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NARCISSISM AS PRISON, NARCISSISM AS SPRINGBOARD

A Reading of Sophocles' *Ajax*

Narcissism is one of the more complicated and confusing ideas in psychoanalytic theory. In his landmark paper introducing the concept Freud linked it to psychosis, which he thought was characterised by the withdrawal of libido from external reality into a narcissistic cathexis of the ego (Freud, 1914c: 74f).[1] A year later, he classified schizophrenia as a 'narcissistic psychoneurosis' (Freud, 1915a: 124). Not surprising then that narcissism has tended to be discussed in terms of pathology. When Ronald Britton (2003: 145ff), for example, set out to clarify the concept, he found it used in three ways: as an observable lack of interest in others and preoccupation with oneself; as a force or tendency in the personality that opposes relationships with others; and in reference to a group of conditions known as the 'narcissistic disorders'. Britton's discussion centres largely on these latter cases, and the part played in them by libidinal and destructive narcissism. This focus on pathological aspects of narcissism typifies much of the literature on the subject. So it is important to remember that the statements by Freud just mentioned are balanced, in his writings, by other passages such as these:

> All through the subject's life his ego remains the great reservoir of his libido, from which object-cathexes are sent out and into which the libido can stream back again from the objects. Thus narcissistic libido is constantly being transformed into object-libido and *vice versa*.
>
> (Freud, 1925b: 56)

> In rare cases one can observe that the ego has taken itself as an object and is behaving as though it were in love with itself. Hence the term 'narcissism', borrowed from the Greek myth. But that is only an extreme exaggeration of a normal state of affairs. We came to understand that the ego is always the main reservoir of libido, from which libidinal cathexes of objects go out and into which they return

> again, while the major part of this libido remains permanently in the ego. Thus ego libido is being constantly changed into object libido and object libido into ego libido.
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> (Freud, 1933: 102f)

Freud saw ego-libido not just as a retreat from object-libido, but as a necessary counterpart to it. There is a continuous oscillation between investment in the ego and investment in external objects. Narcissism only becomes pathological when this free mobility of libido breaks down.

Lichtenstein (1983 [1964]) stressed the qualitative change which the concept of narcissism brought into Freud's view of psychic development. He remarks how close Freud's thinking is to biological, especially embryological, concepts of development. He draws attention, for example, to Freud's comparison between an infant's 'psychical system shut off from the stimuli of the external world' and 'a bird's egg with its food supply enclosed in its shell' (Freud, 1911: 219–20fn). Such a view of development implies progression from a simple primary configuration to a complex, individualised and highly structured end condition. The unidirectional nature of this process means that any retrograde movement must involve disintegration of what has been achieved developmentally. Lichtenstein observes that narcissism introduces into development the crucial idea of reversibility. He acknowledges that regression in the sense of disintegration is certainly possible, but his central point remains: the oscillating ebb and flow of libido between objects and ego, between external and internal reality, is henceforth understood as an essential aspect of the developmental process.

The importance of appropriate withdrawal from the external world is seen most obviously in sleep. Freud wrote: 'In a sleeper the primal state of distribution of the libido is restored—total narcissism, in which libido and ego-interest, still united and indistinguishable, dwell in the self-sufficing ego' Freud (1916–17: 417). Bertram Lewin (1955) drew a comparison between the nature of the mind's activity during sleep and in the psychoanalytic setting. Censorship and resistance, for example, play a large part in clinical work, while in sleep they are the psychic mechanisms behind dreaming. In each case there is a withdrawal of cathexis from external reality. In Lewin's words, 'the narcissism of sleep … coincides with narcissism on the couch' (1955: 171f). Lewin is not using 'narcissism' here to denote pathology. It is a metapsychological description of a self-absorbed state of mind which is necessary for a certain kind of psychic work: dreaming on the one hand, analytic work on the other. These are both avenues of access to the unconscious, and they both illustrate the double need for narcissistic withdrawal into the self, and for the ability to re-emerge from this. Self-absorption is not in itself pathological. What is damaging is imprisonment in a narcissistic state of mind.

