

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU
NARCISSUS

Translated by DANIEL BODEN

Afterword by SIMON CRITCHLEY



ROBBER
TOWER OF HINZELLE
COMEDY

DANIEL BODEN

SIMON CRITCHLEY

LEAVEN-BREAD

NARCISSES, OR THE

A

Translated by

Afterword by

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU

NARCISSUS,
OR
THE LOVER
OF HIMSELF,
A COMEDY

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*For Michæl Henry Heim,
thank you for teaching me
your principles of translation*

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PREFACE

I wrote this comedy at the age of eighteen, & I kept myself from showing it for as long as I held onto some regard for my reputation as an Author. I finally had enough courage to publish it, but I will never have enough to say anything about it. Here then, the matter is not of my play, but of myself.

I must, despite my reluctance, speak of myself; I must either recognize the wrongs attributed to me, or justify myself concerning them. I truly feel that the weapons will not be evenly matched; for I will be attacked with mockery, and I will defend myself only with reason: But provided that I convince my adversaries, I worry very little about persuading them; while working to deserve my own esteem, I have learned to make do without that of others, who, for the most part, make do without my own. But if it hardly matters to me whether people think well or ill of me, it does matter to me that no one be correct in thinking ill of me; and it matters to the truth that I upheld that its defender be not accused of precisely having lent it his help only out of caprice or vanity, without loving and without knowing it.

The side that I took in the question¹ I examined some years ago did not fail to create for me a multitude of adversaries¹ perhaps more attentive to the interests of lettered men than to the honor of literature. I had foreseen this & very well suspected that their behavior in this instance would prove to be in my favor more than all of my discourses. Indeed, they disguised neither their surprise, nor their chagrin at the fact that an Academy showed its integrity so inopportunately. They spared it neither indiscreet invective, nor even untruths,² which attempt to weaken the weight of its judgment. Nor was I forgotten in their declamations. Many tried to refute me openly: The wise were able to see with what force, and the public with what success they did this. The cleverer ones, knowing the danger of directly combatting demonstrated truths, handily diverted onto my person an attention that should have been given only to my reasoning, and the examination of the accusations that they brought against me has erased the memory of the more serious accusations that I myself brought against them. To these it is therefore necessary to respond once and for all.

They claim that I do not believe one word of the truths that I have upheld, and that in demonstrating a proposition, I did not fail to believe its opposite. That is to say, I proved such extravagant things that it can be affirmed that I could only maintain them as a

game. What a great honor they render to the science that serves as the foundation to all the others; and we must believe that the art of reasoning is largely in the service of the discovery of truth when we see it used successfully to demonstrate follies!

They claim that I do not believe one word of the truths that I have upheld; this is undoubtedly a new and convenient way on their part to answer these arguments without response, to refute even Euclid's proofs, and all that has been demonstrated in the universe. It seems to me that those who so rashly accuse me of speaking against my thoughts do not themselves have any great scruples at speaking against their own: For they have assuredly found nothing in my writings or in my behavior that should have inspired in them this idea, as I will shortly prove; and it is not permissible for them to ignore the fact that once a man speaks seriously, we must think that he believes what he says, unless his actions or his discourses belie it, and even that does not always suffice to guarantee that he believes nothing of it.

They can therefore shout as much as they like, that in declaring myself against the pursuit of knowledge I spoke against my feelings; to such a rash assertion, equally devoid of both proof & likelihood, I give but one reply; it is short and energetic, and I politely ask them to consider it as it is delivered.

NARCISSUS,
OR
THE LOVER
OF HIMSELF,
A COMEDY

*Played by les Comédiens ordinaires du Roi,
on 18 December 1752*

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

LISIMON

VALÈRE }
LUCINDE } *Lisimon's children*

ANGELIQUE }
LÉANDRE } *Brother & sister,
Lisimon's wards*

MARTON, *Servant*

FRONTIN, *Valère's valet*

The play is set in Valère's apartment

SCENE I

Lucinde, Marton

LUCINDE: I have just seen my brother walking in the garden. Let us hurry before he returns, & place the portrait on his dressing table.

MARTON: Here it is, Mademoiselle, so altered in its appearance as to make him unrecognizable. Though he's the prettiest man in the world, he shines here as a woman, but with a newfound elegance.

LUCINDE: Valère is, by his daintiness & the affectation of his fineries, a kind of woman in man's clothing, & this portrait so travestied seems less to disguise him than to return him to his natural state.

