

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEORY OF THE IMAGE:
NARCISSUS AND THE OTHER IN THE MIRROR*

by

PIERRE LEGENDRE**

translated by PETER GOODRICH*** and ALAIN POTTAGE****

I. The Subject and the Instance of Representation

The youth dies, lost in the lovelorn contemplation of his own reflection in the water's surface. He exhales his despair at being unable to reach this "shadow of a reflected image," namely, his own face.¹ Then, according to the poem: "*O utinam a nostro secedere corpore possem!*". A literal translation of which might be: "Oh! that I am not able to separate myself from our body". Note that the text says "our body" rather than "my body." In other words, Narcissus addressed his own image as though it were another person with whom he nevertheless shared the same body. In so doing, he established the indissociable, indestructible, bond between body and image.

The modern mind is so thoroughly attuned to the calculative sciences that it is difficult to accept that the body is made present for the subject by means of an image. Even if this is accepted, it is difficult to take the further step of admitting that the status of the body is thereby modified, that in its translation by representation the body loses its status as a biological object and becomes something fictional. In other words, the body is not the body. Its construction has been transposed into the domain of the image; the body which we inhabit is indissociable from the grip of the image.

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** Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes, Section des Sciences Religieuses (Paris).

*** Department of Law, Birkbeck College, University of London, U.K.

**** Department of Law, London School of Economics, U.K.

1 "*repercussae ... imaginis umbra*", Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1985 ed.), Book III, verse 434, 110.

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At the same time, however, the elaboration of human speech takes into account the peculiar fact that the body cannot be said except insofar as it is in the grip of fiction (fiction here being understood in the sense of the Latin verb *fingere*: to mould so as to represent). The body can only become sayable if it makes itself an image. The basic axis of meaning — the bond between word and thing — is indissociable from the subject's structure of representation. Once in the grip of the image, the body can be captured by language.

It seems then that the knotting of body, image and word presupposes an instance of representation. The difficulty initially is to conceive the articulation of the image between body and word, while at the same time recognising the privileged relation between the image and the notion of the instance of representation.

My use of the term *instance* plays on two aspects of the word which can be derived from its Latin etymology.² On the one hand, "instance" indicates a way of remaining constantly present, in the manner of something that holds someone relentlessly, gripping them tightly, perhaps even so as to constitute a threat. On the other hand, "instance" also includes the notion of an insistent demand which requires satisfaction or which has to be addressed to a particular place. From this, the idea of a place in which the instance is the element of a topical differentiation can be derived.³

The subject is gripped tightly and unrelentingly by the image, which, to recall Ovid's formula "he did not know what he was seeing", constitutes the enigmatic stake in the story of Narcissus.⁴ After some false starts, which were finally overcome by Lacan's study of specularity,⁵ psychoanalysis has managed to address the imaginary substance of man's being. That conceptual elaboration should now be developed by recasting the whole question of the specular. Since Freud, the institutional dimension and stake of subjectivity has been neglected, much to the prejudice of clinical practice. Also, specifically in relation to images, as in

2 The verb *insto* (the present participle of *instans*), derives from *sto*. See Ernout and Meillet, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1979), 653.

3 A differentiation which in the circumstances relates to the trilogy of the *image*, the *body* and the *word*.

4 "*quid vident, nescit*", *supra* n.1, at verse 430, p.111.

5 "The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I", in Jacques Lacan, *Écrits. A Selection* (London: Tavistock, 1977), 1-8.

so many of the questions which it initiated, psychoanalysis is in danger of selling itself short, or of becoming nothing more than the exercise of writing glosses on particular authors. Consequently, the study of the image has to proceed by means of certain detours. Principally, it has to begin again with the familiar process of interrogating traditions, and in particular those which are contained in poetic, mythological, and religious works. The path to the unconscious dimension of the image and of speech — or, more simply, to the foundations of the subject — remains in rebellion against the line taken by scientific doctrines and glosses. The unconscious dimension of the life of the speaking being becomes plausible only when the enigmatic and opaque trace of our relation to images is replayed to us directly, as a structure that is at first sight impervious to the human condition. For that reason, and given that it holds us so relentlessly, the image will be approached progressively.

The same approach will be taken to the other aspect of the instance of representation: the idea of the place to which the image addresses itself. From this perspective, the image is taken as a message, because it bears a demand. In asking what demand, or why the message should be construed as such, I shall make use of classical texts.

1. *The Meaning and the Despair of Narcissus. Remarks on the Image and the Category of Nothingness*

To begin at an elementary level, one should first gather some sense of the idea of representability, without which the concept of the image crumbles into nothing. The story of Narcissus offers just such an introduction. How might the despair to which the lovelorn youth succumbs be seen as a sort of prototype of despair? Having arrived in the resting place of the dead, Narcissus continues to gaze at the surface of the Styx,⁶ which suggests perhaps that death is only a transitory point in the journey taken by his absolute desire to be joined with himself. What is at issue in this dual relation between subject and image for it to lend itself to such extremism?

Narcissus wastes away, and eventually dies, because of the impossibility of rejoining his image, an impossibility that is clarified and emphasised by something that we have already seen in the text: the bond

6 "... postquam est inferna sede receptus, In Stygia spectebat aqua", supra n.1, at verse 504-505, p.112.

6 Law and Critique Vol.VIII no.1 [1997]

which separates a subject and an image sharing the same body. In aspiring to embrace his image physically, Narcissus exhausts himself in the attempt to erase the boundary which separates self and image — leaving his delirium he cries “I am that one! I realise it and my image does not deceive me.”⁷ In effect, Narcissus undertakes the path of humanisation in the wrong direction, a direction that leads to the abolition of the image and so puts an end to the disembodiment of the body upon which the future of human representation depends. Reasoning in terms of the category of Interdiction, it can be observed that the basic law of the speaking being is one of division, and the most basic division is that between word and thing in respect of the body. On pain of death, the human subject must give up any attempt to undo this basic division of human life. The first point, therefore, is that Narcissus’ suffering is that sorrow which accompanies our terror at being confronted by the necessity of this division, which requires that we absent ourselves from ourselves and then master the resulting absence.

Ovid’s poem also helps us to conceptualise the relation between image and absence. The significant lines are these: *croceum pro corpore florem inveniunt foliis medium cingentibus albis*.⁸ In place of the absent Narcissus, the story places “a saffron-coloured flower surrounded by white petals”, which to this day we call the narcissus. What does this floral memorial tell us about the relation between subject and image?

At this point, and for good reason, the image is no longer held in the gaze of Narcissus. The image is offered instead to the gaze of thought, and it enunciates or witnesses a truth which is no longer corporeally present but exists only as a trace, or as the mark of what was. In other words, it represents an absence. The truth of Narcissus’ desire for his image becomes a commemorated truth. The reader of this poem in praise of inextinguishable desire sees that desire represented at the end of the story. Our relation to the image, in other words, is quite different from the relation through which Narcissus saw himself. We see the image as the trace of an absent presence, or to use a phrase which Schopenhauer borrowed from Jacob Boehme, we see the image as *signatura rerum*, the signature of thing.⁹ How should one read a trace, mark, or image which

7 “*Iste ego sum; sensi nec me mea fallit imago*”, *supra* n.1, at verse 463, p. 112.

8 *Supra* n.1, at verse 509-510, p.114.

9 This notion returns us to the long history of the theme of the book of nature. A classic passage from F. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Idea* (London: Kegan Paul, 1907), 284-297.

testifies to an absence?

I will first return to the conclusion of the myth of Narcissus, to the moment when the poem uses the metaphor of a floral memorial to capture the notion of the representability of absence. What is at issue in that notion of absence? Most immediately the question is that of the subject's relation to disappearance, to the plausibility of loss, and, beyond this, to death as the precondition of life. The flower is present *in the name of* [*au nom de*] an absent cause. In the space of the story, it effects a recurring delegation: the flower is present in the name of the youth Narcissus and in the name of his image; in the name of an absent body and also of a subject which has withdrawn into death; and, finally, in the name of his name. The narcissus as floral memorial does not restore the lost object but instead testifies to its irredeemable loss.