This recalls a discussion by Gregorio Kohon (2011) of John Steiner's (1993) concept of 'psychic retreats'. These are modes of psychic functioning to which

someone may retreat if their psychic equilibrium feels threatened. Different individuals will retreat in different ways, according to what feels safe and familiar to them. Steiner (1993: 5) claims that such habitual retreats amount, by definition, to pathological organisations, while Kohon wants to make a case that withdrawing into the core of the self may, at times, be needful.

> While we undoubtedly depend on others to develop our sense of identity and need their recognition in order to derive personal meaning and satisfaction, we need to acknowledge and maintain 'a non-pathological, indeed a necessary, silence at the core of psychic life' (Cohen, 2010: 3). This silent core in us is connected to the possibility of creating and nurturing a private self (Modell, 1992), a self that can ignore and at times actively reject the cultural narratives that are imposed on us.
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> (Kohon, 2011: 50)

In Kohon's view psychic retreats are only pathological when they become fixed and rigid. More than this, he sees it as a necessity to establish and make use of an inner psychic space that is isolated from outside contact. This, says Kohon, 'makes the subject feel real. It allows him to experience the continuity of his self, helping him or her to become creative. For the subject, periods of non-relatedness are as vital as periods of relatedness' (Kohon, 2011: 51). The importance of this during adolescence was stressed by Winnicott. 'This preservation of personal isolation is part of the search for identity, and for the establishment of a personal technique for communicating which does not lead to violation of the central self' (Winnicott, 1965 [1963]: 190). The freedom, at times to withdraw into such inward solitude, at other times to reach out and make contact with the world, and the interdependence between these two, reflect in terms of object relations what Lichtenstein described in the language of libido theory. It is only if libido becomes fixated on the ego, or the psychic retreat becomes a bunker, that development stops and disintegration may follow.

Psychic development tends nonetheless to be viewed in terms of progression from the ego being narcissistically invested in itself, to being able to invest itself in contact with others, and so develop a capacity for object-relating. The narcissism may be primary, or secondary if there has been a later retreat from object relationships, but narcissism and object-relating are essentially seen as alternatives; with swings no doubt between them, as Lichtenstein emphasised, but with the former, in normal development, gradually giving way to the latter.

Heinz Kohut developed a fresh conceptualisation of narcissism, which did not involve this oscillation of investment between ego and objects. Kohut's first step was to make a clear distinction between the ego and the self. The ego is an element of the psychic apparatus. It is a high-level metapsychological abstraction, inferred theoretically but not experienced subjectively. The self,

on the other hand, is part of the individual's subjective experience. It is 'experience-near', as Kohut put it, while the ego is 'experience-distant' (Kohut, 1971: xivf). Joseph and Anne-Marie Sandler, in commenting on the work of Hartmann and Jacobson, also distinguished the self as the mental representation of the person that one is, from the ego as an element in the structure of the mind (Sandler and Sandler, 1998: 125f). In Kohut's thinking, narcissism is a matter of a person's relation, not to their experience-distant ego, but to their subjective sense of self. This radically shifts the relation between narcissism and psychic development. To give up attending to who one is as a person, would not be an index of maturation. Continuing attention to one's sense of self is as important an aspect of psychic maturity as is concern with object relationships. Kohut does not see narcissism and object-relating as being in a kind of psychic competition. He refers to the narcissistic 'sector' of the psyche, implying an object-relating sector also, with the two existing alongside each other (Kohut, 1971: 42). Each of these has its own parallel line of development. Kohut is clear that the mature self requires a sufficient and reliable supply of narcissistic investments, and that 'narcissistic sustenance' is necessary for cohesion of the self and a rewarding relationship with one's ideals (Kohut, 1971: 19, 21). Where regression is concerned Kohut does not see narcissism as a way station in a retreat from object-love. Instead there is 'the disintegration of higher forms of narcissism [and] the regression to archaic narcissistic positions' (Kohut, 1971: 6). 'Higher forms of narcissism' is a noteworthy phrase. For Kohut the achievement of qualities such as humour and wisdom depends on successful development of the narcissistic sector of the psyche (Kohut, 1971: 324–8).