MARTON: And where's the harm in that? Since women today seek to draw themselves nearer to men, isn't it fitting that the latter meet them halfway and try to gain in allure as much as women do in resolve? Thanks to fashion, it'll be easier for everyone to find middle ground.

LUCINDE: I cannot approve of such ridiculous fashions. Perhaps our sex will have the good fortune not to be any less pleasant even as it becomes more esteemed. But as for men, I pity their blindness. What do these witless boys mean by usurping all of our rights? Do they hope to please women better by striving to look like them?

MARTON: If they did that, they'd be wrong, & women hate each other too much to love what looks like them. But let's get back to the portrait. Aren't you at all afraid that this little jest might upset the Chevalier?

LUCINDE: No, Marton, my brother is naturally good: He is even reasonable, almost to a fault. He will feel that in using this portrait to make a silent, playful reproach, I only thought of curing him of a petty fault that displeases even the tender Angelique, my father's amiable ward, whom Valère is to marry to-day. It is a service to her to correct her lover's faults, and you know how much I need the help of this dear friend to deliver me from Léandre, her brother, whom my father wishes me to wed.

MARTON: So this young stranger, this Cléonte that you saw last summer at Passy, is still dear to your heart?

LUCINDE: I do not deny it; in fact, I am counting on his word that he would come back soon, as well as on

the promise that Angelique made to persuade her brother to give me up.

MARTON: Ah, give you up! Bear in mind that your eyes will have more power to seal this engagement than Angelique could ever have to break it.

LUCINDE: We will not debate your flattery; I will just tell you that as Léandre has never seen me, it will be easy for his sister to warn him, and to make him understand that, not being able to be happy with a woman whose heart is devoted to another, he could do no better than to free himself by way of an honest refusal.

MARTON: An honest refusal! Ah! Mademoiselle, refusing a woman with looks like yours, and forty thousand crowns to her name, that's an honesty of which Léandre will never be capable. (*Aside.*) If only she knew that Léandre and Cléonte were one and the same, such a refusal would take on quite a different meaning.

LUCINDE: Ah! Marton, I hear a sound; let us quickly hide the portrait. It is undoubtedly my brother coming back, and in distracting ourselves with gossip, we have deprived ourselves of the pleasure of carrying out our plan.

MARTON: No, it's Angelique.

SCENE II

Angelique, Lucinde, Marton

ANGELIQUE: My dear Lucinde, you know how reluctant I was to go along with your plan to have Valère's clothes in his portrait changed into women's finery. At present, as I see you ready to execute it, I fear that the displeasure of seeing himself made a fool will dispose him against us. Let us reconsider, I pray you, this frivolous jest. I feel that I can find no pleasure in making light of things if it means risking my heart's peace.

LUCINDE: How timid you are! Valère loves you too much to take offence at anything that comes from you, whilst you are still his mistress. Remember that you only have one day to breathe life into your fantasies, and that his own will come true all too soon. Moreover, it is a question of curing him of a foible that exposes him to mockery, and that is exactly a mistress's job. We can correct the faults of a lover. But, alas, we must put up with those of a husband.

ANGELIQUE: After all, what do you find so ridiculous in him? Since he is lovable, is he so wrong to love himself, and do we not set the example for him? He aims to please. Ah! If that is a fault, what more charming virtue could a man offer to society?

MARTON: Especially in the society of women.

ANGELIQUE: Finally, Lucinde, if you trust me, we will dispose of the portrait and this whole air of mockery, which could just as easily seem an insult as a correction.

LUCINDE: Oh! No. I will not lose the returns on my industry. But I am perfectly willing to run the risk alone, and nothing obliges you to be an accomplice in an affair to which you could be nothing more than a witness.

MARTON: What a beautiful distinction!

LUCINDE: I will enjoy seeing Valère's reaction. No matter how he takes it, it will still make for quite an amusing scene.

MARTON: I understand. The pretext is to correct Valère: But the real motive is to laugh at his expense. That's the genius and the delight of women. They often

correct the ridiculous, only thinking to amuse themselves.

ANGELIQUE: Fine, if that is what you want, but I warn you that you will answer to me for the consequences.

LUCINDE: So be it.

ANGELIQUE: Since we have been together, you have crossed me a hundred times, for which I owe you punishment. If this affair causes me even the slightest annoyance with Valère, you had better watch out.

LUCINDE: Yes, yes.

ANGELIQUE: Give a little thought to Léandre.

