HELEN TYSON

It’s All Me, Me, Me

The Americanization of Narcissism
By Elizabeth Lunbeck
(Princeton University Press 296pp £25.95)

Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love
By Simon Blackburn
(Princeton University Press 209pp £16.95)

In his 1914 essay ‘On Narcissism’, Sig- mund Freud painted a portrait of ‘His Majesty the Baby’ – a deluded megalomaniac resplendent in a fantastical belief in his own omnipotence. But Freud was led inexorably, if paradoxically, from this image of absolute solipsism (the infant looks around and sees only his self, his thoughts, his desires) to the question of group psychology – of how individuals tie themselves to the social world. It was in this essay that the idea of an ‘ego ideal’ crystallised. Faced with the various blows to narcissism imposed by cultural demands, external reality and the unconscious itself, the individual turns elsewhere: unwilling to ‘forgo the narcissistic perfection of his childhood’, he ‘seeks to recover it in the new form of an ego ideal’. This concept then led Freud to propose ‘a special psychical agency which … constantly watches the actual ego and measures it by that ideal’. This, of course, is conscience – that inner voice watching, chastising, censoring and holding the ego to account that Freud would later call the superego. Tracing the vicissitudes of narcissism from that irrecoverable scene of blissful self-love through its displacement and investment in the ego ideal, Freud follows a path from solipsistic self-love to the question of how that self-love is bound up with (and masked by) certain ideals against which we measure ourselves – including the social side of the ego ideal, the ‘common ideal of a family, a class or a nation’.

That narcissism is an ethically, even morally, freighted term is central to both Elizabeth Lunbeck’s The Americanization of Narcissism and Simon Blackburn’s Mirror, Mirror. Tracing the history of the term in psychoanalysis, social criticism and popular psychology, Lunbeck claims that, though the psychoanalytic concept of narcissism was formulated in Europe of the First World War and interwar London, the word ‘narcissism’ entered the popular American lexicon only in the 1970s as a shorthand for ‘Me Decade’ excess. Within the American psychoanalytic establishment, two radical voices, Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg, had shifted narcissism towards centre-stage. But, while they both stressed the healthy, even enriching, dimensions of a normal narcissism, social critics (epitomised here by Christopher Lasch) seized blindly upon Kernberg’s vision of a pathological, malignant narcissism to bolster a narrative of catastrophic moral decline fuelled by hedonistic self-indulgence.

The relationship between psychoanalysis and our popularised versions of it has always been an uneasy one. As Rachel Bowlby demonstrated in Shopping with Freud, a strange identification between psychoanalysis and consumer culture had taken place by the 1930s; this was encapsulated in Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World, in which the mindless population revere a deity known as ‘Our Ford’ – or ‘Our Freud, as for some inescapable reason he chose to call himself whenever he spoke of psychological matters’. For many modernist critics, psychoanalysis, in so far as it described a subject in thrall to unconscious desires, was useful only in portraying the equally enslaved consumer. Ignoring Freud’s description of psychic life as one of conflict (with the unconscious as a point of resistance to the passive internalisation of social norms), this account viewed both psychoanalysis and popular culture as complicit in creating (and theorising) a passive form of enslaved subjectivity. Lunbeck’s energetic and rigorously researched account of similar misinterpretations of psychoanalysis by the 1970s social critics is highly engaging. Gran-diose Jerusalems, Lasch et al grasped myopically at psychoanalytic language, mobilising the idea of narcissism within a melodramatic lament at American greed, dependency and self-indulgence, while simultaneously overlooking Freud’s far from liberationalist vision of the modern self and ignoring contemporary analysts’ insistence on a positive form of narcissism as the foundation of self-esteem, ambition and creativity.