Kohut's conceptual framework remains controversial, and more detailed exploration of it is beyond the scope of this chapter. It is clear enough, though, that he insists on the essential and continuing role of narcissism in normal development and healthy mental functioning.

Sophocles knew about this, as about so much that is important in psychoanalysis. His tragedy *Ajax* shows narcissism operating both as the source of psychotic breakdown, and as a necessary aspect of normal psychic life. The setting is the Greek camp at Troy after the death of Achilles. The dead hero's armour has been presented to Odysseus. For Ajax, who considers himself the greatest of the Greeks after Achilles, this is an unbearable humiliation. He sets out to murder Odysseus and those who awarded him the armour. In order to protect them, Athene has sent Ajax mad. He has attacked the sheep and cattle of the Greeks, torturing and killing them in the belief that the animals are Odysseus and the other Greek generals. At the beginning of the play he appears in this deluded state, surrounded by dead animals and triumphing in his supposed revenge. He recovers from his madness and is overcome with horror at what he has done. Despite all the pleas of his wife Tecmessa he commits suicide. The second half of the play amounts to a debate, in which Menelaus and Agamemnon, outraged at his attempt to murder them, forbid the burial of

Ajax's body, while Odysseus, up till now the arch-enemy of Ajax, shows an unexpected generosity of spirit and persuades them to allow Ajax the ritual honours due to him.

For a long way into the play, Ajax's madness is ascribed only to external causes. Athene needed to prevent him murdering the other Greek generals, and making him insane is how she did it. This is the Sophoclean equivalent of biological psychiatry. No connection is made between Ajax's psychotic breakdown and his inner mental life or character structure. The goddess has simply altered his brain chemistry. In the first half of the play, the only hint of another viewpoint lies in one remark by Ajax's wife. When Ajax has recovered from his delusion Tecmessa says that, now being sane again, he has to suffer the pain of realising that he himself has been the cause of his own disaster (Sophocles, *Ajax*: 258ff). On the surface this refers simply to Ajax's discovery that he is the one who slaughtered the sheep and cattle that he now sees around him. But Tecmessa's words may also suggest that, at some level, Ajax bears responsibility for his madness.

When Ajax realises what he has done he is horrified and says the only thing to do is to kill himself. His overwhelming feeling is of shame at the disgrace to his reputation. He seems to feel no guilt about the murders he was trying to commit nor concern at the damage his vengefulness has caused. He thinks only of the indignity and mockery he will suffer, especially by comparison with the fame of his father Telamon, who had accompanied Jason as one of the Argonauts. To be concerned for his honour and glory was the normal state of mind for the Homeric hero. Shame, in the sense of having the image he presents to the world damaged, is what he avoids at all costs, and the worst thing possible is to have his reputation diminished in the eyes of his peers. An inner ideal, that he tries to live up to, regardless of what the world thinks, is not part of the Homeric hero's makeup. Ajax shows no concern for the economic and emotional disaster that killing himself will cause his wife and child, but this seems at first not so much a matter of callousness as the expression of a standard social attitude.

Later in the play this will appear in a new light. First, however, there is Ajax's suicide. Here Sophocles gives the audience a remarkable bit of psychiatric realism. Ajax, full of shame and hopeless about his future, leaves the stage with the idea of ending his life (595). The Chorus sing a despairing ode, and then Ajax reenters, apparently in a very different state of mind (644ff). His hopelessness has gone; he does have concern for his wife and son; he can think about the future; and instead of using his sword against himself he is going to bury it. He goes off on his own to do so, while the Chorus sing of their delight at his recovery. A messenger arrives with instructions from the prophet Calchas that Ajax must not go out alone. He must be looked after for the rest of the day by his brother Teukros (749–84). But Ajax has already left his tent. He appears alone by the sea shore and the audience sees him fix his sword in the ground and kill himself by falling on it.