LUCINDE: Ah! My dear Angelique ...

ANGELIQUE: Oh, if you cause me any trouble with your brother, I swear to you that you will marry mine. (*Aside.*) Marton, you have promised to keep the secret.

MARTON: (*Aside.*) Fear not.

LUCINDE: Finally, I ...

MARTON: I hear the Chevalier's voice. Make your decision as soon as possible, unless you want to give him a circle of girls around his dressing table.

LUCINDE: We have to avoid him seeing us. (*She places the portrait on his dressing table.*) There, the trap is set.

MARTON: I want to spy a little on my man to see...

LUCINDE: Silence. Let us get out of here.

ANGELIQUE: I fear that this will not end well.

SCENE III

Valère, Frontin

VALÈRE: Sangaride, today is a big day for you.

FRONTIN: Sangaride, or rather, Angélique. Yes, it's a big day: That of a wedding, and one that lengthens intolerably all the days that follow it.

VALÈRE: I am going to savor the pleasure of making Angélique happy!

FRONTIN: Would you desire to make her a widow?

VALÈRE: Oh, you wag... You know how much I love her. Tell me, to your knowledge, what could be missing from her happiness? With lots of love, a bit of wit, & a figure... such as you see, we can, I believe, always be rather sure to please.

FRONTIN: The thing's beyond doubt, and you've performed the first experiment on yourself.

VALÈRE: What I find a pity about it all, is that I do not know how many women my marriage will make dry

up with regret, and who will no longer know what to do with their hearts.

FRONTIN: Oh, yes they will! Those women who have loved you, for example, will occupy themselves by loathing your better half. The others... But where the devil are we to find them, these others?

VALÈRE: The morning advances; it is time to get dressed to go and see Angelique. Let us go. (*He sits down at his dressing table.*) How do I look this morning? I do not have any sparkle in my eyes; my complexion looks weathered; I think I look so ordinary today.

FRONTIN: Ordinary! No, you're only at your level of ordinary.

VALÈRE: Using rouge is such a nasty habit; in the end, I will not be able to do without it, and in its absence, I will be all the worse for wear. Where then is my patch box? But what do I see here? A portrait... Ah! Frontin; what a charming object... Where did you get this portrait?

FRONTIN: Me? Hanged if I know what you're talking about.

VALÈRE: What! It was not you who put this portrait on my dressing table?

FRONTIN: Not on my life.

VALÈRE: Who would it be then?

FRONTIN: The truth is, I know nothing of the matter.
It can only be the devil or you.

VALÈRE: Come off it. Someone has paid you off to keep silent ... Do you know that comparison with this object wrongs Angelique? On my honor, this is the prettiest face that I have ever seen in my life. What eyes Frontin ... I believe they resemble mine.

FRONTIN: That says everything.

VALÈRE: I find she has a look of me ... She is, I must say, charming ... Ah! If only she has the wits to match ... But of course! Her taste answers for her mind. This minx is an expert on the finer things.

FRONTIN: What the devil! Let us see all these wonders.

VALÈRE: Look here. Do you think that you are fooling me with your simple-minded airs? Do you take me for a greenhorn in adventure?

FRONTIN: (*Aside.*) Am I not mistaken? It's him ... it's himself. Look at him all decorated! What flowers!

What frills! This is Lucinde's doing; Marton will have done at least half of it. Let's not interfere in their mischief. My previous indiscretions have cost me too dearly.

VALÈRE: And so? Would Monsieur Frontin recognize this portrait's original?

FRONTIN: Humph! Of course I know her! Hundreds of kicks in the arse and as many slaps, which I had the singular honor of receiving, have cemented our acquaintance of each other.

VALÈRE: A girl who kicks! That's a bit saucy.

FRONTIN: She's simply prone to fits of impatience with her servants.

VALÈRE: How? Have you been in her employ?

FRONTIN: Yes, Monsieur; and I still have the honor of being her very humble servant.

VALÈRE: It would be rather amusing if there were a pretty woman in Paris whom I did not know! ... Tell me honestly. The original, is she as amiable as the portrait?

FRONTIN: Amiable? You know, Monsieur, if it were possible for someone to approach your own perfection, I could think of none more likely than she.

VALÈRE: (*Considering the portrait.*) My heart does not resist ... Frontin, tell me this beauty's name.

FRONTIN: (*Aside.*) Dear me, I've been caught off guard.

VALÈRE: What is her name? Speak.