Translated to a space outside of the story of the death of Narcissus, the conclusion introduces the subject to the relation to nothingness which is implicit in the life of images. The subject has to dialecticise the alternation of presence and absence which makes the object, and the bond between word and thing, representable. The basic question is how to make that which is absent present in representation without denying the status of the absent object as, precisely, an absent being. Ovid touches on the question of a distance [*écart*], on the very essence of the image, and the phenomenon of the delegation of thing to image and of image to word. The story of Narcissus stages the impossible absence of the object, the impossibility of acceding to the category of nothingness and so to self-annihilation. Each life is lived in the face of the following problem: in order to enter into speech, the subject must live the constantly reiterated loss of the object, and the commemoration of that loss as it is indefinitely reiterated in the order of what we call symbolic life.

I have dealt, thus far, with two different meanings of the image: first, the *narcissistic image* — a description which follows Freud's attentive reading of certain poetic texts — and secondly the image understood as *trace*. It is essential to distinguish these two meanings if we are to appreciate the importance and complexity of the stakes manoeuvred by the institutional structures of society. However, although psychoanalysis now offers us the tools needed to deal with such a question, it should be noted that the legal, theological and philosophical traditions with which the civilisation of civil law has been associated since the mediaeval interpretative revolution had already foreseen the importance of distinguishing image and trace. In doing so, they followed the Roman

8 Law and Critique Vol.VIII no.1 [1997]

distinction between *imago* (image) and *vestigium* (a foot, and thence a footprint). Classical scholasticism made brilliant use of these two terms, not least in problematising the relation of man to the *Imago Dei* and to images in general.¹⁰

2. *The Image is Bearer of a Demand. Remarks on the Image as Message*

One aspect of the idea of an *instance of representation* is that such an instance is an element of a topical differentiation which is itself organised by a logic. The particular style of Ovid's poem itself suggests this differentiation by representing Narcissus' alienation in an image which he contemplates from afar and to which he speaks. The entire dramatisation of this scene depends upon the concept of the gap or distance which duplicates Narcissus, which divides him by splitting his being, but which remains unrecognised by him: he speaks to himself as he would to another. Here, some rather banal or naive questions come to mind: Where does this structure come from? What place is invoked by it? What place is it that is echoed by the image?

The point that the image is an echo emerges if one reads carefully the passages of the *Metamorphoses* which lead up to Narcissus's fatal embrace of his image. Take the conversation with the nymph Echo: "he got back just as many words as he had spoken."¹¹ If one relates this to a non-poetic text of Isidore of Seville, the logic of this topical differentiation becomes rather clearer. Isidore refers to a rock which creates an echo by the Latinised Greek term *icon*: "in answering a voice, it becomes the image of another's speech."¹² This observation can free us from the pervasive modern idea that images are necessarily associated with vision, and can lead us toward a more important issue, namely the profound relationship between image and speech.

It is relevant here to emphasise the dramatic intensity of the truth represented by Ovid's poem: the ineluctable tearing of the subject away from an attachment to animal opacity in order to enter into speech is a

10 Most notably, the thirteenth century scholastic Albert the Great, *Summa theologiae sive de mirabili scientia Dei* (Libri I Pars I, quaestiones 1-50A) vol.34(I) of *Opera Omnia*, 1978, Aschendorff.

11 "*totidem, quot dixit, recipit*", *supra* n.1, at verse 384, p.108.

12 Isidore of Seville (deceased 630) transmitted a great deal of latin antiquity to lawyers: in particular, in his *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. Lindsay (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911).

movement which has nothing to do with any merely mechanical access to reality. Rather, it can only be achieved at the price of splitting the being of man, not only through the image of himself as another, but also through the image of the speech of another. To translate this into the economy of language, when a child begins to speak, or to inhabit language, it is inevitably the image of the speech of another, which might indeed be one way of defining a proper noun. This division of the subject prepares its approach to representation and to the relation of signification; in short, it enables the subject to attach itself not to things but to words. The treatment of images is essential to this subjective work of abstraction.

The idea of an instance therefore enables us to understand better the logical structure of the fabrication of the subject, which is necessarily a question of the institution of images. We can usefully propose the notion that the instance of representation is a place, a place in which image and word originate, and in which representations of self and other are born. Ovid's poem identifies this place as a place which is addressed, namely the place addressed by Narcissus' demand for love. This is what makes Narcissus' image so vivid for him: the demand which, paradoxically, he addresses to himself bears witness to the existence of this place. This raises an unforeseen problem: the message which is unwittingly addressed by Narcissus to himself constitutes a circuit. The poem directs us to the essential issue: behind the recognition of the minimal reality which veils the representation of things — *what he thought was his body was but water*¹³ — there lurks an enigma which has to do with the principle of Reason. How can I ignore the fact that the other to whom I address my message is none other than myself? For the reader of the poem the problem is to understand Narcissus' illusion in relation to the message, and to draw out the implications of this illusion. Message and messenger are confused. One might here refer to Lacan's judicious observation that this is a sort of structural crossroads at which one has to take one's bearings.¹⁴

In order to understand the strange idea of a message-messenger it is instructive to recall Rimbaud's line, "I am an other" (*Je est un autre*), which well expresses something that psychoanalysis, in addressing the narcissistic phase of the subject's development, has clearly brought out by means of the theoretical notion of the imaginary structure of the self. As Ovid's fable makes clear in a mythical register, the subject does not

13 "corpus putat esse quod unda est", *supra* n.1, at verse 417, p.108.

14 Jacques Lacan, *supra* n.5, at 8-30, "Aggressivity in psychoanalysis".

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confuse itself with its self. The drama of Narcissus instantiates, within the mythical space of the narrative, the formula "I am an other". The formula message-messenger is apt because Narcissus is the messenger confronted with his own message. There is no real dialogue, only a form of reflexivity. The text reads: "...each time that I have stretched my lips down to the limpid waters, each time he has strained towards me with upturned mouth, ... when I smile, you smile back, ... I have seen your tears flow, when I have cried."¹⁵ The message consists in the very presence of the messenger, a presence which captivates him.

The capture¹⁶ of the subject by the image — as is suggested by the fragment from Isidore describing the rock "which captures the sound of the human voice" — seems on this basis to be the central element of the division of the speaking being which structures its entry into discourse, both at the level of the individual and at the level of society. Human communication is attained not through a maieutics of dialogue, but rather by way of an image, and, therefore, a sort of formalism. The concept of the message-messenger identifies a primordial structural impasse which is linked to the phenomenon of language. At the social level, it is left to the normative structures of a culture's symbolic order to perform the anthropologically essential task of manipulating the instance of representation in such a way that the narcissistic impasse might be taken up by the subject and so form the basis of social exchange.

II. *The Other in the Mirror and the Subject's Speculation on Similarity. The Narcissistic Basis of Society*

It is now necessary to address the myth of Narcissus in terms of its role in the cultural structuration of identity. The human would be unthinkable without the bonding of body, image and word, or without an instance of representation. It follows that society itself would be unthinkable if this wager, which is essential to life within the species, were not made. It is important, therefore, to develop the study by asking how the mechanism at work in the mythology of Narcissus, and which psychoanalysis has carefully brought to light, is accounted for within the structure of a society. How does it perform its role in a manner that is

15 "quotiens liquidis porreximus oscula lymphis, His totiens ad me resupino nititur ore ... Cum risi, adrides. Lacrimas quoque saepe notavi Me lacrimante tuas." *Supra* n.1, at verses 451-452, 459-460, p.110.

16 *Supra* n.12, "... humanae vocis sonum captans ..."

intelligible to the subject, and how does achieve the stability appropriate to an organisation based upon speech.

From an anthropological perspective, the essential issue is that the subject's point of greatest vulnerability is also the point of its meeting with the institution. In all cultures the principle of institutionality necessarily has to do with the imaginary constitution of the self, the alienation of the subject in its image, and the love of the self as the embrace of another, all of which constitute what I describe as the *material of narcissism*. We are confronted with an ineradicable fact whose importance is hard to gauge because the link between social function and representational logic has not yet been established. This is not in itself surprising. The belief structure presupposed by modern scientism has sought to close off inquiry into this problem. There are, therefore, good reasons to begin again, at the basic level at which we left it, with the phenomenon of narcissism: how can the classical impasse of narcissism be transposed so that it might be assumed by the subject and form the basis of social exchanges?