This reversal has baffled commentators, who offer various explanations. Was Ajax's apparently positive speech just a piece of cynical deception? The richness and emotional resonance of its language belie this. If the speech was genuine, must the audience assume some reversal in Ajax's state of mind which Sophocles leaves unexplained? Was he intending to die all along, but trying to reconcile himself with the gods? Anyone who has worked in a psychiatric hospital, however, knows that the time of maximum risk for suicide is not when a patient is most depressed. At that stage, mental and physical lethargy make any form of activity, even suicidal activity, difficult. The most dangerous time is when recovery has begun and the patient is capable of some initiative. Should suicidal thoughts recur the patient is now capable of acting on them. This is what seems to happen with Ajax. Calchas knew, and after the body has been discovered the Chorus say how heedless they were not to have gone on keeping watch over Ajax (908–14), just like psychiatrists or nurses realising too late that they should not have allowed the patient home for the weekend.

At this point, a crucial aspect of Ajax's character is revealed for the first time. The messenger who reports the words of Calchas says that the prophet also gave an explanation for Athene's treatment of Ajax. When Ajax left home for the Trojan War, his father advised him always to seek the help of the gods in battle. Ajax replied that even a worthless man could win with the gods on his side. He would seek his own triumphs without help from the gods. When Athene did stand by Ajax on the battlefield to encourage him he sent her away, saying he had no need of her and she should go and look after the other Greeks instead.

In the light of this we look back over what has happened with fresh eyes. Ajax's behaviour now appears not simply to exemplify the standard attitudes of the epic hero, but to show the disturbance of his particular character. It always made sense that it should be Athene who drove Ajax mad and thwarted his murderous attack because, of all the gods and goddesses, she is the most concerned to protect the Greeks from harm. But now her involvement has a deeper meaning. It is not that Athene is taking personal revenge for Ajax's insult to her on the battlefield. Euripidean divinities might be driven by wounded *amour-propre*, but not the Athene of Sophocles. What Calchas' story reveals is that Ajax's psychosis is the consequence of a grandiose omnipotence which denies the dependence on others that is part of the human condition. To Greek sensibilities, his dismissal of the goddess would be grotesque. It demonstrates how far the narcissistic attempt to see himself as totally self-sufficient has put Ajax out of touch with humanity. The audience might think back, at this point, to the *Kommos* (348–427); the long lyric exchange between Ajax and the Chorus in which, having recovered his sanity, he curses the ridicule and indignity to which he will now be subject. Unconsciously, Ajax reveals how dependent he really is on other people's opinion of him. His image of himself was shattered when the armour of Achilles was awarded to someone else, and it is psychologically accurate that Athene, who represents the

dependent relationship that Ajax deluded himself he did not need, should be responsible for his breakdown.

In the face of Ajax's impersonal harshness his wife maintains a striking warmth and humanity. When he makes clear that he intends to commit suicide (430–80), Tecmessa asks him to consider the effect of this on herself, their son, Eurysaces, and on Ajax's parents. She would be mocked and enslaved, Eurysaces would have no family to bring him up and protect him, and Ajax's father and mother would live out their old age in misery. Tecmessa evokes vividly her own future suffering, and her care for her son and parents-in-law makes her plea the more touching.

