

MANNERS & MISDEMEANORS



EGO

Me, a Love Story

How good old narcissism—outlandish, fun, even revolutionary—turned ho-hum.

BY NELL CASEY

FORGET NARCISSUS. IT SEEMS EVERYONE IS GAZING ADORINGLY at his own reflection these days—with the occasional furtive glance sideways to make sure others are gazing upon him gazing. There are, of course, the plentiful and inane Facebook status updates. A recent example tells me that a “friend” and her then-boyfriend were once voted the cutest couple at her junior high school, while another offers this ironic proverb: “True friendship consists not in the multitude of friends, but in their worth and value.” It’s nearly a cliché to say this now, but these frequent missives, taken together, offer a vast send-up of the good life; they are more often tiny wishes sent into cyberspace than they are details culled from our lives. Then there is the confusing use of Twitter. Is it meant to be a marketing tool? A life coach? A cry for help? And

there are the ever multiplying blogs, assuring us that there will never be a single moment of unnarrated life out there.

Narcissism has become so ubiquitous, so deeply ingrained in our everyday lives, its very meaning so diffuse and absurd, that it seems at times to be blurred to the point of vanishing. In fact, it came perilously close to doing just that. While drafting the next version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, the DSM-5, the bible of the mental health profession, due out in 2013, psychiatrists proposed that narcissistic personality disorder be removed (raising the philosophical question: If a narcissist is not acknowledged, does he still exist?). There was a critical uproar in the field about the decision, and the disorder was restored, at least for now, as a committee of psychiatrists continues to hash out how to define the illness for our modern age. Meanwhile, the Internet—along with its monstrous cousin reality television—has built a stage large enough for all of us to put on one big, embarrassing show: the tedious narcissism-as-entertainment that represents a significant portion of our cultural life today.

But narcissism wasn’t always so easy to come by—or maybe it just wasn’t so easily expressed—and when it did find its way out into the world, it frequently produced livelier and more interesting results.

Take this scene from 1971, for example: Gore Vidal, Janet Flanner, and Norman Mailer appear as guests on *The Dick Cavett Show*. When Mailer walks onstage—three sheets to the wind, with the tousled hair to prove it—he refuses to shake Vidal’s extended hand, and then lights into his fellow author for an unflattering remark Vidal made about him in the *New York Review of Books*. In response, Vidal commends Mailer’s ability to “re-bear himself like the phoenix” and wonders what his next incarnation will be. After calling Vidal a liar and a hypocrite, the diminutive Mailer declares everyone onstage “smaller” than him, intellectually speaking. “Perhaps you’d like two more chairs,” Cavett replies coolly, “to contain your giant intellect.” It is an exquisite bit of television history and has made the rounds as such for decades. You can YouTube it, of course.

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But Mailer’s half-serious, half-winking, and half-out-of-his-mind show of self-worship also offers a fascinating glimpse into a bygone era, a time when the self-obsessed, at least those given public platforms, looked inward and came up with something meaningful to say. Back in the 1960s, Lenny Bruce was talking about himself in bars. By the ’70s, Woody Allen was directing himself in *Annie Hall* and *Manhattan*; Spalding Gray was channeling himself on a stool or behind a desk onstage. In the good old days of narcissism, these entertaining egotists catapulted us forward on bursts of intellectual energy. Sure, Mailer could act like a jackass, but *The Armies of the Night*, the “nonfiction novel” in which he wove himself into history, was a real literary achievement. His turn on the Cavett show may not have been his finest moment (though it certainly ranks higher than the night he stabbed his wife with a penknife), but it offers a window into a more muscular era of narcissism, one with more substance and heft.

Narcissism, as it is broadly defined in psychology, is a grandiose sense of oneself and a need for admiration by many, coupled with a lack of empathy for others—even for those willing to offer the aforementioned obligatory worshipful attention. (Here’s the late

of Kim Kardashian, Snooki, and Kate Gosselin, not to mention all the survivors and apprentices, bachelors and bachelorettes, housewives and hoarders. These unlikely stars, crammed into bandage dresses and with their hair blown out to cardboard straightness, are always dully chasing their own tails, searching for where reality ends and life begins. Their feuds are not about politics or feminism or whether they’re intellectually superior to their peers, but about, say, whether Kardashian’s galumphing then-boyfriend Kris Humphries is fitting in on a family vacation. Or at which bottom-of-the-totem-pole celebrity—humiliated already by her flagging career but still for some reason coming back for more—Donald Trump will point a meaty finger and bellow, “You’re fired!”

To be fair, these characters resemble Mailer and his ilk only in narcissistic spirit: drunk on themselves, full of grasping ambition, hyperaware of their own entertainment value. Of course, they are not on, or even aiming for, the same wavelength. Mailer and company successfully fashioned themselves as artistic centerpieces by capturing something large and significant about the world in their own stories. They moved the broader conversation forward by

EGOS UNLEASHED

The Kardashians define our age of watered-down narcissism, but they aren't the only self-infatuated attention junkies out there. Some of them even aspire to cultural significance.



BERNARD-HENRI LEVY
I help ze Americans understand zemselves—and chest hair.



ARIANNA HUFFINGTON
Hear me talk about Super PACs until my limo arrives.



BONO
I love high-power photo ops the way Elvis loved six-egg omelets.



LADY GAGA
What ever will I do next? Who cares?



LINDSAY LOHAN
You can't be this much of a train wreck without trying really hard.



KANYE WEST
I'll take that microphone, thanks.



JULIAN SCHNABEL
What does third-rate art have on first-rate ego?

Vidal’s definition: “A narcissist is someone better looking than you are.”) At the heart of this brutal attitude is a primal sense of inadequacy, a psychic black hole that threatens to swallow anyone who ventures too close. The trait can be both spectacular and dangerous to encounter: Sparks practically fly from these captivating characters, unbound as they are by doubt or self-consciousness or anything else that might inhibit. Perhaps the only thing more arresting is when this trait is expressed culturally, when a narcissist, especially someone who has risen to fame for offering his own life as art or entertainment, is granted the audience he so grandly, and perhaps even rightly, believes he deserves. When the stars align to make an icon of a narcissist—as with Marilyn Monroe, Richard Nixon, Michael Jackson, or Madonna, to pluck just a few from history—the resulting spectacle implicates everyone. Questions arise: Why have we, en masse, lifted them up? What part of our shared dream are they playing out?

Recently, from our collective navel, we have produced the likes

inspiring spectacular controversies and compelling debates.

Today the cultural controversies and debates that spring from narcissistic tantrums include (but are not limited to) a manic Charlie Sheen claiming to be, in a television interview, the kind of partyer that made “Sinatra, Flynn, Jagger, Richards all just look like droopy-eyed armless children” while raging against his producers for suspending *Two and a Half Men*, and Kanye West grabbing the microphone from Taylor Swift as she is accepting an MTV Video Music award in order to suggest that Beyoncé—his personal choice—should have won instead.

In an age in which narcissism has become the norm, self-absorption sure isn’t what it used to be. Where narcissism once held the power to produce a cultural spark, it now simply adds another round—another Facebook update, another tweet—to an ever rising chorus of need. We have to strain that much harder to hear a voice that actually has something to say.