In order to grasp in what sense the narcissistic structure of a society is essential, it is important to appreciate that the subjective mechanism that underpins Ovid's myth serves an essential requirement of life: that something should be preserved even as it is transcended. This is not a reference to some sort of psychologism, but to the Hegelian notion of *Aufhebung*,¹⁷ or, more straightforwardly, a recognition of the symbolic character of what is in issue in the phenomenon of representation as such, and which is normally processed by an institutional dialectic.

What Narcissus finds senseless — "he did not know what he was seeing" - relates to the source or origin of his image. But what then is this source for the subject, or for Narcissus, who alone can be present before his own image? It is an origin which is pure; or, to adopt Derrida's phrase, it is "the non-reference to the self."¹⁸ To cite Derrida again: "And if the

17 This term returns us both to the idea of gathering together, conserving, and to that of suppression or abolition. It plays a very important role in the development of Hegelian thought on negativity and the dialectic. See the remarks of Hyppolite, the translator of *The Phenomenology of Spirit* into French (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1947), 19-20; and also A. Kojève, *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 554-559. J. Derrida addresses the question of Narcissism and specularity in terms of the problematic of *Aufhebung* in *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 283-288.

18 "Irreference a soi", Derrida, *ibid.*, at 283.

12 Law and Critique Vol.VIII no.1 [1997]

source has no profile for itself, it is like an absolute glance which being always opened wide and thrown toward the visible, cannot itself perceive itself, never emerging from its night.”¹⁹ This brings out the idea that the scene constructs the self as an external object which it interrogates, not in a causal mode — why is this object here? — but rather according to a mode of suffering consciousness: why am I not an unseparated presence?

There is an important lesson to be found in this scene. It is the model or mould of all the *scenes of origin* encountered by men; it is the original gaze, or the structural point of the logic of representation which founds the subject’s sense of being in the world or its sense of the being of the world, a being which is supported by speech. Before being summoned to inhabit what modern jargon, in its unwitting dealings with the structures of Interdiction, calls parental images, human beings enter into an elementary form of knowledge; namely, that of the instance of specularity. How is this instance to be presented in the absolute form of narcissism?

A mirror is an operation of division which necessarily transforms: it presents an origin as an outcome. It transforms an origin into an outcome, or into something from which it derives, much as in Ovid’s story the image comes from Narcissus. The elements of this operation can be set out by asking three essential questions.

First, what is an origin within the phenomenon of representation? Or, more precisely, how does the origin come to be manifested to the subject; how does it become an effect of representation? The I [*le Je*] must be identified as the point to which any presence is related, including the presence of this I in the world, the image of the self in the world, and the words which it utters. This source or origin, however, only knows itself by means of that which is given to it in its presence as object and according to the different modes of this object. Moreover, it only knows itself as the one who sees this object, not as a gaze upon the gaze which sees. With regard to the theory of the relation of representation in the story of Narcissus, it becomes apparent that the knowledge which the I has of the I is a falsely reflexive knowledge: the I as a point of origin of its own presence in the world is discovered only through this other as object, namely its image. In strictly Hegelian terms, the source or origin is here a result.²⁰

Second, what is the essential lesson of Narcissus’ oscillation between the recognition and non-recognition of his own image? The problem is

19 *Ibid.*, at 284.

20 The source results here. *Ibid.*, at 281.

that of pure identity: how can one coincide with one's mirror image, and who or what warrants this coincidence? This essentially philosophical problem — and here some reference should be made to the scholastic problematic of *id cuius est imago* (that of which the image is an image)²¹ — gives us a clue as to the being of the image for the subject. By this I mean that a transcendental element is at stake in the relation of resemblance, an element which has to do with something other than the concrete relation of resemblance for a given subject or, if I put it like this, the subject of the face. This transcendental stake refers the subject — any subject — to a guarantee of coincidence, or, more precisely, to the Reason of signs, to pure alterity as the guarantee of the presence of the world as a relation of meaning which is taken to be true. In other words, the object of Narcissus' oscillation between the recognition and non-recognition of his image is the guarantee of his divided being, the foundations of truth, or the presupposition of the instance of the third [*tierce*] which founds any relation to the object, the other-than-self, and which, as we shall see, undoes any dual relation with the object. This suggests that the structure of the human subject is a structure of representation. Narcissus is faceless for Narcissus: because he has no guarantee he is denied access to the mirror which, in representing the Reason of signs, is always a transcendental theatre. Narcissus is thus, ultimately, in the untenable position of a divine creator, for whom the question of the mirror or of the guarantor simply does not arise.

Third, what makes the mythical circuit of speech work? A proper understanding of the original scene of communication at the highly abstract level at which Ovid places it, suggests that the answer is a division or a cut [*coupure*]. In using this term, which was much favoured by Valéry,²² and which has enjoyed much success in contemporary

21 Thus Albert the Great expounds a doctrine of Reference through the image for the human animal: the creature which possesses a truth copied from the divine truth ("*creatura ... veritatem habet exemplatam a divina veritate*"). In the same way that the oath of the juror refers to God, so also a person who worships an image of a saint refers, through the image, to the truth of God. Commentary *Super Matthaeum*, ch.5, verse 34 (*Neque per caelum = Do not swear at all, not even to the sky ...*), *Opera Omnia*, 1987, vol.21, Part II, 112.

22 "It is an extraordinary fact that we talk to ourselves and that this discourse is indispensable to us ... Who speaks? Who listens? It is not exactly the same person ... This voice can become (morbidly) a complete stranger. The existence of this speech of the self to the self is the sign of a cut. The possibility of being *several* is necessary for reason, but also used by it. Perhaps we take the image

philosophy and psychoanalysis, I take it to designate that which is at work in the reflexivity of the relation of self to self, namely the division of the subject, which implies its presence in the world, or, as I have already suggested, the mechanism of objectification of the I as another for the I that sees itself. This presence of the self as an effect, as an origin that is a result, is unavailable to Narcissus.

The mirror is a structure, or montage, of speech and division. It is a logical presupposition of human representation, and it signifies for the subject. It signifies in two senses. First, it mobilises the machinery of meaning, and constructs the subject hermeneutically as the interpreter of its own representation. Secondly, according to the juridical meaning of signification, division notifies the subject of an irremediable loss, or, according to the Hegelian category of negativity, the torment of origin. Indeed, a Hegelian phrase summarises the subjective status of the dividing cut: "separation from origin" [*Trennung von dem Ursprung*].²³ In these terms, Narcissus' futile despair expresses the horror that follows in the train of non-separation.

The material of narcissism is therefore an ineradicable given of the organisation of all social bonds. Again, Valéry is instructive:

Because I love myself! ... oh ironic reflection of myself!
Oh my kisses! flung at the calm fountain

....

Must I give my life to your love, oh sweet shadow?²⁴

When at this point in his movement of oscillation Narcissus says "I love myself", he situates his image as other than himself, as the object of his gaze. We know, on the basis of the preceding observations, that this

as other to the impulse of the mirror", P. Valéry, manuscript edition (Paris: C.N.R.S., 1918-1920, 1958), vol.7, 615.

- 23 The formula relates back to what Hegel says of the relation of parents to children: "the piety of the children with regard to their parents is in its turn affected by the emotional contingency of their having become form themselves, or in themselves, in the form of an other who disappears so as to attain a being-for-itself and a conscience proper to itself through its separation from its source — a separation in which this source dries up." *Phenomenology of Spirit*, VI, A, vol.II at 24. One could say that the origin suppresses itself.
- 24 "Car, je m'aime! ... o reflet ironique de Moi! O mes baisers! lancés à la calme fontaine ... Faut-il ma vie à ton amour, o spectre cher?" Valéry, in one of the versions of "Narcisse parle" [Narcissus speaks], in P. Valéry, *Oeuvres* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), Vol.I, 1558-1559.

situating of what is other than the self, at the most basic level of representation, does not lead to any expropriation of the subject, but constitutes a movement of delegation of the subject towards the image. If we analyse things in this way, that is, by analysing the grammatical phrasing of the “I love myself” as a reflexive form, the movement of delegation appears as the construction or assembling of the elements that constitute the mirror. This delegation of self to self presupposes the following: the emergence of the object, of the image, or, in other words, of the source as effect, of the origin as outcome; the assumption of a guarantee of coincidence, or a relation of resemblance; an irremediable loss, a separation from oneself, the assumption of negativity. We have here, therefore, in the formula “I love myself”, the elements of the composition and transposition of the material of narcissism, and we can in this way understand the movement of delegation when Narcissus recognises his own image. Narcissus is transported, literally: the constitutive alienation of the subject in its image finds its greatest accomplishment in the transport of love. And, to the extent that there is transportation, we are referred to the concept of metaphor which, as its etymology suggests, is defined as a transport.

