interpretation. This radical fragility gains a remarkably important role in the threefold relationship of author, work of art and receiver (Derrida, 1993).

In interpreting the central figure of Narcissus, we cannot avoid the recurring motif of water. Thus, we may pose the question independently: what story underlies the role of water in Ovid's text and Caravaggio's painting? Several readings on the nature of water are possible in *Metamorphoses*. Our first insight into the source comes from the narrator's perspective: '*fons erat inlimis*' (Met. III. 407), which means that the water source seems transparent. The description of the story of the source completes the narrator's own perception in the following lines, in which the reader is informed that no man or animal has ever touched its surface. As such, this source can be viewed as the symbol of untouched virginity. In the moment represented by Caravaggio, precisely this untouchedness ceased, which, owing to Ovid's original description, can also be associated with sexual intercourse. In Narcissus' perception, water first appears in its materiality when the hero quenches his thirst with it. As a drink, water is still transparent from the point of view of visuality (Met. III. 416), although the narrator anticipates the awakening of a new desire following the slaking of thirst in a previous line: '*dumque sitim sedare cupit, sitis altera crevit*'. After the smooth water surface is stirred by touch, Narcissus does not perceive it anymore as transparent, but rather as a medium behaving like a mirror. The tragic instance is that the reader and the viewer of the painting have been aware of the reflective nature of water from the start, while Narcissus still considers the nature of water transparent and is looking for that whom he wishes to glimpse beyond the water's surface. The illusion seen in the water behaving first as material, then a transparent medium and presently a reflective medium should finally break in the moment represented by Caravaggio, when water starts behaving as a border.

The topic of border and crossing borders offers individual modes of interpretation that reflect on several approaches mentioned so far. The hand sinking into the untouched water surface in Caravaggio's painting and the kissing of the water's surface in Ovid's poem imply sexual contact and the unfulfillment of autoerotic desires. In connection with water, Narcissus has not yet crossed the border of recognition in the painting. In *Metamorphoses*, following the moment represented in the painting, Narcissus partially crosses the border of recognition; however, since this has not alleviated his desire and his tragic fate has already been sealed, we should mostly consider the disclosure of the subject's internal borders, the splitting of the *self* and the *ego*. Narcissus' personality tragically splits between reality and desire, a circumstance that eventually leads to his own death. All this is related to the hierarchy of seeing and vision, especially if we first believe Narcissus and, accepting the transparency of water, also assume a seeing figure on the other side of the mirror. This interpretation is supported by the fact that when the two gazes

meet, Ovid's text describes the twin nature of the eyes.⁶ Both in the painting and the text, the clarity of the temporal borders and the impossibility of their crossing are just as important, as has already been mentioned in connection with the character of Tiresias and Narcissus' desire. Moreover, when comparing the two works of art, we may also perceive crossing intermedia borders, an act that eventually leads to the borders of our own interpretive process. The identification of borders, recognition of crossing borders or the lack of either ability may highlight the point wherein we lose the sense of reality – as happened to Narcissus – or, in our case, recognition of the work of art.

In conclusion, it can be stated that seeing and reading compete with one another in search of interpreting Narcissus' story. The basis of their exercise of power against one another lies in the story of the interpretive prejudices of Narcissus and his readers or viewers. This is why the mirror encourages us to look into ourselves and sincerely acknowledge that we need to reread the story and continually revise our own interpretations. We will only do so, however, if our aim is to experience ourselves as someone who understands. This is no more than a performative repetition of the above, about which we may calmly pronounce the verdict: it is redundant. Yet the stake, it seems, is how precisely this 'redundancy' can be turned into the indispensable domain of aesthetical discourse. Could this be accomplished by sustaining repetition?

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⁶ In Latin pointing out the twin nature of eyes may at once refer to the paired organ of seeing and to Narcissus' and his reflection's eyes in the experience of mirroring. This impossibility of choice reveals the same structure based on repetition and made infinite which has already been discussed. Due to its nature, repetition suggests identicalness in space, while in its temporality it calls for a history of origin. Thus, at first glance, the copy may always lead the interpretation to the theory of equality. Yet, its genealogy organises the experience of temporal succession into a (patriarchal) hierarchy. This hierarchy, which totalised the difference between the original and the forgery in the classical world of paintings in an aesthetical, ethical, and materialistic sense, was relativised with unexpected speed in the middle of the twentieth century in the artistic movement of pop art or the intertextuality of postmodern literature. This new legitimacy of repetition has, however, remained just as threatening to human relationships today, as it was fateful in Ovid's story.