

Problems with that Reflection in the Mirror

ROBERT TYMINSKI Review of: Kenneth A. Kimmel, *Eros and the Shattering Gaze: Transcending Narcissism*, Carmel, CA: Fisher King Press, 2011.

Kenneth Kimmel has written an intriguing Jungian contribution to the psychology of men, specifically centered on the concept of narcissism and how this impedes meaningful intimacy with others. The author's approach is not primarily couched in clinical language and theory but rather focuses on the practical issues of treating such men. It combines myth, folktales, Biblical stories, film, and clinical vignettes to offer a variety of perspectives on the problem of masculine narcissism. As such, this array widens its potential reading audience to non-clinicians who are interested in Jungian ideas and their relevance for their own lives. The author organizes his research and observations into three parts: the hopeless romantic stuck developmentally in a mother complex, a predatory use of relationships, and the process of deconstructing an armored self-hood through encountering the other, who can wound, limit, shame, and reject.

Kimmel introduces the reader to the tale of *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius (see Graves 1979, for an excellent version) as a framework for considering the self-involved man who be-comes ensnared by his own foolish desires. In that story, Lucius is consumed by a near idiotic passion, attempts to steal magical secrets from a sorceress, and ends up being turned into a donkey. This second-century Latin text thus serves to highlight a man's underdeveloped sense of relatedness, with a resulting cycle of inflation and deflation. The author also introduces us to the tale of Eros and Psyche as another angle on this relational dilemma. Kimmel bases his view of narcissism on both Jung and on the writings of the twentieth-century French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, whose work is grounded in the ethics of the unknowable other. Levinas's philosophy centers on a privileging of the position of the other as a person who cannot be made part of the self. Levinas, therefore, believes we each carry a fundamental ethical duty to the other in our

encounters with his or her alterity. Kimmel finds Levinas instructive for the topic of narcissism because when a narcissistic man, for example, in psychotherapy, faces the limitation of not being able to subjugate the other, this experience may “violently shatter the narcissistic illusions that maintain . . . end-less, romantically driven projections and erotic fantasies” (2011, 4).

From Jung, Kimmel relies on the *Rosarium* (1946/1954/1966) and especially the death *coniunctio* depicted beginning with plate 6. For Kimmel, this part of the sequence is significant in explaining the “fatal attractions” of the hope-less romantic who gets lost in the “fever of a new love’s enthrallment” (2011, 59). Such men suffer from what Kimmel sees as a split-off feminine part that they project onto their potential love partners in conflicted ways. He reviews Bill Clinton’s affair with Monica Lewinsky as well as Jung’s involvement with Sabina Spielrein, which has recently been made into a film star-ring Keira Knightley, Michael Fassbender, and Viggo Mortensen (*A Dangerous Method*, 2011, directed by David Cronenberg). The second part of the book covers the destructive aspects of such narcissistic behaviors, for example, hate, predatory tendencies, aggressive demands, and abusive relational patterns. Kimmel outlines how a man lost in narcissistic pathology ultimately destroys relationships over and over because he is prone to cycles of splitting that entail idealizing and then devaluing the other. This can go on until and unless a man encounters a shattering experience that humbles and shames him. Whether this event gets processed likely determines the course of the man’s life. Does he remain enslaved to his need to use the other? Or, as depicted in the myth of Eros and Psyche, does the pain of burning awaken him?

To be freed from his narcissistic shackles requires a significant and profound working through of the deep-seated vulnerabilities that typically impair such a man’s object relations. Kimmel finds that this can only occur when a man is wounded by the other and pauses to reflect, rather than rushing to defend himself. Why some men can free themselves and others cannot, the author does not answer. However, in Chapter 9, he brings in Levinas to posit why the encounter with the other is crucial for over-coming entrenched narcissistic defenses and character structure. “Throughout his writings

Levinas privileges a *proximity* of relation to the human other, in which only a kernel of the Infinite is revealed, over a mystical oneness and ascent that result from the dissolution of the subject into the Object” (2011, 205. Italics in original). Levinas believes that transcendence occurs by breaking through an ego that suddenly recognizes in the other qualities far beyond anything that a solitary self can generate. This is a bridge that not all men can take because it means grieving all which one cannot be and all which one has lost far too carelessly. This chapter on being wounded by the other is one of the strongest in the book because it conveys the profound psychological work required for a man trapped by his narcissism to grow.

A different kind of masculinity must evolve, one that distinguishes itself from the brittle facade that serves to maintain control for someone in a highly narcissistic frame of mind.

Kimmel returns here to Apuleius, brings in the film *The Graduate* (1967), and presents a detailed discussion of *Parzival* (von Eschenbach 1961)—all to give the reader a sense for how deflation occurs, how a wound eventually becomes integrated, and how an earthier masculinity, capable of accepting pain, takes hold.

The final chapter on love emphasizes what changes when a capacity for mutuality develops: a man seeking to shed his narcissistic armor must recognize not only that his subjectivity is limited, but also that he can be enriched and challenged by a subjectivity distinct from his own. This basic developmental milestone tells much about the origins of what went wrong. Kimmel notes,

Narcissism results in an avoidance of being seen, being revealed through another’s eyes, being unconcealed to oneself. It prevents the welcoming of the other in (her) differences and shared humanity, prevents a generous expansive-ness that considers the other before oneself. . . . These are echoes, I believe, of the infant’s original trauma—the loss of the maternal body that in fantasy seems all containing—always *there*, be-fore memory or words. (260. Italics in original.)