The moment in which Narcissus recognises his own image can be defined as an *instance of metaphorisation*. Let us return to the basic elements: the origin as outcome, the guarantee of resemblance, negativity. We find that they are assumed by the relation of self to self in the phrase “I love myself”, which we now know to be sayable only if the self is seen as an other. “I love myself” presupposes that “I is an other”. The moment in which the image is recognised is a metaphorical moment in the sense that it is the metaphorisation of the other to the self, and of the other as self. The material of narcissism is the pillar of both subjective and social identities.

The question of the image is not only a question of the alienation of the self. Alienation, which is only one aspect of the problematic of specularity, is an articulation or transposition. It makes the articulation of subject and institution — the symbolic — thinkable. The symbolic has to be representable; and, given this necessity, it has to reproduce the original scene of communication — the divided subject’s relation to the other of the self — in order to modulate and develop it at a level which transcends or exceeds the subject. The metaphorisation of alienation is the foundation of symbolic organisation. There is more to the image than the impasse of the self because the instance of representation, which has

to do with the image and which might be termed the *imaginal*, constitutes the basis or the starting point of this transport of metaphorisation. In other words, for the *imaginal* the symbolic is already there.

If identity emerges from the elaboration of the narcissistic impasse, this elaboration, which creates the similar as a term of the dialectic of the mirror, would be inconceivable for the subject as such were it not for the cultural use of the mirror. Focusing on the structures of western culture, my analysis will develop two themes. First, it reveals the fate of the narcissistic structure by looking at its encounter with the principle of institutions, that is, with the symbolic order of a particular society. It then returns to the question of the mirror as a presupposition of metaphorisation, the aim being to define the contradiction which requires us to think of the mirror — or, here, society as it presents itself as a mirror — as being capable of fulfilling the function of representation, or of holding an image up to the subject.

1. *The Narcissistic Process and the Differentiation of the Other.
Observations on the Institution of the Similar*

The aim of this analysis is to grasp the process of identity in its unavoidable stage of transition, what might be termed its elementary narcissistic structure. One of the difficulties of embarking on such a study is that in contemporary western society, which claims to have neither totem nor taboo, this narcissistic structure — the transition of the questioning subject towards dialecticisation by the mirror of culture — is no longer perceived. We fall back instead on ersatz versions of the mirror, which are in essence totalitarian even though they are supposed to shelter the structuration of the subject — the liberated subject which identifies with advertising images. In these circumstances, the metaphorisation of the other of the self, and of the other as self, is no longer understood to involve institutional structures. My observations run contrary to contemporary clichés about the sovereign subject which, because it denies its own division, is supposed to have no similars. What then does similar mean? What does it mean to represent similarity to oneself or to identify oneself with the similar?

When he recognises his image, Narcissus says, “I am he who is over there ... I burn with love for me.”²⁵ To recognise oneself, to identify oneself with the other of the mirror, is to know oneself to be divided and referred

25 *Supra* n.1, Book III, at verse 463, 464, p.84.

to that other, the status of the mirror being that of a dividing third instance or the inaugurator of a relation which I have elsewhere termed the separating bond.²⁶ It is by virtue of this distance, by virtue of the very fact of the dimension of division, that the image of the self always bears the stamp of the other. This irreducible aspect of alterity, which stamps the image, founds the subjective question to which institutional interventions give shape and status. Thus the question of a relation to alterity is at once intrasubjective and institutional. On the other hand, to accommodate oneself to the alterity of one's image by symbolising division is the basis of the subject's relation to culture. Our problem is to envisage by what means and in what mode, the metaphorisation of the other is constructed by the social order of images.

I shall return to the idea of transport that I raised in connection with metaphor. The mode of the discourse by which Narcissus addresses the other of the self is that of the transport of love. This gives us a valuable clue in dealing with those cultural constructions which are based on the material of narcissism. The representation of alterity, to which the amorous subject refers, is a universal condition of humanity. This representation or staging inevitably constructs the image of otherness that it holds out for the world. And it is at just this point, where it is at its most fragile, that the speaking animal anchors itself to institutionalised alterity, using the multiple links which it offers to the figure of the other. At the level of Narcissus' other, we reach the level of another sort of other, the absolute Other rather than the narcissistic other, the former enabling the subject to assume identity and alterity in one movement. The absolute Other therefore signifies the point of opening which the subject uses to organise its narcissistic bond, not only by referring to itself but also by reference to all others. It is important to illustrate this mechanism in order to grasp its nature and to gauge its significance in the unfolding of the institutional order.

In dealing with the western universe of representation, we can appropriate some traditional elements. The theme of *the divine Face* is one of the most interesting of these because of its links with theology, philosophy and the arts. It shows us quite precisely the nature of a society's imaginal instance, and how the representation of the absolute Other, that is to say the Image of the principle of alterity, comes to play a metaphorical mediating role for the subject at the same time as it makes the idea of culture possible. By that I mean that it makes possible the

26 P. Legendre, *Le désir politique de Dieu* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), 132.

government of the empire of narcissistic images which constitute what we call the human community. Of course the theme of the Face of God is only one manifestation of the European theatre of images: nevertheless, the richness of expression that it provides allows it to be invoked as a representative discourse.

The theme of the divine Name and the divine Face emerged from the Jewish tradition before being taken up, enriched and amplified, by Christianity. I am most interested here in Latin Christianity, and its iconographic and theoretical developments. Since the mediaeval revolution of the interpreter which opened the era of institutional modernity, Europe has had at its disposal a vast corpus of scholastic texts in which the interrogation of man's encounter with the image of the Creator (*Imago Dei*) finds its natural place. But, to follow the fable of Narcissus, and to grasp the fact that all theories of the image are structurally moored to the debate about the image, we shall give some consideration to one form of the cult of the Holy Face, which inspired a devotional literature and an almost uninterrupted exercise of the plastic arts, from the end of the Middle Ages up to Matisse. This concrete example suggests how the non-correspondence of self and other — the impossibility of the subject ever joining its image — opens on to the dimension of absolute, irremediable, alterity, a dimension which engulfs any relation to the similar other.

The problematic of the Holy Face emerged from a complex legend whose basic elements are common to the Eastern and Western traditions. According to the Latin tradition, it is linked exclusively to the legend of Veronica, who in one old version is said to have met Jesus, who asked her for a piece of cloth, pressed it to his face, and gave her back the cloth imprinted with his image.²⁷ In another, mediaeval version, which is concerned with the suffering of Christ and which has taken over the modern tradition, Christ's self-portrait is presented rather differently. The story tells of a woman from Jerusalem who wiped Christ's face as he ascended Calvary; the image of Christ remained imprinted on the cloth. This produced the true image (*vera icona*) of the Saviour. The name of the legendary heroine of this episode of the Passion is taken from the ancient tradition: *Veronica*, which according to Greek etymology means bringer of

27 On the history of this legend, see J.A. Robilliard, *Dictionnaire de spiritualité ascétique et mystique* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1964), sub *Face*, col.27-28. Numerous other indications can be found in A. Chastel, "La Véronique", *Revue de l'Art* (1978), 71-78.

victory, is also the name given to the veil bearing the image of the Holy Face (*the veronica*). Notice the semantic shift, from the name of the legendary saint to the Effigy of Christ (*Effigies Christi*), to the prodigious image which was imprinted on the veil and venerated by pilgrims in the Middle Ages.