So far, Ajax has shown no guilt or concern about what he has done or was trying to do, but only shame at the failure of his murderous project. Tecmessa is pleading for Ajax to discover an imaginative capacity to put himself in another person's position—her own, their son's, his parents'—and to think what it will be like for them if he does what he is planning. However, when the Chorus supports Tecmessa and asks Ajax to agree with her, he replies that his approval of her depends on her obedience to him. He does not seem to have heard a word she has said. No dialogue with him is possible. Tecmessa keeps trying, and tells Ajax that killing himself would be a betrayal of her and of their son, only to be told she is becoming tedious (589). To her final heartfelt entreaty that he should relent, Ajax replies that she is a fool if she thinks she can change his mind (594f). He does manage to think of Eurysaces to the extent of asking that his brother Teukros should take care of him, and there is one moment when he is touched by compassion for what his wife and child will suffer when he is gone. But he rejects the feeling. Pity takes the sharp edge off his spirit, he says, and makes his speech 'womanish' (650–53). His sense of masculinity depends on his selfcontained omnipotence, and the experience of caring about someone else is a threat to it. In his final speech before killing himself, he feels again a momentary pity, this time for his parents. He imagines what it will be like for them to hear the news of his suicide. Immediately, however, he has to stifle his 'idle weeping' and 'get on with the business quickly' (852f). He seems afraid that he might lose his resolve, and makes himself rigidly unfeeling so as to push away any such possibility. Ajax's overpowering desire to possess the armour of Achilles symbolises his compulsion to maintain a rigid character armouring that will protect him against human encounters which he is not able, at an emotional level, to deal with.

Compare Ajax, as Sophocles presents him to us, with a man who did know he needed help, but still had great difficulty in receiving it.

Jacques, a social worker from another country, was training as a counsellor. He found the experience disturbing, but hated to acknowledge how out of his depth he felt and how much support he needed from his supervisor. He was referred to me for psychotherapy and came once a week for about a year.

Jacques came from a well-to-do professional family. He had a brother who was two years younger. A pattern developed of this brother being the 'naughty'

child, while Jacques was the 'good' one; the family diplomat who smoothed out difficulties. He told me this with pride, but seemed uneasily aware that it might also need some thinking about. He began school aged five. At first things went well, but then his classmates turned against him. He claimed not to know why, but it seemed they were reacting against how he boasted and bossed them around. From then on he was miserable. Either he would be the leader of a gang, or else rejected and bullied. The issue seemed to be about humiliation: would he be the humiliated one, or the one to humiliate others? In his teens the family emigrated. He said this was difficult because in their new country the family had a lower social position. They were less well-off and had to live in a crowded flat. He found it unbearable that classmates at his new school were more advanced than he was and that many came from wealthier families.

In his social work training he had been held up for a year because he failed an exam. He was astonished that this meant he could not go forward, and complained that the regulations had not been made clear. This was plainly not the case, but he insisted nonetheless that it was true. I wondered if he had needed to think he was so special that such a humiliating rule could not possibly apply to him. He understood my thought, but only intellectually. He felt shamed when other students could answer questions that he could not. He grew withdrawn and isolated, came to be seen as a 'problem student', and eventually took a year out of the course to go travelling. During this time he formed a relationship with Tessa. She went back with him to this country and they married. He completed his training, after which they came to London for his counselling course. When he was referred to me he had about a year of this left, and their son Yuri, born in London, was one year old.

Both at work and at home Jacques was dominated by a desire to be the centre of attention. When he was not admired as he wished he became depressed and anxious, to the extent of fearing a breakdown.

At work he took on multiple projects. When his tutors, instead of praising him for this, told him to slow down and take his time, he could not reflect on what they said. Instead, he became angry because they did not appreciate his efforts. He was full of anxiety about being humiliated in seminars. Once when he had to speak after a woman had presented a case very well, he could hardly get a word out and thought he was going to have a panic attack. He nearly stayed away from an important exam because he could not bear the idea that he might fail it. When he was reprimanded for being late in writing up notes and sending letters, he was angry at the lack of sympathy for his difficulties. He could not think of the clients' and the institution's needs, or consider that he might have a problem he needed to look at.