This is very much an American Freud, and Lunbeck does occasionally make claims for Freud’s insistence on an ‘autonomous self’, a ‘developmental sequence’ and a ‘sovereign self-mastery’ that are at odds with readings of Freud’s more ambivalent relationship to such ideas. While American ego-psychology emphasised self-mastery, the theory of the unconscious was, for Freud, the greatest (and most wounding) in a series of blows to the ‘naive self-love of man’, unseating ‘human megalomania’ by seeking ‘to prove to the ego that it is not even master in its own house’. The unconscious dethrones our delusions of self-mastery at every turn.

Quoting a New York Times columnist’s recent elegy for grandiosity, Lunbeck concludes with a picture of contemporary ambivalence towards narcissism. Despite a widespread consensus that narcissistically deluded leaders and bankers had no small part to play in the recent financial crisis, we cannot, some suggest, ‘do without’ such individuals.
Referring to the psychoanalyst and leadership guru Michael MacCoby (who hailed Steve Jobs as an exemplary ‘productive narcissist’), Lunbeck traces a recent trend in which she describes fittingly as the mobilisation of the Couch in service of the corporation: for MacCoby and his acolytes the ‘productive narcissist’ is the visionary leader, the charismatic personality of our times, exploitative yet irresistible, and crucial to a particular vision of 21st-century capitalist progress.

On this matter, Simon Blackburn is far from ambivalent: prefacing his book with a satirical acknowledgement first to the cosmetics company L’Oreal and their slogan ‘Because you’re worth it’, and then to the shameless ‘greed is good’ generation of bankers, CEOs, remuneration committees, hedge fund managers, tax lawyers and politicians, Blackburn writes with ire and despair of the inequalities perpetuated by ‘these mental and moral deficiencies’ whom ‘some of us would like to hang’. And yet, although (perhaps untypically, and refreshingly), this book announces its ‘moral’ from the start, that moral is inextricable from the complexity of Blackburn’s subject and the subtlety with which he treats it.

Simply to castigate self-love is impossible, Blackburn attests, and what we need may even be more self-love, not less. He exposes the manipulative empty message at the heart of L’Oreal’s slogan: ‘because you aren’t worth it. But you could be if you buy the stuff.’ But this is not some fatuous call for increased self-esteem, navel-gazing, or even a quest for some mystical notion of an authentic self. It is rather a summons to share in the philosophical interrogation of selfhood. Guiding us gracefully through the philosophers and writers of subjectivity (Montaigne, Bunyan, Ovid, Rousseau, Kant, Augustine, Milton), Blackburn’s book is quietly insistent on the potency of rigorous thinking about subjectivity in the face of a deluded, hubristic and dangerous narcissism.

Excessive attention to the self, self-consciousness, excessive demands on behalf of the self and selfishness are, Blackburn writes, things to avoid. But, at the same time, ‘a sense of the self is a precious thing’. The state of not knowing oneself, not having any sense of the self – witness King Lear, or an Alzheimer’s patient – is a frightening prospect. The self, for Blackburn, is a process in time; our identities consist in our unique histories and, crucially, in our changing relationships with others. Drawing out the sinister solipsism of Ovid’s myth, Blackburn reads Echo’s repetitions as a figure for the reverberation of our own voices in the ‘echo chambers of our minds’; we must take heed lest, like Narcissus, we ignore the real voices of others. This serves as much as a denunciation of George W Bush and Tony Blair (whose deluded messianic hubris is compared to that of the patients in Broadmoor) as a warning to the greedy banker. Writing in the Kantian tradition of the care of the soul, Blackburn makes his points with seriousness and severity, but also with a quietly lyrical sensitivity to the necessity of self-respect as a foundation for the respect of others.

A thinker of togetherness and sociability, Simon Blackburn offers us a vision of philosophy, not as that solipsistic discipline with which we are wont to associate it, but as a way of thinking in company and ‘in engagement with the world’. ‘Kleptoparasitism’, he concludes, ‘is ugly wherever it is found, and exposing some of the self-deceptions that underlie it … is not the least important job for philosophy and psychology, responsive, we may hope, to the great myths of our history.’ An admirable calling for philosophers, psychologists and students of myth alike.

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