The representation of alterity — in this case the Holy Face, the figure of the absolute Other which was invented by Christian societies — organises the offer to the subject for which it metaphorises the other of the self and the other as self. For each subject who is of this culture, this representation founds the second order of the image, and it is by means of these procedures that the institution of images is inaugurated. Liturgies and rituals bear witness to this shift in register. We are no longer in a relation of symmetry, or a point for point correspondence with Narcissus' impasse with his image; we are dealing with the advent of the other, not of the self as an other, but of the great Other who bears the imprint of the divine, which pilgrims came to admire. We should attempt to define the terms of this change of register.

2. *The Staging of the Absolute Other*

There are three essential points here:

- (a) *In the representation of the absolute Other invented by Christian societies, the recognition of distance literally makes the image prodigious*

The holy object, the divine self-portrait, the true icon, or painterless painting, is given the Greek term *acheiropoietes*, or works made without the intervention of the hand, the term which in Byzantine Christianity was used to designate the most important icons. We may leave to one side for the moment the works of classical painting, and remain with the reliquary of miracles which was exhibited in Saint Peter's in Rome and venerated by the tradition throughout the Middle Ages.

The ritualistic or liturgical staging of the subject presupposes a primary element which is often overlooked. This element is the *sine qua non* of the prodigious image, the precondition without which it could neither come into being nor produce its effects; namely, the construction of an uncrossable distance, an irreducible gap, or a void which cannot be filled. In common with all holy dialectics, the believer's veneration of the

Holy Face presupposes a separation from something incommensurable. The metaphorisation of pure alterity by the representation of an absolute Other, which thereby acquires for the subject the status of a transcendent image, is effected by assuming that which tore Narcissus in two: a separation from self. The representation of the Holy Face is first and foremost an *apologia* or defence of the gap, and it is on the basis of this rhetoric of division that the divine can work subjectively as a metaphor for the void and for the gap.

What follows depends upon the demonstration effected by the Veronica as a mirror in the second order of representation. What is this demonstration? First, that the overcoming of Narcissism is nothing other than a form of accession to a limit, or more exactly to the principle of limitation. In cultural terms this is precisely what was at issue in the veneration of the divine portrait; it was a means of setting the subject on the way to a recognition of this principle of the limit. Reasoning in modern terms, one might say that to admire oneself in the divine image gives the key to the image of the self as an unattainable image. This mode of subjective access to the limit, to socialisation through an essentially religious structure, is a condition of subjective life; it institutes the separation between the self and its image.

(b) *The representation of the absolute Other constructs the subject's relation to the similar: Narcissus is stuck at this point, preserved yet superseded*

To return to the divine image gathered by Veronica, a hymn composed in the fourteenth century in honour of the Holy Face contains a phrase noted by Chastel: *Dataque Veronicæ signum ob amoris* (Given to Veronica as a sign of love).²⁸ If Narcissus' quest is sustained by the transport of love, then we find the same discursive stamp in this ritual scene. The problematisation of a relation to the other in the representation of the absolute Other is conceivable only on the basis of desire. Veronica's veil is a mirror which is offered to the subject of the phrase "I love myself."

The persistence of the narcissistic "I love myself" cannot be doubted and finds an echo in classical art, as, for example, in Durer's 1513 engraving of the veil. The artist created a Holy Face which reproduced his own features in virtually the same form as they appear in his self-portrait

28 Chastel, *ibid.*, at 72.

of 1500.²⁹ Nor are the mystics, in this regard, far behind. Consider, for example, the amorous passion of Thérèse de Lisieux for the divine face: "Your Face is my only fatherland", she exclaims in her poem "To live for love". At the level of montage where the absolute Other emerges, we re-encounter narcissistic desire.³⁰

Having taken note of the distance between subject and image which is instituted by the ritual representation of the principle of alterity, and which figuratively symbolises the absolute Other, the basis of the operation becomes clear: there is a transfer of narcissistic desire — the desire of the other for its image — towards this Other, the absolute Object which is made present through the agency of ritual. This transition from Ovid's fable to the social theatre of the Holy Face venerated by the believer, institutes the metaphorisation of the other at two structural levels, that of the subjective and that of the cultural. The principle of alterity acquires the status of a metaphor, or a specular object. Hence, the social construction of the distance which makes the cultural entry of the subject into alterity possible should be analysed as the transposition of the logic of the mirror, a phenomenon upon which the entire normative system is dependent. Law itself, as a representational effect which civilises the subject — in other words, law understood as a symbolic structuration — depends upon this logic. It is therefore no exaggeration to say that in bringing to light the production of the other as a specular object, we are isolating the social mechanism of identity within the western cultural tradition.

The motor principle of this mechanism is of importance to anthropology, and its fragility has been identified by psychoanalysis. In order that the metaphorisation of self and other should take shape in an institutional perspective of differentiation, that is to say, one which founds the relations between subjects in the distance which is essential to recognition of the other than self, identity can become intelligible only if it is constructed as a mediated relation between the self and itself, mediated, that is, by a principle of alterity which is posited as being itself identical with itself. The possibility of the subject assuming its own division, which founds its identity and from which its entry into a relation of alterity proceeds, is played out on this basis. The construction of the principle of alterity as it is produced by the scene of the Holy Face, has meaning only because the absolute Other which is made metaphorically

²⁹ Chastel, *ibid.*, at 75-76.

³⁰ Robilliard, *supra* n.27, at col.32.

present coincides with itself, or is itself identical with itself. The metaphor of the absolute Other should be understood as the representation of a relation of identity for the divided subject. Here belongs the vast theological reflection on the Holy Trinity, which from this perspective resolves itself into an attempt to dialecticise an identity thought in the mode of a ternary division which constitutes a unity. In other words, western culture does not conceive the construction of a pure void, or Nothingness, but rather the absence of an Object which is indefinitely destined to attain a rediscovered presence.

Identity is therefore a relation. According to this proposition we can appreciate that the operative mechanism which mobilises representation is based upon the formula "I am an other." Any socialised relation with an other bears the stamp of narcissism, or, more precisely, the stamp of the relation of the subject to its image of the other. It therefore becomes easier to understand that the recognition of the other — what I call the moment of metaphorisation — is at once the metaphorisation of the other than the self and the other as self. From this perspective, culture is a generalisation of the logic of the mirror.

That is the lesson to be learned from putting Ovid's fable and the legend of the *Veronique* in perspective. We discover the most basic stage in human communication: the absorption of the other, any other, in the imaginary constitution of the I. We also establish, through the institution of a distance, or a separation from self, that the construction of identity, or of the relation to self and the relation to the similar, is a three-part scene. This doubled ternarity was quite remarkably set out by Matisse in his "Study for Saint Veronica". He departs from the preceding pictorial tradition in which the veil carrying the image the Holy Face is painted, by including the gaze of the viewer: Veronica shows the veil to a believer who contemplates the Holy Face, the God in whose image he himself is made, and the whole of this scene is offered to the spectator of the Study.

Identity as a relation, or the construction of a relation between self and similar, involves placing the subject under a reference to the absolute Other which guarantees a necessary distance or gap; it is placed under the banner of the principle of alterity, the Other which is beyond any foundation, the Other which founds all bonds with the other. This is the kernel of institutional differentiation. We can therefore define human society as a generalised mirror and the indefinite multiplication of mastered specular objects, which are mastered because they are referred to the dimension of the Third (*Tiers*).

These observations make the terms of our starting point, Narcissus placed before the enigma of the image or the other of the mirror, even clearer. For each subject the other is a supposition. The problem is to make that supposition plausible and viable: that is the basic principle of the enterprise of instituting images. The question of Narcissus allows us to decipher the relation to the world as a process based upon the subject's constitution of the world for himself, and to measure the effect of representation which normative systems have to deal with permanently: others are first and foremost specular objects, or a collection of other symmetrical "I's". If we have properly understood this primordial fact, juridical structures of differentiation become logically referable to the representation of the absolute Other, which I term Reference. Structures of kinship, if they are seen otherwise than according to platitudinous theories of social regulation, lie at the heart of those great manoeuvres of identity which institute the human subject as a living incarnation of a relation to the similar.