FRONTIN: Her name is ... her name is ... she has no name. She is anonymous, like so many others.

VALÈRE: How depressingly suspicious this rascal is making me! Could it be that such charming traits were no more than those of a flirt?

FRONTIN: Why not? Beauty likes to adorn faces that only take pride in their beauty.

VALÈRE: What, she is ...

FRONTIN: A coquettish, simpering nobody whose vanity is without justification: In one word, a real tart.

VALÈRE: See how these knavish valets speak of the people that they have served. However, it must be seen. Tell me, where does she dwell?

FRONTIN: Oh, to dwell? Does such a one ever dwell?

VALÈRE: If you make me wait ... Where does she lodge, you rascal?

FRONTIN: Good Lord, Monsieur, to be perfectly honest, your guess is as good as mine.

VALÈRE: How so?

FRONTIN: I swear to you that I know no better than you this portrait's original.

VALÈRE: It was not you who placed it there?

FRONTIN: No, may the plague suffocate me.

VALÈRE: These ideas that you gave me ...

FRONTIN: Don't you see that you provide me with them yourself? Is there someone in the world as ridiculous as that?

VALÈRE: What! Am I to be unable to discover where this portrait comes from? The mystery and the challenge stoke my eagerness. For, I swear to you, I am really, very much in love with her.

FRONTIN: (*Aside.*) This is priceless! Look at him in love with himself.

VALÈRE: However, Angelique, the charming Angelique ... In truth, I understand nothing of my heart, and I must see this new mistress before deciding anything about my marriage.

FRONTIN: What's that, Monsieur? You are not ... Ah! You jest.

VALÈRE: No, I am telling you quite seriously that I cannot give my hand to Angelique, as long as the uncertainty of my feelings will be an obstacle to our mutual happiness. I cannot marry her today; the matter is settled.

FRONTIN: Yes, for you. But your father, who's already made his own resolutions, is the last man in the world to yield to yours; you know his weakness is not obliging others.

VALÈRE: She has to be found no matter the cost. Let us go, Frontin, run and search everywhere.

FRONTIN: Let's go, run, fly; let's take stock and make a report of all the pretty girls in Paris. Damn, what a fine work of literature that would be! A rare book, the reading of which would send no man to sleep!

VALÈRE: Let us make haste. Hurry and finish dressing me.

FRONTIN: Wait, here comes your father. Let's ask him to join us.

VALÈRE: Silence, tormentor. What an untimely obstacle.

AFTERWORD

Theater is Narcissism:
On Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Narcisse*¹

SIMON CRITCHLEY

What is the connection between narcissism and inequality? For Rousseau, the great sea change in the history of inequality is the institution of private property, where someone said “‘this is mine’ and found people simple enough to believe him.”² Yet, even prior to the establishment of private property, when human beings first gathered together, socialized, and looked at one another — Rousseau imagines this taking place around a tree in a purported state of nature, and the notion of the look, the narcissistic *regard*, is essential — there was engendered a desire for distinction, to be distinct and different from the others. It is with this desire for distinction



1. This text was originally prepared as part of a series of events to mark the bicentenary of Schiller's death entitled *Spieltrieb. Was bringt die Klassik auf die Bühne?* (*Playdrive. What Brings the Classics to the Stage?*), held in Weimar in November 2005. It was originally published in German as “Theater ist Narzissmus — Über Jean-Jacques Rousseaus „Narziss“,” *Theater der Zeit*, Heft № 10 (October 2005) 144–153.
2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Basic Political Writings*, tr. & ed. by Donald A. Cress (Indiana: Hackett, 2011) 69.

that the healthy *amour de soi* or self-love that defines human beings in a natural state begins to be transformed into a narcissistic *amour propre* or pride. For Rousseau, the origin of narcissism consists in this desire for social distinction, from a sense of one's own importance. Thus, inequality and narcissism derive from the same source.

This is the kernel of the drama that is played out in *Narcisse, ou l'amant de lui-même*. Rousseau wrote seven plays, in various stages of completion or incompleteness. *Narcisse* was the only one to be performed publicly — and even then, it received only a single performance, by *Les comédiens du Roi*, on December 18, 1752. *Narcisse* found its way to the stage because of the considerable success of *Le Devin du village*, Rousseau's one-act pastoral opera, which had been performed before the French King, Queen, and court at Fontainebleau the previous October. Louis XV was so impressed by the play that he requested to have an audience with Rousseau, but Rousseau was so neurotically plagued by a weak bladder that he was panicked that he would wet himself during the audience and he therefore declined, complaining of his 'infirmités.'