His contempt for his wife and their child was painful to listen to. He constantly complained about Tessa's differences from himself. She did not care as much as he did what other people thought. She did not pay attention to how she dressed, while for him clothes were very important. The idea that Tessa might have wishes and needs of her own seemed meaningless to him. It was

likewise unbearable to him that his son had needs, and he could only perceive him as a nuisance. When Tessa got up in the night to feed him, Jacques was angry at being left alone. When Tessa was trying to wean Yuri, Jacques did agree to get up himself and feed him because he was glad that the intimacy of breastfeeding was coming to an end. He thought doing this made him feel like a father, but if he had to look after Yuri while Tessa was out of the house, he was annoyed at having to spend time with the child. Once Tessa and Yuri went away together for a week, and Jacques was shocked to find he could not cope on his own. He had looked forward to being rid of them, but in fact he sank into a miserable passivity, unable to do much except gaze at the television.

Jacques' grandiosity and his contempt for Tessa and Yuri were sometimes hard to bear. What was touching and painful, though, was that he knew there was something terribly wrong. He was aware of being cut off from other people. In some of his clients he saw an emotional flatness and shallowness that he could recognise in himself. The therapeutic relationship between us was complicated. He was willing to consider my interpretations, and I sometimes felt he had a real wish to look at himself. At other times, he seemed falsely compliant and concerned mainly to get me to like him. Sometimes he felt threatened and humiliated by my professional position and my ability to understand him, and he would become hostile and suspicious. He felt abandoned by me between his sessions (he could not bring himself to come more than once a week), and we could link this to the abandonment he felt by his mother when his brother was born, and by Tessa when Yuri was born. He could recognise his feelings of helplessness, and also his fear of discovering he was not brilliant after all, but he was afraid of becoming depressed if he stayed with such feelings. Then he would retreat into telling me how much better off he would be without Tessa and Yuri, or into thinking I was deliberately humiliating him. I thought there was a risk of both a depressive and a paranoid breakdown.

At the end of his year's therapy, he returned home with Tessa and Yuri. He seemed a bit more aware of his grandiosity and the terror against which it defended him, but not much seemed really to have changed. I put him in touch with a colleague in his own country, without great optimism.

The point of resemblance between Ajax and Jacques that I want to emphasise is not simply how narcissistic they are capable of being, but that they are not capable of being anything else. They are imprisoned in their narcissism.

To feel concern and gratitude for another person are capacities that have to be achieved. At first, an infant relates to others only in terms of their effects on itself. To realise that those others have thoughts and feelings of their own, and that the infant may have an impact on them for which it can be responsible, are specific steps in development. They make it possible to appreciate and be grateful for another's actions, and to think of one's own behaviour in terms of its effect on another. Ajax represents a character that has not been able to achieve these steps. Athene's offer of assistance implies that Ajax might have

need of her strength. He cannot accept and be grateful because he cannot bear the desire of the goddess to do something for him that he cannot do for himself. When Tecmessa begs him to imagine the disaster his suicide will be for her, the idea does not register. Imagining his effect on other people is beyond him. It is the same with Jacques. He cannot imagine a situation at work from his colleagues' and teachers' point of view. His only concern is whether they support or threaten his inflated picture of himself. At home, he cannot recognise that a wife and small son have needs of their own, and that it could be rewarding for him to respond to these as a husband and father. All he feels is fury at being displaced from centre stage.

The discussion at the beginning of this chapter emphasised that narcissistic states of mind are not by their nature pathological. On the contrary, they are essential to psychic development, provided there is the necessary freedom of movement between an inwardly directed self-absorption and an outward-looking interest in the states of mind of others. Ajax and Jacques show how damaging is a developmental failure to achieve this freedom of movement.

When Sophocles' hero commits suicide half-way through the play, this divides it into two parts which may appear only weakly connected. After Ajax's death the play is peopled with characters, Teukros, Menelaus and Agamemnon, who played no part in the first half. Odysseus, who appeared only briefly in the opening scene, becomes dominant. Some scholars have thought the play falls apart in the middle while others, notably Kitto (1960: 179ff), contend that Sophocles knew his job as a playwright. *Trachiniae*, another of Sophocles' plays, also seems fractured by the death of the central character. As in that instance (Parsons 2000: 115–27), so here also a psychoanalytic perspective reveals the coherence of Sophocles' vision.