(c) The representation of the absolute and the problem of instituting Reason

The legend of Veronica shows how the divine image was introduced into the narcissistic relation. In constructing the void through the very fact of its own instituted place, the absolute Other is the figure that guarantees the principle of alterity and the procedures for the metaphorisation of the image of the other than self and the other as self at the level of the institution. The example of the Holy Face allows us to identify what is in issue for the subject in the scene of division which is thereby projected on the social stage. We can now develop this explanation so as to grasp the extremity involved in the power of staging the absolute Other, or of presenting the absolute specular Object to the subject.

The logic of representation is such that the various elements or indices of the problematisation of the mirror which we have just invoked, once they are mobilised at the social level, are referable to this scene of division. In particular, if the status of the absolute Other is one of specular presence, this mode of presence suggests the way in which culture manoeuvres the origin or the source of what presents itself as the image of the subject, of the outcome which the structure of the mirror produces as origin. The question of origin is therefore an effect of

representation, a question which puts the seeing subject in relation with the enigmatic presence of the other as being, according to Ovid's formula, "that which he sees but does not know". To echo the language of the *Metamorphoses*, I shall summarise what is in issue for the subject in the scene of the Holy Face by reference to an extract from one of Borges' poems: "... the mirrors of the Eternal ... That which has neither when nor why."³¹

What this means is that the operation is one of reversal. The absolute Other of division becomes a figuration of the original Other; it is, yet again, an origin as a result. It is an effect of representation which is configured as a *scene of origin*. This observation takes us back to the foundations of the question of narcissism; the problem of representing the self for the subject, in which the origin is no more than a supposition which makes the image of self plausible. More precisely, the problem of an unrepresentable representation of self — a problem which Louis Marin's study of the Veronica laboriously revolves around³² — is not the problem of working out whether the unrepresentable can in fact be represented, but rather that of working out what is so unattainable for the subject in this representation: namely, the point of origin, the source of the subject's own image, locked in a gaze in which it cannot see itself. This gives a new and rather unexpected slant to Pierre Nicole's observation that "bit by bit we will create so detailed a portrait that we will be able see in each moment everything that we are."³³ I can think of no better way into the problem with which we are concerned here, namely the question of how to conceive of the radicality of the power wielded by social organisation in its manipulation of the absolute specular Object, towards which we address our desire to see 'all that we are' in every moment of our lives. This is the principal lever which power uses and abuses in its role of instituting Reason.

We can see quite clearly in the example of the ritual construction of the Holy Face just what the representation of alterity ordains in relation to the institution of the similar for man. Narcissus' senselessness is reincorporated in the service of life, or transformed into Reason. By virtue

31 From a poem of Emmanuel Swedenborg, reprinted in J.L. Borges and O. Ferrari, *Ultimes dialogues* (Paris: Zoé/Aube, 1988), 85.

32 Louis Marin, "Figurabilité du visuel: la Véronique ou la question du portrait à Port-Royal", *Nouvelle revue de psychanalyse* 35 (1987), 51-65.

33 Extract from *Traité de la connaissance de soi-même*, which is cited from *supra* n.32.

of distance the unrepresentable is relativised and the subject's absence from itself is no longer an abolition or annihilation of the subject: the other can come to being as the similar and this similar is instituted because it receives the mark of Reason. In these terms, Reason is the representation of the specular object itself, or the structural or anthropological function of giving life to representation, of causing the speaking animal to live and to reproduce according to the law of the species. Reason can therefore be called the Reason of representation, the Reason of signs and categories, the Reason of the subject. Three brief observations might help to elucidate the institutional aspect of this concept of reason and its role in representing the principle of alterity and the way in which it introduces us to the political signification of the absolute specular Object, the image in which, as Nicole's formula has it, we are summoned to see all that we are.

First, the religious representation of the principle of alterity in the form of the specular Object shows religion's role in guaranteeing Reason by giving the subject a way of putting an end to the infinite regress of causation. In other words, the fact that the specular object serves to mediate the subject's access to the world allows us access to a representation which makes of the original Other a causal Other. This dimension of instituted distance fabricates the specular Object as an object which is at once caused and causal, and allows any subject to come to presence in representation: the realm of the visible becomes a universe of objects which is outside the subject, but which is nonetheless still attached to the theatre of narcissism and hence to the question of all that we are.

Secondly, lying behind religion there is a pure Politics, a power over the most basic principle of humanity, one which manoeuvres the specular object and which by this means governs the narcissistic relation. Power, therefore, is in a direct relation with the Reason of representation. In order to institute the similar, a society constructs an image of all that we are. Politics, therefore, is eminently religious³⁴, which is evident if we

34 See Emile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européens* (Paris: Editions du Seuil), II, 267-272, which shows that the derivation of the latin *religio*, is not from the verb *ligare* (to bind), but from *legere* (to collect together, bring back to oneself, recognise, and by extension, to read). It is for this reason that I have tended to understand religion as the assemblage of montages and procedures which put human beings in the position of collecting together, bringing back to one themselves, recognising and reading the discourse of Interdiction.

attend to the etymology of the word itself. Politics occupies the structural position of the *Theos* of antiquity in the sense that Herodotus gives to that term — it posits things and the universe³⁵ — and which may be translated as follows: its function is that of posing and exposing a mode of presence of the world, and of the world for the subject, through the theatrical representation of the specular Object.

Thirdly, it can be observed by way of the religious staging of the principle of alterity, that the symbolic absolute Other is intangible. No-one can touch Reason, the Reference, or the absolute Mirror. This is the core meaning of all those legal manoeuvres which are designed to protect the social representation of foundations. Among those manoeuvres, which lie dormant in a secularised western culture which has invented more modern normative methods of socialisation, there is one quite essential technique, namely those doctrines of blasphemy which have now become so obsolete and incomprehensible, despite their renewal in twentieth century totalitarian empires. If, however, we remain with the religious tradition rather than with its totalitarian appropriations, we can see that blasphemy is both a matter of (criminal) social jurisdiction and a question of (penitential) subjective jurisdiction; in other words, it has to do with both dimensions of western practices of power. It institutes an absolute crime, in a form that is very similar to the Roman notion of *laesa majestas* or treason. Because it involves an attack on an indestructible divinity, it is a victimless crime. The crime is considered absolute because it infringes the specular structure — the montage — of a given culture; in a sense the blasphemer pretends to take up the place of the Mirror, he claims to invert the order of the world. This makes it easier to understand what is in issue in the canonical tradition of blasphemy: the equivalent of a patricide perpetrated against the founding Name, against the founding Other and the symbolic principle that founds the linguistic structure of what is law for man in any given society. According to classical European analyses, blasphemy was related to idolatry, sacrilege, and more generally to crimes against Reference which touched upon the problem of madness (God and Reason): these weighty questions have such resonances in contemporary manifestations of fanaticism that some further exploration of them is in order.

35 The vocable *Theos* can be linked here to the development of the Greek verb *tithemi*, to pose, establish, found, as Herodotus in his text relates that the ancient Greeks invoked “the Gods” without ever choosing a personal name for them. Herodotus, *Histories*.

III. *The Relational Nature of Identity and the Mirror*

One of the important benefits of psychoanalysis, at least if Freud's work is taken seriously, was to help the culture of scientific technology to return to the path of humanity by reflecting on the representation of the foundations of Reason. Now, as much as in the past, we question ourselves in mythological terms, through words which found our life, which through the ages have had in common the task of bringing the bond between subject and mirror to life, or to question the principle of alterity, the absolute Other which is the founding instance of images. This description of the ritualisation of the gaze offers a valuable clue to the mechanism of identity which psychoanalysis has done so much to clarify. The history of the veneration of the Holy Face and its post-mediaeval artistic representations brings out the two levels of the mechanism.

The *first level* is that of the subject's recognition of distance. Through the figuration of the face of Christ — the divine self-portrait — the principle of alterity takes on the symbolic aspect of a staging of the Other, from which the subject is separated by an instituted distance. We can therefore establish that the principle of alterity is recognised and *the Other is identified*.

