

# A bit of self-love doesn't go amiss

Robert Reynolds on how US cultural critics in the  
1970s ignored the upside of championing oneself

## The Americanization of Narcissism

By Elizabeth Lunbeck

Harvard University Press

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**W**ho would have thought that narcissism in the US needed defending? From afar, it seems alive and well. Daytime television is saturated in the language of self-esteem, bookshops' shelves groan under the weight of self-improvement manuals, and the narrative of personal redemption inflects countless public accounts of Americans, famous and otherwise. An Australian is said to have coined the term "selfie", but it is the US that most enthusiastically champions the self.

Elizabeth Lunbeck might well

take issue with this diagnosis. Counter-intuitively, she has written an impressively researched history of the idea of narcissism in US intellectual and cultural life and found the concept unfairly maligned. Post-war US psychoanalysis and critics on the Right and Left have paraded narcissism as an affliction gnawing at America's national character. Lunbeck suggests that this critique robbed the phenomenon of complexity. Moreover, by the late 1970s, it ignored a revolution in thinking about narcissism that was remaking American psychoanalysis.

The 1970s are at the heart of this book, and Lunbeck's imagined interlocutors are cultural critics such as Christopher Lasch and Philip Rieff, the former in particular. Rieff's 1966 work *The Triumph of the Therapeutic:*



*Uses of Faith after Freud* helped to pave the way for Lasch's classic excoriation of 1970s US society, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (1978). Lunbeck in effect casts Lasch as the commander-in-chief of critics whose jeremiads bemoaned the rise of narcissism in America.

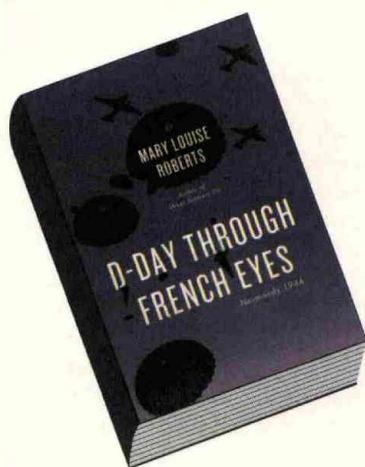
Previous discussions of narcissism had seldom escaped the rarefied confines of psychoanalysis. But by the early 1970s, "the term was suddenly everywhere". Lasch gave intellectual heft to this discovery, marshalling finely wrought prose and psychoanalytic references to paint a woeful picture of Americans obsessed with physical beauty, youth and fitness, self-expression and the baubles of consumer capitalism. These sorry but increasingly common specimens lacked the solid values of yesteryear: deferred gratification, thrift, fortitude, rigorous learning and community spirit. Lunbeck believes such charges against narcissism continue to resonate, and she cites Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000) as one influential expression.

Running a historical and psychoanalytic ruler over these jeremiads, Lunbeck finds them wanting. There is nothing particularly new in an ageing cohort denouncing the young as selfish and lacking in moral fibre, and she has delightful quotes to prove it. Under the tutelage of Heinz Kohut and Otto Kernberg, American psychoanalysis in the 1970s re-engaged and rehabilitated the concept of narcissism. Kohut stressed the importance of healthy

narcissism to a resilient sense of self and meaningful relationships, while Kernberg calibrated pathological narcissism as a distinct personality type rather than a universal one. Lasch and his fellow critics misread or ignored this psychoanalytic reconsideration, and Lunbeck argues persuasively that their cultural critiques are the poorer for it.

And yet by making Lasch central to her account, Lunbeck misses the opportunity to range more critically over the expression of narcissism in America. She is right to point out the narcissism implicit in the cultural critics' position – they wanted an ascetic America that looked suspiciously like an intellectual's life, all books, solitude and no fun. But there is a danger in remaining enthralled to a narcissist: you end up constricted, playing on their terms.

Robert Reynolds is associate professor in modern history, Macquarie University, Australia, and a psychotherapist in private practice.



**D-Day through French Eyes: Normandy 1944**  
**By Mary Louise Roberts**  
**University of Chicago Press**  
**240pp, £17.50**  
**ISBN 9780226136998**  
**and 37049 (e-book)**  
**Published 6 June 2014**

“**W**e awaited the Liberation just as a young woman awaits her first child – torn between impatience for a course of action she does not yet understand, and fear that it will actually take place,” recalls Yvette Moreau. Her voice is one of many to feature in this account of the Allied landings in Normandy that attest to the excitement and terror of both the idea and reality of liberation. As Mary Louise Roberts deftly enables these French diarists and memoirists to show, the landings brought the promise of freedom to those who had long ached for it. But they also brought danger, destruction and death, at the hands of both the German occupiers and the Allied liberators.