Along with Odysseus, Agamemnon and Menelaus were the primary targets of Ajax's murderousness. The latter pair react to the story of his madness and suicide with the same rigid vindictiveness and arrogance that Ajax himself displayed. All they can see is an insult to their kingship, and a threat to their positions of command. Menelaus forbids Ajax's body to be buried, saying that because Ajax would not obey him while he was alive it is a pleasure for him to govern Ajax in his death. When Ajax's brother Teukros tells Menelaus that to dishonour the dead is disrespect to the gods, Menelaus answers that respect for the gods does not apply where his personal enemies are concerned (1129ff). This placing of his own self-importance above the gods mirrors exactly the attitude of Ajax towards Athene. Agamemnon mocks Teukros for his lowly origins in a speech that is full of brittle anxiety about the threat that Ajax's valour posed to Agamemnon's pride of place.

Then Odysseus enters, and Sophocles takes the audience by surprise. Odysseus was the object of Ajax's greatest hatred, but instead of continuing the vitriolic diatribe of Menelaus and Agamemnon he tells them they are wrong, and that Ajax should have a honourable burial. The dialogue between Agamemnon and Odysseus which follows (1346ff) is an emotional turning

point. Agamemnon is amazed at Odysseus' attitude and asks him if he did not hate Ajax. Odysseus replies that indeed he did, but Ajax also had greatness and nobility, and should be recognised as the bravest of all the Greeks after Achilles. Agamemnon asks if Odysseus can feel pity for a corpse that he hates. There is evidently no distinction for Agamemnon between the person and the dead body. Odysseus answers that the greatness of Ajax means more to him than his own feelings of hatred. This line (1357) is the heart of the play. Odysseus' capacity to recognise what belongs to another person, setting aside his own feelings to do so, displays the emotional growth that was beyond Ajax's reach. The psychotic breakdown Ajax suffers reveals how desperately he needed the armour of Achilles to try and shore up, in external, material terms, his narcissistic defences. For Odysseus, on the other hand, the armour represents symbolically an internal structure of strength and security that he already possesses, which lets him respond to the world around him with generosity and openness.

Agamemnon then says that if he agrees for Ajax to be buried it will make him appear a coward. The self-involvement of this statement underlines the contrast between the two psychic positions. Odysseus says that he wants burial for Ajax because he recognises that he too will one day have the same need. Sophocles has already signposted this capacity in Odysseus for identification even with an enemy. The play began with Odysseus telling Athene of his hatred for Ajax, and recounting Ajax's attack on the Greek leaders, which turned into his mad onslaught on the animals. Athene explains that this was her doing, and Ajax in his madness appears, torturing a ram which he triumphantly declares is Odysseus. Odysseus responds:

> I am all pity for his wretchedness,
> enemy though he is, and for the evil
> doom that he is yoked to. Seeing his state,
> I see also my own, for all of us
> live only as dim shapes and shadows.
>
> (Sophocles, *Ajax*: 121–4)

This capacity for identification with a universal humanity recalls Theseus' statement to the blind, polluted, exiled Oedipus: 'I am a man too, and I know the difference between us lies only in the fortune of the morrow' (Sophocles, *Oedipus at Colonus*: 567–8).

My patient Jacques could not respond to his wife's need to be recognised as another human being in her own right. Ajax likewise had no way of responding to Tecmessa's plea for emotional growth on his part. Odysseus at the beginning of the play is terrified of Ajax's madness (74ff), and as a corpse Ajax becomes something still more absolutely 'other'. But Odysseus has been able to achieve the developmental step that Ajax could not. Even faced with the extremities of madness and of death he can identify with, and care for, the man he hated.