The Other is identified not only as the presence of that from which the subject is absolutely separated, but as an operation which springs from the proof of truth in the representation of identity. Identification must here be understood in a transitive sense, that of recognising the principle of alterity or of the Other as a metaphor of separation which founds the identity of the subject. One must also understand the relation of identity as such, at its most abstract level, namely, that of the represented Other. The Other figured by the Holy Face presents itself as a pure relation of identity: it is self-identical with itself. The divine self-portrait is veiled by the essence of this "with": the relational nature of the principle of identity, is itself the same *with* itself. The truth of identity and the question of the relation of identity are inextricably involved in the representation of the Other through the question of this "with", which is an immense question in theological and canonical studies of Christ, the second divine person in the staging of the trinitarian Other.³⁶ At the level of the pure relation of identity, separation presents itself as a logical aporia.

³⁶ One of the traditional treatises in which the problem of the relational character of identity is well formulated is Saint Augustine's *De Trinitate*, especially that part of the treatise which deals with images.

The *second level* of the mechanism is that at which the subject assumes the relation of identity. What is important in this is the meaning which clinical psychoanalysis gives to identification. Any informed analyst knows that this concept, which is essential to the whole architecture of the psyche, refers to the operation by which human beings form themselves.³⁷ The subjective processes of identification are inscribed as the effect of a narcissistic intrication and the deployment of the image of the Father, which is the key to the whole symbolic system is based upon this narcissistic structure. This cannot be over-emphasised, for if one does not understand that the symbolic level carries over and displaces the imaginary constitution of the subject, one cannot understand the psychic importance of the question of identification or its full social and political implications. Before introducing this fundamental Freudian notation, that of a primary identification with the father, I will make one further appeal to mythology.

It is reported that the neo-Platonic philosopher, Iamblichus, who taught at the beginning of the fourth century in hellenised Syria, agreed to perform a wonder for the edification of his students. On the occasion of an excursion with them to the hot springs of Gadara, the following occurred: he asked them first to find out the name that in former times had been given to two of the springs. Once the students had discovered that two of the sources had formerly borne the names of the two opposed figures of Eros, namely Eros and Anteros, he touched the first of the sources with his hand while pronouncing a brief invocation. A beautiful and perfectly proportioned young boy appeared from the bottom of the spring. Iamblichus then went to the second source and performed the same ritual, making another Eros, identical to the first, appear. The text reads as follows: "The two boys clasped him and, just like children in relation to their real father, they did not loosen the grip of their embrace. He then returned them to their natural element and after having taken a bath, he left."³⁸

The purpose of this demonstration of the powers of the philosopher is to render intelligible the presence of the gods in nature. We no longer pause to consider what the story of this marvel suggests, nor do we appreciate the sense in which the narcissistic embrace recounted in the

³⁷ See the general discussion in J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (London: Tavistock, 1978).

³⁸ The story is related in M. Tardieu, *Les Paysages reliques. Routes et haltes syriennes d'Isidore à Simplicius* (Paris-Louvain: Peeters, 1990), 12.

myth has a lengthy future which ends contemporarily in the symbolic, in the love of the Father. There is also a reversal of the narcissistic process: in the scene from Ovid, Narcissus is fascinated by the enigmatic other on the surface of the water, while here, on two occasions, it is the image which becomes flesh and embraces Iamblichus as if he were a “real father”. This scene of narcissistic doubling can be used to assert the following: identification is organised around the narcissistic depth — the innermost being — of the subject.

What the story brings out is the significance of Freud’s model of a primary identification with the father: behind the psychic instance of the Ideal of the self (the superego) — an image of cultural demands — there is hidden the individual’s first and most significant identification, namely that with the father of personal prehistory, an identification which makes possible any investment in an object and hence in the real father. Therefore, the cultural representation of the Third, or, in other words, the Father, is a prior offer of identification, an offer which is made to all subjects of the culture in question. What stands out in the process of identification is the role of a Third which serves to mediate subject and image. The story of Iamblichus reminds of the binding of the subject and of the social construction of the Father, as well as of the central role of identification that the Father plays in the complex Oedipal prehistory of the subject, a prehistory which, it should be emphasised, is inscribed in language and for this reason mobilises the cultural resources of representation. In the story of Iamblichus’ miracle, knowledge of the name was necessary before the apparition of the gods could be invoked. What this means is that we are here faced with the articulation of the subject of language and society, with the relation between man and culture, an articulation which literally carries life, and gives a symbolic foundation to being.

The structural function of the father in the anecdote of the philosopher allows us to glimpse a further stake of these identifications, namely that of Reason. Ovid begins the story of Narcissus by evoking the onset of a delirium (*novitas furoris*).³⁹ This is precisely what is in issue. Consider the Austrian poet Georg Trakl, the author of a text which, in the context of the narcissistic scene, evokes the madness and impending apocalypse of the subject: “... But as I descended the rocky path, madness seized me and I cried out loud in the night; and when I bent down with silvery fingers over the taciturn waters, I saw that my face had left me.

³⁹ *Supra* n.1, book III, at verse 350, p.80.

And a white voice spoke to me: Kill yourself!"⁴⁰

This poetic fragment brings us to the most extreme point in the question of the mirror, the atomic core of the constitution of the subject. This is a question of Reason, or of the principle of life in and by representation.

IV. *The Relational Nature of Identity and the Mirror. Observations on the Symbolic Status of the Mirror*

Narcissus saw no mirror at all. There can only be a mirror where the image is recognised. Any reference to the image or to the mirror refers to something which is embedded in that obscure space of the known in the unknown, or what since Freud we have come to call the unconscious.⁴¹ Whatever has to do with the phenomenon of representation and its symbolic translations, and first of all language itself, has to do with the unconscious. If we remain with this point, the question of the status of the mirror can be fully unfolded; in particular, we will avoid the common temptation of treating the mirror as a thing, and through this the linguistic essence of the structural place of the mirror becomes comprehensible.

Having established the importance of the concept of identification — in the dual sense of identifying and identifying oneself — we can deepen the analysis of identity. We might begin with the principle which underlies identification: the distance or interval of a void which notifies the subject of its alienation from itself and which, in so doing, makes the articulation of subject, image and institutional logic possible.

Given our current propensity for representing the domains of subjectivity and society in terms of totality and conflict, it is difficult for us to recognise that the maintenance of an interval, distance or void is essential to institutional logic, or that it might be a consequence of the linguistic character of all human relationships (not least the relation of the subject to itself). Nevertheless, if we wish to develop our understanding of the life of representation so as to try to decipher the mystery of the instituted subject, the mystery of the subject lodged in its institutional or linguistic habitat, we must learn to reconsider what the

40 "Revelation and Demise", in *G. Trakl: A Profile* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1984), 82.

41 The most familiar formula is that "we are not without knowledge".

classical, pre-industrial, societies recognised and made each subject recognise in relation to the constitutive void of speech. They knew this not in terms of a definitive knowledge, but in the theatrical mode of a representation of the void itself, as, for example, was achieved through using the resources of sacred architecture.

One example is the closed esplanade of the great mosque of Kairwan in Northern Tunisia. This vast quadrilateral space with colonnades, which separates the minaret, the place which calls the faithful to prayer, from the mosque, the place of the adoration of the sacred name, is the absolute Void. Nothingness as a preparatory to the inspired Word. In secular terms, one might say that this sacred space represents the function of the void to each of the persons to which Islam gives birth; in Sanskrit, this was called the *shunya*; Arabic culture took it up and transmitted it in the form of the number zero. In other words, the mosque's esplanade, through a metaphorisation of a dumb, closed space opening itself to the infinite heavens, re-institutes the zero function for each Muslim believer. Equally there are western Latin examples of this theatrical mode of knowledge which translates the unknown foundations of discourse. One such example is the cloister of Mont Saint-Michel, a sacred quadrilateral which performs just the same function in the setting of the Christian tradition. This space stages a void which represents the celestial vault. In secular terms, as with Islam, this represents the essence of the institutional function: the creation of a representation of the void that constitutes speech.