The French experience of the Allied arrival and its aftermath is powerfully conveyed in the personal stories that form the bulk of this volume. In contrast, Roberts' own brief contextualising narratives serve to weaken the book. In seeking “to reach a specifically American audience”, she presents only interactions with US soldiers. But why exclude everyone else on page one? This narrow focus also serves to undermine her story of D-Day from the

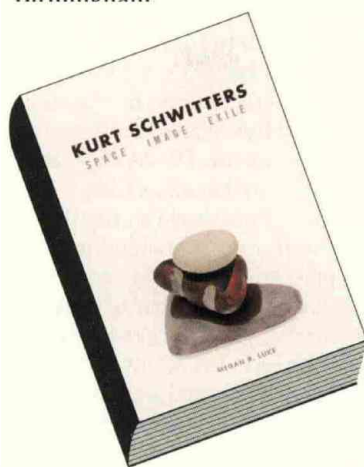
French perspective and scuppers her intention to “widen” Americans’ historical understanding. Indeed, this account might leave you convinced that only US forces landed at Normandy, something Americans need no help believing. Worse, stating that the Allied road from Normandy to “Paris to Berlin was no easy journey”, but that “they triumphed over the Germans within a year of the landings”, while focusing only on US actions, bolsters the misapprehension that the Americans, not the combined Allied forces, won the Second World War. Let us not forget that it was the Soviets who first reached Berlin.

At its worst, Roberts’ narrative is uncomfortably jingoistic, as when she compares the “rigidly hierarchical German army” with the American, adding that the French interpreted the “easy relations between Americans and their officers” as “a sign of true democracy”. This is quite a claim, and one for which she provides no evidence. These assumptions about locals’ feelings for their US liberators are accompanied by a sometimes patronising view of the French themselves. Roberts calls the Normans “a stubborn people. Even in the midst of a battle or bombing raid, they insisted that the crops be planted and the cows milked.” Would she have preferred them to starve? To be sure, the fruits of their labours were well enjoyed by the Americans. In two places, it also appears that she has confused her testifiers’ genders, perhaps unaware that certain French names, unlike their American equivalents, can be either masculine or feminine. If not, the open attraction of two young men to the liberators surely deserves comment.

Finally, there is the problem of treating memory as if it were history. Moreau’s metaphor for liberation as birth is compelling, but she was eight years old in 1944 and surely incapable of such an analogy at the time. Her memoirs were written 45 years

later. One cannot help but wonder whether the passage of time also softened testifiers’ views of D-Day – for it is the haunting contemporary descriptions of the US forces’ destruction of entire towns and populations that are most compelling in this book.

Victoria Harris is research fellow in history, University of Birmingham



**Kurt Schwitters: Space, Image, Exile**  
By Megan R. Luke  
University of Chicago Press  
352pp, £38.50  
ISBN 9780226085180  
and 090375 (e-book)  
Published 7 April 2014

The German artist Kurt Schwitters was a canny crusader who aligned himself with international Dadaism, yet insisted on waving his personal banner. His contribution to the avant-garde of the 1920s consisted of daft poetry and peremptory tracts, alongside anarchic collages made of scraps of litter arranged in inscrutable disorder. Invoking the watchword MERZ – a nonsense fragment snipped from the lengthy name of a respectable Hanover bank – Schwitters fought a solo campaign to force a salutary medicine down the throat of contemporary culture.

Although many thought him an eccentric fool, Schwitters amassed astonishing piles of paper-based collages and extended his output to three dimensions

through assemblages of metal junk and scrap wood, nailed down within a frame to create hermetic alcoves. Many of his early writings comprised quite cerebral arguments about the principle of non-mimetic abstraction, which he sought to reconcile with his collage aesthetic, thereby fusing a sober Constructivism with a quirky offshoot of Cubism. Yet, while exhibiting and agitating alongside other European avant-gardists (including Jean Arp, El Lissitzky and Piet Mondrian), he was secretly creating a unique masterwork in his Hanover studio, hidden away at the back of an unassuming house in a quiet suburb. This was in due course revealed to be an architectural wonder; a piece of non-pictorial, non-realistic art that the beholder could walk inside, and thus a tradition-denying experiment in what he called “radiating space”. This was the Merzbau, a one-off breakthrough in the history of Modernism.

Schwitters’ capricious art was anathema to the Nazis, who displayed it in the notorious travelling display *Entartete Kunst* (*Degenerate Art*) intended to ridicule and stamp out art that the regime saw as cultural pollution. Megan Luke’s energetic study homes in on the decisive moment when Schwitters hurried off to Norway in early 1937 to escape the impending Gestapo knock on the door. He foolishly thought the danger might blow over, but instead found he had opted for permanent exile: it was to extend to his death in northern England in 1948.

Luke’s book offers a refreshing critical perspective on the exile years, which have often been seen in terms of a slump in the artist’s inventiveness, paralleled in his physical decline amid circumstances of privation and poor health. Having scrutinised Schwitters’ pre-exile writings, she argues that the artist’s efforts to synthesise collage and abstraction were not only sustained into his final

years but generated works of unexpected equilibrium and robustness. Tragically, the legendary Merzbau was obliterated in an Allied air raid in 1943, yet Luke judges it to have been the guiding paradigm for Schwitters' late output, within which she identifies several instances of its reincarnation in truncated form, not to mention its echoes in tiny polychrome sculptures that defy simple analysis. Her close attention to such works brings weight and impetus to her monograph, despite the fact that its final pages stutter to a halt as she arrives at the brute fact that the so-called Merzbarn, which Schwitters began to construct in the last months of his life, remains an incomplete fragment.

Nevertheless, Luke achieves a lucid reappraisal of the work of exile and even succeeds in rehabilitating the artist's paintings of Norwegian snowscapes, which are often dismissed as irrelevant kitsch. Schwitters may have died in frustration, but his resourceful spirit remains exemplary.

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**Roger Cardinal is emeritus professor of literary and visual studies, University of Kent.**