Narcisse was described by Rousseau's sometime friend Grimm as 'une mauvaise comédie,' and although one might expect more loyalty from a friend, he is not incorrect in his judgment. The play is in

the style of Marivaux, who read, commented, and even made some changes to the text. Sadly, *Narcisse* is not equal in quality to Marivaux's plays, which is perhaps explained by the fact that Rousseau claimed in the *Confessions* to have written the play when he was just 18 years old. This, though, is certainly not the whole truth: it is clear that Rousseau periodically and significantly redrafted the play between his youth and the time of its only performance, when Rousseau was 40. Indeed, he admits as much in the *Confessions*: "when I stated in the preface to that play that I had written it at eighteen I lied to the extent of some years."³ Nonetheless, it is probable that *Narcisse* was Rousseau's first extended piece of literary composition.

The action of *Narcisse* is very simple. It concerns a man, Valère, who falls in love with a painting of himself dressed as a woman. The drama begins with Valère's sister, Lucinde, devising a plan to trick the incurably vain protagonist, who is engaged to be married to Angélique. The trick is to test his love for her, something which backfires horribly as Valère falls completely in love with his own feminized portrait, his objectified self-image. There is much playful,

3. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions*, tr. by J.M. Cohen (London: Penguin, 1953) 119.

if predictable, dramatic irony, when Valère sends off his man, Frontin, in search all over Paris for his new beloved, who is in fact himself.

LUCINDE: Frontin, where is your master?

FRONTIN: I think at the moment he's looking for himself.

LUCINDE: How so, looking for himself?

FRONTIN: Yes, he's looking for himself to be married to himself. (40)

Eventually Valère realizes his mistake & the error of his ways, is scolded by his father, and decides to marry Angelique after all. There is also a second love story in *Narcisse*, which is curiously unresolved and unsatisfactorily presented in the play, between Lucinde & Léandre, which mirrors the main dramatic relationship.

The play is then a lesson in the failings of narcissism that ends with a moral: "when one loves truly, one no longer thinks of oneself" (58). As such, it is a derivative, slight, and nicely inconsequential piece, just the sort of thing that Rousseau thought might gain him some sort of a literary reputation when he moved to Paris in 1742, in his thirtieth year.

However, matters become more compelling when the play is read alongside the long preface that Rousseau wrote to accompany its publication in 1752.

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SOME FORTHCOMING TITLES

- Jean-Luc Godard, *Phrases*
Pierre Senges, *The Major Refutation*
Claude Mouchard, *Entangled, Papers!, Notes*

Narcissus, or The Lover of Himself is a play of staggering mediocrity. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, better known as a social thinker than as a playwright, claims to have written it as a young man of eighteen, some twenty years before it was performed for King Louis XV on December 18, 1752. It flopped and never saw the stage again in Rousseau's lifetime.

In his preface to the play, penned after its failed production, Rousseau avows that he kept himself from publishing it for as long as he held onto some regard for his reputation as an author. This is a fairly measured judgment, for a work the caliber of *Narcissus* would certainly not bolster Rousseau's status. The plot, characters, language, & comedic elements come off as weak or incomplete. Hence, the reader (or spectator) could understandably question the play's merits, and the need to publish it.

But had *Narcissus* never been, neither would its preface. This afterthought, two decades in the making, becomes, in many ways, a much more interesting opening act to the comedy that follows. It is rich in philosophy

and criticism, madly buzzing with paranoia, & surprisingly convincing in its proposition that the arts and sciences, the pursuit of knowledge, the cultivation of letters, and all the trappings of civilization are destructive forces, harmful to man's morality. It is an apology for having experimented with writing literature in his foolish youth and, at the same time, a justification for the existence of his art. The preface, in which he writes, "I must, despite my reluctance, speak of myself," is fully narcissistic. Peering over Rousseau's shoulder, we, too, see his reflection: a man with reason on his side, standing against his enemies, his age, &, indeed, the world.

Daniel Boden's translation of *Narcissus* and its preface is true to the voice, times, & incongruities of Rousseau. In the afterword that crowns this edition, Simon Critchley situates the play and preface in their historical context, makes connections to other works by Rousseau, comments on the philosophy put forward in the preface, reflects on what brings the classics to the stage, and proposes, quite simply, that theater is narcissism.



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