To return to the subject, that which the subject encounters as a void in the elaboration of its identity is equivalent to these architectural examples: The void is enclosed by speech so as to become the source of speech; the void has a meaning. This means that, for man, nothing is outside the field of discourse, and the maintenance of this essential void is itself a linguistic function. Consequently, one might say that if this void holds its tongue, it does so in the sense of that peculiar silence which in antiquity was represented by the messenger God Hermes' invention of a speech represented by a finger pressed to the lips. The void is therefore replete with the language which brought the subject into the world, and with all the speech that it has yet to use. Thus, the void is something which for the subject remains unformulated. At a general level, one might establish the following: without this logical category of the unformulated, speech would be impossible.

Returning to the narcissistic core of the subjective economy, or the

vital lesson of the story of Narcissus' confrontation with his image (the other of himself which he misrecognises), these comments on the unformulated nature of the void acquire their full significance. If all human life, its sense of self and its place in the world, does indeed approach its destiny by overcoming an original opacity — the biological stake which we call the body is inscribed in representation, the subject accedes to words — this means that man has to come to inhabit the division between words and things by entering speech, which in turn depends upon the subject's ability to divide itself, or to be present to itself and to the world by representing division to itself. The subject must be able to inhabit the division in representation so that, on the basis of a play of the self and the world as images, the bond of speech can be formed. This is what the phrase *I am an other* so clearly expresses:⁴² it is a metabolisation of narcissism, which is at once a representation of division and a discourse about division; it is the subject Rimbaud's way of poetically inhabiting the question. In terms of our non-poetic mode of questioning, the phrase is a translation of the relation of identity as a relation of self to self. The question could be addressed by using other resources such as scholastic doctrines on the movements of the soul or more modern theories of perception. The essential element is a point of transition between terms, the space of a distance or void which allows logic to speak of a relation between terms. The fable of Narcissus reveals a breakdown in the relation of identity: the void is not recognised, and the subject regresses to a point which is prior to any relation to self.

This allows us to formulate more exactly what is at issue in the elaboration of identity: the ternary place of an instituted distance, the locus of that which holds a being of speech indefinitely at a distance from itself and at a remove from the world. The myth of Narcissus sets us on the way to an understanding of the point of transition between the terms of this relation. All that advances towards man, and first and foremost man himself, is inevitably submitted to the test of the specular. The task then is to discover the nature and function of what we call the mirror.

The essential question is that of the status of the mirror in a *discursive construction* which institutes the speaking animal. If this

42 Arthur Rimbaud, in a letter to G. Izambard (May 1871): "It is false to say: I think; one ought to say I am thought. Excuse this play of words. I am an other. Too bad for the wood that turns out to be a violin, and laughs at the unconscious ones who quibble over things of which they are completely ignorant". *Oeuvre-Vie* (Paris: Aléa, 1991), 183-184.

question can be asked it is because the mirror is at the heart of the function of identification, and because it is not only a purely instrumental function but a vital element in the mechanism of subjectivity. The mirror intervenes in representation as a representation. In representing the third space of an instituted distance it acquires a status which allows the division of the subject, or the separation from the other than self, to take effect.

V. *The Beyond of the Logic of the Image. Observations on the Institution and Boundaries of Reason: the Fantastical Dimension*

It is perhaps appropriate to supplement these observations with a general chapter on logic. I use logic in the sense adopted by lawyers of the European tradition after Isidore of Seville defined the term as a form of philosophical discourse which defines, questions, and argues about and around Reason (*philosophia rationalis*).⁴³ When we speak of the subject or of the image and of the principle of institutionality — precisely those themes which we introduced in our study of the image — what role do we attribute to logic in this analysis? What path do we open up in defining, questioning, and arguing about and around Reason? We should now cast an eye upon the Reason of images as my observations have attempted to recognise and to understand it, and then we will sketch a preliminary theoretical conclusion.

The essential point is contained in the term *alienation*, which figures in the phrase formulated earlier in this discussion: the constitutive alienation of the subject. We have seen what is implied in such a formulation. I have suggested that a study of the image in its relation to subjective representation was a matter of the rationality, the life and the death of the subject. In other words, it has to do with the supreme stake of humanity: to make Reason prevail and to thwart madness. Reason is a conquest whose outcome, both for the subject and for the society which institutes it, is nothing other than an indefinite renewal of allegiance to what we in the west call the symbolic order. What then is the symbolic order? Nothing more and nothing less than the fate of the image and of its cause, the discourse, in any culture and for all subjects, of the mirror.

How does the fate of the image and of the discourse of the mirror

43 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae*, II, 22: "*Ipsa est philosophiae species, quae Logica dicitur, id est rationalis definiendi, quaerendi et discerendi potens.*"

relate to logic as the discourse of Reason? Our way into this question is eased by the preceding observations about structure; these observations showed the alienation inherent in the two dimensions of the process of identification of recognition of the other than self and the other as self. At the level of the narcissistic drama of division as it is depicted in the story of Narcissus, and at the level of the social intervention of the Third as it is represented by Dürer, there is a dialectical relation which constitutes the very condition of life in the speaking species, and which is tethered to the instance of representation. Hence, to interrogate the dialectic of alienation through the play of images, to analyse identification in both of the preceding senses, is to interrogate the order of life which is proper to humanity, and which is itself founded in the Reason of language. More specifically, we discover the relation between alienation and the discourse of Reason. We need to take note also of the structure of alterity, which in turn means taking account of the instituted distance which is essential to all speech which is articulated in the logical space of Reference and which is socially communicated by a representation of the absolute Other. This is the essential point in any study of the Reason of images and language; this instituted distance is a logical condition of the alterity which founds identity. There is a phrase in Heraclitus which makes this rather clearer: to ignore this point would be to put oneself in the position of "one who forgets where the path leads".

There is an essential distinction to be made at this point. Once one recognises the condition which governs both the subjective and the social construction of the principle of alterity, the problem of the fate of the image and the discourse of the mirror in its relation to logic as a discourse of Reason can only be addressed in a one-dimensional manner. To symbolise images is to put Reason in play and to be obliged to mark the logical place in which the representation of instituted distance is inscribed. We are therefore dealing with two levels of the discourse of reason, or rather with the logical beyond of the image.

This might be explained by invoking the order of ordinary institutional reasoning, which depends upon Aristotelian causation and which underpins family psychologies of all kinds, as for example in the formula "the father is the cause of the child".⁴⁴ Were it not imprisoned in the contemporary social and political predilection for dual relations, this logic might show that institutional reasoning does not function by dual

44 Aristotle, *Physics*, Book 2, 194b.

relations, but under the auspices of a third instance or ternary montage. In other words, a system of binary relations which acts as an effect of representation is legitimated by a discourse of foundations which presents itself as a symbolic effect. This is the level at which the genealogical order is located and at which it has its effects, it is the level of interpretations and of diverse casuistries.

There is, however, another, more specific, level at which these foundations are elaborated. This is the level of Reference. It is the level at which representations of the absolute Other or of the principle of alterity unfold. The weak point of traditional European societies, which are contemporarily in the grip of a generalised narcissism, is that they do not make a link between these two levels, and thereby claim that life can live in ignorance of the institution of distance. This is a crucial point: the institution of distance has abandoned the west. This accounts for the considerable theoretical difficulty, not to say impossibility, of recognising the logical beyond in which the reason of images and of language is founded. In this beyond, there is a logic which is not Aristotelian; in it, man confronts a category of nothingness, the void, negativity. Here we reach the most extreme point of the question of representation, at which, one might say, it is subjectively incandescent. What is in issue is the construction of a discourse on the cause of causation, the construction of a principle of causation as such so as to make society perform its anthropological function in relation to each and every subject.

It is possible to represent what is at issue schematically. Humanity confronts the *speechless void*. To establish foundations is to erect a screen to protect us from the void. Upon this screen are inscribed all the historical and mythological stories of the world. This is the dimension of the fantastic; the logic which operates at this level can be understood as the fantastic beyond of institutions. Western history is full of attempts to delineate this logic. Two examples in particular stand out: Pico della Mirandola's *project for a poetic theology*, and Vico's attempt to restore to law the poetic dimension which sustains it. We have now, using different means, to discover what this fantastic dimension and its structural principle hold for us; that is why we have to re-think the question of mythology.