Alongside seeing Odysseus as representing an emotional growth that eluded Ajax, one might also take Agamemnon and Menelaus on the one hand, and Odysseus on the other, to represent twin aspects of Ajax, both present in his character, but with an unresolved split between them. The first half of the play could be viewed in terms of an oscillating struggle between these: Ajax gripped for the most part by the grandiose paranoia later represented in Agamemnon and Menelaus, and only occasionally finding the concern for other people exemplified by Odysseus. His suicide, from this perspective, would represent the triumph of the former over the latter.[2]

Back now in the consulting room, here are two patients who had the same thought: a narcissistic thought, one might say, but the results in each case were very different, illustrating further the difference between narcissism as a symptom that imprisons, and narcissism as a state of mind with a potential for evolution.

The first patient is a man who had broken up with his girlfriend and was beginning to recognise that he had not treated her with much consideration. He had let her think the relationship might work out, when he knew that really he wanted to end it. When he did end it he did so abruptly, while they were abroad together and she was out of contact with her friends. He talked of his 'weakness' in not being able to make a clean break when he should have done. I said there might also be some cruelty in his behaviour, belonging to a pattern of wanting women to suffer, which was linked to his relationship with his mother. He found this very difficult ('I wouldn't come to you for a character reference!'), but in the next session he commented that I had not been horrified or disgusted. I seemed to think the way he had behaved could be accepted and thought about. Then he imagined his girlfriend being my patient instead of him. He said there was plenty she needed to look at in herself, and I would be doing the same thing with her that I was with him. 'It's not because you are taking my side against her that you are accepting how I treated her. You're doing something different from that.' He did not fully understand what this was, but he was interested in what I was doing that could belong both to his girlfriend and to himself.

The second of these patients is a woman with little capacity for symbolic thought. She avoided fantasy at all costs, in case what she was imagining turned out not to be true, which would fill her with shame and humiliation. Her life was dominated by fear of getting things wrong or being tricked. She would ask me questions about myself and when, instead of answering these, I tried to understand what lay behind them, she thought I wanted to trap her into making mistakes about me. She wanted me to say she was the most complicated or most difficult patient I had ever had. This was not just a matter of rivalry with my other patients. My entire being had to be totally and uniquely involved with her. I might give her all my attention and try my utmost to understand and help her, but if I were doing the same for another person too, any worth it had for her would be lost.

Both these people have the same thought: 'What if my analyst is doing the same thing with somebody else?' The woman cannot give up her demand for an exclusive relationship, and the idea of sharing her importance to me with another person is unbearable. It would mean that she had no importance to me after all, and that would take away all value from what I am doing with her. A third person would threaten her very existence in my mind. When the man, by contrast, thought of my having the same relationship to his girlfriend as to him, he could accept the idea and be interested in it. It did not obliterate my relationship to him, but shed new light on what it consisted of. The woman's preoccupation with herself was absolute, while the man was capable of giving his up. Narcissism was for her a prison: for him, a state of mind he could make use of for further emotional development.

A secure identity depends on a capacity for self-absorption. This means withdrawing from engagement with external reality to make one's inner world both consciously and unconsciously the focus of attention. This is narcissism, not as a symptom, but as a state of mind. The crucial question is whether such self-absorption is used as a defence against the world, or as a catalyst for further engagement with it. For some, like Ajax, Jacques and the woman who insisted her relationship with me should be exclusive, their self-involvement must be protected at all costs, because other people can only be seen as a threat. Others, like Odysseus and the man who wondered about my seeing his girlfriend, are able to step out of the narcissistic state of mind. It remains necessary, however, as a base to return to. Developmentally mature, non-pathological narcissism implies knowing how to engage with the internal world and one's own being, while also knowing how to yield this up and engage with one's fellow beings in the outside world. A flexible, mobile capacity to shift back and forth between these positions makes narcissism not an affliction, but a springboard for growth.

Notes

1 The term had already appeared in passing in 1910, in a footnote added to the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (Freud, 1905: 144–5fn).

2 I am indebted to Sotiris Manolopoulos for this suggestion.