I suspect Bion might say that such a traumatic loss is not just a fantasy, but, for the infant, a truth that is unbearable (1962).

I heartily recommend *Eros and the Shattering Gaze: Transcending Narcissism* to

anyone interested in the psychology of men. It is a completely worthwhile read, although I note two criticisms. First, I personally would have enjoyed more clinical process. I found, for example, that the clinical material might have benefited from greater commentary on the transference and countertransference. A problem in working with narcissistic patients is how and when their rage shows up in the therapeutic relationship. There is, I think, widespread interest in understanding destructiveness directed at the analyst, which must be taken up for the patient to have a chance at consciousness of what he does to others. I would have liked to read what Kimmel does in these moments with his patients. The case narratives otherwise depict him as treating them compassionately and helpfully. My somewhat bigger objection is about Chapter 7, "A Deadly Narcissism: Saturn's Wounded Eros" (137–166). Invoking the archetype of the negative *senex*, Kimmel explores the rather gross failings of certain historical and fictional figures, who demonstrated abhorrence for human shortcomings while supposing themselves to embody moral, social, and political superiority. These include Saint Augustine, the Spanish Grand Inquisitor Tomás de Torquemada, Goethe's Faust, Melville's Captain Ahab, and Adolf Hitler. Moving back and forth between these categorically different narratives challenges the reader to accept multiple levels of exposition, for example, one referring to historical facts, another to the interpretation of such facts, and yet another to portrayals from fiction, as though they might be equally understood to illuminate catastrophically destructive behaviors emanating from masculine narcissistic grandiosity. For me, this amounts to pushing quite beyond the limits of archetypal psychology. My own feeling is that the book would have been better without much of it, although another reader might find value in this exploration of the cruelty of these characters, whom Kimmel seeks to explain through this archetypal viewpoint. In particular, I do not feel that Hitler fits in this chapter because he is simply too complex a figure to be addressed so briefly. Further, pathological narcissism is not an adequate explanation for Hitler or those who enabled him. The thorny problems inherent in handling German history of the Nazi era continually reveal themselves in academic controversies surrounding the extent of the population's denial, the fixity of the national character, and ultimately, the average citizen's complicity (see, for instance, Daniel Goldhagen's, *Hitler's Willing Executioners:*

Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust, 1997, or William Shirer's classic, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 1960/1991).

Autobiographies of Jewish survivors of Nazi Germany frequently, if not always, indicate that the genocidal actions of the regime looked obvious to anyone paying attention to what was occurring. Two I recommend are Gad Beck's *Und Gad Ging zu David* (1995) and Hans Keilson's *Da Steht Mein Haus* (2011). Beck's has been translated as *An Underground Life: Memoirs of a Gay Jew in Nazi Berlin* (2000). As to Hitler's psychological madness, a television documentary, *Inside the Mind of Ad-olf Hitler* (2005) examines Walter C. Langer's 1943 psychological profile of Hitler done for the Office of Strategic Services, which Kimmel cites in Chapter 7 (Kimmel 2011, 157). These sources provide a more comprehensive view of the tyranny of Nazi Germany under Hitler, and I think they underscore a fuller understanding that Hitler's crimes far exceeded in magnitude what can reasonably be asserted to originate in the narcissistic pathology of his personality.

In addition to Kimmel's discussion of Hitler, his other examples do not hold together coherently because too much is laid at the doorstep of one archetype, the negative *senex*. Perhaps these examples were chosen to represent cases of untransformed, even encapsulated and malignant, narcissism. It might have been better to use patient material to formulate the ways in which narcissism can become both behaviorally destructive and resistant to therapeutic intervention. We have all struggled in our practices with the occurrence of negative therapeutic reactions, and a discussion of destructive narcissism along such lines would have added to this book's clinical application.

To be fair, the author might have intended this chapter as cautionary against too much unbridled optimism about the possibility of transforming—or transcending—every facet of narcissism. He has called our attention to a basic narcissistic problem, namely the demand, which is sometimes aggressive, sometimes ag-grieved, and sometimes manipulative, to be mirrored too exactly because there is little appreciation of the subjectivity residing in the other. A shattering of this illusion can be productive within an

analytic relationship if it is handled carefully, but sometimes this may not be possible. Kimmel's book makes an important Jungian contribution, one that is well written and researched, to both the study of narcissism and men's psychology. For that, the author deserves much credit.

NOTE

References to *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* are cited in the text as CW, volume number, and paragraph number. *The Collected Works* are published in English by Routledge (UK) and Princeton University Press (USA).

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Abstract

This article reviews *Eros and the Shattering Gaze: Transcending Narcissism* by Kenneth A. Kimmel. Using a phenomenological approach, the author combines myth, folktales, Biblical stories, film, and clinical vignettes to offer a variety of perspectives on the problem of masculine narcissism. He divides his book into three sections: the hopeless romantic, a predatory use of relationships, and the de-constructing of an armored selfhood through encountering the other. The last section affords a perspective on how the author sees the transcendence of masculine narcissism occurring through an experience of a shattering—or wounding—other. The reviewer highly recommends this book, especially for anyone interested in a Jungian contribution to the study of narcissism and men's psychology. The reviewer also notes problematic aspects in one chapter that attempts to explore extreme, monstrous forms of what the author considers to be impenetrable pathological narcissism.

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